

Book Review by Will Ross, Editor/Publisher, The Rockwell Kent Forum

North by Nuuk: Greenland After Rockwell Kent

Denis Defibaugh

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“Greenland is only Greenland in the winter-time; and the inhabitants most worthwhile knowing are its native Greenlanders. They are on intimate acquaintanceship quite as improvident, care-free, dirty and altogether charming as the maligned and much-loved Irish poor; and like those Irish by the unobscured, uninsulated warmth of their hearts, more human than ourselves.”

So said Rockwell Kent in an undated hand-written manuscript in the reviewer’s collection. Denis Defibaugh, an emeritus professor of photography at Rochester Institute of Technology, found himself in the footsteps of Rockwell Kent for 15 months in 2016 and 2017. Thanks to a grant from the National Science Foundation, he was able to stay in the towns Kent himself visited during his three extended visits to Greenland. He wanted to document how Greenland has changed, and how it has not changed, in the almost 90 years since Rockwell Kent first visited its rocky shores.

To many of us, when we think of Greenland at all, it is a vast, snowy and unpopulated place. An *Ubekendt Ejland*, “Unknown Island” in Greenlandic. And the small island of that name, 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle, is where Kent lived for two extended periods in the settlement of Illorsuit, first by himself and the second time with his son, Gordon. And it is there where Professor Defibaugh spent the majority of his time. The photographs he made there show that while Greenland is indeed vast and snowy, it is not unpopulated. Instead, as Kent knew, it teems with life.

This is, of course, a book of photography, but it is so much more. Greenland is unique, and so are its people. Professor Defibaugh’s camera allows us to see the land and its people in a telling, beautiful way. What would seem to many of us an almost unbelievably harsh way of life is shown in the photographs to be one of

hard work, independence, and a fierce love for the country defined by rocks, snow, sea and the ever-present icebergs.

For those of us who know Greenland primarily through Rockwell Kent's art, the photographs often bring a spark of recognition of particular mountains that are found in his paintings. There is also the recognition that in his paintings, to a remarkable extent, he was able to capture the tremendous colors of the north, particularly the blues of snow and ice and sea and sky.

Giving added punch to this really amazing book is the inclusion of several of Kent's glass-lantern slides. These were made from photographs Kent took in Greenland with his trusty Leica camera (he also took home movies). He used these slides in the illustrated lectures he would give to make money during the 1930s. Many of them have not been reproduced before. One of them, of Kent's housekeeper Salamina is simply spectacular, and is reproduced elsewhere on the website.

For Kent the camera was primarily a tool, a way to record his travels. He described the usefulness of photography in the article, "Thanks, Camera!" It is found in the Autumn 1938 issue of *U.S. Camera Magazine*. He did take pride in his own photography. His photographs were reproduced in at least two photographic annuals (*U.S. Camera 1936*, pg. 112; *Leica Annual 1937*, pg 106). It is interesting to note that the photographs in these annuals were also used as glass slides. Both photographs are shown on the next page.



U.S Camera 1936



Leica Annual 1937

This is a coffee table book that the reader will actually want to keep on his or her coffee table. It is a book to pick up and savor, examine the photographs, attempt to feel the cold beauty of the country. It is also, frankly, a beautiful book. Seldom today can one find a book so well designed and printed. RIT Press and Professor Defibaugh are to be commended for keeping up such high quality. A book of fine art photography like this shows the importance of real books.

According to Professor Defibaugh Kent is little known in Greenland outside academic circles. There are only two Kent works in Greenland. That is unfortunate, but not totally surprising. Even though he is one of the most important fine artists to visit Greenland, the Danish government was never happy with him. His book *Salamina* was especially disparaging of the Danish government's stewardship of Greenland. That is almost certainly one of the main reasons his requests to return to Greenland in 1937 and again in 1941 were denied. The only Danish edition of *Salamina* was published in 1936 and has never been reprinted to my knowledge. A digital version of the Danish edition should be contemplated by the University of Greenland, or other academic or cultural organizations in Greenland. It would be a worthwhile task and, I am sure, one that Kent collectors world-wide would be willing to support.

After learning so much about Illorsuit and its people the reader is sad to learn that a natural disaster forced abandonment of this small settlement. Shortly after the professor left a massive landslide caused a tsunami that swamped the village. The Greenland government moved all the inhabitants away and resettled them in larger towns. The people of Illorsuit are proud and independent, as reflected in the photographs of them. I hope that they have been able to retain that sense of pride and independence.

For readers interested in Kent in Greenland, Greenland itself, or fine photography in general, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Professor Defibaugh has shown us that Greenland is vast and snowy, but not unpopulated. Most of all, it is no longer a *ubekendt ejland*.