

Epistolary Conrad: Four New Letters

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The four unpublished Conrad letters printed below, all of them currently in private collections, appear by kind permission of the Estate of Joseph Conrad, their presentation following the conventions used in the *Collected Letters*. Three of them are to contacts or acquaintances of Conrad's later years; the fourth is an undated note to an unidentified correspondent.

I

The first letter introduces a new Conrad correspondent, Edith Algerine Bagnold, Lady Jones CBE (1889–1981), a British author and playwright now mainly remembered for her children's classic, *National Velvet* (1935). As this 1918 letter indicates, Bagnold had sent Conrad one of her volumes – that is, either her first work, *A Diary Without Dates* (1917), or her second, *The Sailing Ships and Other Poems* (1918). Conrad's thank-you note for a "little book" of "touching charm and sincerity" seems, however, to be decidedly more applicable to the poetry collection¹ than to the earlier *Diary*, a harrowing record of her experiences as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse in a Woolwich hospital for the war-wounded.

To Edith Bagnold

Text MS Private collection; Unpublished

[letterhead: Capel House]

16. 3. '18

Dear Miss Bagnold.

¹ Bagnold may have felt that the title poem, "The Sailing Ships," would appeal to Conrad: it begins, "I was a sailor sailing on sweet seas ... But now I sail no more before the breeze."

A bad wrist prevented me acknowledging sooner the receipt of the little book into which you've put so much touching charm and sincerity. I am not surprised at the number of friends it has found for itself. My affection was given to it some time before the copy came, but I thank you specially for the kind and friendly thought which moved you to send it to me.

Believe me, dear Miss Bagnold[,] your very faithful friend and servant

Joseph Conrad.²

II

The recipient of the second letter, Frank Vernon (1875–1940, né Spicer), playwright, theatre producer, director, and author of *The Twentieth-century Theatre* (1924) and *Modern Stage Production* (1928), was first introduced to Conrad at Oswalds by J. B. Pinker in mid-September 1919 and agreed to oversee Conrad's forthcoming dramatic adaptation of *The Secret Agent*. The following new letter shows the informal working association in action as Conrad invites Vernon to Oswalds for a discussion about Act I.³ For the next six months, Vernon received various drafts of the adaptation, though he and his partner (J. E. Vedrenne) did not go on to produce it as Conrad had initially hoped.

To Frank Vernon

Text MS Private collection; Unpublished

[letterhead: Oswalds]
5. Nov. '19

Dear Mr Vernon

Your very interesting letter to Pinker about the play has given me the greatest pleasure.

The repetitions you noticed in the first part of Act One (Winnie – Mother – Stevie) arise from my anxiety to drive home to the audience the relations of these 3 people to each other – and the particular relation of Winnie to her brother. Unless the pent-up

² A facsimile version of this letter appeared in the online catalogue of Forum Auctions (London) for 29 November 2018 and was sold for £550.

³ Vernon accepted Conrad's invitation by 7 November (CL6 518, 519) and visited Oswalds two days later. A second epistolary exchange between the two men took place later in 1919 with Conrad's letter of 22 November (CL6 533–35) and Vernon's reply of [4 December] (Stape and Knowles 1996: 144–45).

passion of maternity is made clear the last act will seem to the audience a gratuitous atrocity.

We would have to find an intelligent girl to play Stevie.⁴ I have no doubt that you will drill her effectively in the part.

I cut my letter short here as I understand from P[inker] that you would not mind coming down to see us here in this still half-finished house.⁵ Apart from the pleasure[,] your visit would be of the greatest assistance to me. Can you spare us next Sunday? A good train leaves Victoria at 10.45 arriving Canterbury 12.23. You could be back in town at 10 in the evening same day; and if you can stay the night then you could leave here at 10 on Mond[ay] and be at Victoria at 11.40.

Pray drop us a line. If the above suggestion is impossible then perhaps you will name your own day.

My wife's kind regards

Yours faithfully

Joseph Conrad⁶

III

The third letter is to a friend of Conrad's later years, the portraitist, landscape painter and goldsmith Alice Sarah Kinkead (1871–1926), familiarly known as "Kinkie." Born in Tuam, County Galway, she was educated in Galway and undertook art studies in Paris, before moving to London (in the late 1890s) to further her career. She met the Conrads during their 1921 stay in Corsica and later persuaded Conrad to provide a foreword to the exhibition catalogue of her Corsica and Irish landscape paintings held at the United Arts Gallery, London, in November 1921.⁷ Kinkead also painted separate portraits of the Conrads – of Jessie in June 1921 and of the aged Conrad in 1924.⁸ The new letter shows that Miss Kinkead had written on behalf of a friend in order to consult Conrad on

⁴ It is not clear why Conrad anticipated that a girl would play the part of Stevie; in the stage performances, the role was taken by eighteen-year-old Freddie Peisley (1904–76).

