

Book Reviews

KAMCHATKA: A JOURNAL AND GUIDE TO RUSSIA'S LAND OF ICE AND FIRE. Diana Gleadhill. 2007. Hong Kong: Odyssey Books and Guides. 311p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-962-217780-2. £15.95. doi:10.1017/S0032247409008213

There are very few books about Kamchatka and, therefore, any new volume that is published on that rarely visited and little known sub-Arctic peninsula is worthy of attention. The present work is an attempt to combine, in one cover, the two *genres* of travel guide and author's account of journeys undertaken in the area in question. This is a laudable concept but one that is very difficult of attainment. The reason for this is simple. The guide aims to set out all that the traveller might reasonably wish to know concerning the area. Typically, it is a fairly dry compilation of facts with little pretence to being literature. The traveller's account is very much more difficult to write and requires literary skills of the highest order. Such books have always had an appeal to the reading public and many prominent writers have attempted them. An excellent and successful example is Anthony Trollope's series of fascinating travel books that he wrote in parallel with his novels. Currently publishers' catalogues are full of such works, but as time goes on fewer and fewer seem to have literary merit and, unfortunately, many of the present ones are barely worth reading.

An additional problem with the double *genre* approach is how does the author fuse the two parts to make a satisfactory whole? The method adopted by the present writer is to intercalate sections of text providing information for the traveller on, for example, aspects of the natural history of the peninsula into the accounts of the author's two visits to it, with a friend, in 2000 and 2006. Sometimes these sections are the work of the author but quite frequently they are the work of others and some are extracted from historical works, for example those by Georg Wilhelm Steller and John Ledyard. This approach leads to uneven reading. One jumps from, for example, an interesting four-page excerpt from the preface to Steller's *History of Kamchatka*, as published by the University of Alaska Press with which is printed a beautiful contemporary depiction of the coast in the area of Cape Lopatka, derived from von Krusenstern's expedition of 1803–1806, to an account of the author's trip in a boat around Avacha Bay. This includes such luminous prose as: 'Some Japanese had joined us; unfortunately they thought they had the boat to themselves and had brought along three young, rather pathetic prostitutes! We fairly mucked up their plans, and boy they let us know it by being downright rude.'

More than half of the book comprises the author's accounts of the two trips that she undertook. The attempt itself is admirable, since by 2000 at least, few outsiders had visited the area. And there is no doubt that she and her companion had many interesting experiences. The problem is simply that the author fails to transmit that interest to the reader. There is far too much about the difficulties experienced with, for example, helicopter flights and meals, and not enough informed comment about what was actually being seen. The text seems to be simply a tidied up reprint of a personal commonplace diary and, frankly, it becomes tedious after a while. Not only is the writing prolix, but there is occasional recourse to what one might politely call 'crude' language. For example in a difficulty about hotel keys, the author finds it necessary to inform the reader that her exclamation on the occasion was 'Oh for f. . .'s sake!' with the expletive set out in full. Again, on learning that a flight was cancelled, her reaction was 'S..t, s..t'. Readers may insert the missing letters.

There are some curious comments. Reference is made, for example, to the allied attack on Petropavlovsk in 1854, during the Crimean War, but it is dismissed in a couple of lines, and mostly refers to the monuments to that episode that are in the city. There is no mention of the strategic significance of the settlement (which was not a city at the time as claimed in the text) and the reason why it was attacked, what actually happened during the battle, and what the consequences were. There is no mention of the abandonment of the settlement by the Russians in 1855. Of course, the author might think these things unimportant in the context of the book she was trying to write but, in that case, why mention it at all? And curiously, if one is to mention the Crimean War, why is there no mention by her of the Russo-Japanese War, of which there is, or was when this reviewer was last there, a display in the Petropavlovsk museum? After all, Kamchatka was subject to a brief, albeit unofficial, Japanese invasion in 1904. Again with reference to a specific monument, we are informed that it was erected 'to the liberators of the Kuril Islands from the attack launched from Kamchatka during the Second World War. Four thousand Japanese died in the assault to recapture these strategic islands in August [1945] during the last days of the war.' This shows that the author has swallowed whole the Soviet version of events by repeating it without comment. She has ignored the fact that Japanese sovereignty over the northern Kuril Islands was peacefully secured, and not resulting from capture, in the Treaty of St Petersburg in 1875, in which the Japanese exchanged their rights in Sakhalin for the parts of the Kuril Islands that were then under Russian occupation. It is absurd to

regard the invasion as ‘liberation’ with the implication that the operation was to render the population, all Japanese at that time, free, and then in the next sentence to note the number of them who fought and died trying to resist it. And the Soviet attack on the Kurils started *after* the Japanese surrender on 15 August. Also we have the startling proposition that John Ledyard, who participated in Cook’s last expedition and who wrote an excellent account of it, was a US citizen when the expedition reached the western coast of America. As he had not set foot in what became the United States since well before the expedition departed in July 1776, he was extremely inventive in acquiring a new citizenship while serving as a Royal Marine on board a British ship. In fact, much of the phraseology in the section in question, including the probably incorrect claim that he was impressed into the Royal Navy, appears to be identical to that of the entry on Ledyard in *Wikipedia*, although this could, of course, be mere coincidence.

