

Joseph Conrad and Cunninghame Graham, with special focus on *Nostromo*

Notes by Laurence Davies for the webinar on Friday, 16 April 21 at 19:00.

Do please feel free to contact me with questions and comments either on the Cunninghame Graham Society's website or by emailing ceffylbach@gmail.com.

Advertisements and reviews that presented him as a spinner of romantic yarns of the sea always grated on Conrad. Such publicity ignored among other narratives his three great political novels: *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Nostromo*. These were and are the works that have fascinated such readers, authors, and scholars as, for instance, a PLO guerilla, an underground soldier of the Haganah, a teenage courier in the Dutch resistance equipped with only a bike and a pocketful of forged papers, veterans of the Irish War of Independence, imprisoned writers in Kenya and South Africa, and members of the Polish Home Army, the largest resistance movement in Nazi-occupied Europe. In the case of *Nostromo*, Conrad shows us the transformation of Sulaco, an imaginary province rich in silver into an independent republic, a secession from the equally imaginary Costaguana backed by North American power and wealth and vexed by ethnic resentments and hostilities. Among the book's admirers have been such Latin American writers as Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), Jorge-Luis Borges (Argentina), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), and the Paraguayan novelist and advocate of indigenous culture Augusto Roa Bastos. To such authors we should add that honorary Latin American Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, who relished *Nostromo* and had a part in its making.

If you're interested in reading *Nostromo*, there are many choices, but the Oxford World's Classics edition stands out for the quality of the Introduction and Notes and a chronology to clarify the shifting of narrative time. A Project Gutenberg ebook, readable on line or as a download, is available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2021>.

The quotations from Conrad's letters to Graham in these notes come from either the *Collected Letters* (identified as CL with volume number) or the *Selected Letters* (identified as SL). Very few letters from Graham to Conrad have survived, and those were written in the last few years of Conrad's life. He had a longstanding habit of burning old correspondence. (If Jessie Conrad had not tucked away her husband's drafts in a chest of drawers and a crate in an outbuilding, he might well have burned those too.) The annotations on the letters owe a great deal to Cedric

Watts's doctoral thesis, subsequently published by Cambridge as *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Cunningham Graham*.

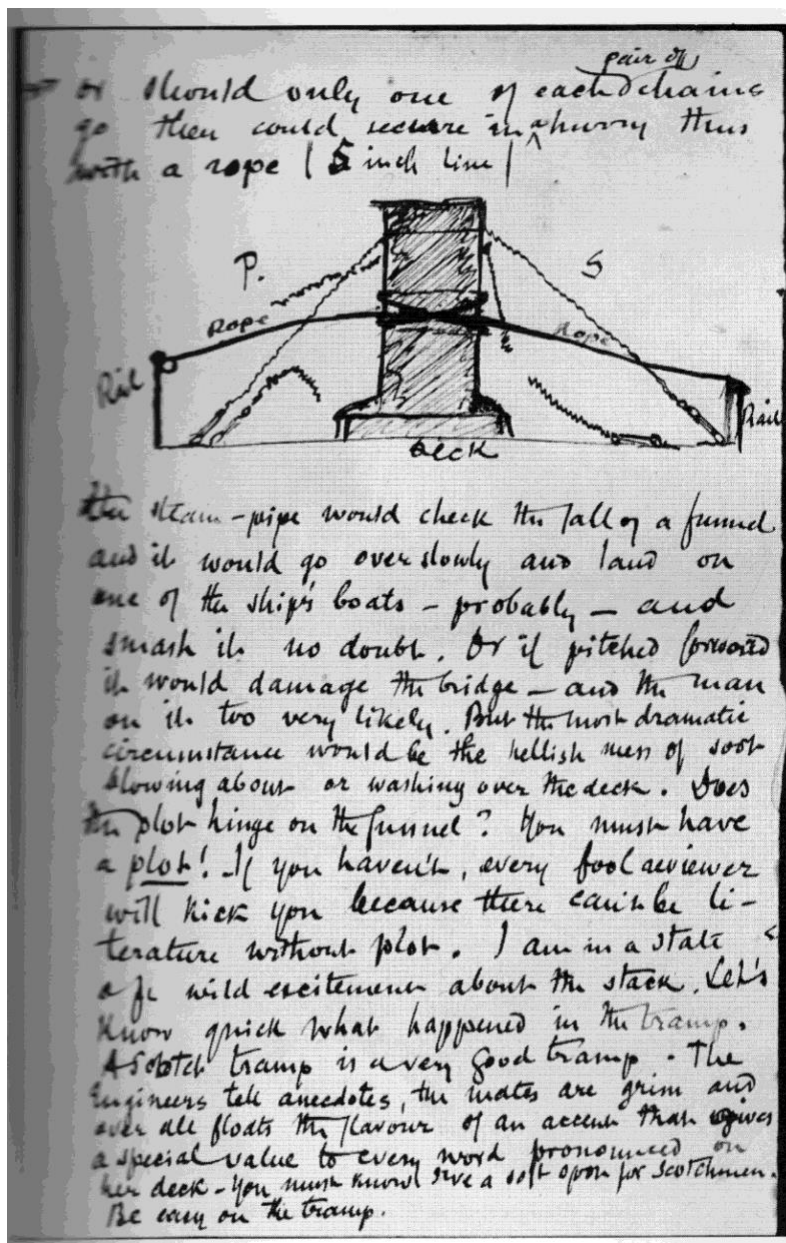
1: The friendship:

