

PREFACE

The idea for this book came about while reading Joseph Conrad's short story 'Falk: A Reminiscence' in which the protagonist of the same name, stranded at sea, shoots and eats a fellow shipmate in order to survive. The 'heroic' characteristics displayed by both men in their struggle for survival embedded in my consciousness the lengths that humans will go in order to secure a good meal. The question then arose: how else does Conrad use food in his fiction? With this thought in mind, I returned to the novels and re-read them from a new culinary perspective, discovering that Conrad's texts are littered with references to food and eating that only a handful of scholars—primarily Tony Tanner, Paul Vlitos and Stephen Donovan—have recognised and acknowledged. Food, it seems, was not considered a 'scholarly' endeavour and references to food were considered incidental to a text; although attitudes to the value of literary food studies are rapidly changing. This book, therefore, was conceived with the intention of showing that references to food and eating are an essential component of Conrad's fiction, providing important historical, sociological and political contexts. The dilemma, however, was in selecting four texts that would form the main chapters of this book. It was clear that *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad's first novel, would set the scene by encouraging the reader to suspend—and hopefully dismiss—the stereotypical view of the East by creating a narrative of food which challenges western perceptions. The subsequent choice of novels, including the short story, 'Falk', are representative of the key themes of Conrad's

fiction, namely the social, historical and political factors—including that most taboo of subjects, cannibalism—that shaped the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chosen texts also represent Conrad's artistic philosophy conveyed through his characters' engagement with food and eating and reflect—either literally or metaphorically—the hunger for certitude in an uncertain and insatiable modern world.

Food is necessary to life and therefore something to which all readers can relate. As such, an analysis of food and eating in Conrad's novels makes accessible an author who has a reputation for being 'difficult' to read. Similarly, the textual analysis of food references contributes to the existing scholarly cannon with which it engages while presenting new and previously overlooked narratives made visible by focussing on that most taken-for-granted activity: eating.

The writing of this book has included many contented hours of reading and archival research which has left me with a recognition of the value of vegetarianism and its role in political activism during the nineteenth century. Most importantly, I have gained an insight into the debt that Britain owes to the culinary diversity of those it colonised and how the food of the 'Other' continues to shape and enhance British culture.

This book has been influenced by conversations with fellow Conradians who have shared their vast knowledge of Conrad's life and work through the community of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK). My gratitude for helping expand and add to the initial idea goes to Professor Allan Simmons. I would like to thank him for his patience, friendship and brilliance. Equally, I thank Professor Laurence Davies whose phenomenal and generous knowledge has helped me to shape this study and understand the history and etymology of a variety of foodstuffs.

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