

**A Fortnight in Oxford**  
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## **Joseph Conrad and the Literature of Empire**

**Dr Angus McFadzean**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Empire had become the famous ‘empire on which the sun never sets’. It possessed territories across the globe and its crown jewel was India, which it had taken direct control of after the 1857 Indian Mutiny. Britain was at the height of its power, yet, after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, numerous other countries began to seek their own overseas colonies. France claimed territory in Indochina and Germany, Italy and Belgium took possession of South-West Africa, Ethiopia, and the Congo, respectively. This was the age of the ‘new imperialism’, of the ‘Great Game’ in Afghanistan and the ‘Scramble for Africa’, an age of European nations competing with each other by invading countries, appropriating their natural resources, and corralling native populations into brutal forms of forced labour.

No author saw the effects of imperialism and colonisation as clearly as Joseph Conrad. Born in Poland, Conrad worked as a sailor on merchant trading vessels for many years before settling in England. There, he wrote a series of novels in his second language – English – that established him as one of the leading novelists of the day. Transforming his personal experience in the Belgian Congo and the East Indies into fictional tales, Conrad offers a damning indictment of the larger colonial system, from the exploitation of the Belgian Congo (*Heart of Darkness*) to the personal follies and shame of serving British sailors in the Malay Archipelago (*Lord Jim*). At the same time, he registered the growth of anarchist movements that threatened the heartland of Empire, and subjected them to his ironic gaze in his masterpiece of spy literature *The Secret Agent*.

Conrad’s perspective on Empire however was singular and the course will also explore the new kind of ‘adventure’ literature that emerged to celebrate the imperial prowess of Britain in this battle for global domination. Rudyard Kipling’s classic boy’s adventure in India, *Kim*, will stand for the tradition including Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, and R.L. Stevenson, stories set in romantic and exotic versions of Africa, India and other colonial outposts, which celebrated the heroic exploits of white men in foreign countries.

Conrad’s distinctive style of writing went on to inspire the great modernist writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the great popular spy and adventure writers. This course will illuminate this challenging writer by putting his life and writings back into the context of this ‘new imperialism’ and the adventure literature of the period.

**Texts:**

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, 1899. Oxford World's Classics, 2008. ISBN 978-0199536016

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900. Oxford World's Classics, 2003. ISBN 978-0192840677

Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, 1901. Oxford World's Classics, 2008. ISBN 978-199536467

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 1907. Oxford World's Classics, 2008. ISBN 978-0199536351

**Tutor Bio:**

Dr Angus McFadzean is from Aberdeen, Scotland. He studied literature at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, obtaining a DPhil in the novels of James Joyce at Wadham College, University of Oxford. He currently teaches undergraduates as a sessional tutor at various Oxford colleges and summer schools with OUDCE.