In August 1897, Graham wrote to Conrad, congratulating him on 'An Outpost of Progress' in *Cosmopolis*. Set at an isolated trading post on an African river, 'An Outpost' is the tale of two clueless Belgians whose brains are stuffed with imperial clichés, and a wily African from Sierra Leone. The Belgians quarrel; one shoots the other and then hangs himself on a graveyard cross. While clearly a forerunner of *Heart of Darkness*, it stands on its own considerable merits. *Cosmopolis* was a remarkable political and cultural monthly whose contents appeared in equal measures of German, French, and English. The satirical ironies of Conrad's story, the power of the writing, and its anti-imperial stance would all have appealed to Graham. Here's part of Conrad's reply:

You've given me a few moments of real, solid excitement. I scuttled about for the signature—then laid the letter down. I am a prudent man. Very soon it occurred to me that you would hardly go out of your way (in the month of August) to kick an utter stranger. So, I said to myself "These—no doubt—are half-pence. Let us see" and—behold! it was real gold, a ducat for a beggar—a treasure for the very poor! [...] I admire so much Your vision and your expression that your commendation has for me a very high value—the very highest! Believe that I appreciate fully the kind impulse that prompted you to write. (SL 65-6)

By the end of the following August, Conrad had written at least 25 letters to Don Roberto, all of them caring, provocative, and substantial. (There may have been more: sometimes completeness is a mirage.) Here's an example, a page from Conrad's letter to Cunningham Graham of 7 January 1898 (CL4, 4-6). It's by no means the only illustrated letter – once upon a time, Conrad had taken classes in drawing. For a story in the *Saturday Review* Graham wanted more details of an anecdote he had heard on board the S. S. *Atlas* about the funnel's working loose, Graham was wondering how the crew had managed to secure it.

Conrad had often sailed in Clyde-built ships and worked with Scottish crews. 'A Scotch tramp is a very good tramp. The engineers tell anecdotes, the mates are grim and over all floats the flavour of an accent that gives a special value to every word pronounced on her deck – you must know I've a soft spot for Scotchmen. Be easy on the tramp'.



'Does the plot hinge on the funnel?' Conrad's question resonated. 'You must have a *plot*! If you haven't, every fool reviewer will kick you because there can't be literature without plot'. Although his early novels are packed with incident, some reviewers had complained about what they saw as a lack of plotting. Both authors were literary innovators, Graham with his essays and tales hovering between fiction and non-fiction; Conrad with his treatment of time and space, his startling

alternations between irony and drama, and, like Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, and Virginia Woolf, his swerve away from Victorian literary conventions.

In the 1890s, Conrad had three confidant(e)s; Edward Garnett, the publisher's reader who encouraged Conrad to keep on writing and gave him notable critiques, his 'Aunt' (actually the widow of a cousin) Marguerite Poradowska, the Franco-Belgian novelist, and Don Roberto. Just a week after discussing the perilous funnel, Conrad began one of the most remarkable letters he ever wrote to Graham or anybody else – a quintessence of his thoughts and feelings (SL 87-9). Elsewhere in the house in Stanford-le-Hope Essex, Jessie Conrad was in labour with their firstborn, who arrived the following morning. Graham, always ready to support new work, was keen to review Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, and had offered an introduction to Frank Harris, the shady but talented editor of the *Saturday Review*, but Conrad was 'shy of my bad English. At any rate prepare him for a "b—y furriner"'. The 'furriner' ribs Don Roberto for asking about the funnel when he was fluent in sailors' language: 'What don't you know! From the outside of a sail to the inside of a prison!' There had been a fire at Gartmore, and Conrad, who had just finished reading her biography of Santa Teresa, was anxious about Gabriela Cunninghame Graham's state of mind (thus far, no one knows whether Conrad knew the secret of her real name).

