

The Brigus Spy Scare

BY FREDERICK LEWIS

**“If minds can become magnetized,
mine was. Its compass needle
pointed north”**

—Rockwell Kent

American artist Rockwell Kent, born in Tarrytown Heights, New York in 1882, was a master of many mediums. Perhaps best known for his striking illustrations for *Moby Dick* and other literary classics, he was also the creator of intricately detailed wood engravings and lithography on stone. He was an oil painter whose canvasses are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Pushkin and Hermitage Museums in Russia.

But Kent was far more than a multifaceted artist. Trained as an architect, he not only designed houses but also built and repaired them with his own hands. He was a celestial navigator who sailed the Strait of Magellan, survived a savage wreck off the coast of Greenland, and then wrote bestselling books about these real life adventures. In later years he was president of the International Workers Order, a fraternal organization with 140,000 members that was dissolved by the state of New York for being communist dominated (Kent was a lifelong socialist but never a member of the Communist Party). When his passport was revoked he won a landmark court case that still stands, allowing all American citizens to travel overseas regardless of their political affiliation.

During the course of his nearly 89 years, Rockwell Kent seems to have lived six or seven lives. Most mortals would be quite content with just one or two of his myriad accomplishments. “I want it all,” Kent often declared. Once, to a radio interviewer, he inquired, “Don’t you?”

A close friend of Kent’s once wrote, “The good fairies endowed him at birth with many extraordinary gifts. Too many, perhaps, for his own good.” One of Kent’s talents was for all manner of trouble. He always championed the underdog, but his persistent rabble rousing and penchant for practical jokes often left him mired in conflict. This was most assuredly the case during his year and a half stay in Newfoundland, from February 1914 to July 1915, a span that ended with his expulsion, suspected of being a spy.

Rockwell Kent, *Newfoundland Home*, c. 1914-15, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.



All Kent artwork courtesy of Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York. All rights reserved.

He had first sought to settle in Newfoundland in 1910. After a successful summer running an art school on Monhegan Island, Maine, Kent and a partner envisioned a much larger enterprise elsewhere. Married, with an infant son, Kent's confessed affair with an island woman named Jenny Sterling certainly hastened his reconnaissance trip in search of low cost land.

Hoping to find cheap passage on a herring boat bound for Newfoundland, Kent went to Boston. When the fishing fleet's voyage was delayed, he decided to continue north by rail. But not before spending an afternoon—and an evening—with Jenny Sterling, his Monhegan paramour, who was now living in the city with her sister.

Kent's journey via train ended in North Sydney, Nova Scotia, where he continued on by boat, first to Port aux Basques, then to St John's. Never drawn to lush landscapes, he was instantly attracted to the stark beauty he beheld. To his beleaguered bride, Kathleen, he wrote, "Oh, you never dreamed of such hills and mountains, terribly stern and bleak . . . bays and inlets full of surprises. It is far too glorious for words." Kathleen, waiting for her husband in Brooklyn, pregnant with the couple's second child, pleaded with Rockwell to return

Enthralled by Newfoundland, encouraged by a chance meeting with Edward Morris, Newfoundland's premier, who supported his art school scheme, Kent continued on to the fishing town of Burin. There he came upon the Jersey Room, an abandoned fish-processing plant whose complex of structures had fallen into deep disrepair. Having found his ideal location, Kent went to St John's to meet with the premier and discuss a proposition. If the Jersey Room could be secured rent-free for five years, Kent and his art students would restore and maintain the buildings of what he was now calling "Newfoundland University." Premier Morris agreed to contact the owners. Rockwell reunited with Kathleen in New York, but he was soon off again, to Monhegan, to ready for sale the sturdy little cottage he had built there.

While working on the cottage, happily envisioning a new life in the north, a shattering letter arrived from Jenny Sterling. Their brief tryst in Boston had left Jenny with child. Rockwell once again begged for Kathleen's forgiveness. Instead of going toward a fresh start in Newfoundland, the Kents's \$4,000 nest egg, a wedding gift from Kathleen's parents, and the proceeds from the sale of the cottage, were given to Jenny in the form of a trust.

