

PETER RAINIER: FROM WESTON SCHOOLBOY TO ENGINEER AND AUTHOR

by Elwyn Jenkins

IN the previous issue of *Natalia* I wrote about how the Irish artist Jeanie Conan had visited Nottingham Road in 1901,¹ where she wrote and illustrated a children's alphabet book called *An African ABC*. I discovered the manuscript in Toronto, and it has now been placed on the website of the Toronto Public Library.² While it was fairly easy to find out more about Jeanie and her family from the Internet (she came from an artistic family in Dublin and her father and the father of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle were cousins) she seemed to have left no trace of her visit in Natal.

The only hint was one of a few annotations that the artist pencilled on the back of some of her pages. The letter N has the verse 'N the queer nests/Some little birds own', illustrated by pictures of two nests, labelled Bush Weaver Bird and Reed Chuck. Her note reads, 'Peter Rainier brought these home'. By an extraordinary stroke of luck, she had identified the one person resident in Nottingham Road in 1901 who went on to leave an international footprint. A biography of Peter Rainier has been published on a family history website by John Richard Michael Weeks Jr.³ Details of his childhood firmly corroborate Conan's visit. Identifying Rainier not only provided the evidence I was looking for but introduced an extraordinary man who appears to be unknown in the country of his birth.

Peter William Rainier (1890–1945) was eleven years old when Jeanie met him. The following edited extracts from the biography are relevant to his part

in Jeanie Conan's visit to Nottingham Road:

Peter was born in 1890 [at Ehlanzeni, near Nelspruit] in an itinerant's tent during the Barberton gold-rush, with a native Swazi midwife presiding. He came from a long line of British naval admirals and sea captains and he was the great, great grand-nephew of Peter Rainier, the British naval admiral for whom Mount Rainier, Washington, was named.

His father had been a midshipman in the British Mercantile Marine who jumped ship, married his mother, and wound up as a transport rider from the Barberton gold strike to Lourenço Marques and back.

Peter was educated at home by his mother. Beginning at the age of nine, his first real school, called Weston College, was in Natal [at Mooi River], where his father had bought a farm with the idea of settling down to educate one boy and four girls. The Anglo-Boer War began on 12 October 1899, and he had to leave school in only his first year because the area which included his parents' farm became occupied by the Boers and he had to live with other families in safe-haven until the war ended on 31 May 1902 with the Treaty of Vereeniging.⁴

This last detail cannot be correct. The threat from Boer raiding parties in the Natal Midlands in the early stages of the war did not last long, and the Rainiers would have returned to their farm long before the war ended. They would have been at home when Jeanie visited in 1901.

The pictures in the ABC include one of a young boy in a garden and a couple of girls. It is intriguing to

wonder whether they are pictures of Peter and his sisters, and whether these children provided the audience that inspired Jeanie Conan to pass her time by compiling a children's book.

Peter Rainier joined the Natal Carbineers and saw action during the Bhambatha uprising. He then worked on assembling and operating a gold dredger in Mozambique. After serving with the South African forces in the German South West Africa campaign, says Weeks:

He volunteered for the Western Front in France but to no avail. This was because the Essential Industries Board of South Africa transferred him on 'foreign duty' as a civilian to the important war-effort job of speeding up severely lagging production on the gold dredger that he had helped to assemble years before on the Revue River in Mozambique. He married Winnie Miller from a farm near Estcourt (he first met her at age 16 when he had once boarded with her family) and left her behind with her people in Beacon Hill, South Africa ... Later, his wife joined him and they were waiting for their first child to be born when his wife contracted [the 'Spanish'] influenza. She bore her child while unconscious but both mother and child died.⁵

Rainier subsequently remarried twice. He led an adventurous life as a mining, civil and military engineer in Africa and South America. An article by three gemologists, relating how they recently undertook a journey 'retracing the steps of Peter Rainier, a brilliant mine engineer with a lust for travel and adventure,' describes the Chivor emerald mine in Colombia that he managed and gives details of his life and mining career, as well as reproducing photographs Rainier took of the mine and family pictures.⁶



Peter Rainier while manager of the Chivor Emerald Mine in Colombia, 1927–1929

Rainier wrote a number of books.⁷ They include *My Vanished Africa* about his experiences in Africa;⁸ a novel, *The Bogota Connection*;⁹ and *Pipeline to Battle: An Engineer's Adventures with the British Eighth Army*,¹⁰ which relates how he was responsible for building a pipeline across the desert to keep the Allied Forces supplied with fresh water as they pursued Rommel. It was published in 22 editions between 1943 and 2013, including a translation into Norwegian and a Dutch translation that was included in *Achter de Schermen van de Tweede Wereld Oorlog: Een Keur van Boeiende Verhalen uit The Readers Digest* (1969). *Green Fire*,¹¹ an account of his experiences when mining emeralds in Colombia, was published in

twelve editions in English, Spanish and German between 1942 and 1957. It was made into a film in 1954, starring Grace Kelly and Stewart Granger.¹² According to the Internet Movie Database, the plot of the film runs: 'In Colombia, mining engineer Rian Mitchell discovers Carrero, the lost emerald mine of the Conquistadors, but has to contend with notorious local bandit El Moro's gang and with coffee planter Catherine Knowland's love.'¹³

Even Rainier's end was out of the ordinary:

Peter died as the result of burns sustained in a hotel fire in Red Lake, Ontario, Canada on July 6th, 1945, while there attending a mining conference. He had attempted to jump through a window when his room was suddenly inundated by flames, and as fire licked his fingers and singed his feet below, he clung to the windowsill before falling into flames. He survived several days and was able to give a full account to his wife, Ruth Rainier, who later wrote about his experience in her memoirs.¹⁴

He was given a military funeral in Toronto, and his remains were buried at Flagler Memorial Park in Miami.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 Jenkins, Elwyn, 'An early children's alphabet book from Nottingham Road', *Natalia*, 47, 2017, pp. 33–8.
- 2 <http://static.torontopubliclibrary.ca/da/pdfs/37131053604930d.pdf>.
- 3 Weeks, John Richard Michael Jr, 'Peter W. Rainier', <https://www.geni.com/people/Peter-Rainier> (accessed 27 May 2017).
- 4 Weeks, 'Peter W. Rainier'.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Weldon, Robert, Ortiz, Jose Guillermo and Ottaway, Terri, 'In Rainier's footsteps: Journey to the Chivor Emerald Mine', *Gems & Gemology*, 52(2), Summer 2016, <https://www.gia.edu/gems-gemology/summer-2016-rainier-footsteps-journey-chivor-emerald-mine>.
- 7 WorldCat Identities, <http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n89643856/> (accessed 31 May 2018).
- 8 Rainier, Peter, *My Vanished Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1940).
- 9 Rainier, Peter, *The Bogota Connection* (reprinted by AuthorHouse, 2005).
- 10 Rainier, Peter, *Pipeline to Battle: An Engineer's Adventures with the British Eighth Army* (New York, Random House, 1943; reprinted by Literary Licensing, 2013).
- 11 Rainier, Peter, *Green Fire* (New York, Random House, 1942).
- 12 *Green Fire*, directed by Andrew Marton (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954).
- 13 Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com/title/tt0047050/fullcredits/?ref=tt_ov_st_sm (accessed 31 May 2018).
- 14 Weeks, 'Peter W. Rainier'.
- 15 Weldon, Ortiz and Ottaway, 'In Rainier's footsteps'.