

BOOK Review---Arctic Passage

Most Alaskan historians mention the Native people only in passing—if they met the explorers boat or massacred the settlers. A refreshing change is William R. Hunt's "Arctic Passage, The Turbulent History of the Land and People of the Bering Sea 1697-1975." Which, although by no means a Native history, recognizes the fact that there were early inhabitants who also had a point of view.

For example, Hunt quotes an early Russian explorer, Captain Krenitsin, explaining to the St.

Petersburg Academy of Sciences that, plainly, the greed of the Aleuts for "Russian luxuries" had regretfully disrupted the Native pattern of life. "They neglect to lay up provision of fish and roots; and suffer their children frequently to die of hunger."

"How easy it was to explain away the disturbing consequences of commercial expansion by fixing the blame on the natives' lack of foresight," Hunt editorializes. "This rationale for the genocide

of Bering Seas peoples was to be relied upon again and again. A century later, solemn reports recounting starvation and disaster in the wake of the American whaling fleet were to echo the same theme of neglectful Natives, although some Americans did recognize the underlying causes of the famine.

He also writes from the Tlingit point of view, "The Russians and their Aleut hunters were invaders on Sitka Sound, since the area had long been occupied

by the proud Tlingits, one of the most highly cultured Native peoples in America. The Tlingits gloried not in war but in beauty, as their art and handicraft showed. They had an exquisite skill in transforming natural materials into objects of utility, grace and significance.

"But in 1820 the Tlingits were pushed beyond their point of endurance by the arrogant Russians and reacted with determination and tactical skill to drive the Europeans away.

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Tlingit warriors burned the Russian stockade and made captives of the survivors after a short, fierce battle..."

And there's sarcasm for cultural interchange: "On the brighter side of white-Eskimo cultural contact (John) Murdock had little to report except that Natives had learned a few English expressions, notably 'get out of here,' a few Hawaiian words from Kanaka seamen, and some songs; 'Little Brown Jug'

and 'Shoo Fly'. What seamen in turn learned from the Eskimos is not noted."

Hunt often digresses to the point where traditional historians may feel edgy but

this makes the book unusually entertaining.

The extinction of the great northern maatee (sea cow) a mere 100 years after the coming

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of the whites, becomes more understandable after Hunt explains the animals tasted like beef, averaged 35 feet in length, 20 feet in girth, had a six foot stomach and no fear of man.

He also provides the titilating note that male manatees came equipped with a six-foot-long oosik of corresponding thickness, and gives a charming account of manatee romance.

Hunt has an eye for characters and the book is full of them, outlined in Jack London style. Most colorful, perhaps, is Max Gottschalk," strong as a bull and knew no fear of man, weather or beast.' Known for lawlessness,

yet admired for his devotion of family.

"Gottschalk had paid \$2,000 to an Aleut family to secure their beautiful daughter for his wife," Hunt reports from the account of an old timer. "They had several children and often times I have seen him walking the streets of Nome with a child perched on each shoulder and others swinging along by his hands."

To read Hunt's "Arctic Passage" is to learn history through the men (and Beasts) that made it. An entertaining experience, well foot-noted.