

George Washington Williams, a lawyer, journalist, minister, and historian, wrote the first full exposé of Leopold's reign of terror in the Congo.



Although by 1890 scattered criticism of Leopold's Congo state had been published in Europe, most of it focused on the king's discrimination against foreign traders. Williams's concern was human rights, and his was the first comprehensive, systematic indictment of Leopold's colonial regime written by anyone. Here are his main accusations:

- Stanley and his white assistants had used a variety of tricks, such as fooling Africans into thinking that whites had supernatural powers, to get Congo chiefs to sign their land over to Leopold. For example: "A number of electric batteries had been purchased in London, and when attached to the arm under the coat, communicated with a band of ribbon which passed over the palm of the white brother's hand, and when he gave the black brother a cordial grasp of the hand the black brother was greatly surprised to find his white brother so strong, that he nearly knocked him off his feet. . . . When the native inquired about the disparity of strength between himself and his white brother,

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he was told that the white man could pull up trees and perform the most prodigious feats of strength." Another trick was to use a magnifying glass to light a cigar, after which "the white man explained his intimate relation to the sun, and declared that if he were to request him to burn up his black brother's village it would be done." In another ruse, a white man would ostentatiously load a gun but covertly slip the bullet up his sleeve. He would then hand the gun to a black chief, step off a distance, and ask the chief to take aim and shoot; the white man, unharmed, would bend over and retrieve the bullet from his shoe. "By such means . . . and a few boxes of gin, whole villages have been signed away to your Majesty." Land purchased in this way, Williams wrote, was "territory to which your Majesty has no more legal claim, than I have to be the Commander-in-Chief of the Belgian army."

- Far from being a great hero, Stanley had been a tyrant. His "name produces a shudder among this simple folk when mentioned; they remember his broken promises, his copious profanity, his hot temper, his heavy blows, his severe and rigorous measures, by which they were mulcted of their lands." (Note Williams's assumption, so unimaginable to his white contemporaries, that Africans had a right to African land.) Of the hundreds of Europeans and Americans who traveled to the Congo in the state's early years, Williams is the only one on record as questioning Africans about their personal experience of Stanley.
- Leopold's establishment of military bases along the river had caused a wave of death and destruction, because the African soldiers who manned them were expected to feed themselves. "These piratical, buccaneering posts compel the natives to furnish them with fish, goats, fowls, and vegetables at the mouths of their muskets; and whenever the natives refuse . . . white officers come with an expeditionary force and burn away the homes of the natives."
- "Your Majesty's Government is excessively cruel to its prisoners, condemning them, for the slightest offenses, to the chain gang. . . . Often these ox-chains eat into the necks of the prisoners and produce sores about which the flies circle, aggravating the running wound."
- Leopold's claim that his new state was providing wise government and public services was a fraud. There were no schools and no hospitals except for a few sheds "not fit to be occupied by a horse." Virtually none of the colony's officials knew any African language. "The

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Courts of your Majesty's Government are abortive, unjust, partial and delinquent." (Here, as elsewhere, Williams provided a vivid example: a white servant of the governor-general went unpunished for stealing wine while black servants were falsely accused and beaten.)

- White traders and state officials were kidnapping African women and using them as concubines.
- White officers were shooting villagers, sometimes to capture their women, sometimes to intimidate the survivors into working as forced laborers, and sometimes for sport. "Two Belgian Army officers saw, from the deck of their steamer, a native in a canoe some distance away. . . . The officers made a wager of £5 that they could hit the native with their rifles. Three shots were fired and the native fell dead, pierced through the head."
- Instead of Leopold's being the noble antislavery crusader he portrayed himself as, "Your Majesty's Government is engaged in the slave-trade, wholesale and retail. It buys and sells and steals slaves. Your Majesty's Government gives £3 per head for able-bodied slaves for military service. . . . The labour force at the stations of your Majesty's Government in the Upper River is composed of slaves of all ages and both sexes."



Reverend William H. Sheppard, Presbyterian missionary, explorer, and the first outsider to visit the capital of the Kuba kingdom. Sheppard's writings documenting the brutality of the Congo state made him the object of a lawsuit and trial.



The rain forest bordering the Kasai River was rich in rubber, and William Sheppard and the other American Presbyterians there found themselves in the midst of a cataclysm. The Kasai was also the scene of some of the strongest resistance to Leopold's rule. Armed men of a chief allied with the regime rampaged through the region where Sheppard worked, plundering and burning more than a dozen villages. Floods of desperate refugees sought help at Sheppard's mission station.

In 1899 the reluctant Sheppard was ordered by his superiors to travel into the bush, at some risk to himself, to investigate the source of the fighting. There he found bloodstained ground, destroyed villages, and many bodies; the air was thick with the stench of rotting flesh. On the day he reached the marauders' camp, his eye was caught by a large number of objects being smoked. The chief "conducted us to a framework of sticks, under which was burning a slow fire, and there they were, the right hands, I counted them, 81 in all." The chief told Sheppard, "See! Here is our evidence. I always have to cut off the right hands of those we kill in order to show the State how many we have killed." He proudly showed

Sheppard some of the bodies the hands had come from. The smoking preserved the hands in the hot, moist climate, for it might be days or weeks before the chief could display them to the proper official and receive credit for his kills.

Sheppard had stumbled on one of the most grisly aspects of Leopold's rubber system. Like the hostage-taking, the severing of hands was deliberate policy, as even high officials would later admit. "During my time in the Congo I was the first commissioner of the Equator district," recalled Charles Lemaire after his retirement. "As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, 'To gather rubber in the district . . . one must cut off hands, noses and ears.'"

If a village refused to submit to the rubber regime, state or company troops or their allies sometimes shot everyone in sight, so that nearby villages would get the message. But on such occasions some European officers were mistrustful. For each cartridge issued to their soldiers they demanded proof that the bullet had been used to kill someone, not "wasted" in hunting or, worse yet, saved for possible use in a mutiny. The standard proof was the right hand from a corpse. Or occasionally not from a corpse. "Sometimes," said one officer to a missionary, soldiers "shot a cartridge at an animal in hunting; they then cut off a hand from a living man." In some military units there was even a "keeper of the hands"; his job was the smoking.

Sheppard was not the first foreign witness to see severed hands in the Congo, nor would he be the last. But the articles he wrote for missionary magazines about his grisly find were reprinted and quoted widely, both in Europe and the United States, and it is partly due to him that people overseas began to associate the Congo with severed hands.

