Films and Literature of Interest

wasn’t. The 96 years that have passed since their journey seem to melt away, especially having visited some of the places they traveled through.

An interesting side-story is that Fay’s party only heard of the war in Europe in October from a trapper they chanced upon when they emerged from the mountains. Soon after their adventure, all five men volunteered for service there, where two of them, Bob Cross and Jack Symes, were killed. It is hard to reconcile the transformation that the world has undergone since 1914, while much of Fay’s route and the types of adventures that he and his companions had there remain pretty much unchanged today.

In summary, I highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the history, natural history, and especially in getting out and exploring the northern Rockies through Jasper, Willmore, Kakwa, Monkman, Tumbler Ridge and the BC and Alberta Peace Region.


Where The Clouds Can Go

by Conrad Kain, Rocky Mountain Books (2009)

Review by Mike Nash (Caledonia Ramblers)

2009 was the hundredth anniversary of Conrad Kain’s arrival in Canada, and, in recognition of that event, Rocky Mountain Books republished the 1935 classic, *Where The Clouds Can Go*. A valuable reference in any mountain literature library. Kain’s book is also a page-turner, but not in the usual sense of a gripping plot that’s impossible to put down. Rather, the book insidiously gets into the reader’s soul - enlightening, entertaining, drawing you back again and again, inspiring as it unfolds, and leaving this reader with only one word at the end of its mammoth 560 pages: WOW!!

Nearly half of the book is set in Europe, in the Austrian, Swiss, French, Italian and Corsican mountains between 1902 and 1909, because that was where Kain developed as a mountain guide and did most of his writing. Arriving in Canada in 1909, he quickly made his reputation here, interspersed with a trip to the Altai Mountains in Siberia in 1912, and three full climbing seasons in the New Zealand Alps between 1913 and 1916, where he left similar impacts on his chosen field. In his disparate writings, Kain audaciously shares his experiences and philosophies towards life and the mountains, despite qualifying in the Preface to the 1935 first edition, “I beg of the reader one indulgence. An unlettered fellow, a former breaker of stones has written this book.”

His early narrative come across as naively simple as the young Kain strides out on his own, giving the impression of a medieval folk tale rather than the start of a Twentieth Century mountaineering epic. But in just seven years, the still-young Kain made a stellar reputation in Europe, and was invited to travel to Canada to become the first professional mountain guide for the recently formed Alpine Club of Canada. His rapid maturation into a confident, top-flight guide penetrates the reader’s imagination and draws you into the text almost without being aware of what is happening. Despite his lack of formal education, Kain developed profound philosophies of life drawn from personal experience, and was a masterful storyteller, renowned as a raconteur, both around the campfire and back in town over the inevitable beer and wine. He kept his journal for seven years in Europe, and continued until the end of his first year in Canada, when growing demands on his time and energies curtailed his writings to select events, ad hoc musings, and correspondence. Not all of Kain’s writings have survived. But in 1934, in the year of Kain’s death, long-time client and friend, J. Monroe Thornton, translated, compiled and edited the writings that had endured into the first edition of this book, which was published the following year.

Unknowingly, Conrad Kain began his guiding career as a youngster when he delighted in helping out-of-work tramps find their way over a pass near his home village of Nasswald in lower Austria. From an early age he harboured aspirations to travel, and since he couldn’t afford the train, he assumed it would largely be on foot. Thus, steeped in the lore and culture of the mountains of Nasswald, imbued with a deep love of Nature, and having adopted walking as a mode of travel, his course was set.

Cloudburst — Fall/Winter 2010

31
Films and Literature of Interest

I found the book highly engaging, a ‘coming of age’ story replete with amusing anecdotes, fascinating history, and a powerful underlying outdoor ethic. Kain also brings out the differences in class structure in the early 20th Century between Europe and Canada, and the disparity between mountain and city people. Kain’s self-ascribed weakness as a mountain guide was that he liked to spend hours on a summit, just looking around and enjoying the beauty. It was not unusual for him to dally on an ascent to enjoy his surrounds, and to spend up to three hours on a summit, alone or with a client, sometimes lingering to watch the sunset. He had little time for, or understanding of those who climbed solely to break records or to make names for themselves, especially if they didn’t take the time to appreciate what was around them. Yet, despite writing “I was never interested in making or breaking records of any kind in connection with mountaineering...” he left an amazing record of achievements on several continents, most notably in the mountains of western Canada and British Columbia.

Two quotes by Kain stand out in the book, describing what it meant to him to summit a mountain as a guide, and his wonderfully succinct principles of leadership:

“There are two points about a first ascent which gave me pleasure as a guide. The first is to bring a Nature lover up a summit which no human foot has trod, and from which height Nature’s work was never seen before. The second point, which is almost more important, is that I love to be able to have the opportunity to see the impression this grandeur makes on my companion.”

“It was in the early days of my career as a guide that I learned that the leader on any climb must hold the confidence of the party. This is not always so simple. Having 30 climbing seasons to look back on, I could write columns on this subject. To mention a few of the points a guide should bear in mind will not be amiss. First he should never show fear. Second, he should be courteous to all, and always give special attention to the weakest member in the party. Third, he should be witty, and able to make up a white lie if necessary, on short notice, and tell it in a convincing manner. Fourth, he should know when and how to show authority, and when the situation demands it, should be able to give a good scolding to whomsoever deserves it.”

A bonus to FMCBC members who also belong to ACC is that the endnotes make extensive references to the Canadian Alpine Journal, allowing readers to take full advantage of “Ever Upward”, the ACC’s searchable DVD of a century of the CAJ from 1907-2007. An added bonus for B.C. readers is the extensive referencing of our mountain geography.

Conrad Kain lived from 1883 to 1934, when he died at the young age of 50, allegedly from encephalitis lethargica and perhaps in part from loneliness following the death of his wife, Hetta, a year before. He left a grieving mother in his home village of Nasswald in Austria. He had not seen her for 22 years, since his only visit home following his 1912 Siberian trip. It was not so easy in those days for New World immigrants to visit family left behind in Europe. In terms of his life experiences, however, he lived the equivalent of many normal life-spans and is regarded as one of the greatest mountain guides in the world in the early twentieth century. Given his huge record of safe ascents, his long list of first ascents, the esteem in which he was held by clients and others alike who respected his leadership and enjoyed his company, the limitations of equipment available to him in his day, and his philosophy of life and the mountains, one may be excused for regarding him as perhaps the greatest mountain guide ever.
