



The British Empire

Stories from the five continents





R A I N B O W S

J. Conrad, R. Kipling, *et al.*

The British Empire

Stories from the five continents

Adaptation, dossiers and activities
by Paola Della Valle



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Birth and Decline of the British Empire

The short stories in this book were written when the British Empire was at its fullest extent. Two main driving forces determined its development. First, it was seen as defence against the growing military strength of other European powers. The Empire would provide military manpower¹ and the economic means to support British leadership. Secondly, the interest in the Empire was commercial. By the end of the 19th century, Britain imported most of its raw materials² and resources from the colonies, which in turn provided the main markets for the products manufactured in Britain.

The foundations of the Empire were laid under the Tudors, especially during Elizabeth I's reign, when English explorers dared to challenge Spain's supremacy in the New World, and corsairs like Francis Drake or Walter Raleigh had a royal licence to rob the treasures of the Spanish galleons coming from South America. The first British colonies in the New World were located on the Eastern coasts of North America. In Virginia and Maryland economy boomed thanks to the experimental planting of tobacco. The Puritan Pilgrim Fathers settled further north and prospered in New England. The British government used the colonies as a place to send undesirable people, such as Catholics and Puritans, criminals, Irish rebels and prisoners of war.

Although the West Indies had first been settled by the Spanish, when the British discovered fertile Barbados, they invested in sugar plantations which resulted in immense riches and accelerated the occupation of other islands. As the tobacco and sugar plantations required a high number of labourers, their owners adopted the Spanish system of imported African slave labour. In three centuries of slavery, more than 3 million Africans died, many of them on British vessels.

The British expanded their Empire all over the world: India, East Asia, Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the South Seas. Colonisation took two different forms: the colonies of occupation (invaded colonies) and those of settlement (settler colonies). In the former – like Nigeria and India – the indigenous people remained a majority ruled by the British elite through the army and the administrative network. In the latter – like Australia, New Zealand and Canada – the Europeans exterminated or marginalized the natives, and became the majority population.

The decline of the Empire started in the 1920s-30s. Most of Ireland became the Irish Free State (with dominion status) in 1922 and a "sovereign independent state" (Eire) in 1937. During the 1930s, there was unrest³ throughout the Empire, most notably in India with non-violent leader Mahatma Gandhi. In 1931, the Statute of Westminster changed the relationship between Britain and its dominions by establishing the "British Commonwealth of Nations", an organisation of countries "equal in status but united by common allegiance⁴ to the Crown". World War II caused the end of all colonial empires. India gained independence in 1947, Sudan, Ghana and Malaya in the 1950s, and most of the remaining African countries in the 1960s. By 1970 British colonies in the West Indies were independent, too. In 1973, when Britain entered the EEC, only a few small possessions remained, including Gibraltar and Hong Kong, which was returned to the Chinese in 1997.

1. *manpower*: the number of workers needed to do a particular job.

2. *raw material*: a basic material used to make a product.

3. *unrest*: a political situation in which people protest.

4. *allegiance*: loyalty.

The Author

Joseph Conrad

(Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, 1857-1924)



Conrad was born in Polish Ukraine, a territory under Russian rule, to Polish parents. He belonged to an aristocratic family and his father Apollo, a landowner and man of letters, was a militant rebel who was exiled to Northern Russia for supporting Polish independence. Conrad and his mother followed him, but she died after only three years and the boy was sent back to an uncle. His father died shortly afterwards, so Conrad never saw him again.

After his studies in Cracow, Conrad left Poland to follow his passionate desire to go to sea. In 1874, he left for Marseilles and served on French merchant vessels until 1878, when he joined the British Merchant Navy. He sailed all over the world, but mainly to the Far East, which later became the setting of many of his novels. In 1886, he became a British subject and two years later was given his first command of a vessel, sailing in the Malay Archipelago. In 1890, he captained a steamer on the Congo river, an experience which affected him deeply and provided the inspiration for his masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness* (1902). He retired from the sea in 1894, settled in England and devoted himself to writing. In 1895, he married Jessie George, who gave him two sons. He died in 1924.