In certain ways Morel is harder to fathom than some of the other figures of the Congo story. For example, it is easy to see how Stanley's painful poorhouse childhood may have fostered his cruel streak and the drive to place his mark on the world. The origin of the fiery passion for justice that fueled Morel is less evident. He spent his youth in the business world, not in the socialist movement that inspired many turn-of-the-century crusaders. As a young man, he was not active in any political party or social cause. Although he had some Quaker ancestors, he may have discovered them only later in life, for there is no record of his receiving Quaker teachings as a child. Formally, he was an unenthusiastic member of the Church of England, but at heart, like another great firebrand of Quaker ancestry, Thomas Paine, he had little use for any form of organized religion. From his campaign against King Leopold, he had nothing to gain, only a promising career at Elder Dempster to lose. He had a sick mother, a wife, and what would soon be a large family to support. In every way, he seemed an unlikely person to become the leader of a great moral crusade. His prodigious capacity for indignation seems to be something he was born with, as some people are born with great musical talent. After learning what he had in Brussels and Antwerp, he writes, "to have sat still . . . would have been temperamentally impossible."



The most effective spokespeople of all, Morel knew, were those with firsthand knowledge. Starting in 1906, the returned Baptist missionaries the Reverend John Harris and his wife, Alice Seeley Harris — she had taken almost all the photographs Morel used — began working full time for the association. The Harrises' zeal matched Morel's. In their first two years with the C.R.A., one or both of them spoke in public on six hundred occasions. A woman in a large audience in Wales was so moved that she handed Alice Harris her jewels to be sold for the benefit of the movement. The Harrises displayed *chicottes* and shackles, and throughout England they led church congregations in special hymns on "Congo Sundays." To shocked audiences, they described personal experiences like this one, which John Harris later put down on paper:

Lined up . . . are 40 emaciated sons of an African village, each carrying his little basket of rubber. The toll of rubber is weighed

TO FLOOD HIS DEEDS WITH DAY

and accepted, but . . . four baskets are short of the demand. The order is brutally short and sharp — Quickly the first defaulter is seized by four lusty "executioners," thrown on the bare ground, pinioned hands and feet, whilst a fifth steps forward carrying a long whip of twisted hippo hide. Swiftly and without cessation the whip falls, and the sharp corrugated edges cut deep into the flesh — on back, shoulders and buttocks blood spurts from a dozen places. In vain the victim twists in the grip of the executioners, and then the whip cuts other parts of the quivering body — and in the case of one of the four, upon the most sensitive part of the human frame. The "hundred lashes each" left four inert bodies bloody and quivering on the shimmering sand of the rubber collecting post.

Following hard upon this decisive incident was another. Breakfast was just finished when an African father rushed up the veranda steps of our mud house and laid upon the ground the hand and foot of his little daughter, whose age could not have been more than 5 years.



E. D. Morel.

BELOW: The docks at Antwerp, where the young E. D. Morel's suspicions about Congo slave labor were awakened.

High school teachers and college professors who have discussed this book in thousands of classrooms over the years tend to do so in terms of Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche; of classical myth, Victorian innocence, and original sin; of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its historical moorings. We read it as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place. Two of the three times the story was filmed, most notably in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, it was not even set in Africa. But Conrad himself wrote, "*Heart of Darkness* is experience . . . pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case." Whatever the rich levels of meaning the book has as literature, for our purposes what is notable is how precise and detailed a description it is of "the actual facts of the case": King Leopold's Congo in 1890, just as the exploitation of the territory was getting under way in earnest.

In the novel Marlow, as Conrad had done, begins his trip with the long walk around the rapids: "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. . . . I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking." These were the laborers starting work on Leopold's railway.

A few pages later, Marlow describes a spot where some starving rail-

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way workers had crawled away to die. Farther along the trail, he sees "now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side," and notes the mysterious "body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead." This is simply a record of what Conrad himself saw on his walk around the rapids to Stanley Pool. In his diary entry for July 3, 1890, he noted: "Met an offic[er] of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camp[in]g place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? Horrid smell." The following day: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose." And on July 29: "On the road today passed a skeleton tied up to a post."

During the hike around the rapids, Marlow also describes how people had fled to avoid being conscripted as porters: "The population had cleared out a long time ago. Well if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road [in England] between Deal and Gravesend catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. . . . I passed through several abandoned villages." This, too, was what Conrad himself saw. The porters of the caravan the novelist was with came close to mutiny during the trip. Only three and a half years later a fierce uprising would break out along this very route, as Chief Nzansu and his men fought their long, doomed battle against the Force Publique.

In describing the caravans of porters that walked this trail, Marlow gives a crisp summary of the Leopoldian economy: "a stream of . . . rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness and in return came a precious trickle of ivory." In 1890, this was still the colony's most prized commodity. "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it," says Marlow. He even mentions Leopold's commission system for agents: "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages."

Conrad stayed true to life when creating the charismatic, murderous figure at the center of his novel, perhaps the twentieth century's most famous literary villain. Mr. Kurtz was clearly inspired by several real people, among them Georges Antoine Klein, a French agent for an ivory-gathering firm at Stanley Falls. Klein, mortally ill, died on shipboard, as Kurtz does in the novel, while Conrad was piloting the *Roi des Belges* down the river. Another model closer to Kurtz in character was Major

MEETING MR. KURTZ

Edmund Barttelot, the man whom Stanley left in charge of the rear column on the Emin Pasha expedition. It was Barttelot, remember, who went mad, began biting, whipping, and killing people, and was finally murdered. Yet another Kurtz prototype was a Belgian, Arthur Hodister, famed for his harem of African women and for gathering huge amounts of ivory. Hodister eventually muscled in too aggressively on the territory of local Afro-Arab warlords and ivory-traders, who captured and beheaded him.

However, Conrad's legion of biographers and critics have almost entirely ignored the man who resembles Kurtz most closely of all. And he is someone we have already met, the swashbuckling Captain Léon Rom of the Force Publique. It is from Rom that Conrad may have taken the signal feature of his villain: the collection of African heads surrounding Kurtz's house.

The "Inner Station" of *Heart of Darkness*, the place Marlow looks at through his binoculars only to find Kurtz's collection of the shrunken heads of African "rebels," is loosely based on Stanley Falls. In 1895, five years after Conrad visited this post, Léon Rom was station chief there. A British explorer-journalist who passed through Stanley Falls that year described the aftermath of a punitive military expedition against some African rebels: "Many women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to the falls, and have been used by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house!" If Conrad missed this account, which appeared in the widely read *Century Magazine*, he almost certainly noticed when *The Saturday Review*, a magazine he admired and read faithfully, repeated the story in its issue of December 17, 1898. That date was within a few days of when Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness*.





