

EASTBOUND THROUGH SIBERIA: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE GREAT NORTHERN EXPEDITION. By GEORG WILHELM STELLER. Translated and annotated by MARGRITT A. ENGEL and KAREN E. WILLMORE. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-253-04778-6, xxv & 220 p., maps, b&w illus., bib., index, appendices, glossary. Softbound. Cdn\$42.00. Also available in ebook format.

Georg Wilhelm Steller (1709–46) is probably best known for the fact that, as a member of Vitus Bering’s expedition to Alaska on board *St. Paul* during the Second Kamchatka Expedition of 1741–42, on the basis of two very brief landings in 1742, he became the first naturalist to visit Alaska. He landed first on Kayak Island on 20 July (Frost, 2003; Divin, 1993) and then on Nagai, one of the Shumagin Islands, on 30 August (Frost, 2003; Divin, 1993). During these brief landings he observed and collected an amazingly large number of plants and birds and on Nagai encountered and described a group of Aleuts, the first European scientist to do so. These aspects of Steller’s claims to fame were emphasized in the major work by Stejneger (1936).

More recently, a series of important works by Steller himself has surfaced due to the efforts of Dr. Wieland Hintzsche of Halle (where Steller spent some time as a student), who, in 1992, discovered a wealth of letters and documents by Steller in Russian archives, especially the Arkhiv Akademii Nauk (Archives of the Academy of Sciences) in St. Petersburg. These were published in German in a series entitled *Quellen zur Geschichte Sibiriens und Alaskas aus Russischen Archiven* (Sources on the history of Siberia and Alaska from Russian archives). The series included two of the works by Steller (2000a, b) now published here in English. Importantly, one of Steller’s journals had already been published earlier in English (Steller, 1988); this one covering his voyage on board *St. Paul* to Alaska and back to Kamchatka and, as a result of Hintzsche’s efforts, another of Steller’s works (Steller, 2003) on the history of Kamchatka had also been published more recently. Thus, the present work, the focus of which is Steller’s journey from Irkutsk to Kamchatka, may be seen as the concluding work in a trilogy by Steller on his travels in 1735–42.

Steller’s career, as summarized in Appendix A of *Eastbound through Siberia*, reads as follows: born in Windesheim, near Bingen, in 1709, in 1729 George Wilhelm Stöller enrolled at the University of Wittenberg to study theology. In 1731 he transferred to the University of Halle to further his studies in theology but switched to medicine to focus on the natural sciences, especially botany. In 1734 he emigrated to St. Petersburg where, since the Cyrillic alphabet has no equivalent of the diphthong “ö”, his name perforce became Steller. On hearing of Bering’s Second Kamchatka Expedition, also known as the Great Northern Expedition (1733–43), he applied to join it. On 5 February 1737, he signed a contract to take part in the expedition as an adjunct in natural sciences with the Academy of Sciences.

First, however, he married Brigitta Helena Messerschmidt and together they travelled from St. Petersburg to Moscow. Leaving Brigitta there, in March 1738, Steller continued his journey east via Tobolsk and Tomsk to Yeneyesky. There, on 7 December, he met Johann Georg Gmelin and Friedrich Müller, two of the eminent scientists attached to the Great Northern Expedition. They provided him with a detailed set of instructions; he was to travel “via Irkutsk, Yakutsk and Okhotsk to Kamchatka and ... investigate and describe—en route as well as at Kamchatka—everything concerning natural as well as political history, and in all places where it seems appropriate ... carry out meteorological observations and those concerning the nature of the earth” (Gmelin and Müller, 2020:9).

In March 1739 Steller headed south from Yeniseysk to Irkutsk and remained there, with interruptions, until 5 March 1740. His observations over this period formed the basis of his very detailed description of Irkutsk and area including various aspects of the city’s activities. He discusses the city’s location on the Angara River with relation to its two tributaries, the Irkut and the Ushakovka, the patterns of their freeze-up and break-up, the fish in the rivers, the surrounding mountains, and the agriculture of the area. He also discusses the city’s major buildings, including the *ostrog* or fortress and the churches as well as the city’s major sources of income including, surprisingly, the rhubarb trade and trade with China. He provides an outline of the breakdown of the population: the descendants of the original Russian Cossack settlers, political exiles of various stripes, and the Indigenous population, the Buryats. The local fishery in the rivers is described in detail.

The summer, which he spent in Transbaykalia (1739), provided Steller with the data for a detailed description of Lake Baykal, including its seal hunt and fishery.

