

Eastbound through Siberia: Observations from the Great Northern Expedition. Georg Wilhelm Steller. Translated and Annotated by Margritt A. Engel and Karen E. Willmore. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. xxv + 220 pp. \$32. Paperback ISBN-13: 9780253047786.

The German-born naturalist, Georg Wilhelm Steller was one of a handful of Western European academics who took part in the Russian Empire's Second Kamchatka Expedition, 1737-43. While better known for his participation in Vitus Bering's 1741 voyage to Alaska, *Eastbound through Siberia* chronicles Steller's earlier 1739-40 trek from Irkutsk to the Kamchatka Peninsula. Compiled from his travel journals, translators Margritt Engel and Karen Willmore want to "acquaint a larger audience with this extraordinary scientist, explorer, and human being" (1) since Steller helped to establish a "baseline of knowledge in the natural and social sciences" and therefore "deserves greater recognition than he has received" (176). At the same time, the translators seek to rehabilitate Steller's reputation as "the man in frequent conflict with the people on board the *St. Peter*" (174), Bering's ill-fated ship that shipwrecked on its return from the Aleutians. They note that previous works on Bering's expedition gave readers the impression that Steller "was ill-tempered and rather intolerant" (1). In the texts that make up this work, however, Engel and Willmore argue "a much more nuanced image of a more likeable man emerges" thereby revealing "his humanity, his strength of character, his intense dedication to scientific discovery, and his wry sense of humor" (1).

As Russia hoped to exploit the commercial resources and geopolitical location of the North Pacific, the imperial government prevented Steller and others involved in the journey from publishing their findings. The letters and journals related to the Second Kamchatka Expedition, consequently, languished in archives for centuries until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Only once Russia opened them to foreign scholars did Wieland Hintzsche, a German natural scientist and historian, discover Steller's works. Engel and Willmore compiled *Eastbound through Siberia* from selections of Hintzsche's *Quellen zur Geschichte Sibiriens und Alaskas aus russischen Archiven* (*Source Materials Concerning the History of Siberia and Alaska from Russian Archives*). In their work, the translators begin with the instructions Steller received from the Russian Academy of Sciences, before continuing with his "Description of Irkutsk and Its Surroundings" and "Travel Journal from Irkutsk to Kamchatka." They conclude with appendices of other documents, such as a timeline of Steller's life, plants named after him, and glossaries of the mostly Russian terms he used in his account.

In part I of *Eastbound through Siberia*, the "Description of Irkutsk and Its Surroundings," Steller documented the region's physical geography and social history. He included an overview of the various Russian social classes who relocated, voluntarily and involuntarily, to the growing city of Irkutsk. Steller described the region's economic position as a center for trade with China and advised the Russian government to improve commerce by removing their monopolies and establishing a set minimum price for Russian exports. On multiple occasions, he also urged the government to allow the *promyshlenniks* (fur trappers and laborers) to marry to reduce prostitution and rates of venereal diseases.

The “Travel Journal from Irkutsk to Kamchatka” of part II spans Steller’s 2,500-kilometer odyssey to the Pacific, from March to September 1740. He and his companions used rafts and *doshcheniks* (river boats) to make their way on the Lena River to Yakutsk. Winter ice delayed the team and presented hazards as they had to wait for it to break and maneuver around ice flows. During the river journey, Steller wrote a recommendation that impelled authorities to create an accurate description of Siberia’s people and resources. Due to administrative turnover, he contended such data would give incoming officials more knowledge of the region and help them to impose more equitable taxes on the local population. Once in Yakutsk, Steller learned that many provisions, such as wagons, sleds, horses, and cattle had not been acquired by the expedition’s leaders who had preceded him. Resolving to continue the voyage, he purchased some necessary items with his own money and ordered others for shipment the following spring. From there, Steller traveled east to the Pacific port of Okhotsk overland, on a rudimentary system of trails across rivers, over steep mountains, and through endless bogs and forests. The journal ends with Steller’s brief sea voyage to Kamchatka.

Engel and Willmore contend that although their translation of Steller’s journals “will appeal most to historians and botanists, general readers who like a good wilderness adventure will also enjoy reading them” (xv). Unfortunately, their work is not for a lay audience. Additional context on Steller’s later journey with Bering and better maps of the route Steller took across Siberia are needed to make *Eastbound through Siberia* more comprehensible for recreational readers. The translators are correct, though, in stating that scholars in several disciplines will find this work useful. Historians, especially those who study Russian imperialism, will appreciate the social history as well as the facets of tsarist rule in eighteenth century Siberia. Those planning to read the translations of Steller’s more famous subsequent accounts, his *History of Kamchatka* and/or his *Journal of a Voyage with Bering, 1741-1742*, should also consider giving this volume a read. Furthermore, as Steller rigorously documented eastern Siberia’s plant and animal life, botanists, too, may find this work useful. Finally, Steller’s account is an important resource for ethnographers since he included descriptions of the religious practices, medical care, and hunting methods of the native people—Buryat, Yakut, Tungus, and Chukchi—he encountered during the expedition.

Daniel Blumlo, Rock Valley College