

Conrad and Bushidō

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Among the various criticisms lodged against *The Mirror of the Sea*—its lack of unity, for instance, or its unevenness—perhaps the most intriguing involve the book’s inaccuracies. Not only does Conrad omit and misrepresent key facts of his life in this “purportedly semi-autobiographical” work (Knowles and Moore 231), but also he turns parts of nautical history into a pastiche of nostalgia and myth. Meanwhile, at the very time that Conrad was preparing *The Mirror of the Sea*, a Japanese book that was then extraordinarily influential in the West was undergoing criticism for its own inaccuracies and mythological distortions of history. That book was *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, written in English by the Japanese professor and internationalist Inazō Nitobe. First published in 1900, *Bushido*, whose title word means “the way of the warrior,” supposedly explained Japanese thinking and national spirit to Western readers. How is it, we might ask, that Conrad—master mariner—could so readily distort maritime history, and how could Nitobe be so mistaken in describing his own country’s past? Or, to put this question another way, what if these supposed faults, these mythologizing errors, are not weaknesses at all but instead essential features? To consider possible answers, in what follows I will explore some relations between *Bushido* and *The Mirror of the Sea* as similar literary responses to the troubling conditions of modernity.

I. A Peculiar Pattern of Errors

At first, it might seem that these two books are unlikely subjects for such

a comparison, given their markedly different genesis, purpose, publication, structure, and style. Nitobe's volume bears the subtitle "An Exposition of Japanese Thought." In his preface to the first edition, Nitobe explains that the book came about after he had remarked to a Belgian jurist around 1890 that there was no religious instruction in Japanese schools. However, Nitobe later decided upon reflection, his moral upbringing did indeed have a foundation: the ideals of bushidō. He determined to write his book in order to answer Europeans who were increasingly curious about Japanese customs and beliefs. As he asserted, without understanding bushidō and feudalism, "the moral ideas of present Japan are a sealed volume" (23, 25). In a series of seventeen tightly-linked chapters, Nitobe systematically defines bushidō and describes its sources; explains each of the constituent virtues of bushidō; and provides chapters on a samurai's education and training, his comportment, weapons, and the "Institutions of Suicide and Redress." He then offers a chapter on "The Training and Position of Woman," succeeded by three chapters on the influence, present condition, and future of bushidō.

While *The Mirror of the Sea* is also divided into discrete sections, there the similarity between the two works would seem to end. In early 1904, Conrad had envisioned the book as a loosely tied collection of essays, which he would produce quickly for ready sale in order to stave off his financial difficulties. He would write the essays in what he terms an "[e]asy narrative style" (CL 3: 114). For topics, Conrad proposed a random list of potential "impressions, descriptions, reminiscences[,] anecdotes, and typical traits," on the general subject "of the old sailing fleet" (CL 3: 113). The result was a hodgepodge of papers, varying in quality, most of which appeared in several different periodicals in 1904 and 1905 before their final book-length assembly and publication in October 1906.

Despite these conspicuous differences, though, the two books share some interesting characteristics. The first has to do with the peculiar nature of their supposed errors. *The Mirror of the Sea* bears the subtitle

“Memories and Impressions,” and Conrad later claimed in his “Author’s Note” that “this book is a very intimate revelation” (vii), “written in perfect sincerity” and which “holds back nothing” (ix). However, as scholars have been aware for some time, the book leaves out such rather important facts as why he had started and ended his sea career. He multiplies the number of his sea commands, and he denies having ever sailed as a passenger. As Owen Knowles and Gene Moore have observed regarding Conrad’s description of gun smuggling on the *Tremolino* and elsewhere in the volume, instead of objective autobiography Conrad offers a “pervasive mixture of potential fact, wishful dreaming, and nostalgic myth-making” (231). With regard to the details of Conrad’s personal history at sea, then, the book is remarkably both reticent and misleading.

