

Reviews

BERING AND CHIRIKOV: THE AMERICAN VOYAGES AND THEIR IMPACT. O.W. Frost (editor). 1992. Anchorage: Alaska Historical Society. vi + 456 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-940521-01-6.

An international conference held in Anchorage in August 1991 was one of several events planned to commemorate the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Bering–Chirikov expedition from Kamchatka to America. The programme in the USSR was disrupted by the attempted August coup, and, as if current political upheavals were not exciting enough for the Anchorage participants, news came while the conference was in progress that a Russian–Danish group on Bering Island had discovered the graves of several of Bering’s crew, including that of the Captain-Commander himself. Details of the preliminary findings of the exhumations are included in this volume, to make 29 papers in all.

The scholarly work in both Russian and English on the two Bering expeditions of 1728 and 1741 is now impressive, but much about those ventures remains unclear. The lack of any authenticated portrait of Bering is somehow characteristic of the haze that surrounds the man and his voyages. Any assessment of Bering’s achievement is bedevilled by uncertainty about what he was trying to do. Both his voyages were, in their own ways, inconclusive, unsatisfactory, puzzling. A cynic could argue that their results bore no relation to the effort involved, as from St Petersburg to Kamchatka armies of labourers and officials struggled to get men and supplies 9000 miles [14,500 km] across Siberia to launch Bering’s vessels. In 1728 Bering sailed to the eastern tip of Asia at Cape Dezhnev [Mys Dezhnev], but caught no glimpse of the American shore. In 1741 *St Peter* reached Kayak Island, where Bering paused only long enough to take on water, a decision that provoked his German naturalist, Steller, into complaining that 10 years of preparation had resulted in 10 hours of exploration. The unfortunate Chirikov in *St Paul* lost his two boats and their crews off the Alaskan coast and was unable to land at all. As the survivors of the expedition straggled back, many of their journals and maps disappeared into official obscurity, and only selective or garbled reports reached western Europe.

Onto this gloomy scene the 1991 paper-givers throw beams of light, although they still leave some dark corners. The arguments about the objectives of Bering’s first expedition still rumble on. The traditional view that Peter the Great sent Bering to discover whether Asia and America were separated by a strait has long since been challenged by Raymond Fisher and others, who insist that the fact of this separation was already known. Here both sides of the argument are heard once more, but are joined by a possible third interpretation. Carol Urness sets the Bering expedi-

tions in the context of the need for reliable maps — of Kamchatka and the lands immediately to the northeast on the first voyage — and in a different stress on cartography she points, as does Boris Polevoi, to the importance of the Homann map of 1722 in planning the voyage. On Bering’s own surveying capabilities a careful paper by Bertrand Imbert confirms James Cook’s recognition in 1778 of ‘the accuracy of that Gentleman’s Discoveries.’ An indication of the seriousness with which officialdom viewed these voyages is given by James Gibson’s estimate of the huge costs of the second expedition — equivalent to one-sixth of the total state income in the last year of Peter’s reign. This adds weight to Fisher’s argument that Bering’s voyages were not scientific in purpose, but ‘economic and imperialistic...the continuation of a movement that had been in progress more than a century, which became ocean-based rather than land-based.’

A series of pen-portraits tells us more about some of the men who sailed with Bering: Kondratiy Moshkov, who carried out years of survey work from Kamchatka before joining Bering for the 1728 voyage; Alexsei Chirikov, who commanded the consort vessel in 1741 and was also with Bering on the first voyage; and Dmitriy Ovtsyn, who mapped along the Arctic coast before sailing on the 1741 expedition. Here again we get some idea of the scale and complexity of the Russian expansion to the east. Details of the second voyage come in papers dealing with the type of ships employed and their routes; the problems of locating on Kayak Island the site of the first recorded Russian landing in America; the fate of Chirikov’s boat-crews; the final voyage of *St Peter* to Bering Island, where Bering died, in Steller’s awful words, ‘more from hunger, cold, thirst, vermin, and grief than from any disease.’ At this point in the volume the reports and photographs of the excavations on Bering Island make their impact. Out of the 13 or 14 graves of Bering’s men who died on the island, six were found in 1991. Only Bering was buried in a coffin, a crude, wooden affair. Analysis of his remains revealed that he was, at the age of 60, a strong, muscular man about 170 cm in height. A reconstruction of his appearance shows some resemblance to the rather flabbier features of his uncle Vitus Bering (1617–1675), whose portrait is often assumed to be that of the explorer.

A final section deals in a fairly random way with the Russian exploitation of Alaska up to 1867. The dismal, if predictable, story of the ruthless treatment of the Aleuts is touched upon, while a paper by Lydia Black hints at a more detailed and dispassionate treatment of the *promyshlenniki* than most historians have managed. The dozen papers in this section are of interest, but, scattered across 100 years of Alaskan history, they provide samples of multi-disciplinary techniques rather than any concerted approach.