⁵ The Conrads had moved into Oswalds in early October.

⁶ A photocopy of the original holograph was kindly supplied by Dr Kalika Sands of Sotheby's (New York), where the letter came up for auction as Lot 233 on 13 December 2018 but did not reach its reserve.

⁷ Conrad's foreword is included in the Cambridge Edition of *Last Essays* (2010: 179–80).

⁸ For a fuller account of Kinkead's relations with the Conrads, see Jones (2006) and (2008).

mid-European spa towns and in the evident belief that this entire area might be too uncivilized for her respectable friend. The bemused writer's reply plays affectionately and comically with these genteel assumptions.

To A. S. Kinkead

Text TS/MS Private collection; Unpublished

[letterhead: Oswalds]

March 8th. 1922.

My dear Miss Kinkead

I haven't been in Bohemia (or whatever the country is called now) since the year of grace 1871,⁹ since when I took not the slightest interest in it. I never heard of the place and for my part I don't believe in baths or drinking waters of any kind.¹⁰ But I make bold to say that the establishment will be everything that it should be. I wonder what your idea of Bohemia can be? Of course there may be cannibals there, but I never heard of them. I can assure you that that part of the world is more civilized than a great many parts of France. Carlsbad and Marienbad (both in Bohemia) have a world-wide reputation; and if the place your friend wants to go to has been recently established, that will only mean that all the torture apparatus will be perfectly new and in dreadful working order, and the water more nasty than any words in any human language can express.

I can't find the place on the map but there are agents for all those medicinal stations who would have probably all the details. I imagine that Cook himself¹¹ would be able to give the information, though as an information bureau Cook, generally speaking, is contemptible. It's a mere ticket-selling enterprise; but even from that point of view I think it would pay them to know something of watering places.

Ever affectionately Y[ou]rs

Joseph Conrad

p.t.o

⁹ After the First World War, Bohemia became the westernmost part of the newly-formed country of Czechoslovakia (present-day Czech Republic). Conrad had visited the area to meet his uncle in 1883, spending time in the spa towns of Teplice and Marienbad.

¹⁰ Although earlier in his life Conrad had undergone hydrotherapy or "water cures" at the baths in Champel-les-Bains in Switzerland.

¹¹ Thomas Cook (1808–92), founder of the famous London travel agency in 1872.

PS We are looking forward to your visit, though Jessie's feelings on that matter are less mixed than mine. Still[,] affection goes a long way and I think I will be really glad to see you, after all. Pray convey my regards and sympathy to Sir Maurice¹² in his bitter disappointment at missing getting dreadfully wet in a howling gale, and give my humble duty to Lady Cameron if she will accept it from such an unworthy source.¹³

IV

The fourth item – a brief Conrad note – offers no clue about its recipient or date of composition. It appears on the front endpaper of a copy of the first edition of *Youth: a Narrative, and Two Other Stories* (1902) that Conrad evidently sent to, or signed for, an admirer who had written to him enquiring whether it could be expected that a youth of eighteen would have such a rich and wide-ranging perspective as the Marlow of “Youth.”

To [?]

Text MS Private collection; Unpublished

I do not know what may be “expected of a youth of 18.” I was twenty when I was 2^d off[ic]^{er} of the “Palestine” and 38 when I wrote the story [“Youth”]¹⁴ which is strictly a personal experience. As to the prose in which it is embodied it is even more “personal” than the experience.

Joseph Conrad.¹⁵

¹² Major Sir Maurice Alexander Cameron (1855–1936; knighted 1914), a military engineer by training, spent the early years of his career as the Surveyor-General of the Straits Settlements. Conrad first met him through Hugh Clifford in 1903 and was reacquainted with him in Corsica in 1921, the year after Cameron had retired from his later position as First Crown Agent in British Central and East Africa, Uganda and the Niger Coast, and had married his second wife, Frances Mary Perkins (1868–1959). Kinkead had known Frances before her marriage and also resided with the Camerons on their return from Corsica in 1921 (Jones 2008: 109).

¹³ A facsimile version of this letter appeared in the online catalogue of RR Auctions (Boston) for March 2016 and was sold for \$708.

¹⁴ Conrad was twenty-five years old when he sailed in the *Palestine* and forty when he completed the story; the young Marlow in “Youth” is aged twenty (12).

¹⁵ An additional typewritten sheet laid into the volume contains a copy of the question sent to Conrad. A facsimile version of Conrad's note appeared in the

Works cited

- Jones, Susan. "Alice Kinhead and the Last Portrait of Conrad." *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 58 (2006): 156–64.
- . "Alice Kinhead and the Conrads." *The Conradian* 33.1 (2008): 103–18.
- Stape, J. H., and Owen Knowles. *Portrait in Letters: Correspondence to and about Conrad*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996.

online catalogue of Swann Auction Galleries (New York) for 21 March 2002; the volume was sold for \$18,400.