On the broader scale of nineteenth-century maritime history in general as well, the book exhibits the same puzzling difficulties. Robert Foulke has addressed on different occasions the gap between life at sea in its historical truth and how Conrad represents it—or misrepresents it—in *The Mirror of the Sea*, among other works. Foulke details how “life on board nineteenth-century sailing ships was not the romantic existence which contemporary yachtsmen sometimes imagine. Long voyages marked by isolation, confinement, boredom, and miserable living conditions taxed the endurance of men who were already hard pressed by the grueling nature of shipboard work,” not to mention the ever-present dangers involved and the possibility of “total disaster at sea” (“Life” 125). According to Foulke, *A Personal Record* “is sometimes more fictional than [Conrad’s] voyage stories, which draw heavily on fact” (“Life” 125). Meanwhile, with regard to *The Mirror of the Sea*, Foulke accounts for these apparent factual lapses by asserting that the book “imitates the literary tradition of the elegy in both structure and tone, allowing Conrad to memorialize his seagoing past and dwell upon its implications” (“Conrad” 204). Such critical conclusions emerged over a long period of time, as it took some decades for the initially rapturous public praise of *The Mirror of the Sea* to fade, and for scholars

to address the factual problems in the volume.

While it took less time, Nitobe too was faulted for virtually identical reasons. Several reviews by Japanese and Western scholars published between 1901 and 1905 identified numerous errors in *Bushido*. According to these critics, Nitobe's mistakes about bushidō included: locating its origins in Zen Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism; asserting that it was an unwritten code; fabricating the roles of patriotism and love of the ruler; and claiming that Buddhism influenced samurai in the Heian era. Even Nitobe's fundamental contention that the term "bushidō" equates to "the soul of Japan" was wrong, they argued, because bushidō could have been legitimately applicable to only one class of the strictly hierarchical Japanese society (Benesch 96).

These critics asserted that Nitobe had not heeded to scholarly standards of accuracy, and in short, they dismissed his book as the product of someone who just did not know much about bushidō (Benesch 96). One of the most scathing reviews appeared in *The Athenaeum* in 1905. This anonymous reviewer pans Nitobe's "whole thesis [as] singularly destitute of historical support." The reviewer summarizes "Nitobe's book [as] a misleading piece of special pleading." Moreover, "He makes out his case by partial statement and wholesale suppression," ignoring the historical reality of life under the shogunate in order to paint an idealistic, mythical portrait of the past (Review 229).

Making matters worse, Nitobe's book departed significantly from earlier descriptions of bushidō. The *Budō Shoshinshū* of Yūzan Daidōji (first published in 1834) is not primarily an exposition of morals but instead largely a guide to such practical considerations as how a samurai should choose a warhorse or build a home. The *Hagakure* of Tsunetomo Yamamoto, which was compiled in the early eighteenth century and published in its first modern edition in 1900 (Ravina 94), is a memoir that similarly covers such topics as how to bring up the child of a samurai (Yamamoto 26) or how to be discreet (68). (The *Hagakure* does also

address how to live a virtuous life.) Significantly, the *Hagakure* offers near its very beginning the well-known assertion “The Way of the Samurai is found in death” (3). The *Budō Shoshinshū* begins virtually identically with the claim that a warrior’s “foremost concern [is] to keep death in mind at all times” (Daidōji 3). In marked contrast, Nitobe writes that “for a true samurai to hasten death or to court it, was alike cowardice” (203), and in general he downplays the transitory qualities of life that figure prominently in the earlier works.

II. Modernity as Moral Problem

The puzzle facing us, again, is why these two writers, who were in some position to know what they were writing about, would produce two such heavily mythologized and historically inaccurate accounts. We might first examine the authors’ stated motivations. Nitobe declared that his purpose was to explain Japan to foreigners, while Conrad evidently needed the money. Historians have gone further to establish additional impulses. Nitobe also wanted to establish “a native Japanese ethical system that was comparable to Western thought and relatively independent of traditional Chinese influences,” in the words of one historian of bushidō (Benesch 94, 92). Put this way, this purpose might also explain how Nitobe (who incidentally was a Christian), included so many references to Christianity and Western philosophers in explaining a native Japanese moral code. As for Conrad, in addition to fulfilling a desire to memorialize the past, in *The Mirror of the Sea* (and elsewhere) Conrad “developed an elaborate sea creed, a full-blown moral system” based on his merchant service, according to Foulke (“Conrad” 204). However, might these two authors share an additional reason for writing: a reason that reveals them responding to a shared historical moment and also explains their otherwise rather odd mythmaking and anachronisms?

