

### Conrad Kain: Letters from a Wandering Mountain Guide, 1906-1933

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Conrad Kain was arguably the pre-eminent mountain guide in Canada in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and left a legacy of first ascents and epic climbs in his native Austria, in his adopted home in North America (e.g., Mount Robson), and in New Zealand's Southern Alps. Kain was born in 1883 in Nasswald, Austria and started his guiding career in 1904. Within five years, he had become a much-sought-after guide for challenging climbs in the European Alps. He augmented his meagre guide's fees by back-breaking labour in a rock quarry, supporting his widowed mother and three younger siblings (he continued to send her money until his death). But his desire for a better life, away from the rigid hierarchy of European society, coupled with a burning desire to travel and see the world, led him to emigrate to Canada in 1909, where he worked for many seasons as a climbing guide for the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC). Kain lived out the rest of his years in Canada, with only one short visit back to his homeland in 1912, although it was never far from his thoughts.

After Kain's death in 1934, his client and friend J. Monroe Thorington edited a collection of his journal articles, diaries, and letters, which was published by The American Alpine Club as his autobiography, *Where The Clouds Can Go*. However, it wasn't until 2005 that a treasure-trove surfaced – 144 letters that Kain had written to his dear friend Amelie Malek between 1906

and 1933. It was Malek, whom he had guided with her sister in 1906, who taught Kain to write English by correcting his letters; who virtually served as his literary agent by correcting, translating, typing and forwarding manuscripts to magazines and alpine journals; to whom he sent his diaries with the hope of publishing them, and who shared all with Thorington for his book. Unfortunately, none of Malek's letters to Kain have been found.

In the short Foreword, mountain historian Chic Scott provides a thumbnail sketch of Kain's life and sets his mountaineering accomplishments in context. This is followed by three very useful maps of the European Alps (pre-WWI), the Rocky and Columbia mountains of Canada, and the Southern Alps of New Zealand. Then Robinson discusses the letters themselves in the Introduction: how he found out about them, the relationship between Malek and Kain, and the importance of letters in understanding individuals and in preserving history. The bulk of the book is the letters themselves. Kain's earliest letters to Malek were almost entirely in German (translated and transcribed for this new volume by Maria and John Koch), with short passages in English, but by the end, Kain was writing almost entirely in English and lamenting his loss of fluency in his mother-tongue. Robinson has ordered the letters chronologically and throughout the book has skillfully annotated them to fill in gaps or provide con-

text. The Epilogue, written by Don Bourdon, then head archivist at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, Alberta, where the letters were deposited, tells the compelling journey of the letters between Kain's death in 1934 and their donation to the museum in 2005.

From his letters, it's obvious that Kain loved climbing mountains for the physical challenge, to meet interesting people, to make a living, and for opportunities to travel around the world, but most especially because of his all-consuming love of the natural world. He often lamented that many of his colleagues and clients did not appreciate and understand nature. In winters, he frequently spent months alone in remote areas, trapping fur-bearing animals and meat hunting. He wrote that these were among the happiest times of his life and that "the beauty of nature and the distraction do a lot to brighten one's life and one forgets, even if not totally at least for some time, the sad parts." Kain kept abreast of world affairs by reading newspapers and books, and would get depressed over the situation in war-time Europe and the inequality between rich and poor.

Although a slight man, Kain possessed almost inexhaustible strength (e.g. during the 1924 ACC camp he led four ascents of Mount Robson in little over a week) and courage, was a good hunter, trapper and all-round woodsman, as well as a very competent camp cook. These attributes, plus his desire to travel to new places, landed him work on two Smithsonian Institution sci-

entific expeditions: a joint one with the ACC, to the Mount Robson area of British Columbia in 1911, and the following year to collect fauna in the Altai Mountains of in East-Central Asia (Siberia). Kain also spent three summers working for A. O. Wheeler on the Inter-provincial Boundary Survey between Mount Robson and Crowsnest Pass. Knowing that Malek loved wildflowers, Kain wrote about which ones he had seen and frequently sent her dried ones collected on his outings. Kain always regretted that he had not been able to complete high school, and "Had my fate been different, I might have become a scientist."

In her own letter to Thorington in 1935, Malek summed up Kain's letters best: "They are no master pieces of elegant style and learnedness, but they are full of [the] flow and enthusiasm of youth, they show the fire of Con's roving nature and above all, they show his love of nature, and his kind-hearted, grateful and just feeling in everything" (p. 426). As Kain signed off many of his letters ... *Bergheil* – long live the mountains.

#### Literature Cited

**Kain, C.** 1935. Where the clouds can go. Edited by J. Monroe Thorington. American Alpine Club Inc., New York, NY, USA.

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