

## Rockwell Kent in the South Seas

In 1920 Rockwell Kent wrote: "I am going there! Will you sometime tell me how, and what is the cost? And will you let me stop and see you months from now when I'm upon my way, and give me all due warnings and instructions?" Kent's destination was the island of Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands, some 500 miles north of Tahiti. While at first you might not



Photo by the author, 2006

recognize the island's name, it remains a permanent landmark in art history for it is here that Paul Gauguin was buried in 1903. Kent had just read Frederick O'Brien's tale of adventure on this island, *White Shadows in the South Seas*. A manuscript letter, that has recently been discovered, reflects Kent's wanderlust newly focused on the South Seas. His time on Fox Island, off the coast of Seward Alaska, had ended in 1919. He was

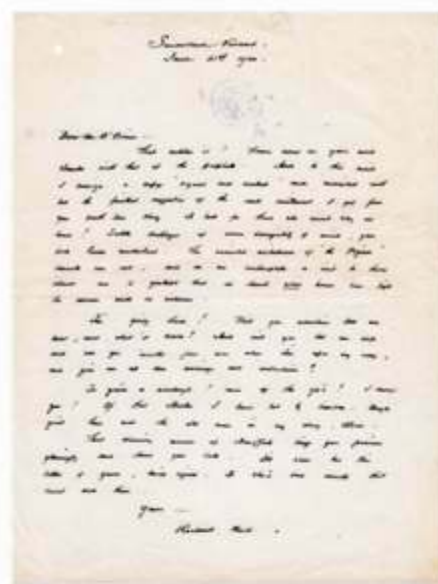
ready to set out again. Unfortunately Kent never realized this goal. One wonders what impact the sunlight, colors and textures of this island would have had on Kent's art. His reaction to Polynesian women remains conjecture. Two years later Kent did depart for a journey through the Strait of Magellan and Tierra del Fuego.

O'Brien's book inspired more than Rockwell Kent; MGM



used the book as the basis of their first sound film (of the same name) starring the lovely Raquel Torres (1908-1987). A viewing of the film reveals that at best it "loosely" follows O'Brien's book.

Kent did send O'Brien a copy of *Wilderness*. A carbon copy of O'Brien's reply in part states: "As you want to go to the South Seas, so I want to go to your island, and to live there as you and little Rockwell did." (Author's collection) Alas, O'Brien never did get to Fox Island and Rockwell Kent wandered off to cooler climates.



Author's collection

Robert Rightmire

Not currently in the South Seas

Sunderland Vermont.  
June 21<sup>st</sup> 1920.

Dear Mr O'Brien :-

That settles it ! From now on your word  
stands with that of the prophets. And to this mail  
I consign a copy "signed and sealed" and inscribed with  
but the faintest suggestion of the real excitement I got from  
your South Sea story. A book for those who must stay at  
home ! Sattle destroyer of mens tranquillity of mind, you  
book breeds scandalous. The ancient wickedness of "the Pigeon"  
danno't us not ; and as we contemplate a visit to those  
islands we is grateful that at least your honor has left  
the women still so virtuous.

I'm going there ! Will you sometime tell me  
how, and what it costs ? And will you let me stop  
and see you months from now when I'm upon my way,  
and give me all due warnings and instructions ?

So give a sendough ! and of the go's ! I envy  
you ! Of that Alaska I know but by hearsay. Maybe  
you'll have met the old man in my story, Olson.

That charming woman of New York says you promise  
gloriously and loves you back. I'll show her this  
letter of yours, twice signed. If she's had doubts that  
must end them.

Yours —

Rockwell Kent.



Transcription of Rockwell Kent's letter to Frederick O'Brien, June 21, 1920

Sunderland Vermont

June 21<sup>st</sup> 1920

Dear Mr. O'Brien:-

That settles it! From now on your word stands with that of the prophets. And to this mail I consign a copy "signed and sealed" and inscribed with but the faintest suggestion of the real excitement I got from your south sea story. A book for those who must stay at home! Subtle destroyer of mens tranquility of mind, your book breeds wanderlust. The ascribed wickedness of "the pigeon" daunts me not; and as one contemplates a visit to those islands one is grateful that at least your honor has left the woman so virtuous.

I am going there! Will you sometime tell me how, and what it costs? And will you let me stop and see you months from now when I'm upon my way, and give me all due warnings and instructions?

So you're a sourdough! and of the 90's! I envy you! Of that Alaska I turn but by hearsay. Maybe you'll have met the old man in my story, Olson.

The charming woman of New York sings your promises glowingly and loves your book. I'll show her this letter of yours, twice signed. If she's had doubts that must end here.

Yours---

Rockwell Kent ,

- 198. -

"Kaoha"  
Sausalito, California  
July 12, 1920

Rockwell Kent  
Sunderland, Vermont

Dear Rockwell Kent:

As you want to go to the South Seas, so I want to go to your island, and to live there as you and little Rockwell did. Maybe I will do it, too, if the possession of a little house here, does not obsess me, and make me a man of property.

You have written a singular, and inspiring book, which is out of your <sup>heart</sup> ~~heart~~ and mind, and not so much out of Alaska. I think you would have done it at Martha's Vineyard, or even in a Harlem flat if it had a roof for hanging out clothes. Your book is beautiful, and brooding, as are the pictures you have made. I thank you very heartily for sending it to me.

I am waiting to get a copy of "White Shadows" to send to you.

Frederick O'Brien

not used

Arlington, Vermont,  
September 5th. 1920.

Dear Mr. O'Brien:

Your Book has come! I am deeply appreciative of the generous tribute you have paid me on your own title page. And at the same time I am a little conscious of the unworthiness of my heavy-footed Wilderness to be linked in thought with your great book of travel, whose pages are so full of light and beauty that life away from the South Seas is made hard to endure.

Some day I shall contrive to meet you. And meanwhile and always I'll remember the solemn vows of mutual belief that we have both so rashly taken on.

Faithfully yours,

*Rockwell Kent*