His dream of an escape to Burin now dashed, Kent went back to Ewing & Chappell in New York, an architectural firm that welcomed him as a renderer whenever he needed money. "It is impossible to give but a few occasional days to my painting," he wrote. "These years, which should be the most productive in a man's life, are thus wasted and going by." In April 1911, Kathleen gave birth to the Kents's first daughter. In June, a son was born to Jenny Sterling.

Still anxious to escape the city, and what he called the "penal servitude of the draughting room," Kent leapt at the opportunity to serve as superintendent on a construction site in Winona, Minnesota, an affluent mill town on the Mississippi. Rockwell's job in Winona was to ensure that no corners were cut during the creation of a pair of palatial homes commissioned by two businessmen married to sisters. Since skilled labor was in short supply, and because Kathleen was pregnant again, Rockwell did double duty, signing on as a union carpenter. The contractor appointed the "young smarty from New York," foreman, a move he must have regretted when, during a dispute, Kent sided with the workers and argued successfully for higher wages.

Rockwell moved easily between Winona's working class and its well-heeled gentry. But he much preferred the company of the carpenters and their families, many of whom were German, a culture Kent much admired. When the twin Georgian mansions were completed, Rockwell arrived back in New York feeling like a chain gang runaway, recaptured and returned.

Increasingly, his thoughts returned to the bleak grandeur of Newfoundland's craggy coast, craving "that satisfaction that one feels standing at land's end." In February 1914, determined to resume his quest, he secured small subsidies from his mother and a novice art dealer, and boarded a steamer bound for St John's.

Kent's search for solitude took him not back to Burin, but to the village of Brigus on Conception Bay. "The place is found," he wrote to Kathleen. "It is truly beautiful and even fairer than Burin." Once the primary port for Newfoundland's seal hunting industry, Brigus was still an active outpost, but its glory days were gone. No longer prosperous, its population was in decline, and cheap housing could be had.

In his letter to Kathleen, Kent described a dilapidated, one-and-a-half-storey house on a narrow ledge of land far from town. It seemed half-buried into the hillside, cradled by the cliffs that bordered the bay. After

