

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RKM-3  
Conrad and the Congo

7 Chauncy Street  
Cambridge 38, Mass.  
July 2, 1963

Mr. Richard Nolte  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Browsing in libraries is usually one-third intellectual endeavor, two-thirds idleness and three-thirds relaxation. Alas, this is not the case in Harvard's Houghton Library which contains the University's manuscripts, rare books, and (with a special pass given to sociologists, psychologists and I imagine a few quacks) an extensive collection of pornography. From outside the brick building one enters a round hallway containing a few locked shelves of not-so-precious books and a man in a blue uniform and red face. If he doesn't recognize you he interrogates you briefly and politely and lets you pass on to a locked door on the right where you press a buzzer. An employee then comes, looks at you through the small pane of glass, and if you are deemed acceptable you are then allowed in. Almost expecting to find a speak-easy or a bank vault, you are reassured by the dozen or so scholars working at the tables: there is a balding gentleman surrounded by bundles of Thomas Wolfe's correspondence, a Soviet specialist going through Trotsky's private papers, a woman with a huge collection of 3 X 5 file cards and a stack of first editions of Samuel Johnson. To use any of the library's material, forms and statements of purpose have to be signed. This you do, only slightly distracted by the increasingly claustrophobic signs of an innocent old Latinist incarcerated in the card catalogue on the left. Finally, from what seems to be the very bowels of the earth, a dumb-waiter arrives with what you ordered.

What I ordered the other day were two begrimed little black copy-books in which Joseph Conrad kept a diary while serving as a captain of a steamer on the Congo River in 1890. The pencilled scribblings fascinated me for several reasons. Conrad's Congo experiences were of considerable literary importance. They were clearly the basis of such short novels as "An Outpost of Progress" and "Heart of Darkness". In fact Conrad claimed years after he had written it that the latter was "experience pushed a little (and only a little) beyond the actual facts of the case". Beyond this, it is to the Congo and its terrible toll on human health that we probably owe all Conrad's literary output. He was a sea captain and had been for fifteen years when he signed his contract with the Société anonyme belge du Haut-Congo, and he planned to remain one. But his health was so undermined by his Congo journey that he was forced to lead a more sedentary life.

Conrad's diary is of interest also because it contains the observations of a man with a keen mind and a brilliant pen who was in the Congo during that crucial period when the Africans of the inland were first experiencing the white man, and vice versa. It was only fourteen

years before, in 1876, that Stanley had first descended the Congo River and proved it to be navigable for over a thousand miles once the rapids just above its mouth had been traversed. At the time Stanley was an explorer and journalist for the New York Herald. Two years later, however, he ascended the river as the agent of the International African Association, which, despite its name was completely dominated by Leopold II, King of the Belgians. And it was the International African Association which in 1885 became recognized internationally as the Etat indépendant du Congo, which conformed to the Congo's present frontiers and was equally the private domain of the able and rapacious Leopold. Despite some extremely skillful public relations work that stressed the suppression of slavery and the mission civilisatrice, Leopold was basically after a profit. The means were not important; in fact so little so that twenty-five years later Belgium was forced to take over the Congo Free State because of the international outcry against Leopold's methods. For example, though the suppression of the slave trade was stated to be one of Leopold's primary aims, Joseph Conrad found when he docked at Stanley Falls in 1890 that he was "no more than ten miles from Rechid's camp...and the yet unbroken power of the Arabs", who were certainly slavers. In fact, until 1892, the Free State's governor at Stanley Falls was none other than the Arab slave trader Tippo-Tib.

Not all the Europeans who were in the Congo in Conrad's time were there for ivory and rubber and the quick accumulation of nest eggs in Brussels banks, however. Along with Leopold's agents came the missionaries American, French, Belgian, British and Canadian. They represented half a dozen sects and had come to teach and proselytize and heal. Though often complaining about the barbarity of the Congolese, they were men (and a few women) of great fortitude and unselfishness - totally different from the Free State people. They had the same drive, though, partly because of competition between sects. In the still-vivid tradition of David Livingstone, they did much exploring, especially in Kasai and Orientale. Shortly after Stanley launched the first river steamer in 1882, the American Baptist Mission launched its own, named Peace, to service a growing network of stations on the Congo and its tributaries.

In 1890 maps of the Congo were still full of blank spaces and large, important rivers represented by uncertain dotted lines. The inhabitants of this huge heartland of the Bantu peoples were largely an unpleasant mystery to the first Europeans (both traders and missionaries) who reacted with a repulsion that precluded the generous curiosity necessary for understanding. For example the Baptist Bently wrote home in 1884:

The chief characteristics of the Bolobo [a tribe centered on what is now Coquilhatville] appear to be drunkenness, immorality and cruelty out of each of which vices spring actions almost too fearful to describe. In hearing these, one living out here almost gets to feel like calling the people terrible brutes and wretches rather than miserable heathen.

