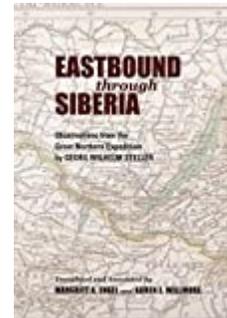




**Georg Wilhelm Engel Steller.** *Eastbound through Siberia: Observations from the Great Northern Expedition.* Trans. and ed. Margritt A. Engel and Karen E. Willmore. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. xxv + 220 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04778-6.



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I have to admit: ever since beginning my own dissertation research, Georg Wilhelm Steller has been my one true historical hero. An opinionated, resourceful, and polyglot German natural historian, Steller played a key role in the Russian state's eighteenth-century exploration of Siberia and Alaska. He provided heroic service after Vitus Bering's shipwreck on the North Pacific's Commander Islands in 1742, tending selflessly to his dying companions while still finding time to compile the only scientific description of the now-extinct Steller's sea cow. Another of the species he described on that voyage, the Steller's jay, frequently visits my house in Oregon, reminding me almost daily of Steller's life. While Steller survived the Commander Islands shipwreck, he died—not yet forty—on the return trip to St. Petersburg. In *Empire of Extinction: Russians and the Strange Beasts of the Sea, 1742–1867* (2014), I cast Steller—admiringly, but fairly I thought—as a conscientious objector to the worst excesses of Russian colonialism and environmental destruction, even as he often benefited from those same processes.

Steller's extensive unpublished notes and journals from the Second Kamchatka Expedition—of which Bering's voyages to Alaska were but one part—are still being published in various languages. Margritt Engel and Karen Willmore, both emerita professors at the University of Alaska Anchorage, have played a valuable part in this work. Their translation of Steller's *History of Kamchatka* was a scholarly tour-de-force, turning one of Steller's masterpieces into accessible and conscientiously footnoted English. Meanwhile, Wieland Hintzsche has led a decades-long project of publishing as much of Steller's material in German as possible. Working from Hintzsche's transcriptions of Steller's Siberian notebooks, Engel and Willmore have now produced another wonderful translation. *Eastbound through Siberia* is Steller's journal of his overland voyage from the Siberian city of Irkutsk to Kamchatka, from whence he sailed onward to Alaska. This journal is much more than a prologue to that more famous voyage. Instead, the journal provides valuable firsthand observations of Siberian life and Russian

colonialism in the mid-eighteenth century. It also offers—as the translators discuss in a substantive preface and afterword—the chance to reassess Steller himself.

The journal begins in Irkutsk, then Russia's most important Siberian bureaucratic and economic center. Steller, writing for government officials in St. Petersburg, provides a detailed account of life in Irkutsk, one that would be exceptionally useful for students in Russian imperial history, and which holds interest for experts as well. He chronicles the decline in fur-bearing animals in the region, the central place brandy played in the local and imperial economy, and the fraught relations between Russians and Buryats. Steller's extended discussion of the important trade with China, much of which went through Irkutsk, is valuable for global economic history. In particular, his description of Russia's declining terms of trade and the power of Chinese consumer goods will resonate with twenty-first-century readers. All in all, Steller paints a picture of a frontier town in uncertain transition, rife with both bureaucracy and bootlegging. "Murder" there, he claimed, was "no longer a rarity" (p. 42).

Departing eastward from Irkutsk, up the Lena River to Yakutsk, and thence across some of the most challenging terrain in all of Siberia down to the port of Okhotsk, Steller's journal focuses on the region's plant and animal life, its Indigenous inhabitants, and the rigors of eighteenth-century travel. As the translators note, Steller's precise botanical and zoological descriptions serve as valuable "baseline" data for contemporary environmental assessments, giving a sense of how much Siberia's natural world has changed in the last three centuries. Engel and Willmore have done exceptional work here, relying on a network of biologists to help them clarify some of Steller's obscure or imprecise observations. Much as he had done in Irkutsk, Steller also closely noted the many signs of decline in species abundance, especially fish, that was already following Russian exploitation of the region.