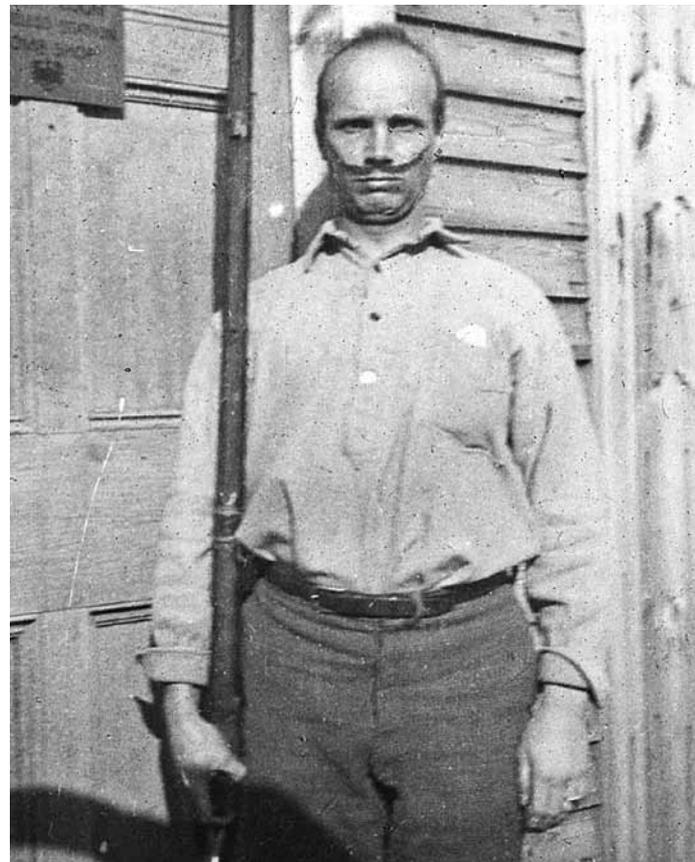
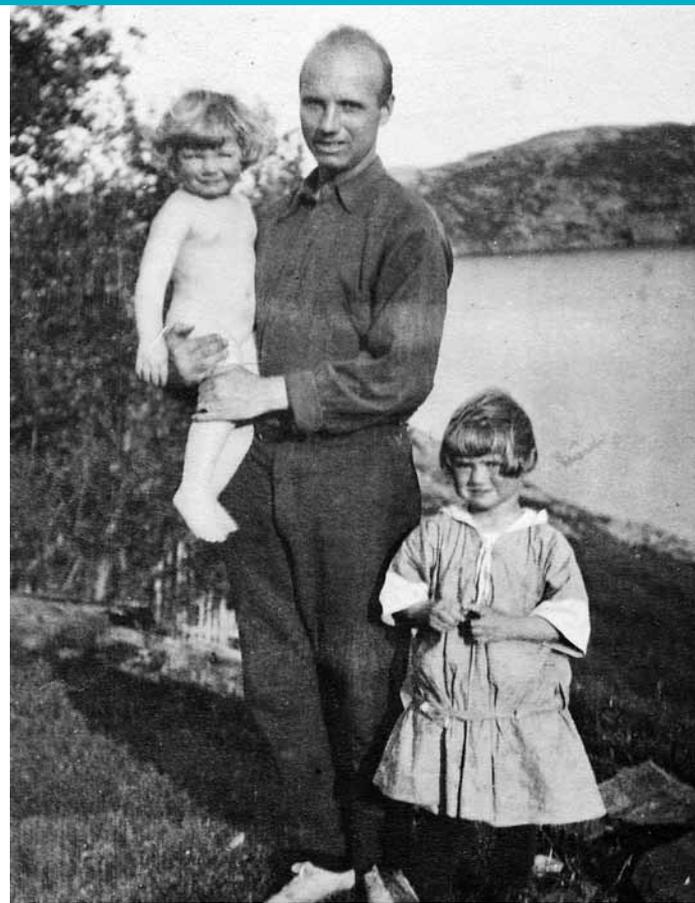
negotiating a very low rent, partially in exchange for Kent's promise to revive and renovate the queer little cottage, he set to work, whitewashing the walls, tarring the roof, working with whatever tools he could borrow, awaiting the arrival of his own black walnut tool chest, which Kathleen had shipped from New York via steamship freight.

Kent had become a carpenter out of necessity during his days on Monhegan Island. When the builder he had hired to construct his modest home there was slow to start, Kent had lost patience. Though he lacked any practical experience, he built the house himself. He had gone on to build several other houses on the island, and to hone the skills that won him high regard from his German-born brethren in Winona.