To probe still further, let us consider some salient details of that historical moment: England and Japan in the summer of 1905. At this time,

Nitobe's *Bushido* was being printed in its tenth edition, and Conrad was writing the last four papers for his collection before later revising all the essays and deciding on their final order (Knowles and Moore 230). The previous October, Conrad had had his letter published in the London *Times* protesting the conduct of the Russian Baltic Squadron in the Dogger Bank Incident of 21-22 October 1904. On 27-28 May 1905, the Japanese fleet crushingly defeated that Baltic Squadron in the Battle of Tsushima Strait, between Korea and Japan. This battle sealed Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War and was hailed in England as "by far the greatest and most important naval event since Trafalgar" (Clarke ix). Through this event, Japan cemented her status as a maritime world power, joining the United Kingdom. She also became the first Asian country to defeat a European world power in the modern age.

This unprecedented outcome resulted partly from Anglo-Japanese cooperation and their Naval Treaty of 1902. The Imperial Japanese Navy had already been modeled after the British Royal Navy, and Japan's first modern naval vessels were British-built. Meanwhile, among the admiring British, the Japanese victory—especially contrasted with the uneven British performance in the Boer War of 1899-1902—sparked a reciprocal "Learn from Japan" movement (Jansen 487). All of these factors combined to heighten the cultural as well as diplomatic ties between the two countries.

And yet this shared Anglo-Japanese historical moment of summer 1905, one of growing cross-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness, was also one in which people in both nations were grappling with the conditions of modernity. Specifically, by "modernity" I mean "a way of living and of experiencing life which has arisen with all the changes wrought by industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation," as one scholar has defined it (Childs 14-15). It was the technological element of modernity that had made Japan's military victory over Russia possible, through the rapid adoption of Western scientific and industrial techniques. Furthermore, interestingly enough, modernity had spread across Japan

largely through the Japanese army and navy, for military organizations had been the vehicle for introducing Western imported goods throughout rural Japan (Benesch 76).

On the other hand, along with modernity also came the spread of materialism, posing new challenges to traditional Japanese values. According to one historian, “A number of [Japanese] thinkers” believed that this attendant materialism was degrading society and “undermining the nation” (Benesch 81). Fortunately, as they believed, the ideals of bushidō held out an antidote. Thus, Nitobe was expressing a shared view when he considered bushidō as a means to counteract the utilitarianism and materialism that modernity had introduced to his country (Jansen 487). When Nitobe wrote thirty years later about aspects of Western culture that had not been appealing to Japan as she emerged from isolation—Anglo-Saxon individualism, “their idea of religion,” and materialism—he assigned to materialism his strongest critique (“Japanese” 64).

For Conrad too, modernity promoted materialism, and in so doing, just as in Japan, posed moral problems. For example, it was for this reason that he had previously denounced the Suez Canal, which had made steamships more lucrative on long voyages. In *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), his narrator had characterized the Canal as “a dismal but profitable ditch,” built by “engineer[s] . . . in order that greedy and faithless landlubbers might pocket dividends” (12). Both authors, then, condemned materialism and utilitarianism, which engineering, science, and the technology of modernity had all made possible.

III. Myth as Antidote to Modernity

One way to think about Conrad’s and Nitobe’s shared aversion to the materialism of modernity comes to us from the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski. In *The Presence of Myth* (1989), he distinguishes between what he calls the “technological core” and the “mythical core” of civilization. According to Kołakowski, the technical core of civilization

extends into, or results in, science—science, such as had enabled the Meiji-era advances and had dug the Suez Canal. (In fact, Kołakowski specifically identifies science with acts of taming the physical environment.) However, in his words, “Metaphysical questions and beliefs are technologically barren and are therefore neither part of the analytical effort nor an element of science. As an organ of culture they are an extension of the mythical core” (1). Kołakowski writes that the enduring appeal of myth, even—or especially—in modern times, results directly from the ability of myth (unlike technology) to answer ultimate questions of meaning, beliefs, and values. Seen this way, what might otherwise pass for mere nostalgia in *The Mirror of the Sea* may also be something much more—something that helps create meaning for individuals and nations, while counteracting the effects of modernity.