Then Conrad turns from the daily struggle of surviving as an author (and father-to-be) in an adopted land and language to the challenge of the cosmic. To be without Graham's side of the correspondence is tantalising, but evidently the two of them have been discussing or debating the value of social improvement and reform. Conrad's position is bleak; he draws upon the conviction, widespread among writers in the '90s, that entropy would triumph. 'The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy'. Yet it is clear from many novels, and stories (for example 'Amy Foster', 'The Warrior's Soul' --- and *Nostromo*) that Conrad did take human suffering to heart, and, in the letters, even clearer. There is more to come in this letter, including a commentary on the deceptions of language that wouldn't be out of place in the late twentieth century, and a self-deprecating reference to 'the string of my platitudes'. Yet he didn't string platitudes; he skewered them, and so did Don Roberto.

The friendship lasted. What with Graham's travels and Conrad's retreat into purdah while working desperately on his MSS, its rhythms varied. The

correspondence is distinguished both for richness of topic and a way of hopping from language to language. Particularly when thrashing out ideas, Conrad would switch into French, and he dotted his letters with Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Arabic words and phrases. They met when they could, for example on JC's visit to Scotland in September 1898, when CG introduced him to Neil Munro and the pioneer radiologist John Macintyre, who x-rayed his hand. There were also meetings in London, and the memoirs of Jessie, Borys, and John Conrad testify to lively and delightful visits wherever the family was living. The boys were much impressed by his revolver and his feats of tree-climbing. Jessie was charmed by his courtliness.



Don Roberto at Conrad's funeral, August 1924: to his left the Polish Ambassador with a massive bouquet, to his right Conrad's friends Georges Jean-Aubry and Richard Curle.

2: Backgrounds:

We know from Conrad's replies that Graham frequently praised his work. For example: 'Cherissime ami. I am simply in the seventh heaven to find you like the *H of D* so far. You bless me indeed, Mind you don't curse me by and bye for the same thing' (SL 113); 'I am glad you like the *S Agent* Vous comprenez bien that the story was written completely without malice. It had some importance for me as a new departure in *genre* and as a sustained effort in ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject – which was my technical intention. [...] Every word you say I treasure' (SL 216). Likewise, Conrad read Graham with delight and serious attention. For example, after reading *Thirteen Stories*: 'I've read Cruz Alta four days ago. C'est tout simplement *magnifique*. I knew most of the sketches, in fact nearly all, except Cruz Alta itself' (CL2 296). Here is Conrad on *A Vanished Arcadia*, which he read at least twice: 'I am altogether under the charm of that book, in accord with its spirit and full of admiration for its expression. [...] There are supreme places – but the *evenness* of inspiration feeling and effort is amazing' (CL2 361). Some readers might object to what my farming ancestors would call 'a lot of soft soap', but Conrad was rarely so effusive with other authors.

Conrad defended 'Victory', another of the *Thirteen Stories* against the strictures of Edward Garnett, who disapproved of its method. CG's 'sketch' is set in a pretentious Parisian hotel where North American tourists are gloating over the destruction of the Spanish Navy in the Spanish-American War of 1898. The men 'read the glorious news, and, taking off their hats, deigned publicly to recognize the existence of a God, and after standing reverently silent, masticating their green cigars in contemplation of His wondrous ways, to take a drink' (*Thirteen Stories* 211-12). Meanwhile a stoic Spanish gentleman and his daughter endure the jingoistic carnival.

Both 'Cruz Alta' and 'Victory' share interests and concerns with *Nostramo*. 'Cruz Alta', one of CG's longest narratives, follows the movements of a troop of horses on their way to be sold in Brazil. Many of the scenes along the way show the lives of immigrants, French, German, English, Scottish, and the enslaved descendants of involuntary immigrants from Africa. Among them is Enrique Clerici, one of the Italians who had followed Garibaldi into Latin American exile. He ran a pulperia (a combination of bar and grocery) in Ytapua, Paraguay, where he maintained order with an arsenal of empty bottles. One of the key locations in *Nostramo* is the Albergo d'Italia Una kept by Giorgio Viola, another Garibaldino, and his family. In *Nostramo*, much depends on communications, whether by telegraph, telephone, submarine cable, or horse and rider. 'Victory' yields pungent comments on long-distance messaging and its importance for capitalism: 'the tapes clicked off their international lies detailing all the last quotations of the deep mines upon the Rand [...] in fact brought home to those with eyes to see, the way in which the Stock Exchange had put a rascals' ring around the globe' (*Thirteen Stories* 212). Moreover, this sketch reflects the growing imperial power of the USA and the potent combination of Social Darwinism and Christian evangelism that sought to justify that growth. It is no accident that in *Nostramo*, Mr Holroyd the grey eminence in San Francisco who funds the re-opening of the silver mine and invests in the high level railway across the sierras also sets up a mission to convert the Roman Catholic population to 'a purer form of religion'. It should be said, however, that the encroachments of *norteño* power during the Nineties and beyond were challenged by such intellectual leaders as José Enrique Rodó from Uruguay, José Martí from Cuba, and as we shall soon see, Santiago Pérez Triana.

