

BOOK REVIEWS

California Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1848. Compiled, translated, and edited by James R. Gibson. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. 492 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewed by David Miller, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of San Diego.

Scholars, students, and history buffs who might overlook the Russian presence in early nineteenth-century Alta California, now have at their disposal an impressive collection of Russian accounts of the region. In Volume 2 of the Early California Commentaries series, James R. Gibson, assisted by Alexei A. Istomin, has assembled 32 documents and over a dozen color illustrations from Russian archives. Gibson is a scholar of Russia and the North American Northwest and his expert annotations breathe life into a little-known aspect of California and global history.

In the brief but informative Introduction, Gibson covers the history of Russian California and contextualizes the documents as both the product of commercial and scientific ventures. He begins with Vitus Bering's expeditions of 1725-29 and 1733-42 and the Russian-American Company's founding in 1799 then traces their presence in Alta California until the American period began in 1848. Myriad geopolitical factors by the early 1800s pushed the Russians south toward Spanish California in search of sea otter pelts. The Russian-American Company sought to create a southerly agricultural colony to supply its settlements in Alaska, eventually founding Fort Ross and Bodega Bay in 1812 along with several farms to provide grain and cattle. The company also built a shipyard, brickworks, and a tannery.

The Russian site was ill-suited for agricultural success and faced opposition from the Spaniards who, lacking the men and guns on the ground to force the Russians out, resorted to founding missions San Rafael and Sonoma to prevent Russian encroachment into the interior and San Francisco Bay area. Little changed in terms of projecting power during the Mexican period, and the Russian presence remained, although St. Petersburg did not take the opportunity to expand when Mexican political instability and de-centralization presented itself. Russia, preoccupied with events to its west, had little desire to over expand in California and risk upsetting the lucrative Russian-American Company's trade. Commerce, a third Russian objective, continued with the Spaniards and Mexicans keeping the company viable. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1830s, the California project

became unnecessary as an economic venture. Southern sea otter populations were depleted and the company had struck a deal with the Hudson's Bay Company for hunting rights in Alaska. The Russian-American Company sold Fort Ross and Bodega Bay to John Sutter in 1841.

Meanwhile the Russian navy was also drawn to Alta California as that nation sought to add its name to the growing list of imperial powers engaging in maritime exploration and discovery. Many of these trips around the world included scientific investigation, and Alta California came under the gaze of many preeminent Russian meteorologists, mineralogists, botanists, and zoologists. The Russian navy could simultaneously defend its only overseas colonial possession and provision its ships. This presence ended in the mid-1820s when Russia signed treaties with the United States and Great Britain admitting their ships to Russian waters, thus making Russian patrols of the California coast unnecessary. Therefore many of the impressions of Alta California came from the navy (its mariners, scientists, and artists) before 1825 and from company officials (governors, managers, and agents) after.

The essence of this volume is the documents and what they reveal about "the varied motives, activities, and impressions of all these Russian visitors to colonial California who wrote records that have survived..." (p. 22). These, according to Gibson, include "articles, letters, reports, orders, memoranda, memoirs, charts, plans, and views" that he has assembled and contextualized for the reader. (p. 22). The documents provide not only a glimpse into Russian experience, but insight into the environment, people, economy, and politics of the Spanish and Mexican periods. For example, Russian observers describe the Franciscan missionaries and their neophyte workers during the Spanish period, while others discuss the social and economic changes of secularization following Mexican independence.

The logical, clear, and accessible organization is especially noteworthy. Gibson begins with the brief Introduction covering the history of Russian California and includes analysis of what the documents reveal. The documents follow and are arranged in chronological order, each beginning with a concise editor's introduction. Gibson's footnotes are informative but not overwhelming, nor do they detract from the text. The book concludes with both a bibliography and index.

Gibson's *California Through Russian Eyes* will appeal to both scholar and lay reader alike. After all, there are several potential hurdles that make studying Russian California difficult, including language, access to archives, and the availability of resources. Gibson's major contribution is that he makes the study of Russian California more accessible and inviting than it has been heretofore. And that will shed light not only on Russian California, but on Spanish and Mexican California as well.