This, from a man who dedicated long years to the hardships of Congo duty, was a typical European reaction to the Congolese of the interior.

During the early period up to the time of Conrad's voyage the tribesmen in contact with Europeans (there were only 430 of them in 1889) generally attributed magical powers to them and were greatly impressed by their guns, steamboats and paltry trade goods. In some places the whites were taken for reincarnations of dead ancestors, in others for spirits or the sons of gods. According to a British missionary, one tribe thought the cheap cotton textile trade goods

"too finely woven to be the work of white men with two eyes, but are made by the sea sprites, who, having only one eye, have the sight of two concentrated in it, and are consequently able to weave these fine textiles".

Sometimes, however, the Congolese found the supernatural powers of the whites to be daemonic in origin. In 1886 Leopold sent out a crew to begin work on the railroad necessary to bring up goods from the sea to the navigable reaches of the Congo River. Obviously he needed labor for such a project and without sufficient economic incentive forced labor was all he could get. (Later he brought in gangs of Chinese coolies, one of whom was to be the grandfather of Joseph Kasavubu, the present head of the Congolese state.) Indeed, forced labor was what carried Conrad's boat, the disassembled Roi des Belges, up the trail which was to be superseded by the railroad. It was this feature of the European penetration of the Congo, along with rapacity of the Free State agents, which made the deepest impression on Conrad.

Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, by trade a sea captain, by temperament a wonderer and harvester of dramatic experience, by turn of mind ironic and melancholy, by literary style romantic, found himself in his thirty-second year in London and unemployed. But it was not out of financial desperation that he signed on as river pilot for the Société anonyme belge du Haut-Congo. Though orphaned at twelve, he belonged to a large and aristocratic Polish family to which he could always turn and he never knew real poverty. Rather, he was fulfilling a childhood dream. In his autobiography he writes:

It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself, with absolute assurance and amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: When I grow up I shall go there.

And there was exactly where he was headed when he disembarked from the Ville de Maceio at Boma in the Congo River estuary in the spring of 1890. It was here that he began keeping the brief and single diary of his life.

The extent to which the great story "Heart of Darkness" parallels the musty, smudged diary in Houghton Library, is remarkable. These parallels give to the story an authenticity, a value as historical documentation, that few works of fiction can have. A few of these

parallels are juxtaposed below:

Diary entry June 13, 1890:

Think just now that my life amongst the people  
(white) around here cannot be very comfortable.  
Intend avoid acquaintances as much as possible.

Heart of Darkness:

I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak,  
my back on that station. In that way only it seemed  
to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts  
of life...They [the Europeans of the station]  
wandered here and there like a lot of faithless  
pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence.

Diary entry July 29, 1890:

Today did not set the tent, but put up in the govt.  
shimbek. Zanzabari in charge - very obliging...On  
the road today met a skeleton tied up to a post.  
Also white man's grave - no name - heap of stones  
in the form of a cross. Health good now.

Heart of Darkness:

Now and then a carrier died in harness, at rest in  
the long grass near the path, with an empty water  
gourd and his long staff lying by his side.

Diary entry July 3, 1890:

Met an officer of the state inspecting. A few  
minutes afterwards saw at a camp place the dead body  
of a Bakongo. Shot? Horrid smell.

Heart of Darkness: the narrator describes a drunken white en-  
countered on the trail who "is looking after the upkeep of the  
road" and remarks:

Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the  
body of a middle-aged Negro with a bullethole in the  
forehead, upon which I stumbled three miles further  
on may be considered as a permanent improvement.

The second of the two notebooks of the diary, the "Up-River Book",  
is almost completely technical. As such it would probably still be of  
use to a Congolese river pilot, and we can see on its yellow-brown  
pages a very conscientious captain making careful navigational notes.  
As literature, however, it is of no value. It's a pity, for example,  
we cannot see the prototype for Kurtz, the disintegrated tragic hero  
of the tale who finally dies on Conrad's ship. In real life he was an  
agent of the Free State, a Frenchman whose name was Klein but little is  
known of this Klein and there is of course no mention in the "Up-River  
Book".