More specifically, for Kołakowski, the need for myth stems in part from “the desire to arrest physical time by imposing upon it a mythical form of time.” Mythical time “allows us to see in the mutability of things not only *change*, but also *accumulation* [*italics in original*], or allows us to believe that what is past is retained—as far as values are concerned—in what endures.” Mythical time allows us to recognize “that facts are not merely facts, but are building blocks of a universe of values which it is possible to salvage despite the irreversible flow of events” (4-5). Conrad explicitly makes the same assertion at the climax of *The Mirror of the Sea*, which concludes with the last paragraphs of his essay on “The Heroic Age” of Horatio Nelson. Conrad tells us, in words foreshadowing Kołakowski’s, “All passes, all changes: the animosity of peoples, the handling of fleets, the forms of ships; and even the sea itself . . .” Despite this onrush of physical time—“In this ceaseless rush of shadows and shades . . . we must turn to the national spirit, which . . . can alone give us the feeling of an enduring existence and of an invincible power against the fates” (194). As Conrad elevates Nelson to mythical status, he exemplifies how to preserve values through mythical time against the “flow of events” in physical time.

He thereby connects the past to the present and the future, through transcendent values of heroism. In this example, these values can not only inspire military victory regardless of passing technological change, but also at the same time give the nation a coherent and enduring identity.

Nitobe ends *Bushido* on a remarkably similar note as he interprets how Japan had defeated China in their war of 1894-95. “It has been said that Japan won her late war with China by means of Murata guns and Krupp cannon,” he writes, or “the modern school-system; but these are half truths.” He goes on to assert, “The most improved guns and cannon do not shoot of their own accord; the most modern educational system does not make a coward a hero. No! What won the battles on the Yalu, in Corea and Manchuria, were the ghosts of our fathers, guiding our hands and beating in our hearts.” Furthermore, like Conrad, Nitobe unites past, present, and future: “The great inheritance of honour, of valour, and of all martial virtues is . . . ‘but ours on trust.’” [T]he summons of the present is to guard this heritage,” while “the summons of the future will be so to widen its scope as to apply it in all walks and relations of life” (293, 295). Both passages concluding the two authors’ respective books, then, make identical claims about what national myth can do to arrest time, advance values, and create national identity, just as Kołakowski would later explain. Myth can arrest time by showing how values transcend the mutability of all things that is announced by changing technology.

IV. Mythic Virtues and Moral Codes

These two parallel conclusions, furthermore, crown parallel moral codes that their authors build: the code of bushidō and the code of the sea. According to Nitobe, bushidō includes rectitude, courage, benevolence, politeness, veracity and sincerity, honor, loyalty, and self-control. However, for him loyalty was the most important. According to Nitobe, “Of the causes in comparison with which no life was too dear to sacrifice, was the duty of loyalty, which was the key-stone making feudal virtues a

symmetrical arch” (143). (Incidentally, he makes this claim despite history, for “unilateral loyalty to superiors was highly unusual on medieval battlefields,” as Oleg Benesch points out [27]).

As for Conrad, although he never explicitly formulated a code of the sea and called it that, we can piece one together from elements in *The Mirror of the Sea*. The virtues in this code include “the honour of labour” (24), a leader’s “trust” in his crew (190), selflessness (30), the “duty” to proper seamanship (e.g., 47, 66, 111), and fidelity. These ideas reappear throughout *The Mirror of the Sea*, periodically converging and combining in such expressions as: “To forget one’s self, to surrender all personal feeling in the service of that fine art, is the only way for a seaman to the faithful discharge of his trust” (30). The most important of all these virtues, though, is fidelity—which, as we well remember, was a keystone of all of life for Conrad. We recall the later expression of his “conviction that the world . . . rests on a few very simple ideas . . . notably, amongst others, on the idea of Fidelity” (“A Familiar Preface” 17). Conrad thus joins Nitobe in placing loyalty—fidelity—foremost among the virtues. In *The Mirror of the Sea*, there is fidelity to the ship and fidelity to art (29), for example; and in the chapter entitled “The Faithful River,” the Thames is home to ships that are faithful to their men in return (111). In *The Mirror of the Sea*, the words “fidelity,” “faith,” “faithfulness” and related terms appear no fewer than forty-five times, underlining their significance.