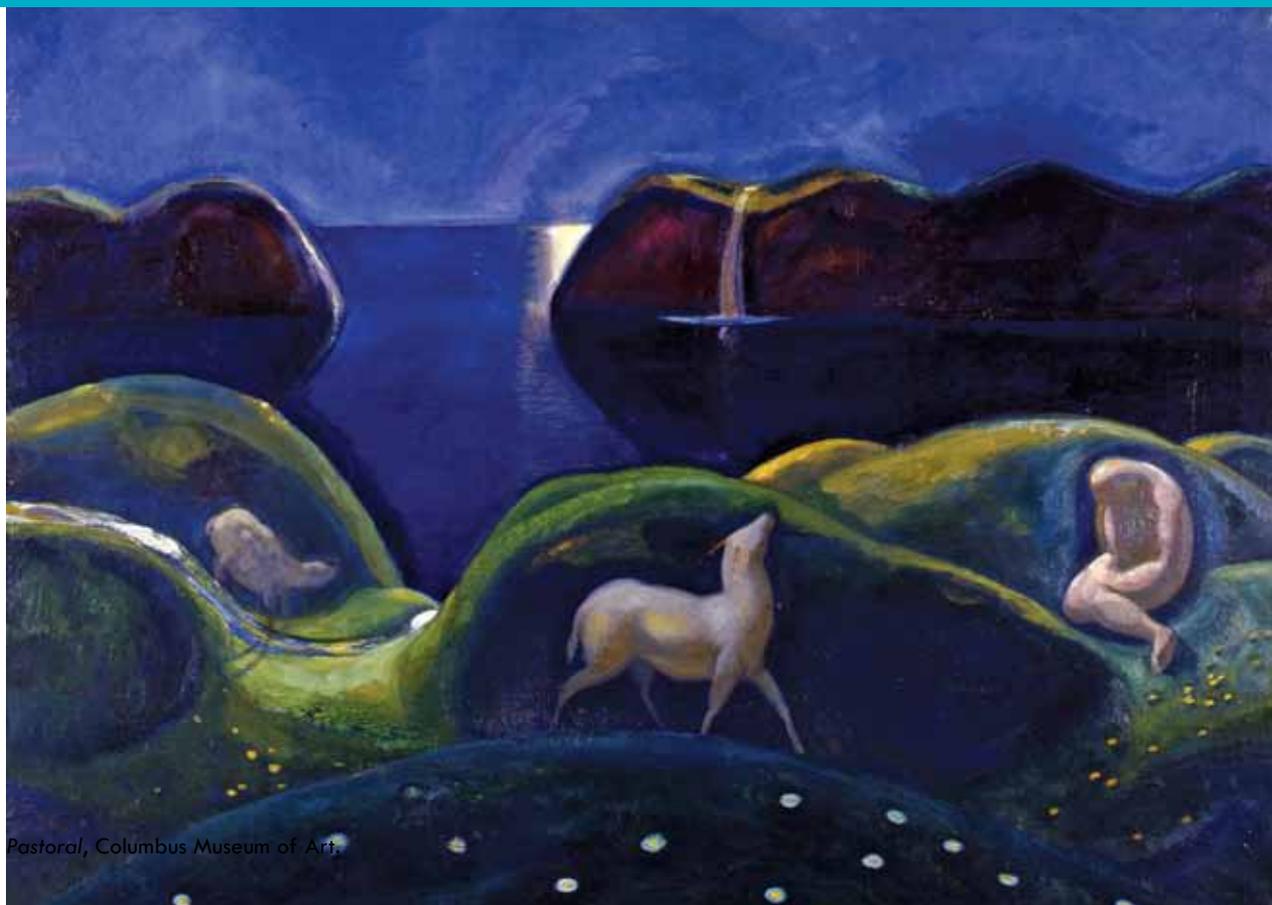
When a messenger handed Kent a cable informing him that the SS *Sydney* had hit a reef near Halifax, and that his chest of tools was underwater, Kent was frantic. These tools of his trade were, he later wrote, "... precious to me on the purely sentimental grounds of association—not only with periods and events of my own life but, many of them, with the life of my revered but dimly remembered father." Kent's father, a banker, died from typhoid in 1887 when Kent was five years old, making Kent, his mother, and his two siblings dependent upon the conditional kindness of a wealthy aunt. Kent fired off a barrage of cables and letters, imploring the steamship company to salvage his tools, even offering a reward. He was ecstatic when divers recovered his chest.

Blessed with unusually mild winter weather, Kent and a local carpenter named Robert Percy renovated the cottage quickly, adding a small wing that contained a narrow studio below and a bedroom above. But near the end of March, Percy looked skyward as he and Kent were walking home from church. "That's a bad moon," he warned, motioning toward a low, thin crescent that appeared to be lying on its back. The winds raged, approaching hurricane velocity. Eight feet of snow fell over the next few days. Kent was horrified when it was learned that almost 80 men, half the crew of the steamship *Newfoundland*, had frozen to death on the sea ice. Another ship, the *Southern Cross*, was never seen again. Hoping to make this tragedy known to the outside world, he depicted it in drawings and prose but never found a publisher.