But Joseph Conrad had a remarkable memory, and if all he noted on  
his journey up the Congo in 1890 were items like:

11(A). Long reach to a curved point. Great quantity  
of dangerous snags along the starboard shore. Fol-  
low the slight bend of the shore with caution. The

To day's march -

Direction  $NNE \frac{1}{2} N$ . Dist. 13 miles

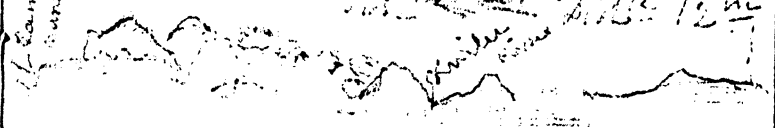


Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose. In the evening 3 women of which one albino passed our camp - Horrid chaulky white with pink blotches - Red eyes, Red hair - features very negroid and ugly. - Mosquitos - A bright moon when the moon rose heard shouts and drumming in distant villages. Passed a bad night.

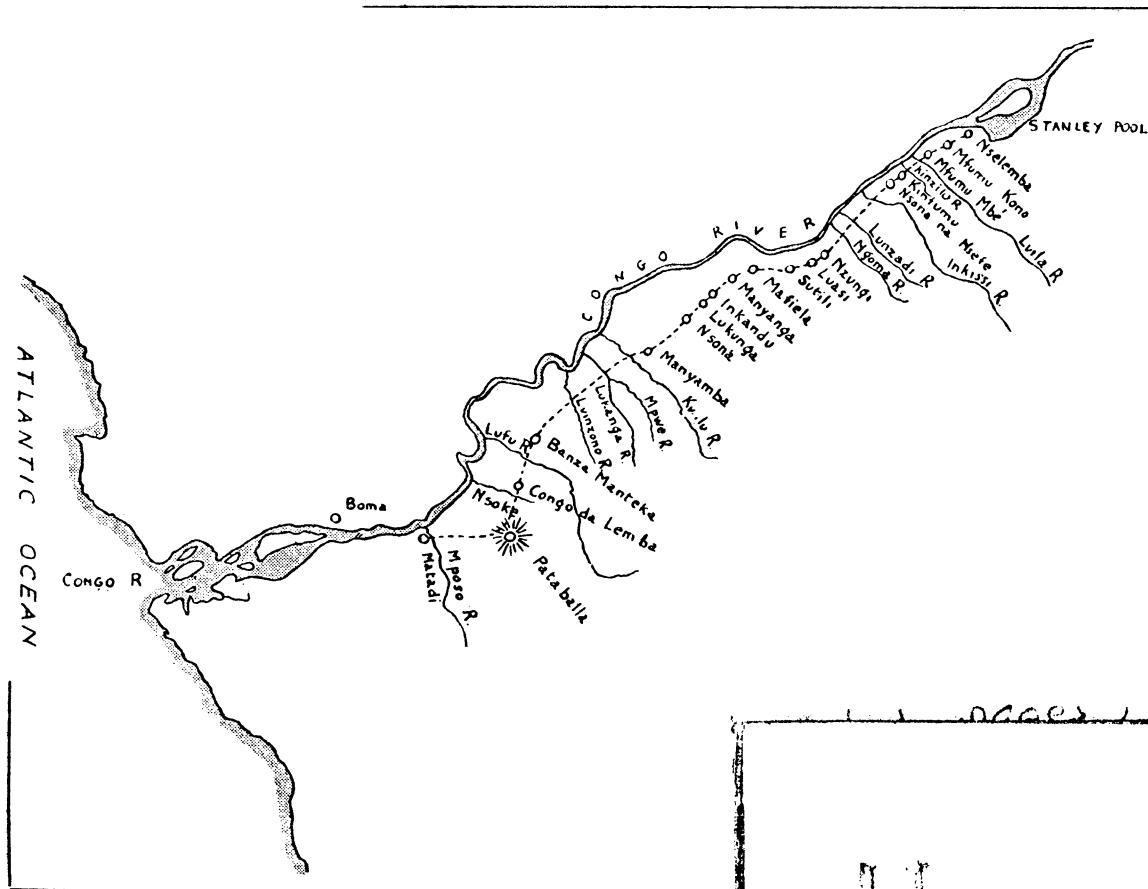
Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> July 90 -

Left at 6.15. Morning cool, clear, cold and very damp - Sky cleared by overcast. Gentle breeze from NE. Road through a ~~marshy~~ plain up to R. Kwila. Swift flowing and deep swift tide - crossed in canoes. After up and down very steep hills intersected by deep ravines. Main chain of heights running north to S. on Wam. (part time). Stopped at Manyamba - Camp place bad - in a hole - Water very indifferent. Tent set at 10.15.

Section of the day's road



The above is a reproduction of two entries from the first diary, written when J. C. was halfway between Matadi and Leopoldville. The page on the left reads: "Today's march direction  $NNE \frac{1}{2} N$ . Dist. 13 Miles. Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose. In the evening women of which one albino passed our camp - Horrid chaulky white with red blotches. Red eyes red hair. Features very negroid and ugly. Mosquitos (sic). When the moon rose heard shouts and drumming in distant villages. Passed bad night."



