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Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception

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Comments

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PETERS, John G. *Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 274 pp. \$95.00.

Until the arrival of the four-volume Cambridge *Contemporary Reviews* of Joseph Conrad, readers have depended on Norman Sherry's excellent but highly selective, overwhelmingly British-based *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, published in 1973. The latter may be the most cited volume in Conrad studies. The welcome new collection, which arrived in 2013, provides an embarrassment of riches, with reviews not only from the UK and the US, but from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, China, Malaysia, and India, and from newspapers as small as those from my hometown, Syracuse, New York.

John Peters was one of the volumes' editors, so he brings a comprehensive, historical perspective to *Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception*, which provides synopses of the most important, mostly book-length Conrad criticism from the opening of Conrad's career in the 1890s until 2012.

What makes this volume so useful, even indispensable, to both emerging and established Conrad scholars is its comprehensiveness. Peters provides a thorough summary of the wide-ranging, often insightful criticism that has appeared since Conrad began writing at the end of the nineteenth century. Peters is a literary archaeologist, unearthing interesting criticism and reviews we likely would never have found on our own. He reminds us of Richard Curle's contributions, for example, which anticipate so much of the later criticism concerned with Conrad's peculiar irony, with psychology, and with gender. Less well known but equally interesting is Helen Thomas Follett and Wilson Follett's "Contemporary Novelists: Joseph Conrad," which appeared in the *Atlantic* in 1917 and, among other things, deals with the complex ways Conrad balances individual desire and group solidarity. Frances Wentworth Cutler's essay, "Why Marlow?" in the *Sewanee Review*, 1917, analyzes Conrad's doppelgänger in ways that anticipate the preoccupation with Marlow's reliability in the 1990s. Raymond Fernández's "L'art de Conrad," which appeared in a volume of essays entitled *Hommage à Joseph Conrad* in 1924, pays tribute to Conrad's polyphony before Bakhtin introduced the term to literary analysis. I never knew that Hemingway wished, in print, he could grind T. S. Eliot into fine powder if that would bring Conrad back from the dead until I saw it in Peters's book.

One difficulty with the volume is its lack of coherence. We learn, for example, quite usefully, that Grace Isabel Colbron wrote the first extended response to Conrad's representation of women in 1914, arguing that, for the most part, "they are typically

inarticulate and seem alive only when silent” (7): not exactly fair, but certainly provocative. This detail is followed, incongruously, by a brief synopsis of Henry James’s snide criticism of *Chance*. A better approach might gather these early commentaries together based on themes. Peters might have brought all the “Conrad is a Pole writing in English” reviews together in the first chapter, for example, and then presented his defenders. Early reviewers often linked Conrad with Kipling in the exotic adventure tradition; Peters might have devoted a section to this variety of criticism.

Peters does gather later criticism together under particular headings, however, and most people consulting this volume will not read it straight through, so the lack of coherence in the first chapter should not be off-putting. Most readers will look for criticism on individual topics or works, and the index is appropriately comprehensive. Consulting the index on “Conrad and Women,” we discover not only Grace Isabel Colbron’s contribution, but also the American novelist Mary Austin, who published an article with the irresistible title “Joseph Conrad Tells What Women Don’t Know About Men” in the *Pictorial Review* in 1923.

Peters is very scrupulous in this volume; he provides little of his own commentary. This is understandable. Had Peters attempted to adjudicate among so many competing judgments and analyses, he would have doubled the size of the book and likely violated its purpose, which is to provide us with a disinterested overview of over a century of Conrad studies. Still, a bit more guidance would have been helpful. He notes, for example, H. L. Mencken’s review of previous Conrad criticism in Mencken’s *Book of Prefaces* (1917), pointing out the criticism Mencken likes and doesn’t like. But he doesn’t explain why. It would be helpful to know, given Mencken’s own critical perspective, why he would “dismiss” Galsworthy’s commentary. The same might be said for E. M. Forster’s and Virginia Woolf’s criticisms. Given Forster’s own literary concerns, why would Forster complain, famously, “that Conrad’s genius contains a vapor rather than a jewel,” and what is it about Woolf’s own aesthetic concerns that would make her compare *Nostramo* to “a superb but immobile tiger” (14)? Later in the volume Peters simply notes that Robert F. Lee’s *Conrad’s Colonialism* (1969) argues Conrad was a supporter of imperialism without suggesting that Lee’s book has very little credibility among, and is very seldom cited by, Conrad scholars.

These are quibbles, however. By providing this heavily annotated, contextualizing bibliography, Peters has done the Conrad community an enormous service. Every research library and every serious student of Conrad will want a copy.