With his family soon to join him, Kent added a final welcome touch to the little cottage. On walks to and from town, he had caught sight of an abandoned ship's figurehead lying in someone's yard. With permission he dragged this badly faded beauty home. Using sandpaper,



Above: Rockwell Kent in Brigus with daughters Clara and Kay. Courtesy Kent/Whiting Family Collection. **Below:** Rockwell Kent, complete with Kaiser moustache, posing in front of his so-called "Bomb Shop."



Pastoral, Columbus Museum of Art.

Pastoral, 1914, oil on canvas, Columbus Museum of Art.

putty and paint, he returned her to her previous countenance, restoring “the lily whiteness to her skin, rose to her cheeks, ruby to her lips ... raven to her locks” and set her above the cornice of the doorway, so that she once again gazed seaward. “Now let the family come.”

Kathleen and the children arrived in mid-April. The Kents were quickly welcomed into the community, joining the social circle of legendary navigator and polar explorer Captain Bob Bartlett and his family. Born in Brigus, Bartlett had accompanied Commander Robert Peary on his attempts to reach the North Pole, and led over 40 expeditions to the Arctic. Bartlett’s extraordinary tales of rescue and adventure surely fired Kent’s imagination and inspired his later sojourns to Greenland.

At first, all was idyllic. Kent became a familiar sight hiking across the cliffs, sketching or at his easel, and in the village, painting signs for local merchants, tuning the minister’s piano, singing at church socials, and playing tennis. “If only I had not liked tennis,” Kent later lamented. When he discovered that many of his new friends also enjoyed the game, despite playing in a pasture whose surface was far from flat, the Brigus Tennis Club was formed, and Kent set about securing

a more suitable place to play. A deal was struck to lease land from a bewhiskered Irishman named James Hearn, one of two druggists in Brigus. Kent set to work, leveling a piece of property adjacent to Hearn’s apothecary and home. But after the project was completed and play had begun, Hearn, vexed that the other druggist in town, a man named Cantwell, was enjoying the court, broke his verbal agreement.

Lacking a written lease, Kent was furious. He devised a bizarre plan to intimidate the easily unnerved druggist into signing an agreement. With Hearn away on business in St John’s, Kent and other club members lay in wait at the train station, a carriage ready to whisk Hearn off to the office of a doctor and co-conspirator, where, amidst scalpels and other potentially torturous instruments, he would be bullied into signing the lease.

But when Hearn’s train arrived, and the plan began to unfold, the driver of the buggy bolted, and Kent’s other accomplices also turned tail. Standing alone amidst the on-looking crowd, feeling genuinely self-righteous, Kent horse-collared Hearn, a much taller man, pulled him into the railroad agent’s office, and proceeded to coerce the terrified chemist. When the railroad agent arrived and rescued Hearn, Kent headed home, thinking his “practical prank” was in the past.



Newfoundland Ice, 1915, oil on panel, Columbus Museum of Art.

Three days later Kent was served with a summons and ordered to appear in court to answer assault charges. Before an array of witnesses, Kent eventually pleaded guilty, but not before playing to the crowded gallery, sketching cartoons of the red-bearded plaintiff. When offered a choice of 30 days in jail or a \$5 fine, Kent asked the judge, “Does *he* get any of the money?”

“Not a cent of it,” answered the magistrate.

“Then I’ll pay the fine.”