3: Writing *Nostramo*:

Conrad started work on what became *Nostramo* on Christmas Day 1902. He expected its length to be around 35,000 words (CL3 6); by the time he finished at

the end of August 1904, the count was 170,00 words. This was not the first time that a novel grew and grew. *Lord Jim*, which is only slightly smaller began life as 'Jim: A Sketch' of around 6,000 words. Nor was Conrad unique in finding his subject more and more involving. It happened, for instance with Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The more startling aspect of Conrad's novel is that he'd spent very little time in South America. In 1876, as a sailor in the making, he made one of three voyages from Marseilles to the French Antilles. While his ship was moored off St-Pierre, Martinique he apparently found a passage to the coasts of Colombia and Venezuela (CL 8 140). It's been suggested that he was running guns to Colombia, where a conflict between Liberals and Conservatives was being fought over compulsory religion in the schools – one of many civil wars, this one is remembered as *la guerra de las escuelas*. The evidence is flimsy, but gun-running is a motif in several of Conrad's novels and stories. Guns or not, this was his sole exposure to Latin America.

As late as 9 May 1903, when Conrad wrote to Don Roberto asking if he could come down to Kent to discuss the novel, it was still 'concerned mostly with Italians' (CL3 34), probably those like Enrique Clerici, who had followed Garibaldi. Writing to him again in July, Conrad was still adrift: 'I am dying over that cursed Nostromo thing. All my memories of Central America seem to slip away. I just had a glimpse 25 years ago – a short glance. That is not enough pour bâtir un roman dessus. And yet one must live' (CL3 45).

At some point after that cry from the heart, Conrad changed his strategy, keeping the Italians but painting a much broader and richer presentation of Costaguana and the breakaway republic of Sulaco. It's long been established that Conrad read a wide selection of books about South America. Phrases and passages from some of those books are echoed in *Nostromo*; well-known examples are E. B. Eastwick's *Venezuela: Or, Sketches of a Life in a South American Republic*, Ramón Páez's *Wild Scenes in South America: Or, Life in the Llanos of Venezuela*, and G. F. Masterman's *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay* (since Masterman was imprisoned and tortured on the orders of the tyrant Francisco Solano López, the title is a wry understatement). To this list I would add the autobiographical Mexican novel *Tomóchic* by Heriberto Frias and Domingo F. Sarmiento's analysis of the struggles in Argentina between rural *caudillos* and centralising 'Unitarians' in *Facundo: Civilisation and Barbarism*. Who was in a position to recommend such volumes? Who but Cunninghame Graham. He and Conrad were both members of the London Library, which enabled Conrad

(who had joined in 1897) to borrow books by post for less than the cost of a return train ticket to London.

Another of Don Roberto's invaluable moves came late in 1903, when he introduced Conrad to Don Santiago Pérez Triana, whom he had known since 1899. Triana had twice been Colombian Minister Resident in Washington. The son of a Radical Liberal President of Colombia, he fled Bogotá when the Conservatives regained power. Since the main routes out from the city and the Caribbean sea-ports were under surveillance, he escaped by canoe, travelling through areas hardly known by the people of the capital. *De Bogotá al Atlántico* the story of his travels was first published in Spanish; it appeared in English in 1902 as *Down the Orinoco by Canoe*, graced by one of DR's idiosyncratic prefaces. Characteristically, he warns the reader against being 'embedded in the putty of our prejudice' (iv). Triana was now Colombian Minister in London and Madrid, and as if the cruelty of the Thousand Days War in his homeland wasn't enough, he had to deal with the diplomatic fallout of a coup engineered by a foreign power and the secession of a whole province to suit that power. After eyeing the Isthmus of Panama for many years, on 3 November 1903, the Americans now had virtual control of a new and docile republic wrapped around the line of a gigantic high level canal. 'What do you think of the Yankee Conquistadores in Panama', Conrad asked Graham, 'Pretty, isn't it? Enfin' (SL 179). Conrad meanwhile was writing about another secession, this one also far from the seat of national government, but its leaders emboldened by the prospect of huge amounts of silver. No wonder the phrase 'material interests' echoes throughout *Nostromo*.

To do justice to the novel itself would need many more pages, but I leave you with the conviction that without Don Roberto's help it would have been a lesser book. Here's an image he might enjoy, the mainstay of the backwoods pulperia.

