

Chapter 7. Evelyn Briggs Baldwin and Kersting Bay²⁴

Alejandro Cruz

Abstract

A letter from Evelyn Briggs Baldwin to the photographer Rudolf Kersting in May of 1898 lends credence to the notion that the two men were close associates, shared membership in the Arctic Club of America, and that Kersting was the personality behind Baldwin's place name of Kersting Bay on Wilczek Island in Franz Josef Land later in 1898 during the second Wellman polar expedition.

Keywords

Franz Josef Land, historic place names, historical geography, Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, Walter Wellman, Rudolf Kersting, Kersting Bay, polar exploration, Oslo NSF workshop

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7557/5.3584>

Background

Evelyn Briggs Baldwin's journal from the Wellman expedition includes passages describing both Kersting Bay and Operti Bay, as if they had long been known. Today, if one searches for Kersting Bay it will be found under the name "Bentsen Bay," after Bernt Bentsen, a Norwegian who perished at Fort McKinley during the Wellman expedition (Wellman 1900).

Although Baldwin's place name of "Kersting Bay" has not stuck over time, the record of him naming the bay in Baldwin's diary in 1899, the letter addressed to Kersting in 1898, and the Arctic Club as the fraternity to which both men belonged is all substantial evidence that Rudolf is the Kersting named for Kersting Bay.

Kersting, Baldwin, and Kersting Bay

This research sought any direct connection between Baldwin and Kersting. This was initially discovered online, through evidence of a letter from Baldwin addressed directly to Kersting and dated May 5, 1898. This letter is mentioned in the *Finding aid to the Arctic Club of America Collection 1894 – 1914* of the Explorers Club in New York City (see: Lembo and Mendel 2002). Using the series and subject file number, we requested a copy from the archives of the Explorers Club (the Arctic Club folded into the Explorers Club by 1912 (Lembo and Mendel 2002)). A pdf of the letter was kindly provided by the Explorers Club.

²⁴ © 2015, Copyright is with the author. Published in Septentrio Conference Series 2015 (3). This work is licensed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Fig. 1. Portrait of Kersting (from Henry Collins Walsh's *Last Cruise of the Miranda*).

The document revealed that Kersting and Baldwin were communicating through letters and had met at least by the date of the letter, May 5, 1898, and evidence of the relationship between the two men is found throughout the letter.

Page one of the letter begins:

“My Dear Kersting,

Thank you for your kind words. Our expedition will cross the Atlantic separately. Consequently the ‘blow out’ will be out of the question. The expedition is an assumed fact.

Yes, I was born in a military camp as stated.

I regret exceedingly to hear of Dr. Cook’s prolonged absence without tidings from him...”

Baldwin, after fondly responding to Kersting, immediately references the Wellman expedition that would be leaving for Franz Josef Land the following month. The “blowout” being “out of the question” seems to be an allusion to an oncoming celebration apparently planned by the Arctic Club.

Baldwin then changes the subject, writing down his concern for Dr. Frederick A. Cook (a friend to both Baldwin and Kersting) who was at the moment with the Belgian Antarctica expedition aboard the *Belgica* (Cook 1900).

Returning to page two of the letter, Baldwin continues:

“...and especially of the sad news awaiting him should he return. How very sad. They were both very good friends of mine. Is there still no news of the *Windward*? I fear the worst has occurred—yet hope for the better...”

From the context clues in this second page, Baldwin is presumably referring to the sad news that Robert Peary is also missing, somewhere near Ellesmere Island aboard the *Windward*, and nothing would be heard from him for another year. Baldwin expresses his concern over Peary, with whom he travelled as meteorologist during Peary’s North Greenland expedition in 1892-1894 (Baldwin 2004).

Noting the history and significance of 1894, it is important to remember Kersting and Cook set out on the voyage of the *Miranda* in that year. The historical note here being, that the formation of The Arctic Club was the ultimate outcome of Cook’s ill-fated expedition to Greenland in the rather unlucky *Miranda*. In this planned polar cruise, after the *Miranda* struck an uncharted reef and began to take on water, Cook traveled 90 miles by open boat to procure the fishing schooner *Rigel*, returning with the plan to tow the *Miranda*. Once it became clear that the *Miranda* was sinking, it was abandoned, and all the passengers (over fifty persons) came aboard the *Rigel*.

As *The Arctic Club Manual* of 1906 put it, albeit crowded:

“...the company was an especially genial and harmonious one...[a]cquaintances ripened into friendships...[and] out of this intimacy, a more formal association...[arose] for the purpose of keeping alive and perpetuating the pleasant friendships which had been formed on the cruise and cemented by its mishaps” (The Arctic Club 1906).

