Conrad’s working life as a novelist spans a crucial period in British society and English literature. His career overlaps those of such central, and different, writers as the great Victorian novelist Thomas Hardy, and the twentieth century experimentalists D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Conrad’s first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, was published in 1895, one year before Hardy’s ultimate novel, *Jude the Obscure*; the bulk of his fiction was published before Lawrence’s great new novels, as he referred to them, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women In Love* (1921); and Conrad’s final completed novel, *The Rover*, was published in 1923, only one year after Joyce’s extraordinary *Ulysses* and Woolf’s first experimental novel *Jacob’s Room*.

His artistic achievement was to take a major role in transforming the nineteenth century classic realist novel, which was mainly based on a reliable, authoritative and chronological narrative development, into a twentieth century modernist artifact challenging received notions of reality. Conrad also wrote a good many essays and articles on a wide variety of subjects, as well as being a prolific private correspondent. He ventured into play-writing too, although with no success, either commercially or artistically, and also made a single, unsuccessful attempt to write a film script. If his early collaborator Ford Madox Ford is to be believed Conrad made only one, extremely brief, attempt to write poetry, round about 1902.

Conrad is rightly known predominantly as a great novelist. Nevertheless his output of non-fiction is both interesting in its own right, and a revealing entry into the novels. The subjects covered include politics, philosophy, science, literary criticism, artistic and aesthetic theory – all areas that his own fiction embraces. His essays, newspaper articles and letters also show Conrad’s keen interest in, and perception of, the important national and international events of his time, some illustrations of which have already been cited in chapter 1. Conrad the former seaman never closeted himself in an aesthete’s ivory tower.
Conrad's essays and articles show that his interest in the sea as a setting for some of his fiction was not the result of mere nostalgia on his part: he retained an interest in seafaring developments throughout his life, even going to sea during the Great War of 1914–18, at the age of fifty-eight, to observe the activities of the British Navy. That Conrad was not simply embedded in the past is also illustrated by the fact that in 1916 he flew for the first time. That was very early in the history of aviation, which was then almost entirely a young man's activity. The first cross-Channel flight had occurred only six years earlier, in 1910, and aeroplanes were hardly out of the experimental stage. The adventurousness, and curiosity, of Conrad was particularly emphasised by the fact that he flew in a hydroplane, taking off from and landing on the sea (they were later known as flying-boats), a concept that had been developed into an actual machine only four years previously. Conrad described the plane, and his experience in climbing into it, in his essay 'Flight':

[st] seemed as big as a cottage, and much more imposing... The close view of the real fragility of that rigid structure startled me considerably, while Commander O. discomposed me still more by shouting repeatedly: 'Don't put your foot there!' I didn't know where to put my foot. There was a slight crack; I heard some swear-words below me.

(NL, p. 211)

Despite the apparent frailty of the machine Conrad enjoyed the flight and 'its mysterious fascination, whose invisible wing had brushed my heart' (p. 212). Flying was an aspect of progress of which he fully approved, responding to its romantic features, the idea of man and machine in touch with, and controlling, the elemental forces.

At that time planes were relatively small and very unsophisticated, flown by only one or two people. A plane the size of 'a cottage' is obviously going to give a different experience from a present 500-seater flying restaurant, which is controlled mainly by computer. These are factors in Conrad's response, for part of his scepticism regarding progress as applied to ships was that they had become too big, and liners especially had developed into luxurious floating hotels. In an essay for the English Review, 'Some Reflections on the Loss of the Titanic', the ship launched as unsink-