**Three New Conrad Letters: 1914, 1923, and 1924**

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he three unpublished letters printed below, all of them belonging in private collections, appear by kind permission of the Estate of Joseph Conrad, their presentation following the conventions used in the *Collected* *Letters*. Their publication here brings the total number of Conrad letters discovered since the appearance of the last volume of the *Collected Letters* (2007) to 78 items.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I

The first item – a brief note of 1914 to a London-based firm of insurance agents and brokers – shows Conrad arranging insurance for his second car. After parting with his first motor – a second-hand, two-seater Cadillac acquired in mid-1912 (*CL*5 96) – Conrad purchased another second-hand vehicle in January 1914, a more capacious “ten h.p. Humber four-seater touring car”[[2]](#footnote-2) from C. Hayward and Son, of Ashford, Kent, for the sum of £75: the first instalment of £25 was paid in January 1914, followed by monthly cheques of £5 from February to November. When expressing thanks to Pinker for “consenting to the car transaction,” Conrad expected to cover its cost from the serialization of *Victory* or the sale of manuscripts to John Quinn (*CL*5 330, 333).

**To Messrs. Hinton Hill & Coles Ltd.**

*Text* MS Private collection; Unpublished

[letterhead: Capel House]

3d Ap. ’14

Dear Sirs.

*Car insurance*

I am sorry to have given you this trouble. I bought the car second hand last Jan[uar]y and this, it seems to me, is what I was told. It certainly is *not* a 1905 make. The maker’s number is *C. 4748*.

Yours faithfully

Joseph Conrad.

*Messrs. Hinton Hill & Coles Ltd*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

II

A second item – in this case, a Conrad letter of 1923 to one of his old crew-mates, John C. Niven – has previously been known only through a small extract included in G. Jean-Aubry’s introduction to the first volume of his *Joseph Conrad:* *Life and Letters* (1927: 99) and later reproduced in Volume 8 of the *Collected* *Letters*, where the editors comment that the lost original “was last seen on the wall of a pub in Troon, Scotland, in the 1950s” (*CL*8 240 n3). In fact, the letter has always belonged to Quintin Jardine, a Scots crime-writer and Niven’s great-nephew, and can now be printed here in full and accurate form.

Renfrewshire-born John C(ampbell) Niven (1853–1926), second engineer in the *Vidar* in 1887 when Conrad was serving as first mate, makes an appearance by name in *The Shadow-Line* (1917) as a “sturdy young Scot” and a “fierce misogynist” (p. 13). The two other crew-members of the *Vidar* mentioned in the letter are the ship’s captain, James Craig (1846–1929), a Scotsman who had arrived in Singapore in 1875, and her chief engineer, James Allen. On 3 December, Niven had written from Woburn Sands (Bucks) on behalf of Craig and Allen to remind Conrad of his old *Vidar* shipmates who “are all alive & in this country” and to congratulate him on his “great achievements” (Stape and Knowles 1995: 226). Delighted to hear from crew-mates whom he had not seen for over 35 years, Conrad responded by return of post:

**To John C. Niven**

*Text* TS Private collection; Unpublished

[letterhead: Oswalds]

Dec. 5th. 1923.

My dear Niven

Your letter was the pleasantest kind of surprise. I am sorry I have to answer it by dictation but I have had a devil of a time with gout all this last month and I feel not well enough yet to sit up and write by hand. But I don’t want to lose even one post in thanking you all for your kind and friendly message to an old shipmate. You could not really have believed that I had forgotten my time in the Vidar. It is a part of my sea life to which my memory returns most often, since there is nothing in it to remember but what is good and pleasant in my temporary association with three men for whom, I assure you, I have preserved to this day a warm regard and a sincere esteem.

I would have liked to tell you something about myself and asked you to let me hear more of you all, but I won’t do it now. This morning’s post is too big and I myself feel too cheap[[4]](#footnote-4) to write at length to anybody.

Pray give most cordial messages from me to Capt. Craig and Mr Allan\*. None of you had ceased to be a good friend to me in those thirty years or more.

Accept a warm handshake and believe me faithfully yours,

Joseph Conrad.

III

The third letter introduces an American correspondent, Sharpless Dodson Green (b. 1885), a high-school teacher based in Trenton, New Jersey, who had written to Conrad pleading for a letter that would offer his pupils helpful life-guidance. In reality, Green was an obsessive autograph hunter and book collector, who achieved his ends by clever, if rather cynical, flattery: he sent the identical letter to eminent writers, musicians, artists, and scientists, concocting the same touching story in each of them – that eight of his pupils were such admirers of the addressee that they had requested their teacher to contact their hero for life-guidance. Who could resist such a flattering appeal on behalf of youthful admirers? During the period 1923–24, Green sent out numerous requests to such correspondents as Conrad Aitken, Carl Sandburg, H. L. Mencken, Somerset Maugham, A. A. Milne, and D. H. Lawrence and duly received autographed letters, some of them with long and effusive responses, as in the case of Lawrence’s three-page address to “My dear Eight [students].” By contrast, Conrad’s answer is characteristically brief and understated:

**To Sharpless Dodson Green**

*Text* TS Private collection; Unpublished

[letterhead: Oswalds]

Feb. 19th. 1924.

