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# Reflections on Rockwell Kent in Newfoundland

## The Brigus Spy by Edward Roberts

Rockwell Kent, a man seldom if ever at a loss for words, never in his remotest dreams expected to receive a letter like the one from Newfoundland's premier that he opened one morning in the winter of 1967.

"What (to me) a strangely warm and friendly letter it turned out to be!" was the way he described it a year or so later.

Kent was no stranger to Newfoundland. He had made an extended visit here in 1910, during which he had a friendly encounter with Sir Edward Morris, Newfoundland's prime minister. Early in 1914 he returned with his family and lived in Brigus until July 1915. He hadn't come near the island in the half-century since then.

Joe Smallwood, Kent recounted, came quickly to the point, in his own inimitable fashion:

"I certainly would not blame you if you felt nothing but revulsion at the thought of Newfoundland," Smallwood said, "and yet from all I have ever read of yours, and heard about you from mutual friends, I would truly be surprised if you had not taken it all with good humour ... How can Newfoundland show her regard for you? ... Would you come back here? Would you be this government's guest on a visit back to Newfoundland, including Brigus? ... Please forgive us for past injuries, and please be magnanimous enough to be our guest some time at your convenience ..."

### AT GOVERNMENT EXPENSE.

Most Newfoundlanders had long since ceased to be surprised by Smallwood's impulsive and sometimes quixotic gestures. So what was this all about? What led him to invite Kent to return to Newfoundland, at the government's expense, after more than 50 years?

Kent accepted Smallwood's invitation, and, accompanied by his wife, came to Newfoundland in July 1968. They were the guests of honour at a State luncheon and stayed with the premier at his home, near Brigus, for several nights. He later sent Smallwood a large oil painting of a Newfoundland harbour scene. The painting hung in Smallwood's living room for the rest of his life.

He saw old friends in Brigus, and again visited the house in which he had lived - "a deeply

moving experience," in his words.

Brigus was a thriving, prosperous community of 1,000 people in early 1914, on the eve of the Great War. Kent, his wife Kathleen and their three children were looking for a place to live and to paint. He soon found an old house in the area of Brigus called The Battery, that offered him what he wanted; it was "isolated from the village, [and] so promising of the quietness that we liked that was necessary for my work." The house, known today as the Kent Cottage at Landfall, still stands, overlooking Brigus Bay.

### ALLEGATIONS OF ASSAULT.

Kent was a man of strong opinions, and he was not afraid to voice them. He quickly became involved in the life of the community. He was a man of some musical gifts, and "folks invited us to play and sing."

He went to church socials, and acted in a play. He volunteered to help members of the Brigus Tennis Club to build a proper court. And, before long, he became embroiled in a row with one of the community's leading citizens, a druggist. The quarrel led to hard words, and to an allegation that Rockwell had assaulted the druggist. The American was summoned to appear before J.B. Thompson, the local magistrate, to answer to "the said complaint and to be further dealt with according to law."

The trial was held in July 1914. The only description that has survived is by Kent himself, and must be viewed as being one-sided. Kent testified, and made great sport with the druggist.

He described the outcome:

The plaintiff, said the judge, 'has stated that you threatened to kill him. Did you?

And suddenly, a tense quiet fell upon the courtroom as people, leaning forward, strained to miss no syllable of my reply.

"Yes, your Honor," I said. "I did. I threatened to kill him." and, I added, "to eat him." And in the roar of laughter that ensued, Niagara's would have been a whisper. Even the judge had trouble keeping dignified.

Guilty, of course, I was. Of what? 'The whole affair,' said the judge addressing me, preliminary to passing sentence, 'appears to have been in the nature of a practical joke. But,

he added impressively, 'owing to the fact that the complainant is one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace the matter assumes a more serious complexion. Mr. Kent, I shall have to sentence you to thirty days in jail or' — and he paused significantly — 'the payment of five dollars' fine.'

"Does he get any of the money?" I asked his Honour.

"Not a cent of it."

"Then," I said, "I'll pay the fine."

And so ended the great "Case of the Assaulted Apothecary."

### SINGING IN GERMAN.

The First World War broke out on Aug. 4. Kent, having already offended some of the leading citizens of Brigus, went out of his way to irritate others. He strolled about the community singing folk songs — in German.