His first novel, published under the pen-name of Conrad, was *Almayer's Folly* (1895) followed by *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897). After that, a series of novels and short stories appeared, which strongly identify him with the eastern seas: *Lord Jim* (1900), *Typhoon* and *Youth* (1902), *The Secret Sharer* (1912), *Victory* (1915) and *The Shadow-Line* (1917). He was also interested in the theme of revolution, which he explored in *Nostramo* (1904), set in a South American Republic, *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

Although at first glance Conrad appears to be a writer of action stories in exotic places, there is much more to his works. Far from being

romantic, his fiction presents men in extreme situations, having to face hostile external forces and make dramatic choices. Conrad's main interests are the ambiguity of human nature, the ambivalence of man's moral codes and the difficulty of communication between individuals. His works are therefore voyages into the inner¹ self of his characters as much as explorations of faraway countries. Some of them, such as *Heart of Darkness*, pose² critical questions on European colonialism.

An Outpost of Progress was first included in the collection *Tales of Unrest* in 1898. A Belgian company leaves two agents, Kayerts and Carlier, in charge of a small trading station on a river in the middle of the African jungle. Their job is to trade European goods for ivory, as in *Heart of Darkness*. In fact, it is their African employee³, known as Makola, who is the real 'head' of the station, because he is the only one who can speak both the various local languages and French. Kayerts and Carlier are depicted as ineffectual bureaucrats, unable to act and make choices. They symbolize the gears⁴ of a complex system that uses (and finally sacrifices) mediocre⁵ people, by giving them the illusion of easy success. They will end up being victims of their mediocrity.

The role of efficient Makola is crucial, since he seems to have identified with the interests of the company better than the two white men. He basically sells the black labourers of the station as slaves, in exchange for a considerable amount of ivory. Kayerts and Carlier are horrified at first, but the prospect of good money makes them approve of Makola's action. Conrad probably wanted to underline that the slave trade could never have occurred without the help of black chiefs, as proved by historical evidence. However, the overall story throws a dark light on the aims and practices of European colonialism in Africa.

1. *inner*: private and secret.
2. *pose*: ask.
3. *employee*: a person who works for a company.
4. *gears*: pieces of a machine.
5. *mediocre*: not very good, second-rate.



Conrad on the Congo River (C. Anyango, 2010).



BEFORE READING

- 1 The story is set in a trading station along a river in Africa. Do you know what a trading station is? Choose the best option.
 - a. A shop or store selling European products to native people.
 - b. A place where European products are kept to be exchanged with local goods brought by the natives.
 - c. A place where people can take a train or bus.

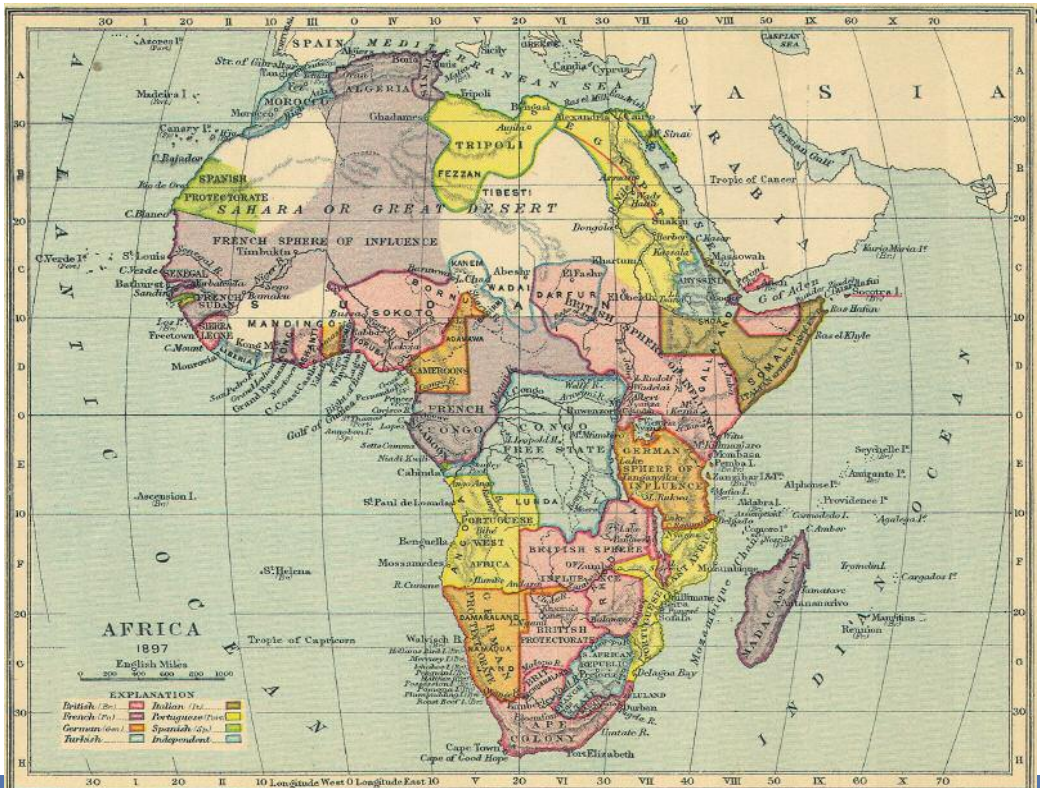
- 2 What African goods or material may interest the Europeans?

gold – clothes – ivory – artifacts – animal hides and furs – food

- 3 The surnames of the two protagonists are Kayerts and Carrier. What nationality do you think they are?