Henry Morton Stanley, in the "Stanley Cap" he designed for exploring in the tropics.

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Beneath the eagerly repeated stories of wealth and glory to be found by young white men in the Congo usually lay something else: the sly hint that you could leave your bourgeois morality back in Europe. (As we shall see, this would be the case for Léon Rom.) For Europeans of the day, colonies all over the world offered a convenient escape. Kipling wrote:

*Ship me somewheres east of Suez,
where the best is like the worst,
Where there aren't no Tën Commandments,
an' a man can raise a thirst.*

In the Congo the Ten Commandments were practiced even less than in most colonies. Belgium was small, the Congo was huge, and the white death rate in the African tropics was still notoriously high. (Authorities tried hard to keep such figures secret, but before 1895 fully a third of white Congo state agents died there; some of the others died of the effects of disease after returning to Europe.) And so in order to find enough men to staff his far-flung network of river posts in malaria-ridden territory, Leopold had to recruit not just Belgians like Léon Rom, but young white men from throughout Europe, attracting them by such get-rich-quick incentives as the lucrative commission structure for acquiring ivory. Many who came out to work in the Congo were like the mercenaries who joined the French Foreign Legion or the fortune hunters who flocked to the two great gold rushes of the day, in South Africa and the Klondike. With its opportunities for both combat and riches, to

WHERE THERE AREN'T NO TEN COMMANDMENTS

Europeans the Congo was a gold rush and the Foreign Legion combined.

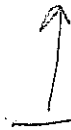
This first wave of Leopold's agents included many hard-bitten men fleeing marital troubles, bankruptcy, or alcoholism. A popular song sums up the mood of the time. One official describes in his memoirs how, newly arrived in the Congo, he was kept awake all night by drunken agents singing it endlessly in the bar of his seedy seaport hotel. The first verse runs:

*Y en a qui font la mauvais' tête
A leurs parents;
Qui font les dett', qui font la bête,
Inutil'ment:
Qui, un beau soir, de leur maîtresse
Ont plein le dos.
Ils fich' le camp, plein de tristesse
Pour le Congo. . . .*

(There're those who blow up at their families,
Who run up debts, who play the fool in vain,
Who one fine evening are fed up with their girls.
They take off, full of sorrow, for the Congo. . . .)

Africans in the Congo, meanwhile, were singing very different songs. A missionary transcribed this one:

*O mother, how unfortunate we are! . . .
But the sun will kill the white man,
But the moon will kill the white man,
But the sorcerer will kill the white man,
But the tiger will kill the white man,
But the crocodile will kill the white man,
But the elephant will kill the white man,
But the river will kill the white man.*





THE WOOD THAT WEEPS

IT WAS RAINING in London on July 12, 1890, but the crowd gathered outside Westminster Abbey anyway, ignoring the downpour. Thousands of people surged back and forth on the slick pavement, trying to glimpse the dignitaries who stepped out of carriages and filed into the cathedral between lines of policemen: former Prime Minister Gladstone, the speaker of the House of Commons, the lord chancellor, assorted dukes and princes, bejeweled women and bemedaled generals. The rich and famous filled the abbey, even standing in the aisles.

Finally, a carriage pulled up and the man everyone was waiting for eased himself out, ill, pale, leaning on a walking stick. Henry Morton Stanley was about to do something more daunting for him than any of his African adventures. He was getting married.

The bride, Dorothy Tennant, was the eccentric, high-society portrait painter who had previously rejected him. While the explorer had been plodding through the jungle in search of Emin Pasha, Tennant had changed her mind. On his return to England, she had begun sending Stanley startlingly passionate letters. "Suppose a wild, uncultivated tract of land and suppose that one day this land is ploughed up and sown with corn. If the field could speak it might say: 'I have never borne corn, I do not bear corn, I shall never bear corn.' And yet all the while the wheat lies hidden in its bosom. . . . My love is a flame which will never die, it began so small a spark you could not see it light, now it burns like the altar flame."

To the altar it was. The news spread, the price of Tennant's paintings

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soared, the congratulations poured in from around the world. Queen Victoria gave Tennant a locket with thirty-eight diamonds, and Thomas Edison sent one of his new phonograph machines. From Brussels, Leopold dispatched his representative, the Count d'Aarcke, to be best man.

On the day itself, Stanley was painfully ill with gastritis, an inflammation of the stomach lining. He had suffered from it before, but its recurrence now was probably not by chance. He tottered up the aisle of Westminster Abbey but had to sit in an armchair for part of the ceremony. After the wedding, he was helped into the couple's carriage. Protected by a mounted police escort, it headed off through a shouting and jostling crowd that almost blocked its passage. During the reception, Stanley lay on a couch in a separate, darkened room, in agony. The illness continued into the honeymoon.

At war in Stanley all his life were the craving for acceptance and the fear of intimacy. The fear was so strong, believes the explorer's most thorough biographer, Frank McLynn, that Stanley's marriage was never consummated. The evidence is mainly circumstantial. Dorothy Stanley did not produce children, and clearly, despite her letters, had powerful neuroses of her own. In a most unromantic decision, Stanley insisted that his young male assistant come along on the couple's honeymoon in Switzerland. Finally, Stanley's diary of the honeymoon period has several passages inked out, apparently by his wife after his death. The end of one such entry, however, is legible: "I do not regard it wifely, to procure these pleasures, at the cost of making me feel like a monkey in a cage." Stanley's fear of women was so great, McLynn concludes, that "when he was finally called upon to satisfy a wife, Stanley in effect broke down and confessed that he considered sex for the beasts."

Whether this inference is right or wrong, the inhibitions that caused Stanley so much pain are a reminder that the explorers and soldiers who carried out the European seizure of Africa were often not the bold, bluff, hardy men of legend, but restless, unhappy, driven men, in flight from something in their past or in themselves. The economic explanations of imperial expansion — the search for raw materials, labor, and markets — are all valid, but there was psychological fuel as well.

Stanley's marriage marked the end of his exploring; he now devoted his time to being famous. Having reached the upper class at last, he became something of a caricature of its attitudes. He traveled about the world giving lectures and after-dinner speeches, receiving honorary de-

A RECKONING

As E. D. MOREL, Roger Casement, and their allies caught Europe's attention with reports of the holocaust in central Africa, newspapers and magazines ran pictures of burned villages and mutilated bodies, and missionary witnesses spoke of the depopulation of entire districts. Looking at this written and photographic record today immediately raises a crucial question: what was the death toll in Leopold's Congo? This is a good moment to pause in our story to find an answer.

