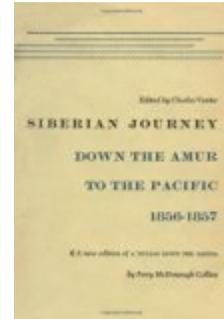


Perry McDonough Collins. *Siberian Journey: Down the Amur to the Pacific, 1856-1857*. Edited by Charles Vevier. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 380 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-02674-5.

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Russian America? Perry McDonough Collins's Voyage on the Amur

Alexis de Tocqueville was the first, but certainly not the last, to see parallels between Russian and American expansion: both experienced landward migration across immense distances into a thinly populated (or, more accurately, depopulated) territory, settled lands abounding in natural riches, and created continental empires in the process. In the mid-nineteenth century, many believed Russia and the United States—young, vital nations, at once European and anti-European—would achieve greatness in their vast heartlands, surpassing Europe in the process. The latest edition of Perry McDonough Collins's *Siberian Journey Down the Amur to the Pacific*, first published in 1860, offers eloquent testimony to this mid-century optimism, and provides valuable descriptions of Siberia and the Far East during a momentous period of Russian expansion (Collins's original title was *A Voyage Down the Amoor: With a Land Journey through Siberia, and Incidental Notices of Manchouria, Kamschatka, and Japan*). Charles Vevier, a historian of U.S. foreign relations, edited Collins's work in 1962, and his combined volume has recently been republished. With Vevier's informative notes, additions, and introduction, Collins's *Siberian Journey* is essential reading for scholars of Siberia, the Russian Far East, and the history of U.S.-Russian relations, and is accessible enough to serve as a text for advanced undergraduates.

Collins was a lawyer and entrepreneur who co-founded the American-Russian Commercial Company in 1847. Seeing potential markets in Russia, he implored

the State Department to pursue greater economic cooperation with the tsarist empire. In 1856, President Franklin Pierce appointed Collins the "American Commercial Agent to the Amoor River," and Collins shortly thereafter departed for St. Petersburg, joined by a Virginian named John Lewis Peyton, a lawyer by trade. The pair made the arduous land journey to Irkutsk, whence Collins alone continued on to the Amur, descending the river as far as Nikolaevsk, then traveling to Japan and Kamchatka.

As a travelogue, *Siberian Journey* is informative and engaging. Indeed, there are few more vivid descriptions of the Amur region from this period in any language. Collins wrote with a flair for the dramatic and a speculator's eye for fortunes to be made, presenting the Far East in a very positive light. Traveling by barge (provided by the tsarist state), Collins took careful note of the extent and composition of the forests, fisheries, and grasslands, all with an eye to future development. He provided a lengthy exegesis on the Amur's natural conditions, its native inhabitants, and the prospects for importing crops. Collins cited few sources, and it can be hard to separate what he observed directly and what he gleaned from others. Nevertheless, coming on the heels of the earliest Russian surveying expeditions (in 1864-65), his account gives an invaluable picture of the region during the first days of colonization.

As Vevier notes, Collins's work was in some sense "a

book about his own country,” a work that projected the optimism of westward expansion onto East Asia (p. 6). As Collins moved into the Amur watershed, he felt he was entering a second America, where wild nature could be transformed into private profit and general prosperity. Collins made constant comparisons to the United States, viewing the Amur as a kind of Russian Mississippi. Wending through forest, marsh, and prairie, bordered by rich soils, dotted with shoals and sandbars, the Amur seemed to Collins the perfect analogue for America’s great riverine artery, one offering similar opportunities for settlement. Though it remained frozen for nearly half the year, and despite the many difficulties encountered during his descent to the Pacific, Collins was confident that it was one of the “safest navigable rivers in the world” (p. 260). Following Nikolai Murav’ev (later Murav’ev-Amurskii), the governor-general of Eastern Siberia and the architect of Russia’s expansion on the Amur, Collins believed that the river was the key to unlocking Siberia’s natural resources.

Collins’s work overflows with optimism. In contrast to many contemporary observers, he was very impressed with Russian commerce and industry. He even wrote glowingly of the empire’s roads, suggesting that the United States could learn much from the tsarist post-road system. He was particularly struck by the scale and variety of Russian trade on the Volga River, the Caspian Sea, and the Kiakhta River (on the Russo-Chinese border), a view that stands in stark contrast to ideas of a stunted Russian commercial sector and a “missing bourgeoisie.” At times, Collins’s enthusiasm led him to downplay serious problems. Thus, noting the cramped and unsanitary conditions among Far Eastern Cossack settlers, he deduced that their survival could only be due to “the salubrity of the climate and the robust constitution of the people” (p. 147).

