

Earle Birney:  
*Conrad Kain*

The glow of our rocks is richer by the life of an Austrian goatherd,  
Of Conrad Kain the Mountain man, of Conrad Kain the Canadian.

There is not much doubt that Birney's *David* (1940) is the most dramatic and vivid mountaineering poem in Canadian literature. The sheer momentum, graphic rock slab images and tragic tension packed into the epic poem make it the definitive classic of mountain culture in Canada. *David and Other Poems* was published in 1942 and won the much coveted Governor General's medal that year. I remember, most clearly, hearing Birney read *David* in the 1970s-it was an experience not to miss.

Birney wrote many other poems on the mountains: *Once high upon a hill* (1930), *Daybreak on Lake Opal: High Rockies* (1946), *Takkakaw Falls* (1950), *Climbers* (1950) and *Bushed* (1951) are just a few of Birney's poetic missives that evoke much about mountain life.

Conrad Kain came to Canada in 1909, and Birney was alert to such a significant moment. He realized he had to honour Kain, so forty years after Kain's arrival in Canada, Birney's poem, *Conrad Kain* was published in December 1949 in *National Home Monthly*. The poem was published again in the *Canadian Alpine Journal* (1951, pgs. 97-100). Birney made it abundantly clear that he was informed and inspired to write the poem by *Where the Clouds Can Go* (edited by J. Monroe Thorington & published by the American Alpine Club, 1935).

*Conrad Kain* is a longer poem, much like *David*, but unlike the fictional *David*, *Conrad Kain* is biography turned into succinct and compact poetry. It is Birney at his alliterative and alluring best, and Kain is held high as the model and icon of the authentic Canadian mountain man.

There are 14 sections in *Conrad Kain*, and each section invites and walks the reader into Kain's chronological and maturing journey. Section I deals with early years in Austria, and Section II with Kain's short sojourn in Saskatchewan. The poem begins to pick up tempo in Sections III-V as Kain gets rooted and grounded in Banff and Canadian mountain life. Sections III-V are shorter, but Kain's transformation and flexible growth are nimbly tracked and traced. Section VI hovers like a windhover, looks down on Kain

and ponders his unique character. 'Yet he learned to win the men of the West and to master their peaks By his animal patience and grace and the craft of his ancestors'. Sections VII-IX point the path forward in Kain's unfolding life: the Purcells, a reputation as a fine guide and trapper and his trek in New Zealand are duly noted. 'Conrad's name grew tall with Rockies' and 'he mocked the mountain's fame By a grand traverse of its peaks with one wiry determined female of sixty'

Sections X-XIII are reserved for Kain's ascent of Robson. Birney lingers and describes this climb in exquisite detail. Images are anchored well, and the tale is spun in a manner that has many an affinity with *David*. I find Sections X-XIII the most convincing and hold me for many a read—it's almost a poem in itself-- 'icerobed and stormcrowned Robson' chills yet challenges--it's as if Birney is with Kain, McCarthy and Foster on their perilous climb to Robson's upper throne. Section XIV is almost anticlimactic after the nail biter of Robson. The poem winds to a reflective and wondering close. What was the point of it all? Why is Kain important? 'He is dead and his conquests faded'. And yet! And yet! 'The glow of our rocks is richer by the life of an Austrian goatherd, of Conrad Kain the Mountain man, of Conrad Kain the Canadian'.

It would be quite unfair and unkind to compare *David* and *Conrad Kain*. *David* is a much stronger, more dramatic and intense poem that has held the imagination of Canadians for decades. Most of us took the poem in with our mother's milk and studied it annually when in school. There are sections in *Conrad Kain* that almost match the vivid ethos drawn forth in *David*—the sections on Robson conjure up such a heightened sense of adventure massaged by mountain skill, dedication, loyalty and courage. There is no poem, though, in Canadian literature that celebrated the life of Kain, and Birney, to his poetic credit, walked us to such a mountain vista---both he and Kain should be welcomed into the Canadian mountain hall of fame for their efforts.

Ron Dart