The question is not simple. To begin with, history in this case cannot have distinct lines drawn around it as it can, say, when we ask how many Jews the Nazis put to death between 1933 and 1945. King Leopold II's personal *État Indépendant du Congo* officially existed for twenty-three years, beginning in 1885, but many Congolese were already dying unnatural deaths by the start of that period, and important elements of the king's system of exploitation endured for many years after its official end. The rubber boom, cause of the worst bloodletting in the Congo, began under Leopold's rule in the mid-1890s, but it continued several years after the end of his one-man regime.

Furthermore, although the killing in the Congo was of genocidal proportions, it was not, strictly speaking, a genocide. The Congo state was not deliberately trying to eliminate one particular ethnic group from the face of the Earth. Instead, like the slave dealers who raided Africa for centuries before them, Leopold's men were looking for labor. If, in the course of their finding and using that labor, millions of people died, that

to them was incidental. Few officials kept statistics about something they considered so negligible as African lives. And so estimating the number of casualties today requires considerable historical detective work.

In population losses on this scale, the toll is usually a composite of figures from one or more of four closely connected sources: (1) murder; (2) starvation, exhaustion, and exposure; (3) disease; and (4) a plummeting birth rate. In the worst period in the Congo, the long rubber boom, it came in abundance from all four:

1. *Murder*. Although outright murder was not the major cause of death in Leopold's Congo, it was most clearly documented. When a village or a district failed to supply its quota of rubber or fought back against the regime, Force Publique soldiers or rubber company "sentries" often killed everyone they could find. Those times when an eyewitness happened upon a pile of skeletons or severed hands, and a report survives, represent, of course, only a small proportion of the massacres carried out, only a few sparks from a firestorm. But among those scattered sparks are some that burn distinctly:

• In 1896, a German newspaper, the *Kölnische Zeitung*, published, on the authority of "a highly esteemed Belgian," news that 1308 severed hands had been turned over to the notorious District Commissioner Léon Fiévez in a single day. The newspaper twice repeated the story without being challenged by the Congo state. Several additional reports of that day's events, including some from both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, cited even higher totals for the number of hands. On a later occasion, Fiévez admitted that the practice of cutting hands off corpses existed; he denied only, with great vehemence, that he had ever ordered hands cut off living people.

• In 1899, a state officer, Simon Roi, perhaps not realizing that one of the people he was chatting with was an American missionary, bragged about the killing squads under his command. The missionary, Ellsworth Faris, recorded the conversation in his diary: "Each time the corporal goes out to get rubber, cartridges are given to him. He must bring back all not used; and for every one used he must bring back a right hand! . . . As to the extent to which this is carried on, [Roi] informed me that in six months they, the State, on the Momboyo River had used 6000 cartridges, which means that 6000 people are killed or mutilated. It means more than 6000, for the people have told

me repeatedly that the soldiers kill children with the butt of their guns."

• The punitive expeditions against the Budja rebels [see pages 192-193] altogether killed more than thirteen hundred Budjas. Reports of this appeared in various Belgian newspapers in 1900, one of which was subsidized by the Congo state. Dozens of other rebellions against rubber-collecting broke out throughout the territory over the next decade. Estimating the death toll caused by suppressing them all is impossible, but sometimes a stray statistic carries appalling implications, when we remember that soldiers were severely punished for "wasting" bullets on nonhuman targets. Among a raft of revealing documents from the A.B.I.R. concession company that Morel got hold of is a register showing that in the year 1903, a *single* one of the thirty-five rubber-collecting posts in A.B.I.R. territory was sent a total of 159 firearms and 40,355 rounds of ammunition.

The list of specific massacres on record goes on and on. The territory was awash in corpses, sometimes literally. Where a river flows into Lake Tumba, wrote the Swedish missionary E. V. Sjöblom, "I saw . . . dead bodies floating on the lake with the right hand cut off, and the officer told me when I came back why they had been killed. It was for the rubber. . . . When I crossed the stream I saw some dead bodies hanging down from the branches in the water. As I turned away my face at the horrible sight one of the native corporals who was following us down said, 'Oh, that is nothing, a few days ago I returned from a fight, and I brought the white man 160 hands and they were thrown into the river.'"

It was not only missionaries and visitors who recorded the mass murders. Many Force Publique officers kept astonishingly frank diaries about the death and destruction they left behind them.

• At the village of Bikoro on Lake Tumba, a Swedish officer of the Force Publique, Lieutenant Knut Svensson, may have been the cause of some of the mangled bodies his countryman Sjöblom had seen. Svensson noted in his diary a death toll of 527 people in four and a half months' time, upon the imposition of the rubber regime in 1894-1895. (According to oral tradition in the area today, Svensson would assemble the people of a recalcitrant village, on the pretext of signing a treaty or recruiting porters, and then simply open fire.)

• The diary of another officer, Charles Lemaire, is chilling in its casual-

ness: "28 March 1891: . . . The village of Bokanga was burned. . . . 4 April 1891: A stop at Bolébo. . . . Since they wanted to meet us only with spears and guns, the village was burned. One native killed. . . . 12 April 1891: Attack on the Ikengo villages. . . . The big chief Ekélé of Etchimanjindou was killed and thrown in the water. . . . 14 June 1891: Expedition against the Loliva who refuse to come to the station. Dreadful weather; attack made in driving rain. The group of villages was large; couldn't destroy them all. Around 15 blacks killed. . . . 14 June 1891: At 5 A.M. sent the Zanzibari Metchoudi with about 40 men . . . to burn Nkolé. . . . The operation was successful and everything was burned. . . . 4 September 1891: At 4 A.M. preparations for attacking Ipéko. . . . The whole village was burned and the banana trees cut down. . . . 13 July 1892: The Bompopo villages were attacked 7 July by Lieutenant Sarrazijn; 20 natives killed; 13 women and children taken prisoner."

- From the diary of Louis Leclercq, another Force Publique officer: "21 June 1895. . . . Arrived at Yambisi at 10:20 A.M. Village abandoned. . . . We sent several groups of soldiers to scour the area; they came back several hours later with 11 heads and 9 prisoners. A canoe sent out hunting in the evening also brought back several heads. 22 June 1895: They brought us three prisoners in the morning, three others towards evening, and three heads. A man from Baumaneh running through the forest shouting for his lost wife and child came too close to our camp and received a bullet from one of our sentries. They brought us his head. Never have I seen such an expression of despair, of fear. . . . We burned the village."