German – British – Portuguese – Belgian – Italian

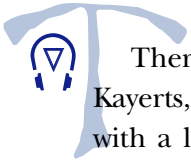
- 4 Here is a map of Africa in late 1800. Look for Belgian Congo (also called Congo Free State), where the story takes place (although it is never explicitly mentioned). Look for other two places mentioned: Angola and Sierra Leone.



The British Empire

An Outpost of Progress

Story 1



There were two white men in charge of the trading station. Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat; Carlier, his assistant, was tall, with a large head and broad shoulders on top of a long pair of thin legs. The third man of the staff was a Sierra Leone¹ nigger², who said his name was Henry Price. However, for some reason or other, the natives down the river had given him the name of Makola. He spoke English and French, had beautiful handwriting, understood book-keeping³ and, deep in his heart, venerated evil spirits. Makola, quiet and impenetrable, detested the two white men. He lived with his wife, a negress⁴ from Loanda⁵, and their three children in a hut near the small clay storehouse with a dried-grass roof. Makola pretended to keep correct account of the trade goods that were kept there: beads⁶, brass wire⁷, cotton pieces of clothing, red kerchiefs⁸ and other things.



Beside Makola's hut and the storehouse, there was only one large building. It was made of reeds, with a veranda on all four sides. There were three rooms in it. The one in the middle was the living-room, and contained two rough tables and a few stools. The other two were the bedrooms for the white men. Each had a bed and a mosquito net as all the furniture. Some distance away from the buildings, under a tall cross, slept the man who had planned and watched the construction of this outpost⁹ of progress: the first chief of the station. He had been an unsuccessful artist

1. *Sierra Leone*: a settlement for freed slaves and a British colony.
2. *nigger*: today an insulting term meaning 'black man'. In Conrad's time it was used more freely.
3. *book-keeping*: keeping records of the accounts of a business.
4. *negress*: today an insulting term meaning 'black woman' (but see previous note on nigger).
5. *Loanda*: a city on the coast of

- Angola, then under Portuguese rule.
6. *beads*: small round pieces of glass used to make a necklace.
7. *brass wire*: a thin thread made of a bright yellow metal which is an alloy of copper and zinc.
8. *kerchief*: a piece of cloth to be worn around the head.
9. *outpost*: a group of buildings in a remote part of a country.



Ivory at Bandundu, Belgian Congo (1932).

at home and had gone out there thanks to high connections. Makola had watched him die of fever with his kind of “I told you so” indifference.



Makola had stayed in the station alone for some time, with his family, his account books and his god. He got on well with his god, maybe he propitiated him with a promise of more white men to play with. When the director of the Great Trading Company had come up in the steamer¹⁰, he found the station in good order. He had appointed Kayerts as chief and Carlier as second-in-charge. He made a speech to them, pointing out the promising aspects of the station. The nearest trading post was about three hundred miles away. It was an exceptional opportunity for beginners to distinguish themselves and earn percentages on the trade. Kayerts was moved almost to tears by his director’s kindness and expressed his gratitude. He had been in the Administration of the Telegraphs for seventeen years, and knew how to speak properly. Carlier, an ex-cavalry officer of an army that had never been involved in a battle, was less impressed.

“We shall see very soon”, he muttered¹¹ between his teeth, thinking of the commissions.



The next day the steamer went off, not to return for another six months. On the boat, waving to the two men on the shore, the director turned to an old servant of the Company and exclaimed,

“They must be mad at home to send me such imbeciles. I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new storehouses and construct a landing-stage¹². They won’t know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river useless, and they just fit the station!”



The two men watched the steamer disappear and, walking arm in arm, returned to the station. They had been in this vast and dark country only a very short time and always under the guidance of their superiors. Suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness, they felt very lonely. They were two perfectly insignificant and

10. *steamer*: a boat driven by steam, used on rivers or along coasts.

11. *muttered*: said something in a quiet

voice difficult to hear.

12. *landing-stage*: platform on water near the shore.