He purchased eight tons of coal, as his winter's supply. He kept the door to his studio locked, and put up a sign on it that read "CHART ROOM — WIRELESS STATION — BOMB SHOP." And then he painted a German eagle underneath the sign.

Not surprisingly, rumours began to circulate throughout the community. The coal, it was said, was fuel for a German submarine, lurking off Newfoundland's shores. The workshop to which no callers were admitted at the house at the far end of Brigus — these, too, spoke of espionage and underhanded deeds. Soon rumour magnified into "facts." Kent was a German spy.

### ORDERED TO LEAVE.

Word went to St. John's, and in due course a detective came from the city to question Kent. A further interview followed, with the Inspector General of Police.

The final blow came in mid-July, 1915. The Brigus Constabulary officer, accompanied by a plain-clothes policeman from St. John's, knocked on Kent's door. Their message was simple: "you and your entire family are ordered to leave Newfoundland at once." They were shown the orders to do so, Kent recalled

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## THE BRIGUS SPY

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in his 1952 autobiography, "It's Me, O Lord." He and his family left St. John's a few days later.

### PART II. BUT WAS ROCKWELL KENT REALLY A SPY?

Rockwell Kent left Newfoundland in July 1915. He said, in his 1952 autobiography, "It's Me O Lord," that he was "ordered" by the Inspector General of Police "to leave Newfoundland at once." A year later, in October 1916, he told The New York Times that he had been "expelled from Newfoundland ... on suspicion of being a German spy."

He continued:

"During the fall and winter of 1915, suspicion soon began to point a finger at me. One day, in an argument, I told a Britisher it would be a long time before the British Army reached Berlin. The rumour spread and it was not long before it was whispered that I was really a German.

I got in eight tons of coal, and the place fairly buzzed with the news that I was laying in a supply for a fleet of U-boats. I foolishly wrote a letter to a German friend in this country [the USA] and part of it was written in German. The next day an officer came to the house [in Brigus] and I was ordered to appear before the police in St. John's."

Finally, he concluded, notice was served upon him that he had 24 hours in which to leave the country. He left.

More than 50 years later, in 1968, he was still repeating the same story, telling a New York newspaper that he had been "expelled."

### PRONE TO EXAGGERATION.

But was Rockwell Kent really a German spy, or for that matter a spy for anybody else? There need be no doubt that he was advised - "ordered" is too strong a word for the message that was given to him - to leave Newfoundland in July 1915. But why was he told to leave? And who gave the instructions to tell him to do so?

The answer has lain buried for nearly a century in the confidential files that contain the papers of the governors of Newfoundland. They tell a very different story:

Kent and his family came to Newfoundland in March 1914. They rented a home in Brigus - a small, 100 year-old house on the area known as The Battery, the outer fringe of the community. They began to make friends amongst the people of Brigus. And Kent also began to annoy some of his neighbours.

The American artist had at least two notable encounters with officials in Newfoundland. He got into a row with James Hearn, the local druggist and a Justice of the Peace. Kent was convicted of having threatened harm to Hearn, and paid a fine of \$5.

A few months later, Kent got into a dispute with the magistrate, J.B. Thompson. Kent asked him to notarize his signature on a customs form required for the shipment of a painting to New York. Thompson refused to do so unless he could inspect the painting. Kent would not allow him to look at it.

#### ACCUSATIONS START TO FLY.

The outbreak of the Great War, on Aug. 4, furnished Kent with a wonderful opportunity to make more mischief. Within days, he was singing German songs aloud whilst going about Brigus, and he missed no opportunity to proclaim his admiration of Germany and her people. The good citizens of Brigus soon took offence.

On Sept. 4, a month to the day after the opening of the war, Kent complained to J.S. Benedict, the American Consul in St. John's, that he was being harassed by the Newfoundland Constabulary, and was "accused of being a German spy" by local residents. Benedict was quick to jump to the defence of his fellow countryman. He called upon the Prime Minister, Sir Edward Morris, to protest. After looking into the matter, the prime minister expressed his "regrets that he should have been in any way troubled," explaining that "it was due entirely to overzealousness on the part of the police."