Steller clearly loved conversation, and he spent many of the hours during the trip talking with his travel companions, especially the Yakuts and Tungus who inhabited these regions and whose support was essential for the success of the Kamchatka Expedition. The Yakuts barked like dogs when their spirits ran high, making Steller laugh. He questioned the Tungus closely about their naming practices, finding again a lively sense of humor. One of his male companion's name, for example, translated to "dog's daughter," while another was "fat lip," appellations which derived from notable birth and childhood events. To the north, the Chukchi, Steller reported, insisted that their land and their numbers were far bigger than those of the Russians who pretended to be their conquerors. Such intense engagement with peoples of foreign, fascinating cultures turned Steller from a simple botanist into a first-rate ethnographer, and Engel and Willmore's translation will be very valuable for ethnohistorians and historians of empire. Not that Steller was anything near an impartial observer—his committed Christianity and sense of cultural superiority would not allow him to be. Thus, even when a Yakut shaman

prophesied, with eerie accuracy, that Steller would travel beyond Kamchatka (something not then clear to Steller) and that his wife was his greatest enemy (she had refused to accompany him on the trip and was even then squandering his money), he could only scoff at these pagan superstitions. The Yakuts, he wrote, dismissively, “have no insight into physical phenomena” (p. 142). Steller also feared that some Siberian settlers were becoming too indigenized, forgetting agriculture and the Russian language, though he did seem upset by the shocking disease-caused declines he detected in Siberian populations.

What gives Steller’s journals a special intimacy is the way he relates the day-to-day vagaries and frustrations of life on the road in colonial Siberia. Frequently cold, often wet, many times lonely, and sometimes elated at the incredibly beautiful scenery, his mood on the journey changed by the hour. Retiring to bed at the end of a day marked by a river soaking, Steller wrote that “a nice fur coat did feel good” (p. 113), and the reader almost experiences along with him a palpable sense of relief. Similarly, the “dreadful gas” (p. 36) Steller reports as the result of too much hardtack will likely also stir the imagination. On the other hand, Steller expresses no emotion at times we might expect it. His journal provides a vivid reminder of the close proximity with all number of animals that everyday life then entailed. The frequent, and often violent deaths along the trail of horses, cows, oxen, and dogs evinced in Steller no surprise, but more often macabre jokes at how well he and his companions would eat.

If this sounds like a smooth-flowing narrative, I want to acknowledge the miracles the translators have performed with this material, synthesizing and rearranging it in ways that make sense of Steller’s probable intentions for later editing. When I worked with Hintzsche’s transcriptions years ago, I found them almost unreadable thanks to their fragmentation, and while that format

served some audiences well with its fidelity to the source material, Engel and Willmore’s work has unlocked this engaging, often truly delightful, narrative for a much broader swath of scholars and students.

In their afterword, Engel and Willmore state that these journals reveal a Steller far more likeable than the picture other commentators and biographers have drawn of him. Instead of arrogant and irascible, the Steller of these journals is modest and personable. I agree that the journals reveal new sides to the man, but I am not as sure they are so positive. Instead, Steller presents himself as an eager supporter of some of the imperial government's more oppressive practices. He advocates for harsher enforcement of the empire's notoriously punitive internal passport policy. He gives St. Petersburg details for how to better crack down on those who would evade its monopolies and taxes. He charges the Russian settlers with laziness and immorality when they fail to make imperialism pay for St. Petersburg. In fairness, Steller also attempts to provide information that might allow for fairer taxation. Still, his very agreeableness in these pages often looks, from this distance, to be an agreement with things he ought to have questioned. Once, in a memorable passage written as he stared, for the first time, upon the endless undulations of the mountains guarding the approaches to Okhotsk, this awareness seemed to have begun dawning on him: "I wished the esteemed senators in St. Petersburg could have this view from their windows for half an hour to properly evaluate this project of the Kamchatka Expedition and the insight and conscience of its planners" (p. 134). Indeed, when Steller explored Kamchatka and saw how cruelly the expedition's demands had fallen on the native Itelmen, he began a far deeper questioning of Russian imperial policy. *Eastbound through Siberia*, in that sense, shows Steller at the beginning of his journey, from Russia to Alaska, from naïve supporter of empire to skeptic, a journey from which he never returned.

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