Collins did not ignore such problems entirely, but, drawing on the American experience, he believed that they could be overcome with the power of modern science. One could find squalor and suffering on the Hudson or Mississippi as well, he wrote, but in America, as in Russia, this state of affairs was temporary, as “steam, artillery, and revolvers give to civilized man irresistible power” (p. 216). Of course, Siberia differed in important ways from the American West: the climate was much less forgiving, the Amur presented major navigational hazards, and migration from the metropole was daunting. Unlocking the “potential” of the region would remain a challenge throughout the next century. Yet for all his sanguine predictions, Collins’s account reminds us of

the confidence of the mid-nineteenth century, and that, despite its problems, many paths remained open for Russia on the eve of emancipation.

As in other contemporary works on the Russian Far East, Collins’s account was anti-Chinese, casting a vibrant Russia against the decaying Manchu Empire. Russian conquest of the East, he wrote, might serve as “a solution of the Chinese riddle,” forcing open the Chinese door, and bringing Christianity and civilization to a stagnant backwater. Writing of his arrival at Nikolaevsk, Collins portrayed Russian expansion in world historical terms. “The blood of Japhet has triumphed over that of Shem,” he wrote. “The curse of Noah is about to be accomplished, the prophecy fulfilled, and Asia Christianized” (p. 289). Though Collins was not alone in his triumphalism, his work is notable in ascribing to Russia such an unambiguous civilizing force.

Indeed, the *Siberian Journey* is in many ways a classic statement of the white man’s burden. Collins emphasized that, morally, the Russians were just as justified in acquiring and settling the Amur region as European settlers of the Americas had been. Moreover, he argued, beside the Chinese treatment of native groups, the Russians were far more humane. While the Manchu authorities cheated the locals and pressed them into guard service, Russians paid fair prices and were both “kind and just” (p. 251). One curious element of *Siberian Journey*—and one consistent with the “imperialist gaze”—is Collins’s frequent assessment of the native women he encountered, a habit that occasionally caused friction with locals. Thus, having irked one husband, he and a Russian officer had to intervene to prevent the jealous “brute” from beating his wife (p. 212).

Thanks in part to Vevier’s additions, *Siberian Journey* also offers insight into a unique era in U.S.-Russian relations. Collins’s trip occurred at a time when the interests of United States and Russia were very close. Faced with hostile European powers in the Pacific, St. Petersburg looked to America as a potential ally in the East, while reform-minded administrators saw in the United States a model for liberal governance and economic development. Russian officials—foremost among them Murav’ev, to whom Collins dedicated his work—supported the journey and regaled the American along his way with dinners and speeches (many included in the text). Vevier situates Collins’s expedition within the context of a growing U.S. interest in the Pacific in general and in the “China question” in particular. Japan, China, and the European powers were never far from Collins’s mind as he

assessed tsarist domains, and he emerges as an unequivocal advocate of Russian expansion along the Pacific littoral. Vevier intersperses the travelogue with Collins's dispatches to the State Department and letters to tsarist officials, keeping the explorer's commercial ambitions and the larger geopolitical picture in view. Unfortunately the Russian context—particularly the domestic situation—is passed over only briefly. It would be interesting to compare Collins's account to the perspectives of his Russian interlocutors, such as Murav'ev, or even to that of Peyton, who remains mysteriously silent during the voyage.

From colonial mentalities to diplomacy and ethnography, *Siberian Journey* represents a rich source for an array of scholarly interests. Vevier's editing, supplements, and introduction add a great deal to Collins's text, and it

is a testament to his erudition that his 1962 volume has been republished almost verbatim. For greater insight into the Russian context, Mark Bassin's classic works on the "Amur epoch" should be read alongside *Siberian Journey*.^[1] But Collins's account itself has retained its great value, offering a unique perspective on two nineteenth-century empires and their divergent fates on the Pacific Rim.

Note

[1]. Mark Bassin, "The Russian Geographical Society, the 'Amur Epoch,' and the Great Siberian Expedition 1855-1863," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73, no. 2 (1983): 240-256; and Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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