The diaries of Lemaire and Leclercq — and others — go on in this vein for day after day, week after week.

Resistance of any kind, or even cutting corners, was fatal. E. D. Morel reprinted a message that a district commissioner, Jules Jacques,* sent to one of his underlings after finding that some villagers had severed vines, killing them, to extract the rubber, instead of merely tapping the vines as they were supposed to: "M. le Chef de Poste. Decidedly these people of [Inongo] are a bad lot. They have just been and cut some rubber

* Jacques later won glory in World War I, and today there is a statue of him in the main square of Diksmuide, Belgium.

vines. . . . We must fight them until their absolute submission has been obtained, or their complete extermination. . . . Inform the natives that if they cut another single vine, I will exterminate them to the last man."

Conrad was not making much up when he had Mr. Kurtz scrawl the infamous line "Exterminate all the brutes!"

2. *Starvation, exhaustion, and exposure.* As news of the terror spread, hundreds of thousands of people fled their villages. In retaliation, soldiers often took their animals and burned their huts and crops, leaving them no food. This pattern of action was established even before the rubber boom, when Leopold's soldiers were looking primarily for ivory and for porters and food for themselves. A Swedish lieutenant describes such a raid in 1885 in the lower Congo rapids district: "When we were approaching there was a terrible tumult in the village. The natives . . . were completely taken with surprise. We could see them gather what they could of their belongings and escape into the deep thick woods. . . . Before I left the place I had the village plundered of the large number of goats, hens and ducks that were there. . . . Then we abandoned the village and retired to a better place for our noon rest."

As they fled these expeditions, villagers sometimes abandoned small children for fear that their cries would give away their hiding places. As a result, many children starved. A small proportion of the population, lucky enough to live near the Congo's borders, escaped from the country. Some thirty thousand refugees, the French colonial governor estimated, had crossed into French territory by 1900. Others fled to British territory, although a number of them drowned in the Luapula River, which formed part of the border with British-owned Northern Rhodesia. But for most people there was nowhere to flee except deep into the rain forest or the swamps, where there was no shelter and little food. The American soldier of fortune Edgar Canisius saw refugees from his scorched-earth raids "living like wild beasts in the forest, subsisting on roots, and ants and other insects." A fellow Presbyterian missionary of William Sheppard's wrote, in 1899, "All the people of the villages run away to the forest when they hear the State officers are coming. To-night, in the midst of the rainy season, within a radius of 75 miles of Luebo, I am sure it would be a low estimate to say that 40,000 people, men, women, children, with the sick, are sleeping in the forests without shelter."

Around the same time, a young English explorer named Edward S. Grogan walked the length of Africa and was shocked at what he saw in

crossing a "depopulated and devastated" 3000-square-mile tract in the northeastern part of the Congo: "Every village has been burnt to the ground, and as I fled from the country I saw skeletons, skeletons everywhere; and such postures — what tales of horror they told!"

Hunger also struck villagers who did not flee into the forest, because if they were near a rubber post they had to give up much of their bananas, manioc, fish, and meat to feed the soldiers. The village of Bumba in the A.B.I.R. concession, for example, had only a hundred families, but it was expected each month to deliver fifteen kilos of yams or similar vegetables, in addition to five pigs or fifty chickens. Furthermore, villages like this one usually had to come up with all the food while their able-bodied men were in the forest, desperately searching for rubber. Without the manpower to clear new garden plots, so essential in farming the fragile soil of the rain forest, the women often replanted worn-out fields. Harvests declined, and in the old A.B.I.R. region the period is remembered today as *lonkali*, the time of famine.

Untold thousands of people, women, children, and the elderly, died as hostages. Soldiers kept them in dirt compounds, often in chains, feeding them little or nothing until the men of a village brought in the demanded amount of rubber — something that might take weeks. In one stockade in 1899, prisoners were found to be dying at the rate of three to ten a day.

3. *Disease.* As with the decimation of the American Indians, disease killed many more Congolese than did bullets. Europeans and the Arab slave-traders brought to the interior of the Congo many diseases previously not known there. The local people had no time to build up immunities — as they largely had to malaria, for instance. Both new illnesses and old ones spread rapidly, because huge numbers of Congolese were now forced to travel long distances: as men conscripted to be long-haul porters or to work as steamboat crews (a large boat required from twenty to sixty woodcutters) or as soldiers impressed into the Force Publique. The most notorious killers were smallpox and sleeping sickness, although less dramatic lung and intestinal infections also took a high toll.

Smallpox had been endemic in parts of coastal Africa for centuries, but the great population movements of the imperial age spread the illness throughout the interior, leaving village after village full of dead bodies. A Kuba king — the successor to the one who had welcomed William Sheppard to the kingdom — died from the disease. Smallpox inspired a particular terror. The Africans called it "the sickness from above" or "the

sickness of heaven," because the terrifying disease seemed to come from no familiar source. One traveler to the Congo came on a deserted town where a fifteen-foot boa constrictor was dining on smallpox victims' flesh, and on another where the vultures were so gorged that they were too heavy to fly.

Sleeping sickness also spread lethally up the rivers. Half a million Congolese were estimated to have died of it in 1901 alone. The disease is caused by a parasite first spread by the bite of the pink-striped tsetse fly, about the size of a horsefly, with a distinctive high-pitched buzz. Once contracted by humans, sleeping sickness becomes highly contagious. It can cause fever, swelling of the lymph glands, a strange craving for meat, and a sensitivity to cold. At last comes the immense lethargy that gives the illness its name.

Faced with undeniable evidence of massive population loss, Leopold's apologists, then and now, blame sleeping sickness. And it is true that sleeping sickness and the other diseases would doubtless have taken many lives even if the Congo had come into the twentieth century under a regime other than Leopold's. But the story is more complicated, for disease rarely acts by itself alone. Epidemics almost always take a drastically higher and more rapid toll among the malnourished and the traumatized: the Nazis and Soviets needed no poison gas or firing squads to finish off many of those who died in their camps. Today, thanks in part to our century of famines and barbed wire, epidemiologists understand all too well the exact mechanisms by which this happens. Even in the Congo, one did not have to be a physician to see that those who were dying of disease were not dying of disease alone. Charles Gréban de Saint-Germain, a magistrate at Stanley Falls, wrote in 1905: "Disease powerfully ravages an exhausted population, and it's to this cause, in my opinion, that we must attribute the unceasing growth of sleeping sickness in this region; along with portage and the absence of food supplies, it will quickly decimate this country. I've seen nowhere in the Congo as sad a spectacle as that along the road from Kasongo to Kabambare. The villages for the most part have few people in them; many huts are in ruins; men, like women and children, are thin, weak, without life, very sick, stretched out inert, and above all there's no food."

