

After Us the Savage God

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CHARLES CONDER: THE LAST BOHEMIAN

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WHEN HE REACHED Paris in 1890, Charles Conder was not yet twenty-two and his career as an 'Australian' painter was over — barely two active years in Melbourne and, before that, a haphazard period of training and apprenticeship as a black-and-white illustrator in Sydney. He never went back. Instead, the handsome, gregarious youth who painted such sunny landscapes as *A Holiday at Mentone* (Art Gallery of South Australia) spent the rest of his short life in France (where he was frequently dismissed as *anglais*) and in England (where he was thought suspiciously French). Nor did he derive much benefit in either place from having spent his childhood in India, or from having lived for a few years in Australia. Indeed, on these grounds a German critic once called Conder 'not a pure-blood'. As Algernon Moncrieff remarks to Cecily Cardew in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world are not particularly encouraging.'

Ann Galbally's splendid new biography of Conder evokes the various artistic and literary milieux between which this sad, beautiful man moved with ease — sleeping for weeks on other people's sofas, surviving on handouts, fossicking for old clothes (dandyish, from the 1830s), fascinating men and women alike, sometimes to the point of frenzy, hanging around louche bars in Dieppe, getting into drunken scrapes, being tortured by successive stages of syphilis; yet still managing to paint exquisitely delicate silk fans and other decorations (occasionally using a bottle of Pernod as a medium for his brush, as well as a source of refreshment), while marking with rose petals favourite passages in his copy of Claude Phillips's monograph about Antoine Watteau.

At first, Conder thought Monet & Co. were 'ultra extremists', Bastien-Lepage 'perfect' and Puvis de Chavannes 'great, great, great'. He was also impressed by the cold blues and greys of Whistler, even though the older artist disliked him. So Conder was emphatically not an Impressionist. Instead, he became the focus of that intriguing cult of paleness that flourished in the mid to late 1890s, along with a renewed taste for relics of the *ancien régime*. That taste for the rococo was thought to be very modern indeed. Conder experimented with such oddities as watercolour on leather, and his silks were famous for their subtlety, and for the curious, penumbral dramas that unravel in them: moody transactions beside trellises, in shady walks, behind boudoir

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screens. In one example (Leeds City Art Gallery), a cupid holds a butterfly over a candle, singeing its wings, while nearby elaborately coiffured ladies read their fortunes (obviously mixed) in a deck of cards. In due course, Conder would be nostalgically enshrined in W.B. Yeats's famous remark: 'After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.'

Galbally's cast of characters is large and delightful. There is Stephen Mannington Caffyn, Conder's Melbourne doctor, the inventor of a patented meat essence called 'Liquor Carnis', and his novelist wife Kathleen, whose first novel, pungently entitled *Victims of Circe*, was published in 1891. The Amazonian actress Janet Achurch (Mrs Charles Charrington), who captivates Conder while under contract to J.C. Williamson's in Melbourne, turns up again years later at the Café Royal in London, a hopeless opium addict lost in a crowd of crooks, tarts and private detectives — so said the young Augustus John, and he would know. In Paris, Conder is a regular companion of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec at the Moulin Rouge, and makes numerous appearances in his posters and prints. On one occasion, the cancan star 'Rayon d'Or' pays Conder the supreme compliment of kicking his hat off.

Po-faced John Longstaff reports to friends in Melbourne that Conder is 'tastefully attired in pegtop nether garments of brown velveteen, with a short coat of the same delightful material, a crimson sash round his waist and a tall pointed hat'. In the lesbian bar called Le Rat Mort, Conder befriends the dandy Edouard Dujardin, whom he later challenges to a duel (pistols) over a volatile, wayward girlfriend. In a Dieppe orchard afternoon-tea 'mystery play' about the Garden of Eden, his beautiful model Aline Harland plays the role of God the Father, while Conder plays Adam and D.S. MacColl the serpent, dangling upside down by his toes from the branch of a tree. Remembering Dieppe, Oscar Wilde describes Conder's conversation as being 'like a beautiful sea mist', an especially generous assessment in the circumstances, because Conder was almost certainly drunk at the time. (Wilde was extremely kind, but, after he got out of gaol, his kindness was usually repaid with cruelty and contempt — sadly on one occasion by Conder himself, a rare lapse, perhaps understandable but not easily forgiven.)