Tom Hom: Rabbit on a Bumpy Road. By Tom Hom. San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2014. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. vii + 348 pp. \$21.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by Matthew Schiff, Marketing Director, San Diego History Center.

For anyone with deep ties to San Diego, *Tom Hom: Rabbit on a Bumpy Road* revives hazy memories of a time that was not that long ago but seems like an eternity away, given how the city has changed. With the exception of some minor historical inaccuracies (chapter 2 begins with “In the year 1884, the United States started construction on the Panama Canal” – the U.S. took over from the French in 1904 who began construction in 1881) and a few typos that made it through editing, the book reads smoothly and grabs the reader’s attention.

Its author, Tom Hom, was born to first-generation Chinese immigrants in San Diego’s Chinatown neighborhood in 1927 on the site of what is today the San Diego Chinese Historical Museum at 3rd Avenue and J Street. The place of Hom’s birth was an area that many still called the Stingaree—a location where temptation and vice were permanent fixtures. Despite the Hom family’s proximity to this neighborhood, Tom and his siblings were brought up in domestic circumstances that seemed a world away, as their parents (and others in San Diego’s Chinese community) strove to maintain the sanctity of the home.

Hom communicates with the reader through a traditional first-person narrative but slips frequently into a conversational tone, sometimes to the point of dictation, as if he were responding to a biographer’s questions rather than writing an autobiography. Paragraphs that seemingly have reached their logical conclusions receive added editorialized endings like: “...In most cases, there would not be a problem. I would round it out saying ‘My client has the cash and can afford to buy in the neighborhood and is a very responsible family!’ That helped a lot. I quickly learned that cash talked...a whole lot!” Such passages pop up throughout the book, and in this conversational, familiar tone Hom covers the span of his life in remarkable detail. This is due in part to the fact that he kept a diary for fifty years, beginning at thirty years old, and this is probably where much of the familiarity with the reader originates. The approach works wonderfully for the book as the reader has a greater sense that he or she is learning valuable life lessons along with Hom.

What is striking is the specificity of detail he recounts about esoteric parts of his past before the diary, in the thirty years when he grew from boy to man, from son to father. Word-for-word recollection of events seventy-plus years ago might seem an impossibility to the skeptic; however, much of what Hom learned was

passed down through the generations, underscoring the power of oral tradition. Lessons from mentors like his father, David, to “always be a gentleman” or from early teachers prompting him to look at the root of an issue (“brakes don’t stop the car, they stop the wheels”) and various early business contacts guiding him one way or another come alive for the reader and do contain wisdom. Aside from the touching and didactic lessons the book offers, the detailed recollections elucidate some of the less glamorous parts about growing up Chinese in San Diego in the pre- and post-war years: the racism that shrouded a deal on a new family home, the mistaken impression of his family’s ancestry as Japanese Americans, and the tepid responses he received from people when he announced he would like to go into politics. These remind the reader that despite one’s diligence to the task at hand, opportunities seized, or advantages afforded, often forces beyond one’s control and the wills of others alter one’s course in life.

The reader takes away from this book themes that center on humility, perseverance, and the truth that despite one’s heritage or other irrelevant classification, skill and strength of character are indeed rewarded. Throughout his career, Tom Hom went from produce merchant, to real estate agent, to the first person of color to serve on the San Diego City Council, to task force chairman for Jack Murphy Stadium (Qualcomm), to California State Assemblyman, to involvement in launching the Gaslamp Quarter project, an important economic engine for San Diego today. Hom encountered both success and defeat throughout his life (more often the former), though he seems to approach both with a similar indifference, assured that both are only temporary and that change lurks around every corner. Imparting these challenges and triumphs the way Hom has chosen—taking readers by the hand and guiding them through the peaks and valleys of his life’s progression—leaves them feeling as if they had just left a discussion with an old friend and the time devoted to reading it was not ill spent.