4. *Plummeting birth rate.* Not surprisingly, when men were sent into the forest in search of rubber for weeks at a time, year after year, and women were held hostage and half-starved, fewer children were born. A Catholic

missionary who worked for many years in the Lake Mai N'dombe district, a major rubber area, noticed this pattern. When he arrived, in 1910, he was surprised by the almost total absence of children between the ages of seven and fourteen, although there were many of other ages. This pinpoints the period from 1896 to 1903 — just when the rubber campaign was at its height in the district. A witness in a nearby area at that very time was Roger Casement, on his investigative trip. He estimated that the population had dropped by 60 percent and wrote that “the remnant of the inhabitants are only now, in many cases, returning to their destroyed or abandoned villages. . . . A lower percentage of births lessen[s] the population. . . . Women refuse to bear children, and take means to save themselves from motherhood. They give as the reason that if ‘war’ should come to a woman ‘big with child’ or with a baby to carry, ‘she’ cannot well run away and hide from the soldiers.” Part of the population loss in the Congo resulted, then, when families, terrorized and torn apart by the rubber campaign, simply stopped having children.

No territory-wide census was taken in the Congo until long after the rubber terror was over. But Daniel Vangroenweghe, a Belgian anthropologist who worked in a former rubber area in the 1970s, found persuasive demographic evidence that large numbers of men had been worked to death as rubber slaves or killed in punitive raids — and he discovered the evidence in the regime’s own statistics. No other explanation accounts for the curious pattern that threads through the village-by-village headcounts taken in the colony long before the first territorial census. These local headcounts consistently show far more women than men.

At Inongo in 1907, for example, there were 309 children, 402 adult women, but only 275 adult men. (This was the very town for which, some ten years earlier, the district commissioner had ordered “absolute submission . . . or . . . complete extermination.”) At nearby Iboko in 1908 there were 322 children, 543 adult women, but only 262 adult men. Statistics from numerous other villages show the same pattern. Sifting such figures today is like sifting the ruins of an Auschwitz crematorium. They do not tell you precise death tolls, but they reek of mass murder.

During Leopold’s rule, by how much, from all four causes, did the Congo population shrink? Just as when historians chart population loss from the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe, they can be more confident of the percentage than they are of absolute numbers. They have,

after all, no census data. Interestingly, some estimates of population loss in the Congo made by those who saw it firsthand agree with some of those made by more scientific methods today.

An official Belgian government commission in 1919 estimated that from the time Stanley began laying the foundation of Leopold’s state, the population of the territory had “been reduced by half.” Major Charles C. Liebrechts, a top executive of the Congo state administration for most of its existence, arrived at the same estimate in 1920. The most authoritative judgment today comes from Jan Vansina, professor emeritus of history and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin and perhaps the greatest living ethnographer of Congo basin peoples. He bases his calculations on “innumerable local sources from different areas: priests noticing their flocks were shrinking, oral traditions, genealogies, and much more.” His estimate is the same: between 1880 and 1920, the population of the Congo was cut “by at least a half.”

Half of what? Only in the 1920s were the first attempts made at a territory-wide census. In 1924 the population was reckoned at ten million, a figure confirmed by later counts. This would mean, according to the estimates, that during the Leopold period and its immediate aftermath the population of the territory dropped by approximately ten million people.

Burned villages, starved hostages, terrified refugees dying in swamps, orders for “extermination” — even in crass, purely monetary terms, aren’t these inefficient means of doing business? Massacring huge numbers of people may frighten the survivors into gathering rubber, but doesn’t it destroy the labor force? Indeed it does. Belgian administrators ordered the census taken in 1924 because they were deeply concerned about a shortage of available workers. “We run the risk of someday seeing our native population collapse and disappear,” fretfully declared the permanent committee of the National Colonial Congress of Belgium that year. “So that we will find ourselves confronted with a kind of desert.”

Why, then, did the killings go on for so long? The same irrationality lies at the heart of many other mass murders. In the Soviet Union, for example, shooting or jailing political opponents at first helped the Communist Party and then Josef Stalin gain absolute power. But after there were no visible opponents left, seven million more people were executed, and many millions more died in the far-flung camps of the gulag. So

many engineers were seized that factories came to a halt; so many railway men died that some trains did not run; so many colonels and generals were shot that the almost leaderless Red Army was nearly crushed by the German invasion of 1941.

In the Congo, as in Russia, mass murder had a momentum of its own. Power is tempting, and in a sense no power is greater than the ability to take someone's life. Once under way, mass killing is hard to stop; it becomes a kind of sport, like hunting. Congo annals abound in cases like that of René de Permentier, an officer in the Equator district in the late 1890s. The Africans nicknamed him Bajunu (for *bas genoux*, on your knees), because he always made people kneel before him. He had all the bushes and trees cut down around his house at Bokatola so that from his porch he could use passersby for target practice. If he found a leaf in a courtyard that women prisoners had swept, he ordered a dozen of them beheaded. If he found a path in the forest not well-maintained, he ordered a child killed in the nearest village.

Two Force Publique officers, Clément Brasseur and Léon Cerckel, once ordered a man hung from a palm tree by his feet while a fire was lit beneath him and he was cooked to death. Two missionaries found one post where prisoners were killed by having resin poured over their heads, then set on fire. The list is much longer.

Michael Herr, the most brilliant reporter of the Vietnam War, captures the same frenzy in the voice of one American soldier he met: "We'd rip out the hedges and burn the hooches and blow all the wells and kill every chicken, pig and cow in the whole [redacted] ville. I mean, if we can't shoot these people, what [redacted] are we doing here?" When another American, Francis Ford Coppola, tried to put the blood lust of that war on film, where did he turn for the plot of his *Apocalypse Now*? To Joseph Conrad, who had seen it all, a century earlier, in the Congo.

History lies heavy on Africa: the long decades of colonialism, several hundred years of the Atlantic and Arab world slave trade, and — all too often ignored — countless centuries of indigenous slavery before that. From the colonial era, the major legacy Europe left to Africa was not democracy as it is practiced today in countries like England, France, and Belgium; it was authoritarian rule and plunder. On the whole continent, perhaps no nation has had a harder time than the Congo in emerging from the shadow of its past.