Morris then instructed the attorney general, Richard Squires (a later prime minister of Newfoundland), to make a full investigation. Squires moved quickly. Within a fortnight, he wrote to Morris to report that "a careful inquiry" had been made. Squires said Kent had not been harassed. Far from it, he had sought notoriety: "Mr. Kent is undoubtedly a gentleman who is justly proud of his German associations and connections. He has made it quite clear to the residents of Brigus that he is a German scholar and sympathizer, and the freedom with which he has expressed himself has caused resentment. "Mr. Kent has not been molested."

#### KENT CAUSED MISTRUST.

Kent, however, wasn't prepared to leave well enough alone. A few months later, he again sought Benedict's protection. This time, Benedict didn't trouble the prime minister, but

instead went to no less a person than Sir Walter Davidson, the Governor of Newfoundland. But Davidson was not as trusting as Squires. His first move was to send a telegram to the British Consul General in New York to ask whether a man named Henry Wohlgen, to whom Kent wrote from time to time, was a German agent. Within a fortnight the Consul General replied that "the case is suspicious, [but the] proof you desire cannot be obtained."

The governor also sent Benedict's complaint to Newfoundland's Colonial Secretary, John R. Bennett, who in turn asked Squires for advice. Squires' answer was even more definitive than the one he had sent to the prime minister in September. "Mr. Kent has himself created the unpleasantness in which he is involved ..."

He went on to offer his considered opinion:

"The very openness of Mr. Kent's expression of sympathy for Britain's enemies and his contempt for the British residents of the town where he temporarily resides, proved that he is not a German spy, because no spy would be guilty of such indiscretions."

He ended by telling his colleague that: "Mr. Kent ... must expect to find himself in an uncongenial atmosphere."

#### 'INVITED' TO LEAVE.

These events occurred during the early months of the war, as Newfoundlanders were gearing up to do their part for King and Country. The First Five Hundred - the Blue Puttees - sailed for England early in October. Young men flocked to the colours that fall, many to join the Newfoundland Regiment and more the Royal Navy. As 1915 went by, the British Admiralty became increasingly concerned that German submarines might be operating in the waters off Newfoundland. By late May, the concerns had become a full-fledged spy scare. A defence committee was formed, and patrols were set up along Newfoundland's northeast coast and Labrador.

The submarine threat came to a head at the end of May, when Captain Abraham, a Royal Marine Light Infantry Officer who was the Admiralty's intelligence officer in St. John's, wrote to the governor. Davidson immediately ordered Bennett: "to issue special instructions to coast guards, police, fishermen and ship masters to report immediately anything suspicious they may observe both on land and sea."

He then turned his attention to Kent:

"With your own knowledge of the sympathies of Mr. Rockwell Kent ... you may agree with me that he might be invited in his own interests to

leave the colony, pending the duration of the war.

As soon as the population is aware of the grave risk on our coasts to British lives and property at sea [from the submarines] the local feeling would be so strong against him that he would need special police protection for his personal safety."

Kent's complaint to the authorities had made their mark. They were well aware that he had brought these troubles on himself.

Early in July, Abraham advised the governor that: "it would be prudent to ... remove from the country those who actively sympathize with the enemy."

#### SENSE OF DEVILMENT.

Davidson immediately sent the letter to Bennett. Kent's fate was decided:

"As regards persons who not being of enemy nationality can be shown to be actively in sympathy with the enemy, I know of only one person who falls in this category, namely, Mr. Rockwell Kent. In the case of this man there is ample evidence officially on record to show that he is hostile in intention and I should advise that he be requested to leave the colony."

Rockwell Kent was not deported from Newfoundland because he was a German spy. Far from it. His many months of taunting the people of Brigus were brought about by his sense of devilment. Kent himself turned the people of the community against him. The authorities became convinced that he should leave town for his own safety, and the safety of his family.

#### AS THE OLD SAYING GOES: "AS YE SOW, SO SHALL YOU REAP."

Edward Roberts whose ancestors came to Brigus in the mid-17th century, has had a life-long interest in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. He was a Member of the House Assembly for 23 years, and served as the province's Lieutenant-Governor from 2002 to 2008. (Note: Canada is both a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy in which the LGs in each of our ten provinces (states) personally represent the Queen of Canada (who is also the Queen of Great Britain). LGs are appointed by the Governor General of Canada, not elected.) ☺

*This article by Edward Roberts was published on line in two separate articles in The Compass; 1/17/12 and 1/31/12. For more information contact [www.cbnccompass.ca](http://www.cbnccompass.ca).*