He left Irkutsk on the next leg of his journey to Kamchatka on 5 March 1740, one of a party traveling in horse-drawn sleighs, reaching Kachuga on the Lena on 9 March. Continuing down the river, he reached Kirensk on the 20th, and while he waited for the ice to break up, he had a boat built. Break-up occurred on 21 April, and on 2 May, Steller started downriver in his boat. Occasionally delayed by ice jams and drifting ice, he reached Yakutsk on 24 May. As throughout his travel accounts, his narrative is interspersed with details of the geology, vegetation, and local agriculture.

At Yakutsk, Steller met Captain Marin Spangberg, one of the most active members of the Second Kamchatka Expedition. Spangberg had already made a voyage south from Bolsheretsk, Kamchatka, to within sight of Hokkaido and Honshu, Japan, and had interacted with the crews of Japanese vessels in June 1739. He was now on his way back west to St. Petersburg.

Steller continued by boat to nearby Yarmanka where he bought horses, including pack-horses plus some cattle (i.e. meat-on-the-hoof), for a total of 101 animals. He started on the long overland trip to Okhotsk on 19 June. His route eastwards involved crossing a sequence of mountain ranges

and a series of major rivers, including the Amga, the Aldan, the Belaya, the Yuma, and the Yedoma. Major rivers were crossed by means of ferries; bridges had to be built to cross smaller ones if they were too deep to ford, otherwise the horses swam across them. The horses repeatedly became completely mired in bogs and had to be destroyed or simply died from lack of forage. Mosquitoes were an almost intolerable plague, while frequent heavy rains represented a further torment. Steller's difficulties place into perspective those which Spangberg had earlier faced in transporting over the same route anchors, cannon, and other equipment (a total weight of 76 tons) for vessels to be built at Okhotsk (Frost, 2003). Despite all the hardships, Steller recorded details of the vegetation on an almost daily basis. He finally reached Okhotsk on the Sea of Okhotsk on 14 August, and here met Vitus Bering for the first time.

At Okhotsk Steller took the trouble to make a detailed study of the salmon fishery and of the various methods of preserving the catch. He sailed from Okhotsk on 8 September and reached Bolsheretsk on the 16th. Following quite extensive travels around Kamchatka, including trips across to Avacha Bay (present site of Petropavlovsk) and south to the southern tip of Kamchatka at Mys Lopatka, in February 1741, Steller received a letter from Bering to join him on his voyage to Alaska on board *St. Paul* as medical officer and naturalist. It was this invitation that would lead to his all-important observations on Kayak Island and on the Shumagin Islands.

Steller's reputation as a pioneer naturalist had already been brought to the attention of the English-speaking world through the works of Stejneger (1936) and Frost (2003). In terms of the meticulous detail on flora and fauna during Steller's travels from Irkutsk to Okhotsk and of the desperately difficult conditions of travel along that route, the translating and editing work by Hintzsche, Margritt Engel and Karen Willmore will enhance that reputation even further.

Unfortunately, the quality and value of one of the two maps included in the book do not match those of the text. The first map (p. 82) of Steller's route from Irkutsk almost to Yakutsk, including his daily progress, is clear and very useful. But this is in large part because the map is arranged on the page such that to read the map one must turn the page sideways, making a reasonably large scale possible. In the case of the second map (p. 105) covering Steller's route from Yakutsk to Okhotsk, this useful practice has not been followed and as a result, the map is only half the size it would need to be for place names and details to be legible and, is therefore totally useless for the reader trying to follow Steller's daily progress. This, however is the fault of the designer employed by the University of Indiana Press, and neither Engel and Willmore, nor the cartographer, Eckehart Jäger can be faulted for this blunder. Indeed, they probably found it extremely annoying, especially since the first map, at a reasonable scale, is so useful.

Apart from this shortcoming, this is an extremely valuable contribution to the literature on the history of

Siberia. It provides a useful picture of the complexity of the Great Northern Expedition. Moreover, previously little was known about Steller's involvement in the expedition, apart from his brief landings in Alaska, on Kayak Island and the Shumagin Islands, and his role in keeping his companions alive on Bering Island.

This book does much towards correcting this situation; what emerges is a more complete picture of the man himself. While his observations on such aspects as the seal hunt in Lake Baykal or on the cities of Irkutsk and Yakutsk in 1739–40 are fascinating, his detailed comments on the vegetation and geology of the vast tracts of Siberia, which he traversed, are invaluable. The book will appeal to serious students and academics with an interest in the history of Siberia and the history of science.

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William Barr,
Senior Research Associate,
Arctic Institute of North America,
University of Calgary,
2500 University Drive NW,
Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4
wbarr207@gmail.com