Above: A rough map of J. C's trip on foot from the sea to the navigable reaches of the Congo River.

Right: The first page of the second diary which consists of navigational notes on the 1,000 mile course from Stanley Pool to Stanley Falls.

# Up - river book.

Commenced -

3. Aug 1896 -

C. S. a Roi des Belges

29th

Inkissi River very rapid, is about 100 yards broad - Passage in canoes - Banks wooded very densely and valley of the river rather deep but very narrow.

To day did not set the tent but put up in gov. shimbek. Zanaibari in charge. Very obliging. - Met ripe pineapple for the first time. - On the road to day passed a skeleton tied up to a post. Also white-man's grave - no name. heap of stones in the form of a cross.

Health good now.

Left: J. C. writes at a point near Stanley Pool: "Inkissi River very rapid, is about 100 yards broad - Passage in canoes - Banks wooded very densely and valley of the river rushes deep but very narrow - Today did not set the tent but put up in gov. shimbek. Zanaibari in charge. Very obliging - Met ripe pineapple for the first time - On the road today passed a skeleton tied-up to a post. Also white-man's grave - no name heap of stones in the form of a cross. Health good now -"

J. C. had his minor as well as his major irritations. To the right he notes: "Today fell into a muddy puddle. Beastly. The fault of the man who carries me."

The day fell into a muddy puddle. Beastly. The fault of the man that carries me. After camp went to catch stream fishes and gather clothes. - Feeling jolly and sick of this place. - Tomorrow expect a long march to go to Mena. - from Manyanga. - No sunshine to day.

middle of the channel...etc.

In 1899 when he wrote Heart of Darkness he could remember and write, in some of the finest English prose, passages like:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest...it was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.

Or:

The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, welcoming us - who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings, we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign - and no memories.

Heart of Darkness is about a European who, without the supportive order of society, becomes a moral wreck, a grotesque parody on his former self and ideals. He is an exceptional man, a man of sensitivity and intelligence, and Conrad presents him in a sympathetic light despite his degradation. He is about the only European mentioned in the long story of which this is the case. Conrad, using the narrator of Heart of Darkness as a mouthpiece, gives a much more typical depiction of the Europeans involved in the penetration of the Congo in his description of a band of men calling themselves explorers who arrived when he was at Leopoldville in the summer of 1890:

Their talk was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the earth was their desire, with no more moral purpose in back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.

When Conrad first lands in the Congo from Europe he remarks through the narrator:

...as I stood on this hillside I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a monster of a rapacious and pitiless folly.



On the Upper Congo, the narrator, who uses the steam whistle on the boat to scare off hostile tribesmen, relates: "I pulled the string of the whistle, and I did this because I saw the pilgrims [Conrad's ironic appellation for the Free State agents] on deck getting out their rifles with an air of anticipating a jolly lark".

The Africans Conrad encounters are perforce those in contact with other Europeans, and they are a sorry lot. At what is now the important port of Matadi where railroad construction began in 1890, he comes across a group of Africans in a grove "in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair":

They were dying slowly - it was clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air - and nearly as thin.

Like other Europeans in the Congo at the time, Conrad is struck by the barbarity of the Congolese, but unlike most of them he can see other things as well. In Heart of Darkness he writes:

It was unearthly, and the men were - No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it - this suspicion of their not being human. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with that passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you - you so remote from the night of first ages - could comprehend.

Nowadays, after the world wars and the threat of the Bomb, people do not generally consider themselves so far away from "the night of first ages" as they did in the positivist second half of the Nineteenth Century, nor was social anthropology yet invented, but withal, Conrad clearly differentiates his own attitude from that of the other Europeans he encounters. Perhaps this attitude was colored by his being a Pole whose nation and parents had been destroyed by Russian imperialism. Or perhaps it was his non-conformism, his sense of irony and humanity.

Conrad was skeptical about the possibility of introducing European civilization into Africa. He looked on himself and his fellow Europeans as intruders who in no way belonged and would soon be conquered by the

restless silence of the jungle and its people, just as the hero of Heart of Darkness was. And indeed he raises an important question: To what extent has the European mold, stamped on the African continent with brutality, intelligence, bloodshed, rapacity, and compassion for the sake of profit, enlightenment, Christianity, national and personal glory and vainglory - to what extent has this mold stamped an imprint resembling the original?

Sincerely,

*Richard Mathews*

Richard Mathews

Received in New York July 8, 1963.