Indeed, this spirit of comradeship carried over into the philosophy of the Arctic Club in the form of mutual respect for arctic explorers by arctic explorers. By 1899, the Arctic Club would have Baldwin and Wellman as members (Lembo and Mendel 2002), and Kersting’s involvement as club treasurer may explain this last exciting line from the letter:

“Please send me Operti’s address.

Fraternally yours,
Evelyn B. Baldwin”

The connection here is the Italian born illustrator Albert Operti (see: Lockerby, this volume), who was on Peary's expedition to Greenland in 1896 (Higgins 2008). This last line links Kersting, Baldwin, and Operti.

Conclusions

As treasurer to the Arctic Club, it would be likely that Kersting would have the address of Operti, but it isn't fully evident why Baldwin needed it. Further research in to any additional private correspondence between Operti and Baldwin might offer specific reasons why Baldwin asks for Operti's address from Kersting. Perhaps he was seeking Operti's talent to illustrate scenes from the upcoming Wellman expedition, but whatever the purpose, simply including Operti in the message was further indication that Baldwin's place names "Kersting Bay" and "Operti Bay" were respectively named for Rudolf Kersting and Albert Operti.

References

The Arctic Club Manual. 1906. WorldCat.org. <http://www.worldcat.org/title/arctic-club-manual/oclc/671516788> (accessed July 2015).

Baldwin, Evelyn Briggs. 2004. *The Franz Josef Land Archipelago: E.B. Baldwin's Journal of the Wellman Polar Expedition, 1898-1899*, edited by P.J. Capelotti. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Cook, Frederick Albert. 1900. *Through the First Antarctic Night, 1898-1899 : A Narrative of the Voyage of the "Belgica" among Newly Discovered Lands and over an Unknown Sea about the South Pole*. Internet Archive. February 28, 2008. <https://archive.org/details/throughfirstanta00cookrich> (accessed July 2015).

Higgins, Jenny. 2008. "The North Pole." Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site. 2008. <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/exploration/north-pole.php> (accessed July 5, 2015).

Kersting, Rudolf. 1902. *The White World; Life and Adventures within the Arctic Circle Portrayed by Famous Living Explorers*. New York: Lewis, Scribner.

Lembo, Karen K., and Sarah Mendell. 2002. *Finding Aid to the Arctic Club of America Collection*. Updated And edited by Morgen Stevens-Garmon, October 14, 2009. https://explorers.org/pdf/arctic_club_finding_aid.pdf (accessed April 28, 2015).

Walsh, Henry Collins. 1896. *The Last Cruise of the Miranda: A Record of Arctic Adventure*. New York: Transatlantic Publishing, 1896.

Wellman, Walter. 1900. "The Race for the North Pole." *McClure's Magazine*, February 1900: 318-328.

Discussion

Forsberg: One of the big questions we had before we published our article, was to find the year of Kersting died. Strange enough, this Kersting, he's secretary for the Arctic Club. He's the secretary when the Arctic Club becomes the Explorers Club. Then he vanishes. He pops up again in the 20s as an old man, I can't remember the year. Then in '29, or something, '28, he just vanishes. Gone. The Explorers Club have a list of all the members, the year they were born and when they passed. But the death date is blank for Kersting.

Larsson: That list though is a bit suspect.

Capelotti: They (the Explorers Club) think he died either in late 1930 or early 1931.

Wråkberg: These associations between the three men, especially the formal of salutation "Fraternally yours," were they also derived from their membership in the same Masonic lodge or club or chapter or what-have-you?

Capelotti: That is an excellent observation. Baldwin was a Mason. Operti was a Free Mason. It's probably likely that Kersting was as well. So there may very well be further connections through, especially, the Kane Lodge (the explorer's lodge) in New York.

Barr: Yes, that would make a lot of sense.

Capelotti: The only weakness of this letter is that there is no mention of Quereau, or else we might have been able to wrap up the entire triangle of place names problems we set the students to this semester.

Barr: Concerning modern place names, or glaciers, and so forth, Borge Ousland found a new island. Have you gotten that in your list?

Forsberg: Cape Flora. The first time I got it was when Marie Gavriolo and I sat together and discussed Franz Josef Land. It was actually not him. The Russians claim that they had seen it the same year, before him. So we have not in our article added that island when we're talking about Cape Flora, because that wasn't known by us at that time. This will be an endless issue up in Franz Josef Land

Barr: This will be added to your list?

Forsberg: The Russians have not decided the name of that island to date, because I think they have three different names that have been proposed.

Barr: Ousland put a name on it as well.

Forsberg: He put a name on it.

Barr: What was the name he put on?

Forsberg: I sat with him a few years ago, and he told me this story also... They came there, took a kayak or something and found that the cape was now an island. And there will be many, many issues like this in Franz Josef Land in the near future, as the glaciers are retreating. You see, climate change opens up all of these opportunities for place names changes in the future.