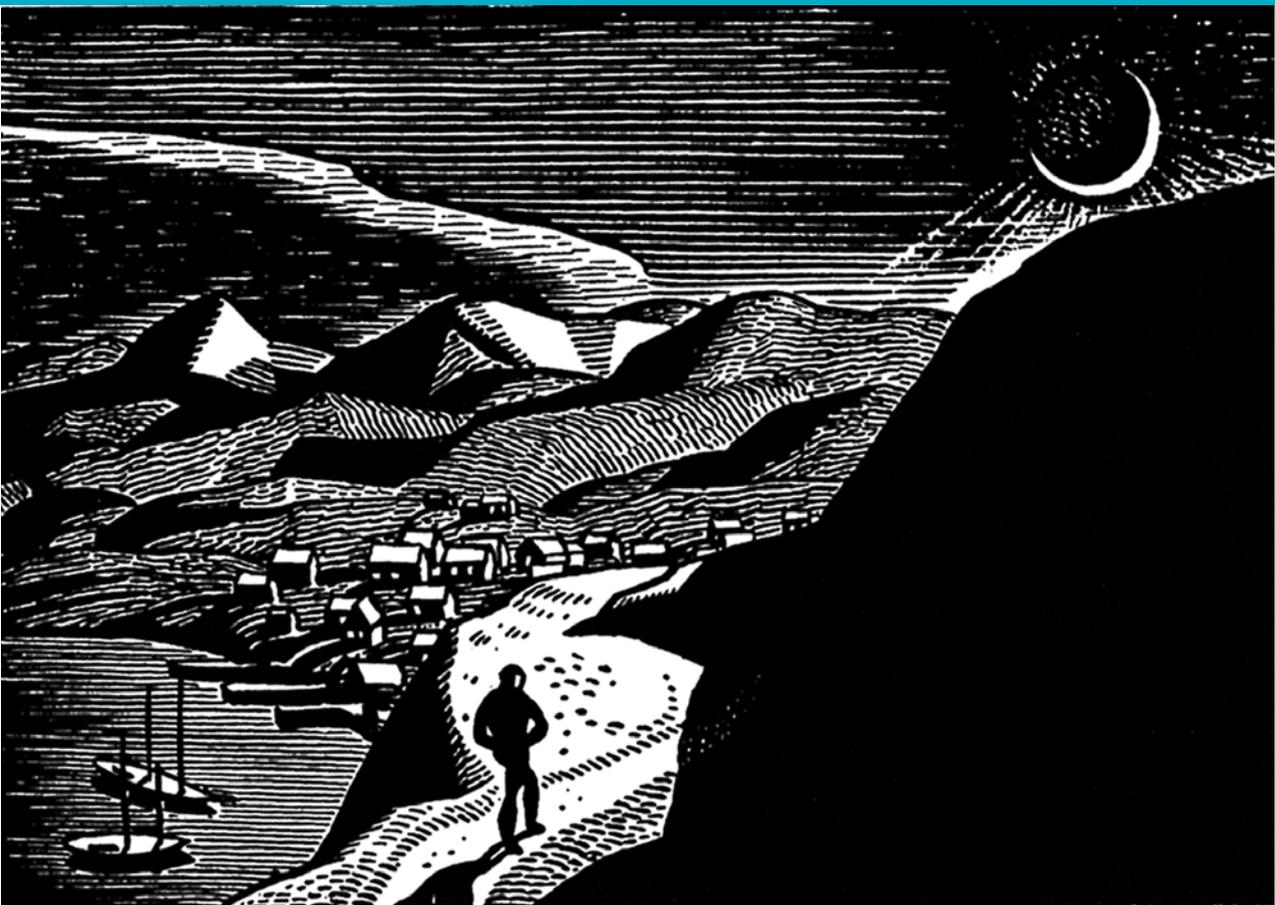
Kent’s antics in court had done more than end his chances of ever playing tennis in Brigus again. Previously accepted as the affable but sometimes arrogant American who lived in the isolated cottage on the cliffs, his performance brought him into finer focus for many of the townsfolk. In August, Britain declared war on Germany. As a colony of the British Empire, Newfoundlanders were now on guard. Kent, an unabashed lover of German culture, freely espoused the merits of the Fatherland. He had acquired this affinity easily enough, having been raised by a German nanny, as well as his father having studied in Freiburg. A maiden aunt who practiced the decorative arts had taken him on a trip to Dresden when he was 13.

