

# K E N T

DR KEITH CARABINE ON

## CONRAD & CANTERBURY

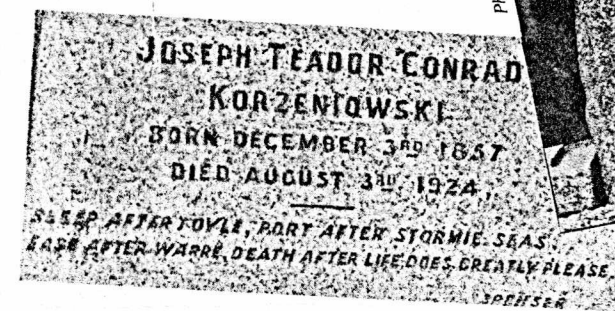
When I arrived in Kent in September 1967 as a "Temporary" Lecturer in English and American Literature, I needed to find a place to live and I wanted to visit the grave of Joseph Conrad.

The former proved much easier than the latter because nobody seemed to know where Conrad was buried. When I finally discovered the graveyard only a mile away from the campus (on the right-hand side of Westgate Court Avenue) I expected signposts and feared commercial exploitation, and met instead a sexton who "hadn't heard the name". I mentioned that Conrad was buried a Roman Catholic and he indicated the "R.C. bit" in the far right-hand corner.

The marble stone is shaped like a tooth. Conrad born in the Russian Ukraine in December 1857 and christened Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski is called Joseph Teodor Conrad Korzeniowski on his tomb.

It is grimly appropriate that a writer famous for his sardonic wit, and buried so far from his birthplace – yet in his beloved adopted country – should lie beneath a stone which misspells his second name and intermingles his English and Polish identity. As a seaman Conrad called himself Conrad Korzeniowski and shortly before he was naturalized in 1886 he began to use Conrad as his surname.

The headline of Conrad's obituary in the Kentish Gazette and Canterbury Press of August 9th, 1924 concludes "A ROMANTIC CAREER", a cliché which for once is most apt. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, a romantic nationalist who was imprisoned in 1861 for his clandestine political activities against Russia and who died in exile in 1869, deliberately named his son after the hero of Adam Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*.



Apollo's son was expected to be inspired by his literary forbear who was an epic, chivalrous defender of Poland's national integrity against the Czarist barbarians. Conrad eschewed his father's idealistic politics and left

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Poland as a sixteen-year-old for Marseilles, and embarked on a career which is more romantic and



Photo: Richard Leemel

Conrad's gravestone in Canterbury Cemetery. (left) The inscription.

remarkable than any in English letters. His dreams of becoming a sailor were truly Quixotic because Poland then had no sea coast and his kinsfolk thought his ambitions were absurd. He spent four years based in Marseilles (1874-8) and sailed to the West Indies and South America. In February 1878 he tried to commit suicide, but fortunately the bullet passed straight through his chest. Within ten years (1878-1889) he rose through the ranks of the British Merchant Service from able-bodied seaman to master mariner, spending much of his time in the Far East. In

1890 he visited the Belgian Congo – an experience vividly recorded in *The Heart of Darkness* (1898), the finest novella in the English language. His maritime career ended in 1893 and his first novel *Almayer's Folly* was published in 1895. He married Jessie George in March 1896 and lived in six

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different houses during his 28 years of married life, punctuated by frequent trips to the continent. He visited Poland for the first time in 20 years



Joseph Conrad, painted by W. Tittle. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery.

Conrad's obituary in the Kentish Gazette, August 9th 1924.

**Kentish Gazette and Canterbury Diocesan**

**THE PASSING OF MR. JOSEPH CONRAD.**

SEA STORIES WHICH HAVE BECOME A VOGUE.

A ROMANTIC CAREER.

The world is the poorer by the death of Mr. Joseph Conrad, the eminent novelist, which occurred at his residence, "Oswald's," Bishopsbourne, near Canterbury, on Sunday morning. Mr. Conrad had been practically an invalid for thirty years.

**SUDDEN DEATH OF JOSEPH CONRAD.**

**THE NOVELIST FROM THE SEAS.**

**HIS ROMANTIC LIFE STORY TOLD BY A FRIEND.**

We regret to announce the

Conrad's death as reported in the Daily Mail of August 4th, 1924. Courtesy Daily Mail.

with his family in 1914; and, typical of a man who was a personal disaster zone, war broke out. Only the intervention of the American Ambassador to Austria ensured a safe return to England.

