

the **KENT**  
COLLECTOR

SUMMER 2012  
VOL. XXXVIII, NO.2

a tri-annual journal published by the Plattsburgh State Art Museum



**Plattsburgh**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

# Some Thoughts on The Great German Spy of Brigus

by Will Ross



I read with some interest the two articles by Mr. Roberts about Kent's problems in Newfoundland. As with many stories about Kent, it is always worthwhile to realize there are at least two sides to the story. Or, you want to answer, "Yes, you are right, but there is more."

Kent's sojourn in Brigus was brief, poignant and dramatic. It contained elements of tragedy and farce. Because of the events described here, some of his most personal and compelling art was created. "House of Dread" is a masterpiece, an agonizing depiction of one man's struggle, against internal and external demons.

I was able to obtain from the National Archives Kent's State Department files. When you combine their information with Kent's own stories from *It's Me O Lord* and the Newfoundland government files, we can come to a few conclusions.

First, as happened a lot throughout his life, RK brought a lot of this on himself. He was a great believer in large-scale and quite elaborate practical jokes, with which he often poked fun at the people he considered his "lessers". They often were the people he was living with. Off-hand I can think of examples in both

got the bit in his teeth, and the authorities were, in his mind, assaulting him, he would not, could not back down and keep his mouth shut. What started as a practical joke became a "Cause". Kathleen must have been beside herself. After all, he could shut himself in the studio and paint but she really had to LIVE in the town of Brigus with its 1000 inhabitants, many of them thinking her husband was a spy, or at least a German sympathizer. Imagine the looks and behind the hand talking going on while she was in town doing the shopping.

Third, there is contemporaneous evidence, written by Kent, of his police interview on August 31st, 1914. This is less than a month after the declaration of war. He states, "It was made known to me that information had been given to the St. John's police that I was a German, that my name was not Rockwell Kent, and that I was in this country, at this time, engaged in obtaining information about the British and their Colony for the benefit of the German Government. In other words I was accused of being a German spy."

Fourth, that same letter, written by RK to the American consul, also has him giving his opinion on the war. He contrasts his British heritage, and his admiration for the Germans.

Monhegan and Ushuaia in addition to Brigus. After all, he DID sing German songs, write "Bomb Factory" on his studio door and write inflammatory letters to magazines like *The New Republic*, in May 1915, where he says, "I love the Germans and I have said so." It was incredibly naïve of him to think that everyone would get the joke.

Second, RK was also incredibly self-righteous and stubborn. Once he

The result is him saying that he wishes the Germans to have a "limited victory to crown their struggle." It must be understood by today's readers that there was a strong pro-German and anti-British feeling in America that continued until the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915. That event changed much, and probably had more than a little to do with Kent's being forced out of Newfoundland.

Fifth, contrary to the claim by Mr. Roberts that RK was "invited" to leave Newfoundland, he was ordered to go. The Newfoundland government documents may say he was "requested" to leave. Once again, contemporary documents from RK and Mr. Benedict, the American Consul, say something else. On July 25th 1915, Benedict writes to Kent, "I have been advised by the Deputy Minister of Justice of Newfoundland that you are EXPECTED to depart from the Colony not later than by the *S.S. Florizel* due to leave this port (St. John's) on Saturday the 31st instant; and he has asked me to notify you accordingly." Indeed, Mr. Benedict's report to the Secretary of State is entitled, *Deportation of Rockwell Kent, an American citizen*. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck ....

Sixth, on the other hand, Kent was not terribly mistreated, despite his protestations. After the first incidents, the police were told to back down by the government. However, neither Kent nor the police backed down and the entire situation got out of hand. I thought it was fascinating that the Governor of Colony, Mr. Davidson, stated that Kent was the only person in Newfoundland that he could think of as a German sympathizer!

No doubt there is considerable fault here to go around, on both sides. I certainly don't mean to imply that RK was without fault. What is striking here is the fact that, almost 100 years since the event, people are STILL talking about Rockwell Kent and his activities. And, like the Farnsworth Museum, attempting to justify them.

I am not sure there is a moral to this story. There probably are several, depending on your perspective. For me, as always, there is the fact that the truth is a difficult thing to discern. All we can do is get as much information as we can and lay it out. As I said at the beginning, there is more to the story. ☺