In 1874, Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, a 17-year-old orphan, persuaded his uncle to allow him to join the French merchant marine. After promising never to forget that “wherever you may sail, you are always sailing towards Poland,” Konrad set out for Marseille, France, and then London, where he found work as a deck hand.
and, eventually, as a captain in Britain’s legendary merchant fleet. For two decades, Korzeniowski traveled the world, from Malaysia to the Congo to the Caribbean, along with Western imperialism and colonial rule.

By the end of the 19th century, Konrad Korzeniowski had become Joseph Conrad, a naturalized British subject. “I may have been a seaman,” he would tell his amanuensis, “but I am a writer of prose.” And, indeed, he was.

In “The Dawn Watch,” Maya Jasanoff, a professor of history at Harvard University, explores Conrad’s life and work “with the compass of an historian, the chart of a biographer, and the navigational sextant of a fiction reader.” She demonstrates that Conrad’s four great novels (“The Secret Agent,” “Lord Jim,” “Heart of Darkness” and “Nostromo”), drew on his experiences — “the flimsiness of ideals he’d encountered among the nationalists of his youth, the perils of modernization he’s seen at sea, the malignancy of greed he’d witnessed in Africa” — to illuminate the phenomenon we now call globalization.
Jasanoff is a splendid storyteller and stylist. As a boy, she tells us, Conrad “gobbled Dickens in Polish translation.” Although Dickens’ London was disappearing when he arrived there, he framed his autobiographical reflections through Dickens, “turning a story of arrival into a story of becoming.”


Jasanoff is equally adept in supplying historical context for her narrative. Personal decisions, she points out, often turn on “conditions remote, if not invisible” to the individual making them. In 1874, Conrad almost certainly did not know that England
was the very best place for a European sailor to find employment. Preeminence in steel production, engineering excellence and command of a global network of coaling stations helped England use steamships to control about 70 percent of world trade. Although other European nations required at least two-thirds of sailors and one hundred percent of officers to be citizens, England had no quotas — and offered wages higher than its competitors. Not surprisingly, then, about 20 percent of the crew on British ships were continental Europeans. Moreover, in the merchant marine, unlike the Royal Navy, ordinary seamen could become captains by meeting minimum service requirements and passing an exam administered by the Board of Trade.

Most important, Jasanoff provides compelling assessments of Conrad’s novels. In “Lord Jim,” she writes, Conrad wrote about an indigenous culture under colonial rule as he had seen it in Malaysia — “from the deck of a steamship.” Conrad knew “more about Anglo-Dutch rivalry, merchants, pilots and lascars,” Jasanoff adds, “than he knew about Malay sovereignty, the nature of Islam, or the Dayak societies of Borneo.” His fiction “rarely ventured outside the heads of European characters.”

That said, “Conrad was also on to something.” Jim did not project the confidence of imperialism at the height of its power. Drawing on stereotypes about “the Orient,” Jim ruminated about the impact “progress” and “civilization,” with their “utilitarian lies” and fractured communities, would have on Malays. Noting as well the abandonment of honor and honest authenticity in the West, Conrad has Jim rediscover “in a moment of illusion” the “deep hidden truths of works of art” and of self-sacrifice.

In “Heart of Darkness,” “what had been a search for routes in Conrad’s journal became a search for meaning” in the Belgian Congo. The now famous cry, “The horror! The horror!,” Jasanoff suggests, “hung as an epitaph over Kurtz’s contradictions”: the agent who brought civilization and stole ivory, embraced “savage customs” and women and promised to “exterminate all the brutes.” The “horror,” then, could well mean, “Anyone could be savage. Everywhere could go dark.”

The only novel set in a place Conrad had never visited (South America), “Nostromo,” published in 1904, posited with “extraordinary prescience” an end game for European colonialism, in which what one nation gained, another would lose, with an “American-led consortium of ‘material interests’” in the ascendant, writes Jasanoff.

“With a glance fixed upon nothing from under a fixed frown,” hoping against hope “to
restore vanished Arcadia,” but convinced that somehow imperialism would continue, albeit with the term “empire” no longer in use, Conrad concluded that the question for the future “was not what would happen. It was when and how.” Fittingly, Jasanoff reveals, Conrad was in Poland in the summer of 1914 when World War I commenced.

Conrad “made me see,” Jasanoff concludes, with both eyes fixed on the 21st century, that “today’s hearts of darkness are to be found wherever civilizing missions serve as covers for exploitation.” In manufacturing jobs performed by robots. In “material interests” located in China and the United States. In “the hollowness of civilization” and what appears to be “a universal potential for savagery.”

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The Dawn Watch

Joseph Conrad in a Global World

By Maya Jasanoff

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