Dear Sir.

I am not the sort of person who knows how to write helpful messages. They are those who can speak naturally out of a full heart. It is not everybody who has the gift. All I can say is that I am touched to think that there is a group of the latest generation who has chosen me for particular honour; but if I am not presumptuous enough to offer them any advice I venture to hope that they will accept my sincere wishes for success in the prosecution of their studies, and in their journey along the path of life they have selected for themselves.

Yours sincerely

J. Conrad.

Accept my apologies for not writing before. Certainly I will sign the book. [[5]](#footnote-5)

**Works cited**

Conrad, Borys. *My Father: Joseph Conrad*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1970.

Conrad, John. *Joseph Conrad: Times Remembered*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Jean-Aubry, G., *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, 2 vols. London: Heinemann, 1927.

Peters, John G., “Uncollected Conrad Letters Recently Published: A Checklist.” *The Conradian* 38.2 (2013): 119–21.

Stape, J. H., and Owen Knowles. *A Portrait in Letters; Letters to and about Conrad*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995.

**Appendix**

The following list updates John G. Peters’s checklist (2013) of previously unknown Conrad letters and notes that have come to light and been published in *The Conradian* since the appearance of Volume 9 of the *Collected Edition* (2007), adding 30 items to the 48 listed by Peters. These are organized chronologically, with the names of the correspondents listed first.

**1894**

Geraldine Sanderson, 21 October 1894, *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016), 2–7.

**1898**

T. Fisher Unwin, 24 May 1898, *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 122–23.

**1899**

Hon. A. E. Bontine, 25 November 1899, *The* *Conradian* 41.1 (2016): 116–17.

**1900**

[?], 19 September 1900, *The Conradian* 42.1 (2017): 97.

James MacArthur, 8 December 1900, *The Conradian* 42.1 (2017): 98.

**1901**

*New York Times*, 2 August 1901, *The Conradian* 39.2 (1914): 108.

**1910**

Ernst P. Bendz, 8 November 1910, *The Conradian* 41.1 (2016): 118–19.

**1911**

J. B. Pinker, 27 May 1911, *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016): 88.

**1913**

E. L. Grant-Watson, 2 October 1913, *The Conradian* 41.1 (2016): 120.

**1914**

F. N. Doubleday, 28 March 1914, *The Conradian* 40.2 (2015): 124–25.

Messrs Hinton Hill & Coles Ltd., 3 April 1914, *The Conradian* 43.2 (2018): 103–04.

**1915**

Sir Robert [Arundell Hudson?] 21 March [1915], *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 124.

Thomas F. Moxon, [1915?], *The Conradian* 43.2 (2018): 110–11 (in part).

**1916**

Sir Sidney Colvin, 24 April 1916, *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 113.

**1917**

Arthur Simmons, [8 October 1917], *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016): 80.

Robert Donald, 10 October 1917, *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016): 82.

**1918**

Sir Sidney Colvin [14 or 21? January 1918] *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 114.

Paul Creswick, 6 March 1918, *The Conradian* 42.1 (2017): 99–100.

**1919**

Sir Sidney Colvin, 4 March 1919, *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 125–26.

Sir Robert Jones, 8 November 1919, *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016): 84–85.

**1920**

William Heinemann, [5 April 1920], *The Conradian* 42.1 (2017): 100–01.

**1921**

Samuel A. Everitt, 21 August 1921, *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 115.

**1922**

Charles H. Baldwin, 24 September 1922, *The Conradian* 40.1 (1915): 116–17.

[?], 15 December 1922, *The Conradian* 42.1 (2017): 101.

Gladys Russell, 28 December 1922, *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016): 87–88.

**1923**

Cecil Roberts, 4 April 1923, *The Conradian* 41.2 (2016): 86–87.

Mrs [Laura?] Merritt, 14 May 1923, *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 117.

John C. Niven, 5 December 1923, *The Conradian* 43.2 (2018): 103–4.

Count Dmitry Alexandrovitch Lanskoy, 1923, *The Conradian* 40.1 (2015): 128.

**1924**

Sharpless Dodson Green, 19 February 1924, *The Conradian* 43.2 (2018): 106.

1. See Peters (2013), and Appendix to this note. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Borys Conrad 1970: 81. John Conrad (1981: 52) errs in describing the Conrads’ second car as a Model T Ford; in fact, the Ford was their *third* car and followed the Humber Tourer in August 1915 at the cheaper cost of £40 (*CL*5 496, 497). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We are grateful to the owner of the letter, Jack Devanney (Florida), for supplying a copy of the document. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An unusual word in this context, but, according to the *OED*, “[to feel] cheap” was a slang or colloquial usage current in the late-nineteenth century meaning “in poor health; out of sorts.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A facsimile version of the letter appeared in the online catalogue of Freeman’s Auctioneers (Philadelphia) of 28 September 2017 and was sold for $813 (https://bid.freemansauction.com/). Green’s collection of letters from other eminent figures responding to his plea for life-guidance was sold at the same auction and helps to establish the identity of Conrad’s correspondent. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)