

Conrad before fame

The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad. Vol. 1. 1861-1897. Edited By Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies. (C U P. £19.50.)

THERE are about 3,500 letters from Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) extant, and this is the first of what are to be eight volumes. Several selections have been made in the past, some of these taking a special aspect of Conrad's correspondence, or, in the case of "Conrad's Polish Background" (1964), reproducing letters to him from that striking figure his uncle and guardian Tadeusz Bobrowski, to which the nephew's replies unfortunately do not survive.

They would have shed much light on the young Conrad during the obscure Marseilles period. In fact, after a letter written with a guided pen at the age of three-and-a-half to his father, the earliest is dated about 16 months before Conrad passed (after first failing) his examination to become a second mate. By that time he had already served as third mate after just over two years in the British merchant service as an ordinary seaman. In 1886 he became a naturalised British subject and (again after initial failure) passed his master mariner's certificate.

In other words, the letters do not become at all plentiful until Conrad is over 30 in 1889, making plans to leave for the Congo and experience the highly disagreeable interlude from which he subsequently drew "Heart of Darkness." The next eight years see him established as a writer, taking him to the publication of "The Nigger of the Narcissus," when Conrad was 40.

There are inevitably a fair number of routine letters in this collection, of interest only as establishing dates and the like but, for the Conrad fan, several relationships are highlighted, both personal and literary. Of the former, that with Mme Poradowska, recipient of many of the letters, is perhaps the most striking.

Marguerite Poradowska, always addressed by Conrad as "Aunt," was really the wife (in these Letters soon widow) of a first cousin of Conrad's maternal (Bobrowski) grandmother. She was Belgian, an acknowledged beauty, wrote several novels, and was five or six

years older than Conrad. He wrote to her with great affection and a touch of flirtatiousness. One feels that she was at once the mother, who had died when Conrad was eight, and the semi-official sweetheart Conrad never seems otherwise quite to have established in early life, though one or two "understandings" have been suggested.

After the letters to Mme Poradowska have been running for about five years she suddenly ceased to preserve them, though evidence exists that

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Conrad continued to write to her. Conrad's tone had latterly become appreciably warmer, and it seems not impossible that he proposed, a short time before he actually married Jessie George in 1896. Of the latter Conrad wrote with characteristic realism: "She is a small, not at all striking-looking person (to tell the truth alas—rather plain) who is nevertheless very dear to me." The marriage was successful, though Jessie was fated greatly to irritate Conrad's friends and biographers.

After an apparent first trial-run as writer of fiction in a *Tit-Bits* competition Conrad placed his novel "Almayer's Folly" with the monumentally stingy T. Fisher Unwin.

Fisher Unwin bought the copyright outright for the sum of £20 in 1895, a period by which time eyebrows were beginning occasionally to be raised at such publishers' coups. Conrad's main object, however, was to get into print, and he always referred to Fisher Unwin as the "Enlightened Patron of Letters." Publication had come about through the recommendation of Edward Garnett, thereby beginning a friendship which was of immense consequence to Conrad, and supplies some of the most revealing of the letters so far as Conrad's views and methods of writing are concerned.

Conrad is always apologetic about speaking of himself and his doings, so the Letters are

not a great repository of detail or pen-pictures of people he came across. He never indulges in gossip, but occasionally touches on politics. When the Liberal Government came to power in 1885 he wrote: "the International Socialist Association are triumphant, and every disreputable ragamuffin in Europe feels the day of universal brotherhood, despoliation and disorder is coming apace . . . Socialism must end in Caesarism." It is clearly a relief to his editors when in 1897 he also refers to the "languid imbecility of the present [Conservative] government," a judgment generally agreed to be true.

On July 20, 1897, Conrad wrote to Fisher Unwin, who had published Somerset Maugham's "Liza of Lambeth" and presumably sent him a copy of the book.

