

Foreword

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS celebrates the centenary of the publication of *Nostromo*, that “most anxiously meditated” of Conrad’s longer novels. First mentioned to John Galsworthy on 23 October 1902, five months after Conrad famously declared to William Blackwood “I am *modern*” (CL2 418), the novel in its sheer audacity of scope and technique defines the modern ethos. Its companion pieces are *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *The Waste Land*, and *Ulysses*.

Biographically, the novel belongs to Conrad’s spell in the French Merchant Service. If he ever set foot on South American soil, it would have been in the second half of 1876 as an interlude during his third and final voyage to Martinique for Delestang et Fils of Marseilles. Steward in the *Saint-Antoine*, Conrad shipped with the Corsican Dominique Cervoni, who serves as one of the title-character’s prototypes. In his “Author’s Note,” Conrad recalls that “in 1875 or ’6” while visiting “the West Indies or rather in the Gulf of Mexico” his “contacts with land were short, few, and fleeting” (vii); but he managed none the less vividly to create from them a cultural world remote from his own, as he had from his brief experience in the Malay Archipelago.

Nostromo’s place in Conrad’s collected works is self-evident: the first in his great trilogy of political novels, it belongs to the decade of masterpieces that cement his place in literary history. To Jacques Berthoud, “With *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent* we reach the summit of Conrad’s achievement as a novelist” (1978: 94).

Conrad described as “the blackest possible frost” (CL5 139) the novel’s reception, but this does not tell the full story, and in 1928, Richard Curle reported that Conrad thought the novel his “principal achievement.” Edward Garnett found this feat “not in the power of any English contemporary novelist to touch” (1904); and Arnold Bennett declared the work “the finest novel of this generation (bar none)” (1912). Later, Walter Allen advanced its claim to being “the greatest novel written in English this century” (1955: 175) with *Moby-Dick* its only rival; Jocelyn Baines found it “worthy of comparison with the most ambitious of all great novels, *War and Peace*” (1960: 297).

This critical rehearsal, well known to Conrad scholars, points to the paradox with which Juliet McLauchlan began her 1969 study of *Nostromo*: despite the general recognition of its importance, the novel eludes the kind of attention that other major works receive. Nor, one imagines, does it win the popularity sweepstakes either among Conradians or general readers. Whether as a cause or a symptom of this, *Nostromo* figures infrequently as a set text on university course lists. Not even its reputation as “difficult” explains this omission, both because other “difficult” novels (*Ulysses*, for instance) are standard fare, and because two or more generations of critics and editors have worked at elucidating many of its complexities. While admitting that its narrative chicaneries can suggest that “the world, truly perceived, may be recalcitrant to man’s decoding endeavours” (Watts 1990: 83), the critical consensus remains, as Keith Carabine has summarized it: *Nostromo* is Conrad’s “longest and greatest novel” (1997: xv).

Eight years after its publication and recalling how he had “wrestled with the Lord” for this “tale of an imaginary (but true) seaboard,” Conrad noted that it “is still mentioned now and again ... sometimes in connection with the word ‘failure’ and sometimes in conjunction with the word ‘astonishing’” (*A Personal Record* 98). If it comes as no surprise that the marketplace is often impervious to masterpieces, one remains struck by the persistent paradox that *Nostromo* is still oddly absent from the academy that ritually proclaims it “great.” As the essays brought together here prove, in the century since its publication *Nostromo* has lost none of its power to astonish and continues to attract scholarship of the highest order.

Allan H. Simmons
J. H. Stape

Note

All references to Conrad’s fiction are to Dent’s Collected Edition except for volumes available in The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad. References to Conrad’s letters, abbreviated *CL*, are to *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Laurence Davies *et al.* (Cambridge University Press, 1983–).