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CONRAD KAIN  
1883-1934

Conrad Kain was born at Nasswald, a village of Lower Austria, not far from Vienna, on August 10, 1883. His father, a miner, died in 1892, leaving a large family of whom Conrad was the eldest child. Their circumstances being very poor, Conrad left school at the age of fourteen to become a goatherd on the Raxalpe, whose cliffs form the technical playground for Viennese mountaineers. Several years later we find him at work as a quarryman and, during this interlude, a mountain guide evolved from a poacher.

One noted guide had already come from the Rax district; Daniel Innthaler had added to his local reputation by conquering the north wall of the Planspitze in

1885, and it was through him that Conrad obtained his first employers.

Kain began guiding in 1904, and in this season was taken to the mountains of the Ennsthal as well as to Tyrol, where he climbed in the Ortler, Zillertal and Dolomite groups. In 1905 his travels extended to Courmayeur, Chamonix, Zermatt; then back in Austria, in the Dolomites and the Dachstein region. In 1906 he went to Corsica, with Albert Gerngross of Vienna, and later in the summer was at Chamonix once more and finally in the Kaisergebirge and other Austrian sections. In 1907 he visited the Dolomites, Silvretta group, Chamonix, the Brenta group and Dauphine, making many notable ascents. In 1908 he went to Vienna to study English in the family of Erich Pistor, a well-known Viennese climber who secured the Canadian engagement for Kain. During that summer Conrad visited the Maritime Alps, Dauphine, the Dolomites, as well as the peaks of Zermatt and Chamonix.

Kain arrived at Banff in the spring of 1909, a young man of twenty-five, a guide "of very great promise." He assisted Fynn and others in setting up the Lake O'Hara camp, climbed Victoria alone and led several groups up Mt. Huber. He went to Sherbrook lake and took part in the crossing of Balfour snowfield to Yoho valley. After the climbing was over he went to Glacier, ascended Sir Donald alone and assisted Wheeler with measurements of Illicillewaet glacier as well as with survey work on Adams lake.

His desire for adventure and experiment led him to spend the winter at Fort Saskatchewan, near Edmonton, to see how prairie people lived. In the summer of 1910 he took part in the Bow valley-Yoho expedition, and went with Wheeler and Longstaff across the Purcells.

Space will permit of but the barest outline of his subsequent activities; the Yellowhead expedition of 1911, when Resplendent and Whitehorn fell to him; the winter 1911-12, which he spent with Donald Phillips trapping on Smoky river; the summer of 1912 when he accompanied Hollister to the Siberian Altai and saw his home in Austria for the last time.

1913 brought him the conquest of Mt. Robson, and the three succeeding winters his engagements in New Zealand, where his coaching of native guides raised the standard of mountaineering in that country. In addition to many new ascents he twice traversed Mt. Cook.

In the summer of 1914 Conrad was at the Yoho camp, and afterward led MacCarthy to the summit of Mt. Farnham, loftiest of the Purcell range. In the following summer he accompanied MacCarthy and Stone on their explorations in the Purcells. 1916 found him making his most difficult Canadian ascents: Mt. Louis and Bugaboo Spire. The lure of the trap-line again attracted him, and the winter of 1916-1917 was spent in a cabin on the Simpson river, without human companionship from September until February.

He married in the spring of 1917 and settled down on a little farm in the Columbia valley, but mountaineering was not entirely put aside for he turned up at the Cataract valley camp that summer.

In March, 1919, Conrad made a solo ascent of Mt. Jumbo on snowshoes, the first high winter ascent in the Purcell range. That summer was spent with the Inter-provincial Survey at Thompson pass, on the Athabaska river and Fortress lake. He remained at Thompson pass for the winter, trapping on the Bush headwaters and coming out on foot to Lake Louise in February.

In 1921 he took part in the search for Dr. Stone, who perished on Mt. Eon, earning high praise for his strenuous efforts. 1922 found him with Harmon, visiting the Lake of the Hanging Glaciers.

Ladd and I made a fruitful expedition with him to the Columbia icefield in 1923, and he went with Strumia and myself to Athabaska pass, Tonquin valley and Mt. Robson in the following year, Kain remaining at the A.C.C. camp and conducting parties up Mt. Robson. Later, in the same season, he accompanied Hickson and Palmer up the Athabaska.

Conrad was raising mink, marten and chinchilla rabbits at his Wilmer farm, and taking out hunting parties with his pack-train, frequently working over

toward the Rockies on the headwaters of Cross and Palliser rivers. In 1925 he was taken on a bear hunt to southwestern Alaska.

I saw him again in 1928, when he went with Cromwell, Hillhouse and myself up Toby creek and across to the A.C.C. camp in Horsethief valley. In 1930 we travelled up Dutch creek, to the source of the Columbia, and later he took Cromwell and Peter Kaufmann to the Bugaboos. In 1931 we visited the head of Findlay creek.

Our last climbs together were in 1933: my wife and I with him in the Bugaboos; Kingman and I climbing with him from Peyto lake. He dropped in at the Paradise valley camp, saw old friends at Banff and climbed Mt. Louis (for the third time) on his fiftieth birthday. His final ascents were made in August with I. A. Richards, whom he took to the Bugaboos and the mountains immediately north.

He became ill in December and, despite every care, died of lethargic encephalitis in the Cranbrook Hospital on February 2, 1934. Dr. Bell saw him a few days before the end came. Conrad was buried at Cranbrook beside his wife who predeceased him by less than a year. They rest in the Purcell mountains, on the edge of the "rough country" that Conrad loved and which had been his home for many years.

In 1917 A. L. Mumm expressed the opinion that Conrad's record of new ascents must be "one of the longest and most remarkable held by any guide now living." On the Corsican expedition of 1906, Capo Tafonato was his first virgin peak. In New Zealand he made at least thirty first-ascents, and in Canada (Rockies and Purcells) more than sixty. He was the first, and is still the only one to have ascended the three highest peaks of the Canadian Rockies.

Mt. Conrad in New Zealand, Mt. Kain and Nasswald Pk. in the Rockies, as well as Birthday Pk. in the Purcells, hold him in remembrance.

Conrad Kain, however, will be remembered for much besides his feats of mountaineering. There have been plenty of peasants who were well enough as guides, who could ably face the rock and snow problems of their local peaks, but few of them have accepted with equanimity

the hazards of foreign travel and sea voyages. But a new country was always an adventure to Conrad, and he adapted himself to the ways of the Canadian trail, delving into natural history, acquainting himself with the handling of a pack-train. He brought glamour and imagination into the sport of mountaineering as few guides have done before him. Recalling his personality and amusing stories one should not forget that his approach to mountains was first and foremost an esthetic one; he saw a peak first as something beautiful—the technical problem was always secondary—and nothing counted beside that vision.

It is well that our sport should have at least one outstanding figure upon whom we can look back with admiration. Conrad Kain will never be forgotten in Canadian mountaineering, and a little of hero-worship, one feels, will do no harm. “Whoso touches a joy as he flies, lives in Eternity’s sunrise,” might have been his epitaph, but I think he would have preferred the simpler one that his neighbours wrote when he died: “He will be much missed, for he was a kind, honest man.”

—J.M.T.

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