V. Literary Means: Stories, Images, and Symbols

However, when articulating the mythical core of civilization, merely providing a set of virtues is not enough. To bring these codes of conduct alive, Conrad and Nitobe both rely on particularly literary means: first, through stories. For example, Nitobe stresses how samurai inculcated virtues in their children by telling stories (69, 71). He goes on to illustrate the virtue of benevolence by retelling the famous story of Kumagai and Atsumori from the fourteenth-century *Tale of the Heike* (89, 91). In this

episode, Kumagai's remorse over having to kill his young enemy Atsumori in the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani (1184) leads him eventually to become a monk. In *The Mirror of the Sea*, the most elaborate story is that of Dominic Cervoni in the *Tremolino* chapter. In Conrad's telling, after Cervoni confesses to having killed his brother, he leaves the sea. The chapter ends with a vision of Cervoni striking inland with an oar over his shoulder, just as Odysseus had to do in penance for having blinded the Cyclops (183).

Interestingly, in both Conrad's and Nitobe's stories a hero is forced to kill a rival, and then, in remorse, retreats to a life of penitential solitude. The parallels between the story of Kumagai and Atsumori in Nitobe's retelling and the story of Dominic Cervoni in Conrad's account may be coincidental—or Conrad may have learned about the Japanese story through Nitobe's bestselling book. Beyond these details, both stories illustrate shared aspects of the two parallel professional codes, and the stories do so in the same striking way through their unexpected yet oddly similar endings. Furthermore, that the stories may not actually be historically true is not only beside the point, but rather, a key part of their effect: the aura of legend that surrounds such stories enhances their function of reinforcing the mythical core of civilization, as Kořakowski puts it.

An even more evocative literary method that both authors use in parallel ways involves images and symbols. Conrad employs many images and symbols throughout his book, such as anchors, which he explicitly calls "emblems of hope" (15). One especially rich symbol to which he repeatedly returns is that of the ship. It would not be until 1918 that Conrad would call the ship "the moral symbol of our life" ("Well Done" 188), but the ship as a moral symbol permeates *The Mirror of the Sea*. In the chapter "Initiation," for instance, he writes, "The humblest craft that floats makes its appeal to a seaman by the faithfulness of her life" (130). The ship thus symbolizes fidelity—that key virtue. Let us note, furthermore, the odd inversions at work in this claim. Ships are made of inert material, unlike

humans; yet in Conrad's formula it is the ship that has the "life." Likewise, the faithfulness of this anthropomorphized ship inspires the reciprocal faithfulness of her crew—just as Conrad will later refer to "the ship we serve" in equating the ship to "the moral symbol of our life" ("Well Done" 188). "There are good ships and bad ships," Conrad writes in an earlier chapter of *The Mirror of the Sea* (16). However, in "Initiation," the new ship that the narrator notices may turn out to be one of the good ones, but only if properly treated. Conrad even compares the ship to "a young bride" with whom her crew would "share their life" in mutual fidelity (131-32). Through this image of the ship, Conrad further symbolizes the mutual faithfulness that makes a good professional sailor.

The equivalent symbol for Nitobe is the sword, in whose presentation Nitobe departs significantly from the received literature on bushidō. The *Budō Shoshinshū* makes a passing reference to swords in a chapter on "military equipment," where the main point is that a samurai should equip himself and his servants with equipment and weapons appropriate to his status (Daidōji 45-46). Swords appear throughout the *Hagakure*, but typically as items in stories about samurai, without a special metaphysical significance. In Nitobe's *Bushido*, on the other hand, swords assume a much more profound quality. While bushidō is "The Soul of Japan," as the book's subtitle goes, "The Sword" is—according to the title of the entire chapter devoted to it—"The Soul of the Samurai." Nitobe begins that chapter, "Bushido made the sword its emblem of power and prowess" (215), and he goes on to explain how a young samurai acquired his swords, how they were made, and what they looked like.