A pernickety reviewer of this volume could point to examples of repetition, lack of cross-references, and problems with the reproduction of some of the maps. Such a reviewer would not only be pernickety, but churlish. To publish a well-produced, indexed volume of some 400 pages of conference papers little more than a year after their delivery is an achievement that calls for warmest congratulations to the editor. A final thought relates to a point made during the conference, that the time is now ripe for a new, general study of Bering. For the non-specialist, certainly, such a book would help to bring together some of the threads that dangle so tantalisingly from the pages of this volume. (Glyndwr Williams, Queen Mary and Westfield College, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS.)

THE FALKLAND ISLANDS/MALVINAS: THE CONTEST FOR EMPIRE IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC. Barry Gough. 1992. London and Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Athlone Press. xvi + 212 p, maps, hard cover. ISBN 0-485-11419-4. £32.00.

During 1992 the tenth anniversary celebrations commemorating the 1982 Falklands War recalled a conflict responsible for restoring British control over the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and the South Sandwich Islands. It resulted also in a difficult period of Anglo-Argentine relations, or rather virtual non-relations, until 1990, when the restoration of diplomatic relations between London and Buenos Aires was followed by rapid progress in a range of fields. However, this contemporary rapprochement cannot disguise the continuing Anglo-Argentine divide over sovereignty. In fact, a so-called 'sovereignty umbrella' freezing their respective legal positions proved a major element in the arrangements reviving diplomatic links between the two countries.

More recently, in January 1993, the visit to Buenos Aires undertaken by Douglas Hurd, the British foreign minister — this represented the first British ministerial visit since the war — merely highlighted the ambiguities in the relationship. The two governments, divided and imprisoned still by history, continue to provide conflicting answers to the central question: 'Which country has the rightful claim to the Falklands/Malvinas?' For Britain, the matter is not negotiable, particularly as its traditional concentration upon territorial rights has been reinforced by a stress on the islanders' rights to self-determination. Argentina takes a different position. Despite military defeat in 1982 and the subsequent politico-economic transformation, Argentina neither withdrew its claim to the *Islas Malvinas* nor went away. The claim, deeply embedded in all sectors of society and pressed repeatedly in Argentine policy statements and publications, remains on the table.

Historical anniversaries are increasingly exploited by publishers. Although the Falklands question has become more peripheral during the past decade, the tenth anniversary of the Falklands War was no exception, even if few of the resulting publications added much to what we know already. However, Barry Gough's book was an exception,

for it illuminates in an authoritative manner a number of historical controversies relevant to understanding the nature and development of an ongoing sovereignty dispute dating back at least to the 1820s.

Hitherto, Gough, a historian based at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, has published mainly on the higher northern latitudes. This book, arising out of his 1990 article examining the Falklands question between 1832–1843, marks a confident entry into the affairs of the southern hemisphere. The title, like the preface's mention of 'a five-sided study of Spanish, French, British, American and Argentine aspirations and enterprises in regards to the Falklands Islands or *Las Islas Malvinas*' (page xi), encourages readers to expect a wide-ranging historical monograph surveying the Falklands problem from its origins until the present day. But readers should not expect too much from a book in which the detailed coverage of developments is confined to the allegedly crucial decades centred on the 1760s–1770s and the 1820s–1840s. Other periods are covered less fully in terms of either in-depth analysis or reliance upon primary source materials. Nor is the promise of a five-country study really fulfilled, given Gough's concentration upon the British dimension.

Nevertheless, this British focus, alongside the clear, concise, and confident manner in which Falklands events are related to the wider colonial scene, helps Gough to satisfy his promise of a 'contribution to the literature of British naval, imperial and colonial history' (page xi). The evolution of British policy, insofar as there was a 'policy' as opposed to what might be described as a 'reactive pragmatism,' is well covered for the 1820s onwards. Particular attention is devoted to the post-1833 uncertainties of what to do with the islands as well as to moves culminating in the reluctant decision to make the islands part of the British empire.

The basic story is well told, but the continuing dispute means that readers in Argentina, Britain, and the Falklands will seek to assess the study's implications for the sovereignty problem. Those located on opposing sides of the controversy will find some material to reinforce their respective viewpoints, although the book's value would have been improved if sections dealing with historico-legal criteria like discovery and occupation were elaborated and analyzed in a fuller and more critical manner. Points meriting further consideration include Gough's assertion concerning 'probable' prior discovery in 1592 by the British navigator, John Davis (page 3); the likely existence of a secret Anglo-Spanish agreement of 1770–1771 promising future British withdrawal from the islands (page 24); the legal significance of the reference to 'Falkland's Island' (in the singular rather than the plural) on the plaque deposited when Britain evacuated the islands in 1774 (page 25); and the validity of the 'irrefutable' Argentine claim to actual occupation before 1833 (page 155). Readers familiar with the topic will know that such aspects remain the subject of considerable academic and political controversy.