

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

9. Georg Wilhelm Steller's *Journal of a Voyage with Bering, 1741-1742*

Marcel Robischon

Dr. M. Robischon is a professor in the Faculty of Life Sciences, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, D-10099 Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany

Dr. Steller was, for the most, not exactly a happy man, and in the last years of his short life he may at times have bitterly regretted having accepted Captain Bering's offer to join his crew. The second Kamchatkan expedition of 1741 was the most expensive and most expansive scientific undertaking of the time, aiming at no less than connecting the Russian-controlled Siberian peninsula of Kamchatka with the American continent, and within this project Georg Wilhelm Steller was promised "every possible opportunity to achieve something worthwhile."

This seemed to be a once in a lifetime opportunity for Steller, a man of humble origins, born in 1709 and raised in a devout Lutheran environment in Windsheim, Frankonia, Germany. He found his way into science and medicine via a university scholarship for divinity, and his way into Russia via a stint as a military surgeon, hoping to find in foreign services what was all-too unlikely home: an academic career in the natural sciences.

He was driven by an "insatiable desire to visit foreign lands and to investigate their conditions and curiosities," in particular in a time when still new coasts and countries were to be discovered for science, and navigation itself was, to a great deal, applied natural history.

As the journal attests, its author was highly observant, from the moment the ship left Avacha Bay towards the as yet uncharted coast of North America that had to be out there, somewhere. It shows that he knew how to read the phenomena of living nature, how to interpret the meaning of jetsam and flotsam, indicative of marine currents,

of marine mammals, such as porpoises or whales "of which one rose aloft upright out of the sea for over half its length" that may have announced an upcoming weather change, and of birds that told the observant of the proximity of a coast.

And he was eager to contribute to the success of the endeavour, by sharing his insights and, notably, suggesting a route further to the northeast, where, as all signs indicated to the naturalist, soon land would have been found. His proposal, as basically all of his input, was rejected by the naval officer's altogether, making him understand that his role in this project was quite a different from what he had expected. In fact, he learned that there was for all his knowledge and enthusiasm no role for him at all. Because the officers chose to ignore Steller and his observations, it took them six weeks instead of three or four days to reach land off Kamchatka, as they instead sailed around a large part of the South Alaskan coast.

Steller's descriptions of being "scorned," "refused," or "contradicted right away" inevitably makes the modern-day reader think in a way some of those in charge of steering that global ship we are all living on reject the observations and interpretations of science in our times.

There is bitterness in his writing, however with a change in tone being noticeable whenever he turns to observation of nature, such as when admiring "a very beautiful black pied diver never seen before, together with other strange birds never seen before" (where the translation falls somewhat short of finding the tone of the original, with "wunderschön" in German meaning not just "very

beautiful” but refers to a miraculous and touching beauty) or when longingly gazing over the water to “Beautiful forests close by the sea as well as great flatlands beneath the inland mountain range”, as the expedition was finally approaching the American continent.

Among the many times America was “discovered,” this clearly is one of the more awkward ones, and mirrors in a somewhat distorted fashion Columbus, coming from the east and landing not on the continent itself but on an offshore island. The coastal island the Bering expedition reached almost exactly 250 years later, without ever setting foot onto the mainland, was separated from the continent at the narrowest spot by only about two miles. It must have been tantalizing for the researcher to see the mainland, so close yet out of reach, looking “mournfully at the depressing limits” that were set for his explorations.

"We have come only to take American Water to Asia" he mordantly comments, when about to be denied even access to this island, achieving his “opportunity to achieve something worthwhile” in a few precious hours at land only by threatening to report misconduct. Again all bitterness eases in the contemplation of nature, for example when spotting a blue jay, now known as Steller's Jay, that confirmed for the naturalist having arrived on an American island.

The journal is more than an account of a disregarded and disgruntled scientist trying to do his work against the counteraction of administrative powers, for worse, *much* worse was to come. Just as the expedition had been stopped shortly before reaching the destination, it was brought to another stop by being shipwrecked shortly before reaching the home port on an inhospitable island that was to be called Bering Island.

Having earlier not only refused to collect water from a clean freshwater source (discovered by the disregarded Steller) rather than from a “preferred salty puddle,” and having kept their physician Steller from collecting antiscorbutic plants, the crew was already scurvy ridden and weakened. They were now marooned on inhospitable shores, an island that was about 200 km east of Kamchatka. And winter was to come. With the wreckage, the all-too-familiar story of a ridiculous struggle against authoritative structures turns into a deadly struggle for life. Bering Island became the stage for a drama to unfold, with 32 crew, including the

captain commander himself, losing their life, a human tragedy comparable with other expeditions ending in disasters, such as the doomed endeavours of Scott and Franklins. The journal documents a Hollywoodesque story, ready for a survival film, complete with the drama of building from the remains of the wreck, a new vessel to escape and a final return to the port they set sail from.

Steller had three more years to live, three more years to continue his scientific and ethnographic studies before heading back to St. Petersburg with his collection of notes, manuscripts, and specimens. His journey was interrupted by an indictment for allegedly fomenting unrest among the native tribes against the Russian rule. Waiting for his acquittal delayed his journey into Siberian winter. Ill, worn out, and weakened by the past exertions, he passed away in the Siberian town of Tjumen on November 2nd, 1745.

His journal was posthumously published about 50 years later, and appeared in due course in several editions and translations from the original German.

As with many researchers, his work found appreciation only a considerable time later. In our time the value of this book as a piece of natural history writing does not rest exclusively on its dramatic and novellesque qualities, but on the description of a world inhabited by creatures such as the North Pacific Sea cow, a large, slow moving and peaceful marine mammal. “The back and half the belly are constantly outside the water, and they munch along just like land animals with a slow, steady movement forward,” we are told in the book and learn that they were “not in the least afraid of human beings,” remaining “constantly in one spot, no matter how many of them were wounded or killed.” This species was to persist only for a short time after its discovery, and in reading Steller's journal we are in fact witness to the very beginning of its demise.

Often the first ones to see a “new” region are also the last ones to see it in that very untouched state. Often those who made the discovery at the same time opened the doors for those who caused its destruction. World history all too often has seen exploitation follow closely upon exploration, obliteration upon observation, and destruction upon description. Bering's expedition is no exception and in its wake the whalers, trappers, and hunters were to savage the newly found lands relentlessly.

At times, Steller's account even reads as if its author may have had a feeling of what was to come. There is compassion in his considering the merciless and wasteful butchering of the "poor sea otters, which were needlessly and thoughtlessly killed merely for their pelts, the meat being thrown away." There is a sad kind of poetry resounding in his talking of the sea cows who showed "an extraordinary love for one another which extends so far that when one of them was cut into, all the others were intent on rescuing it" or reporting how

"a male two days in a row came to its dead female on the shore and inquired about its condition." These are observations that till today touch the readers and allows them to sense the reflection and distance echo of a long lost, long destroyed world.

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