But when one examines the rest of the book, the situation becomes much better. There are authoritative sections by recognised scholars on the geology of Kamchatka, on the vegetation of the peninsula, its bird life, native peoples, etc. These are well written, informative, and a pleasure to read. One of the most interesting is by Josh Newell and is entitled ‘Kamchatka; a sustainable future?’ At the end he claims that ‘how these revenues [arising from tourism] are being distributed remains terribly unclear’ and makes the naive suggestion that visitors should ask their tour operator for a breakdown ‘on how the money will be allocated and if taxes will be paid.’ As if one stood the remotest chance of being told the truth! In addition, there are four interesting ‘literary excerpts,’ two from Steller, one from Ledyard, and one from Sten Begman’s *Through Kamchatka by dog sled and skis* (1927).

The section entitled ‘Facts for the traveller’ is a reasonable and useful summary of the situation as the book went to press, but it would hardly be sufficient for those who wished to make a reasonably prolonged stay in the peninsula.

The most impressive aspect of the book is the illustrations. There are two types of photographs. The first are basically holiday snaps and were taken during the trips by the author and her friend. These illustrate the sections written by the author and do, at least, serve to relieve the tedium of the prose. The second are those taken by the professional photographers listed in the acknowledgements. These photographs are simply wonderful, by far the best this reviewer has ever seen in a travel book. There are also numerous reprints of illustrations from old works that are very interesting. The maps are well selected and informative and there are some fine Landsat images. The book is a delight to handle and to inspect and the quality of printing is excellent.

The author is to be warmly congratulated on putting all this together. It cannot have been easy to assemble the experts who have contributed to the book and to

that extent the effort she made is wholly laudable. This could have been a superb book if it had been subject to tight editing under which the sections written by the author herself were reduced to a small fraction of their current length, with most of the extraneous detail omitted, and the prose tidied up, with a concomitant increase in the other much better and more informative material. An opportunity has been missed to produce a definitive book on a little known region. However, the price is so reasonable, and the quality of production so excellent, that the book is highly recommended to all with interests in the area. It is available at good bookshops or direct from www.cordee.co.uk (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

PHOQUIERS DE LA DÉSOLOGATION: LA CHASSE AUX ÉLÉPHANTS DE MER AUX ÎLES KERGUELEN PAR LES NAVIRES-USINES FRANÇAIS (1925–1931). Patrick Arnaud, Jean Beurois, Pierre Couesnon, and Jean-François Le Mouël. 2007. Vachères: privately published. 268 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-2-9530233-0-5. €21.00. doi:10.1017/S0032247409008225

Known in earlier days as the Islands of Desolation, Îles Kerguelen, named after the archipelago’s eighteenth-century discoverer, is one of the groups of French sub-Antarctic islands more than 2000 miles to the southeast of the Cape of Good Hope, and administered by TAAF (Terres australes et antarctiques françaises) since the mid-twentieth century. The islands were a haunt of British and American sealers and the site of scientific expeditions in the nineteenth century. They were visited by Captain Scott’s old *Discovery* during the BANZARE voyages of 1929–1931, led by Sir Douglas Mawson. This book results from the labours of the four authors, all of whom have been associated with the islands. It is a pioneering work, which chronicles the activities of the French sealers, between the World Wars, sent there by the brothers René and Henry Bossière of Le Havre, whose father Emile had obtained from the French colonial authorities in 1893 the concession for the islands for 50 years.

It is not a happy story: apart from the indiscriminate slaughter of vast numbers of sea elephants for their oil, regardless of their age and sex, the enterprise was a commercial failure, resulting in a number of fatalities, and the abandonment of several vessels. In their preface, the authors point out that their book is neither glorification nor a condemnation of the ‘hunt’ (*la chasse*) for elephant seals. Their aim has been to reveal the previously little-known French participation in the elephant sealing trade, the product of which was oil from the rendering down of the carcasses on shore and afloat between 1925 and 1931. They leave the reader to make his or her own judgement, but are not afraid to criticise the lack of regulations and their enforcement before and during the period concerned. To their great joy, early enquiries revealed the existence