All of that information may or may not be historically true, but more important to us is how Nitobe foregrounds the symbolic value of the sword in a way that is entirely absent from his best-known predecessors in the literature of bushidō. For, according to Nitobe, the samurai's sword is both a "badge of his status" and "a symbol of what he carries in his mind and heart,—loyalty and honour" (217). In Nitobe's words, "The two swords . . .

never leave his side. When at home, they grace the most conspicuous place in the study or parlour; by night they guard his pillow within easy reach of his hand” (215). Thus, the sword, just like the ship for Conrad, takes on human characteristics while both symbolizing and calling forth the faithfulness of the human in the relationship. And, for the sword in Nitobe’s book just as for the ship in Conrad’s book, the object is part of a warm relationship of mutual affection. Nitobe writes of the samurai’s swords, “Constant companions, they are beloved, and proper names of endearment given [to] them” (217)—recalling to us the importance of the ship’s name in *The Mirror of the Sea* (131-34).

Such symbolic images play a key role in myths for a number of reasons, one of which James Frazer describes in *The Golden Bough* in terms of “homoeopathic or imitative magic.” Frazer explains the belief, common across many ancient cultures, that one could “injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him” (14). In this light, it seems significant that both the sword and the ship are objects to be protected and identified with, in Conrad and Nitobe. A sailor cannot survive the sea without his ship, and a samurai cannot survive the battlefield without his sword. In some deeply resonant way, then, the ship and the sword both promote mythical survival and need to be protected in order to ensure that survival—the survival of individuals, of nations, and of the cultural past.

VI. The Role of Ritual

And yet, if we think of *The Mirror of the Sea* and Nitobe’s *Bushido* as vehicles for preserving and transmitting cultural memory, myth alone is not enough. What is also needed is ritual, for myth and ritual go together in the work of cultural memory. Partly this effect results from how ritual, usually thought of as an action, is also akin to language in its structure and rules (“Rites and Ceremonies”). Meanwhile, it has been argued, although “Myth is commonly taken to be words, often in the form of a story,” something “read or heard,” “According to the . . . myth-ritualist theory, . . .

Myth is not just a statement but an action” (Segal 49). Furthermore, Paul Connerton remarks in *How Societies Remember* (1989), “Both ritual and myth may quite properly be viewed as collective symbolic texts; and . . . ritual actions should be interpreted as exemplifying the kind of cultural values that often are expressed in the elaborate statements that we call myths—as exemplifying these values in another medium” (53). Thus, myth and ritual are intertwined symbolic expressions of values that preserve cultures.

Given this basis, it may be no surprise that both *Bushido* and *The Mirror of the Sea* highlight certain rituals as capturing their respective mythic codes. For Nitobe, one such ritual is the tea ceremony. A Westerner might think that instructions on how to serve tea are out of place in teaching the way of the warrior. However, according to Nitobe, the tea ceremony is not merely part of a warrior’s education in “correct social behaviour” (101); rather, the way of serving tea illustrates “the most economical use of force” (103), and “Fine manners . . . mean power in repose” (105). Furthermore, Nitobe goes on to praise the tea ceremony as “more than a ceremony—it is a fine art; it is poetry,” he explains, and “[i]ts greatest value” lies in how it is a way “of soul discipline”—of imparting moral principles (109). In a separate essay, he later claimed that the tea ceremony’s “essence, its ulterior object, is in detaching yourself from the world, to raise the warrior’s thought ‘above the battle,’ and thus pave the way for a higher light to reach you” (“On Teism” 528). In this way, Nitobe elaborated on, and emphasized, the ceremony’s moral dimension as first explained in *Bushido*.