But suddenly Kent and Kathleen’s singing of German lieder at social gatherings was cast in a different light.

Why was Kent so proficient at reading and writing in German? What was in that padlocked tool chest he had so frantically besought the steamship company to rescue from the remains of the *SS Sydney*? The seven tons of coal he had ordered well in advance of winter was now seen as fuel for the submarines feared to be patrolling the waters off Newfoundland. When he tried to ship a portrait of his daughter, Clara, to his dealer in New York, officials refused to let it leave the country, alleging that coastal maps and charts were somehow concealed in the canvas.

Kent’s response to the rumors was defiant. Over the door of his small studio he affixed a sign that read: PRIVATE. CHART ROOM. WIRELESS STATION. BOMB SHOP. For good measure he added a German eagle. When he learned that his mail was being monitored, he brazenly wrote a letter in German to Alex Geckler, his closest friend in Winona, wondering, “What will the censors say to this?” A constable soon appeared at his door, instructing Kent to meet with the Inspector General in St John’s. Kent complied, but continued to assert that, under British law, he had every right to express his point of view.

With Brigus no longer a refuge, Kathleen now expecting their fourth child, and money woes



Brigus, N'f'l'd. Chapter Heading for *N by E*, 1930.

mounting, Kent's melancholy became apparent in his paintings. “*Man on A Mast* is a crucifixion scene done in incredible blues, but it also has a sense of pathos about it—depression,” says Constance Martin, a fellow at the Arctic Institute of North America at the University of Calgary and the curator in 2000-2001 of a well-received Rockwell Kent retrospective. “It’s a time when he’s trying to find his own symbolism.” Another canvas, “*Pastoral* is not depressing but it’s certainly one of deep introspection. There are strange, deer like animals—nothing about it is realistic and it is completely allegorical in its own personal way.”

In the midst of the Brigus Spy Scare, Kent was called away to Boston. Karl, his son by his Monhegan mistress, Jenny Sterling, had died in early 1915. Kent was seeking to reclaim what was left of the trust he and Kathleen had given to Jenny, who was now comfortably married. A portion of the money was eventually returned to Kent, but before the trial ended he had to rush back to Newfoundland due to severe complications with Kathleen’s pregnancy. She had almost died during the delivery of the Kents’s third daughter, called Hildegarde, likely named after Alex Geckler’s young child back in Winona.

In mid-July 1915, Kent received notification that he was being expelled from Newfoundland and ordered to depart the colony by the 31st. The deep despair Kent felt permeates his best-known painting from that period, *House of Dread*. In his autobiography he wrote:

*Upon a bleak and lofty cliff, land’s end,
stands a house. Against its corner and facing
seaward leans a man, naked. His head is
bowed as though in utter dejection. And from
an upper window leans a weeping woman. It
is our cliff, our sea, our house stripped bare
and stark, its loneliness intensified.*

The Kents were escorted to their steamship by a constable, leaving what they had hoped would be their permanent home after a mere 18 months.

*The siren blows . . . and as the gap of
seething water widens in our wake, we,
sadly, have no hope or thought of ever
seeing Newfoundland again.*

Kent vowed to continue to fight his expulsion, but soon, new adventures beckoned. In 1918-19 he spent nine months living on a remote island off the coast of Seward, Alaska with his young son and a crusty old

Swedish prospector. But even there, Kent could not contain himself when confronted with anti-German sentiment, stirring trouble in Seward when he went there for supplies.

In 1922-23 he ventured to South America, navigating the Strait of Magellan, and living to write about a capricious, wisely abandoned attempt to round Cape Horn in a 26-foot lifeboat he had converted into a sailing vessel.