When independence finally came to the Congo, the country fared badly. Like most other colonial powers in Africa, Belgium was taken by surprise by the demand for self-rule that swept across the continent in the 1950s, igniting mass demonstrations in Leopoldville in 1959 that were bloodily suppressed by the Force Publique. Until then, Leopold's heirs had thought independence might come, but decades hence. Some Africans were being trained for that distant day; but when pressure grew and independence came in 1960, in the entire territory there were fewer than thirty African university graduates. There were no Congolese army officers, engineers, agronomists, or physicians. The colony's administration had made few other steps toward a Congo run by its own people: of some five thousand management-level positions in the civil service, only three were filled by Africans.

King Baudouin of Belgium arrived in Leopoldville to grant, officially and patronizingly, the Congo its freedom. He said, "It is now up to you, gentlemen, to show that you are worthy of our confidence." An angry, impromptu speech in reply by Patrice Lumumba caught the world's attention. Barely a month earlier, an election had made Lumumba a coalition-government prime minister. It was the first democratic national election the territory had ever had. In substance if not form, it would be, for more than thirty-five years, the last. Lumumba believed that political independence was not enough to free Africa from its colonial past; the continent must also cease to be an economic colony of Europe. His speeches set off immediate alarm signals in Western capitals. Belgian, British, and American corporations by now had vast investments in the Congo, which was rich in copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, tin, manganese, and zinc. An inspired orator whose voice was rapidly carrying beyond his country's borders, Lumumba was a mercurial and charismatic figure.

His message, Western governments feared, was contagious. Moreover, he could not be bought. Finding no sympathy in the West, he asked for help from the Soviet Union. Anathema to American and European capital, he became a leader whose days were numbered. Less than two months after being named the Congo's first democratically chosen prime minister, a U.S. National Security Council subcommittee on covert operations, which included CIA chief Allen Dulles, authorized his assassination. Richard Bissell, CIA operations chief at the time, later said, "The President [Dwight D. Eisenhower] would have vastly preferred to have him taken care of some way other than by assassination, but he regarded Lumumba as I did and a lot of other people did: as a mad dog . . . and he wanted the problem dealt with."

Alternatives for dealing with "the problem" were considered, among them poison (a supply of which was sent to the CIA station chief in Leopoldville), a high-powered rifle, and free-lance hit men. But it proved hard to get close enough to Lumumba to use these, so, instead, the CIA supported anti-Lumumba elements within the factionalized Congo government, confident that before long they would do the job. They did. After being arrested and suffering a series of beatings, the prime minister was secretly shot in Elizabethville in January 1961. A CIA agent ended up driving around the city with Lumumba's body in his car's trunk, trying to find a place to dispose of it. We cannot know whether, had he survived, Lumumba would have stayed true to his rhetoric and to the hopes he embodied for so many people in Africa and elsewhere. But the United States saw to it that he never had a chance. Like millions of Congolese before him, he ended up dumped in an unmarked grave.

The key figure in the Congolese forces that arranged Lumumba's murder was a young man named Joseph Désiré Mobutu, then chief of staff of the army and a former NCO in the old colonial Force Publique. Early on, the Western powers had spotted Mobutu as someone who would look out for their interests. He had received cash payments from the local CIA man and Western military attachés while Lumumba's murder was being planned. Wearing dark glasses and his general's uniform with gold braid and a sword, he later met President Kennedy at the White House in 1963. Kennedy gave him an airplane for his personal use — and a U.S. Air Force crew to fly it for him. With United States encouragement, Mobutu staged a coup in 1965 that made him the country's dictator. And in that position he remained for more than thirty years.

Further U.S. military aid helped Mobutu repel several attempts to

overthrow him. Some of his political enemies he ordered tortured and killed; some he co-opted into his ruling circles; others he forced into exile. The United States gave him well over a billion dollars in civilian and military aid during the three decades of his rule; European powers — especially France — contributed more. For its heavy investment, the United States and its allies got a regime that was reliably anti-Communist and a secure staging area for CIA and French military operations, but Mobutu brought his country little except a change of name, in 1971, to Zaire.

Government-owned media began referring to Mobutu variously as the Guide, the Father of the Nation, the Helmsman, and the Messiah. With American and European approval, the country's wealth flowed mainly into the pockets of the Messiah and foreign mining companies. Mobutu's loyalty to his Western backers made him a popular visitor to Washington, where he shrewdly abandoned his military uniform for civilian dress, a carved ebony cane, and a trademark African-looking leopard-skin hat that had actually been made by an elegant Paris milliner. Ronald Reagan received him at the White House several times, praising him as "a voice of good sense and good will." George Bush greeted him as "one of our most valued friends." He added, "I was honored to invite President Mobutu to be the first African head of state to come to the United States for an official visit during my presidency."

Mobutu and his entourage helped themselves to state revenue so freely that the Congolese government ceased to function. When he ran out of money to pay the army and other state workers in 1993, he printed up a new kind of currency. Because shopkeepers would not accept it, soldiers rioted, looting shops, government buildings, and private homes. Hundreds of people were killed. For years, garbage piled up in heaps, uncollected. A few foreign airlines continued to stop in the country, but they avoided leaving their planes overnight; insurance would not cover it. Government support of schools and hospitals dwindled to almost nothing. The U.S. embassy advised its staff in the capital not to unlock car doors or roll down windows when stopped by police at roadblocks: they should show their papers through the window only, lest their wallets be taken.

Before Mobutu was overthrown, in 1997, his thirty-two years in power had made him one of the world's richest men; his personal wealth at its peak was estimated at \$4 billion. He spent much of his time on his yacht, on the river at Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville. One of the big lakes he

A KING AT BAY

renamed Lake Mobutu Sese Seko. He acquired palatial homes in France, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and elsewhere. He made no distinction between state assets and his own; in a single year, he dispatched a state-owned jet airliner thirty-two times to Venezuela to ferry five thousand long-haired sheep to his ranch at Gbadolite; while his yacht was being renovated in 1987, he simply took over the most comfortable of the few remaining passenger boats still operating on the river system. And he demanded, and got, a piece of the action in almost every major corporation operating in the country.

It is an oversimplification to blame Africa's troubles today entirely on European imperialism; history is far more complicated. And yet, consider Mobutu again. Aside from the color of his skin, there were few ways in which he did not resemble the monarch who governed the same territory a hundred years earlier. His one-man rule. His great wealth taken from the land. His naming a lake after himself. His yacht. His appropriation of state possessions as his own. His huge shareholdings in private corporations doing business in his territory. Just as Leopold, using his privately controlled state, shared most of his rubber profits with no one, so Mobutu acquired his personal group of gold mines — and a rubber plantation. Mobutu's habit of printing more money when he needed it resembled nothing so much as Leopold's printing of Congo bonds.