For Conrad in *The Mirror of the Sea*, the corresponding ritual is that of observing the departure from land in navigation, which Conrad highlights by placing it as the very first topic in the entire book. He capitalizes the first letter in the word “departure,” and he writes, “the term does not imply so much a sea event as a definite act entailing a process—the precise observation of certain landmarks by means of the compass card.” Not only

is a departure a technical act and process, but also, he claims, “The departure is distinctly a ceremony of navigation” (3). Yet this ceremony is not mere administration, an act without moral content, as his chapter entitled “Landfalls and Departures” goes on to detail. The Departure makes it possible, for example, for a sailor to put away “regrets, memories, the instinctive longing for the departed idleness, the instinctive hate of all work” (7). Just like the tea ceremony according to Nitobe, then, for Conrad this ceremony of navigation calls its practitioners to a heightened attention to professional values, to a more exacting devotion to a code of conduct.

VII. Catastrophe and Paradox

Of course, the typical early readers of *Bushido* or *The Mirror of the Sea* were probably neither warriors nor merchant sailors. However, such ideals as these codes express, founded on the appeals of myth and ritual, both offered an antidote to modernity and helped shape national identities that anyone could grasp. For Britons, the appeal of Nelson as a heroic figure who epitomized Britishness would have been clear in the atmosphere of growing Anglo-German naval rivalry. In Japan, proof of the usefulness of bushidō, specifically as formulated by Nitobe, lay in its adoption as a national ideology. The government emphasized the loyalty-infused principles of bushidō in order to maintain communal status quo, suppress egalitarian social movements, and justify international ambitions (Holmes and Ion 312-13). Significantly, Nitobe’s vision of bushidō exerted an appeal in Britain as well. As Britain’s economic position and international power relative to other nations began to decline in the late nineteenth century, and after many recruits in the Boer War had been found unfit for service, British commentators turned to Japan as a model of efficiency and to bushidō as the source of Japanese military success (Holmes and Ion 314-18).

Tragically, such mythologizing would play an important role in the national catastrophes of the twentieth century. In the years leading

immediately up to the British intervention in the First World War, more than one influential Briton explicitly saw in bushidō “the quality of sacrifice of the self for the state and all the consequences attendant on this” as what had “made for Japanese greatness” (Holmes and Ion 319). In Japan, Nitobe’s work, however historically inaccurate in its depiction of samurai culture, ultimately—and inadvertently—created or reinforced the ideals that he fictionally portrayed, as bushidō expanded into a cult that could be exploited by elements in the Japanese government. The interpretation of bushidō in Japan became increasingly militaristic, chauvinistic, and focused on sacrificing oneself for the empire. This packaging of bushidō lent itself to the domestic propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s that enabled the actions leading to the war in East Asia and the Pacific, and continued the conflict. Then, Japan’s enemies used the ideals of bushidō against her, to caricaturize and dehumanize the Japanese people (Benesch 3). What Nitobe—not only a Christian but also a Quaker—might have thought of these disastrous outcomes can never be known, as he died in 1933.

As for Conrad, who outlived the First World War if not the Second, how might the parallels between *The Mirror of the Sea* and *Bushido* alter our perception of how Conrad understood his own work? One possible answer lies in the Author’s Note that he added to *The Mirror of the Sea* in 1919. Near the end of the note, he makes that assertion, usually puzzling to us and seemingly debunked by critics and historians, that the book is a “full confession.” However, we might miss what comes immediately before that claim, when he recognizes that the book’s first readers saw it as revealing, but incompletely so. He goes on to quote one such reader (in a review that apparently has not been located), according to whom Conrad had recorded “the events of his life . . . those haphazard events which for no definite reason impress themselves upon the mind and recur in memory long afterward as symbols of one knows not what sacred ritual taking place behind the veil.” That reader seems to have inadvertently touched on the truth, for it is only then that Conrad immediately replies, “To this I can

only say that this book written in perfect sincerity holds back nothing” (ix). We might now agree with him, if we read *The Mirror of the Sea* not as flawed autobiography nor as nostalgic tribute to the past, but rather as enduring myth, symbol, and indeed, “sacred ritual,” which can tell us truthfully—if not necessarily factually—about Conrad and his world.

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