In 1929, forever seeking higher latitudes and crueler climates, and the type of barren beauty he had first encountered in Newfoundland, Kent set sail for Greenland with two young men who were each less than half his 47 years. This planned three-month cruise ended in shipwreck off the coast of Greenland and was the subject of *N by E*, the third of Kent's bestselling travel memoirs. In the book's early pages Kent uses his brief return to Newfoundland's shores, his passing by Cape Ray and the harbor town of Channel-Port aux Basques en route to Greenland, as the spark for somber, unsentimental reflection:

Oh Newfoundland! How young I was when I first came to you, and how at this revisitation the memory of my illusions rises to reproach me!

Kent also writes of the figurehead he proudly rescued, repainted, and mounted above his doorway in Brigus, revealing to readers how, ten years later, he discovered that very painted maiden in a high end New York City antique shop:

I reached out to touch her as I used to—suddenly I dared not. And I knew what changes time and affluence had wrought. And I reproached myself. "Where did you find her," I asked the salesman in a whisper. "In Boston," he whispered back. So then—not even asking what her city price might be—I tiptoed out.

In the ensuing years, Rockwell Kent would go on to be known as the stormy petrel of American art. He would become the dominant illustrator of his day, make two more extended trips to Greenland, argue to a standoff with Senator Joseph McCarthy, win the Lenin Peace Prize, marry two more women, and—return to Newfoundland one last time.

In 1967, more than 50 years after Kent's expulsion, Joseph Smallwood, Newfoundland's premier, had happened upon papers documenting the Brigus Spy Scare. Smallwood issued an apology, and an invitation, and 86-year-old Rockwell Kent accepted both.

In July, 1968, Kent and his third wife, Sally, journeyed to St John's where more than 200 attended a banquet in



Rockwell Kent and the cliffside cottage in Brigus, his residence in 1914-15, now known as Landfall, are the focus of a centennial celebration presented by the Landfall Trust, guardians of the house. The trustees oversee a summer artist in residence program and have organized a series of symposia being held in both Brigus and St John's.

On July 23rd, at The Rooms in St John's, Canadian writers who have featured Rockwell Kent as a fictional character in their work will take part in a panel discussion moderated by Eleanor Wachtel, host of CBC's *Writers and Company*. Authors include Jane Urquhart, who wrote *The Underpainter*; Michael Winter, *The Big Why*; and Mack Furlong, *I Want It All*. On July 26th the authors will be in Brigus to read from their works of fiction in which Kent is prominently portrayed. Guided tours of Landfall and Brigus will also be offered.

For ticket info and exact times and locations of these events go to: www.landfalltrust.org/kcevents.php

The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery has mounted an exhibition of Kent's paintings, drawings, and prints inspired by his experiences in Newfoundland. **Pointed North** features Kent's *House of Dread* on loan from the SUNY Plattsburgh Art Museum, and runs through September 21, 2014. Go to: www.therooms.ca/rockwellkent/



House of Dread, 1915, oil on canvas, Plattsburgh State Art Museum.

Kent's honor. After the pomp and ceremony, they were driven to Brigus, which to Kent's eyes seemed little changed, save for the absence of the sailing vessels that once crowded the harbor. Only a few friends from 50 years earlier were alive to welcome Kent back, but he beamed when he saw that a bas-relief of a dolphin he had carved for his friend, John Hiscock, now decorated the pediment of a new home built by Hiscock's son.

The climax of Kent's trip was his tearful return to the little cottage on the cliff. "What hopes of happiness had been built into that house!" Kent later wrote. Seeing the house again, coupled with thoughts of the carved maiden figurehead that once adorned its doorway, brought to mind lines by Lord Byron that Kent found fitting:

*If I should meet thee
 After long years,
 How should I greet thee?—
 With silence and tears?* **NQ**

Frederick Lewis is a professor in the School of Media Arts and Studies at Ohio University. He produced, wrote, and directed *Rockwell Kent: A Documentary* and is now at work on a biography of Kent.



Man on Mast (A Young Sailor), c. 1914-15, oil on canvas, courtesy Christopher Huntington and Charlotte McGill.