Four of Conrad's six rented homes were in Kent. He lived at Pent Farm, Postling near Hythe from 1898-1907; Capel House, Orlestone, near Ashford, June 1910-March 1919; and after six months at Spring Grove near Ashford he moved to "Oswald's", Bishopsbourne where he dwelt until

*Joseph Conrad*

his death. Conrad wrote *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *Nostramo*, *The Mirror of the Sea* and *The Secret Agent* at Pent; *Under Western Eyes*, "The Secret Sharer", *Victory* and *The Shadow-Line* at Capel House, and finished *The*

*Rescue* and wrote *The Rover* at "Oswald's". Conrad thought "Oswald's" "a hole" because he could not see the sea. It is surely fitting that a restless exile should suffer the heart attack that killed him on his way to inspect a fresh house within sight of the Channel.

Conrad's funeral took place at St. Thomas' R.C. Church during "Cricket Week", the high spot then, as now, of Canterbury's social and sporting life. Kent defeated Hampshire by an

*continued overleaf*



## CONRAD & CANTERBURY

innings and 21 runs, and two cricketers immortals, Frank Woolley and "Tich" Freeman (the finest leg-spinner England ever produced) excelled themselves. According to his great friend Cunningham Graham the streets were "all hung with flowers, as if to honour" Conrad, and "the collected band of cricketers" stood outside "the chief hotel" and "saluted" as the cortege passed "as reverently as if the funeral had been that of one of their own mystery".

The obituary in the Kentish Gazette is flanked by "Local Intelligence" and a corset ad. The

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former includes news of a "Druid's concert at Lodge 98 where Brother Gaylor presented a case of butterflies to be disposed of to augment the fund". (Devotees of Conrad will be irresistibly reminded of Stein in *Lord Jim* among his butterflies: "Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece" he said keeping his eyes fixed on the glass case".) "Some Features in Corsetry" includes a drawing of a buxom matron gazing rapturously into the future wearing an ample "closed-back corset", "the first great progressive step of modern corsetry . . . since we broke away from the tyranny of the 1890 corset."

The obituary also informs us that "the body" was placed "upon a purple-draped catafalque flanked with lighted candles in front of the altar". A Requiem Mass was sung and the "Dead March" (from Saul) resounded as they bore his body from the church. A bitter-sweet end for a confirmed austere atheist who once declared wryly: "It is impossible to know. It is impossible to know anything tho' it is possible to believe a thing or two". Kent that day claimed Conrad as their own; but the Polish Minister to London, who attended the funeral, sent a telegram to Mrs. Conrad

assuring her that "we know that until the end he ever remained a true son of Poland". His gravestone attests that Conrad was, as he once said, "an homo duplex". Inscribed on the tomb are the last two lines of a stanza from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

*"He there does now enjoy etemall rest  
And happy ease, which thou doest want and crave,  
And further from it daily wanderest:  
What if some little payne the passage have,  
That makes frayle flesh to feare the bitter wave?  
Is not short payne well borne, that bringes long ease,  
And layes the soule to sleep in quiet grave?  
Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,  
Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please."  
Book I, Canto 9, Stanza 40.*



"Oswald's" at Bishopsbourne.

I wonder if Conrad left us with one last wry retrospect on his own life, and one last grasp on the sensibilities of those readers who will visit his tomb? The words are spoken by Despair to the Redcrosse Knight to induce a loss of hope which would

lead to suicide. The Knight resisted and found sustenance in Christianity. Conrad survived a suicide attempt, rejected spiritual nostrums and, stoically, fulfilled his uncle Tadeusz's motto and endured "usque ad finem" .. "to the very end".

## PROFILE

Dr. Keith Carabine, Lecturer in English and American Literature, came to Kent in 1967 after five years at Leeds and three at Yale where he held the William R. Coe fellowship in American Studies. He has taught at Yale, Texas Southern, Colorado State, and U.W.I. (Jamaica). His publications include articles on Sherwood Anderson, Conrad, Dickens, Hawthorne, Hemingway and the modern Nebraskan novelist Wright Morris. He reviews for *Modern Language Review* and *Notes and Queries*. His edition of *Nostromo* for Oxford University Press, World's Classics Series, will appear in June 1984.