"Those who are conquered," wrote the philosopher Ibn Khaldūn in the fourteenth century, "always want to imitate the conqueror in his main characteristics — in his clothing, his crafts, and in all his distinctive traits and customs." Mobutu's luxurious Villa del Mare, a pink-and-white marble colonnaded chateau at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera, complete with indoor and outdoor swimming pools, gold-fitted bathrooms, and heliport, lay a mere dozen miles down the coast from the estates Leopold once owned at Cap Ferrat. From one cape you can see the other.



CHINUA ACHEBE

An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*¹

In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot. It was a fine autumn morning such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Black youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man going the same way as I turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain Community College not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. "Oh well," I heard him say finally, behind me: "I guess I have to take your course to find out."

A few weeks later I received two very touching letters from high school children in Yonkers, New York, who—bless their teacher—had just read *Things Fall Apart*. One of them was particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe.

I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them. But only, I hope, at first sight.

The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on account of his age but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things.

The other person being fully my own age could not be excused on the grounds of his years. Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more willful than a mere lack of information was at work. For did not that erudite British historian and Regius Professor at Oxford, Hugh Trevor Roper, also pronounce that African history did not exist?

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful inexperience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote

and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

This need is not new; which should relieve us all of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately. I have neither the wish nor the competence to embark on the exercise with the tools of the social and biological sciences but more simply in the manner of a novelist responding to one, famous book of European fiction: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work that I know displays that Western desire and need which I have just referred to. Of course there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose but most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today. Conrad, on the other hand, is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good story-teller into the bargain. His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class—permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. *Heart of Darkness* is indeed so secure today that a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language."¹ I will return to this critical opinion in due course because it may seriously modify my earlier suppositions about who may or may not be guilty in some of the matters I will now raise.

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting, peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks." But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world."

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. It is not the differentness that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too "has been one of the dark places of the earth." It conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.

These suggestive echoes comprise Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. In the final consideration his method amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. We can inspect samples of this on pages 36 and 37 of the

¹An amended version (1987) of the second Channing's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 18, 1975; later published in *The Massachusetts Review*, 16 (1977): 752-94.

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present edition: a) *It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention* and b) *The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy*. Of course there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time, so that instead of *inscrutable*, for example, you might have *unspeakable*, even plain *mysterious*, etc., etc.

The eagle-eyed English critic F. R. Leavis drew attention long ago to Conrad's "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery." That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw; for it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological pre-disposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must crave the indulgence of my reader to quote almost a whole page from about the middle of the story when representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the denizens of Africa.

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of black rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to 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 understand because we were too far and 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.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. 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 inhuman. 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 this wild and 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.

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours. . . . Ugly."

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

And between whistles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity—and he had filed his teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance.

"Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place," he tells us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness.

Before the story takes us into the Congo basin proper we are given this nice little vignette as an example of things in their place:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the stiff

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along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.

Towards the end of the story Conrad invites a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little liberty) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

9
She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. . . . She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval and second, she fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story:

She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning. . . . She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard you were coming." . . . She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. In place of speech they made "a violent babble of uncouth sounds." They "exchanged short grunting phrases" even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

"Catch 'im," he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—"catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat 'im!" he said curdly. . . .

The other occasion was the famous announcement:

"Mistah Kurtz—he dead."

At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their

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hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head in the doorway" what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who willfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seal amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

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It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers.

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Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever.

Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

They were dying slowly—it was very 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.

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The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epit-

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ominizes the ambivalence. In a comment which has often been quoted Schweitzer says: "The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother." And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lamberenc, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word *brother* however qualified; the farthest he would go was kinship. When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

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And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about *distant kinship* as about someone *laying a claim* on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "... the thought of their humanity—like yours. . . . Ugly."

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz.

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorably good passages and moments:

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The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. Its exploration of the minds of the European characters is often penetrating and full of insight. But all that has been more than fully discussed in the last fifty years. His obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it is high time it was!

Conrad was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.²

Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms. . . .

as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in *A Personal Record* what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him "my unforgettable Englishman" and describes him in the following manner:

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"(his) calves exposed to the public gaze . . . dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory. . . . The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men . . . illumined his face . . . and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth . . . his white calves twinkled studiously."³

2. Jonah Raskin, *The Mythology of Imperialism* (N.Y.: Random House, 1971) 143.

3. Bernard C. Meyer, M.D., *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967) 30.

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Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that talented, tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. In his lengthy book *Dr. Meyer follows every conceivable lead* (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and hair-curling in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad's antisemitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria.

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as "among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language." And why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities.

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There are two probable grounds on which what I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, did sail down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms. How could I stand up more than fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history."⁴

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of

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it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

Gauguin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable; it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was 'speechless' and 'stunned' when he saw it, bought it, from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze. . . . The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!⁵

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name too: the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. The event Frank Willett is referring to marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art, which had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the peoples of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa.

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Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad with xenophobia, can be astonishing blind. Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled *Description of the World* his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. But there were at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He said nothing about the art of printing, unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever the reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly 4,000 miles long and already more than 1,000 years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon!⁶ Indeed travellers can be blind.

⁴ Frank Willett, *African Art* (N. Y., Praeger, 1971) 35-36.

⁵ See the omission of the Great Wall of China, I am indebted to *The Journey of Marco Polo*, as recalled by artist Michael Foreman, published in *Penguin Magazine*, 1973.

As I said earlier Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this essay I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of the West's television and cinema and newspapers, about books read in its schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there was, in any case, something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word *willful* a few times here to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful.

The Christian Science Monitor, a paper more enlightened than most, once carried an interesting article written by its Education Editor on the serious psychological and learning problems faced by little children who speak one language at home and then go to school where something else is spoken. It was a wide-ranging article taking in Spanish-speaking children in America, the children of migrant Italian workers in Germany, the quadrilingual phenomenon in Malaysia, and so on. And all this

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while the article speaks unequivocally about language. But then out of the blue sky comes this:

In London there is an enormous immigration of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.⁷

I believe that the introduction of dialects which is technically erroneous in the context is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad's withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects!

In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done not only to the image of despised peoples but even to words, the very tools of possible redress. Look at the phrase *native language* in the *Science Monitor* excerpt. Surely the only *native* language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer means something else—something appropriate to the sounds Indians and Africans make!

Although the work of redressing which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe it is not one day too soon to begin. Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.