I've finished reading *Liza of Lambeth*. It is certainly worth reading—but whether its worth talking about is another question. I at any rate have nothing to say except this: that I do not like society novels, and *Liza* to me is just a society novel—society of a kind.

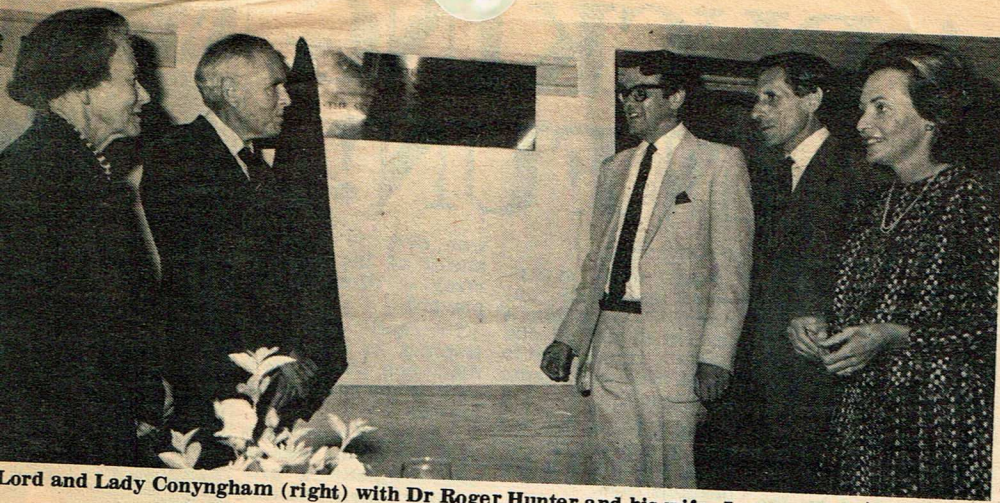
I am not enough of a democrat to perceive all the subtle difference there is between the two ends of the ladder. One may be low and other high—a matter of pure chance—just as the ladder happens to be stood-up. The principal thing is that the story gets on a rung and stays there; and I can't find it in my heart to praise it because the rung happens to be low. Rungs are artificial things, that's my objection.

There is any amount of good things in the story and no distinction of any kind. It will be fairly successful I believe, for it is a "genre" picture without any atmosphere and consequently no reader can live in it. He just looks on—and that is just what the general reader prefers. The book reminds me of Du Maurier's drawings—same kind of art exactly, only in another sphere.

This seems to make a critical point worth bearing in mind. There are plenty of others scattered through the Letters, which are excellently annotated and contain a useful chronology and summary of main correspondents.

Justice in the

Marquis opens hall extension



Lord and Lady Conyngham (right) with Dr Roger Hunter and his wife, Joyce, and Mr John Hall (centre), chairman of the parish council, after the unveiling.

A NEW £28,000 extension to Bridge Village Hall was officially opened on Tuesday by the 7th Marquis of Conyngham.

The two-storey extension provides the village hall with a new kitchen, extra storage space and lavatories on the ground floor and a large upstairs committee room.

Many villagers attended the opening

ceremony with City Cllrs Tim Hoare and David Pentin, and County Cllr Laurence Shirley.

Parish Council chairman, Cllr John Hill, said the village hall committee preferred to extend the current hall rather than build a new one, and the Marquis had agreed to sell the hall to the village.

The hall was built before 1867 and was used as a reading room. Villagers were taught to read there by one of the Conyngham family before the 1870 Education Act was passed.

Old ink wells were found during the extension construction and it is hoped to display these inside.

Cllr Hill thanks donors, especially Dr Roger Hunter who has lived in the village for over 40 years and paid half the purchase price of the hall. The committee room will be named the Hunter Room.

He also thanked architects Cllr Mervyn Gulvin and his partner Mr David Marsh, builders Chapman and Humphreys and Mrs Mary Perridge from Kent Voluntary Services Council, which advised the village hall committee and helped obtain grants from the City and County Councils.