The critic and epigrammatist Logan Pearsall Smith, the beautiful Kinsella sisters, Lady Ottoline Morrell, the Chilean heiress Doña Eugenia Huici Errázuriz, the photographer Adolph 'de' Meyer and his glamorous, pencil-thin gymnast wife Olga (who died of a heart attack while taking a cure in Austria), Max Beerbohm, Walter Sickert, Jacques-Émile Blanche, Prince and Princess Troubetzkoy, the *grande horizontale* Cléo de Mérode all stray into the action, sometimes frequently. Conder becomes a key figure in the decadent Arthur Symons—Ernest Dowson—Leonard Smithers—Aubrey Beardsley 'days of wine and roses' set. In sickness, he is nursed by the Comte de Vallombreuse at his house in Algiers and, later, overlooking

a golf links in Scotland, by the hearty polo-playing barrister Llewellyn Hacon and his exotic wife Amaryllis (Ryllis for short, formerly known as Edith). From his hotel window in Paris, Conder watches 'a devout fair-girl' repeatedly set fire to herself in a bizarre sideshow re-enactment of the martyrdom of Joan of Arc. Despite being three sheets to the wind, he catches a thief inside his house in Chelsea, locks him up and hands him over to the police the next day.

Conder endured various professional and artistic disappointments with magnanimity, if not cheerfulness. His biggest break was the inaugural 1895 exhibition at Samuel Bing's *Maison de l'art nouveau* in Paris, to which he contributed Louis XVI-style decorations painted on white silk for a small boudoir. However, nobody got the gist of these rococo vignettes and medallions, which were meant to bring up to date the eighteenth-century idea of a whole interior without any distinction between high art and mere decoration. Having been raised up, Conder's hopes of success — the kind of Parisian success that all artists then dreamed of — were dashed by hostile critics. The bigoted Arsène Alexandre did not hold back. The show, he thought, 'smacks of the vicious Englishman, the Jewess addicted to morphine, or the Belgian spiv, or a good mixture of these three poisons ... I left exhausted, exasperated, my nerves on edge and my head full of dancing nightmares.' So that was that.

Nevertheless, success did come to Conder, but slowly, and mainly in England. André Gide bought a little landscape. So did the famous actor Benoît-Constant Coquelin of the *Comédie Française*. The Carfax Gallery in Ryder Street, St James's, gave Conder his first solo show. It was a huge commercial and critical success. A close-knit group of loyal clients kept him going in the lean years, along with friends such as the devoted, long-suffering Will Rothenstein, and interesting disciples such as William Orpen, whom Conder nevertheless did his best to alienate. Through Florence Humphrey (*née* Pash), who late in life boasted about knowing more than was good for her about the true identity of Jack the Ripper, Conder met a wealthy Canadian widow called Stella Maris Belford. To everybody's surprise, they married and settled in a beautiful house in Chelsea. ('Well, well!' wrote the sceptical Arthur Streeton, rather unkindly.) Stella probably extended Conder's lifespan by a good five years, but alcohol and syphilis got him in the end, shortly before he turned forty.

This book is handsomely bound, beautifully printed and, despite a few dreadful typographical errors, a pleasure to read. I devoured it in one sitting on an aeroplane flying across the Pacific Ocean. Which reminds me: at 10,000 feet the front cover popped open and didn't want to shut; at 18,000 feet the spine turned back on itself and, by the time we reached 37,000 feet, the pages started fanning out like a rolodex. Has anybody else observed this ghostly *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon? Even stranger, and to my relief, the process completely reversed itself upon descending into Los Angeles. I do not know what I would have done if I had needed to stop reading in mid-air. Fortunately, I did not want to.