



Joseph Conrad's reading: evaluating the *Reading Experience Database*

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Introduction

As part of an innovative, evidence-based study of Conrad as a reader, seen from the perspective of the history of reading, this poster presents an overview of some of my RED data on his reading experiences, and aims thereby to show the value and the limitations of this research tool in examining an individual literary reader



'[...] he brought all the resources of a mind steeped in the modern literature of Europe, especially in that of France'. (Cunninghame Graham, 1925)

RED data sources: hierarchy of quality of evidence

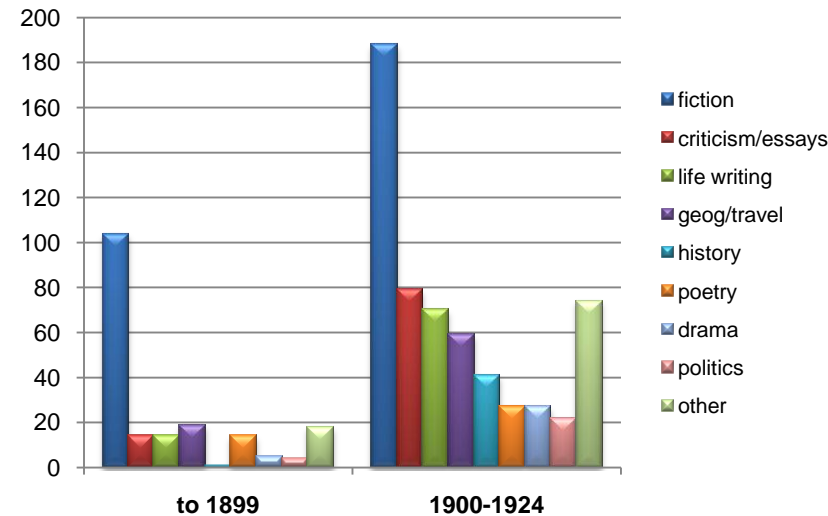
- Immediate and current acts of reading recorded in letters, especially to and from close friends
- Recollected acts of reading in letters and interviews
- Essays on books and reading
- 'Autobiography'
- Family and friends' memoirs

Other data collected but currently excluded from RED

- Implied acts of reading (allusions and long quotations)
- Acts of reading depicted in Conrad's fiction
- Reading of reviews of his own works
- Re-reading his own works
- Acquisition of texts with declared intention to read

Selected results (615/31,000 records)

What did Conrad read and when?



How, why and with whom did he read?



R.B. Cunninghame Graham



Ford Madox Ford

Where?



- Identification of multilingual reading currently requires hand-searching of RED records
- How and why Conrad read is often vividly described in evidence
- Shared reading identifiable (14/615)
- Reading/editing his friends' MSS easily identifiable (44/615)
- Conrad's reading as a sailor is under-represented and demands an alternative approach (8 records only, 7 from Ford's memoir)
- His domestic reading spaces are readily identifiable by searching specific addresses and locations.



John Galsworthy



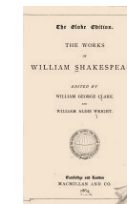
Edward Garnett



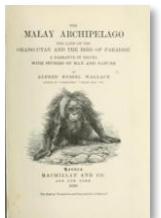
Pent Farm, nr. Hythe

Some early conclusions

- With good quality submitted data, searching RED returns information about genres, forms of texts, spaces/places, responses to, and reasons for reading, but less easily for dates of reading experiences and for language
- Initial results suggest some interesting lines of enquiry e.g. Conrad's reading of poetry, women writers, popular fiction, friends' work-in-progress, the relationship between book ownership and reading, and also the representation of readers and texts in *Youth*, 'Heart of Darkness', *Lord Jim* and *Chance*
- Recorded acts of reading may be unrepresentative of reading overall
- 'Reading that leaves no trace', which is embedded in an author's life and works but is rarely if ever mentioned, cannot be adequately represented in RED



'a thick green-and-gold volume, a half-crown complete Shakespeare.' *Lord Jim* (1900)



Wallace's *Malay Archipelago* (1869) Conrad's 'favorite bedside companion'

Selected References

- The Reading Experience Database <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/>
- The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, 1861-1924, 9 vols, gen.ed. Laurence Davies (CUP, 1983-2007)
- Stape, J.H. and Owen Knowles, *A Portrait in Letters: Correspondence to and about Joseph Conrad* (Rodopi, 1996)
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- Ford, Ford Madox, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Duckworth, 1924)