

## Book Reviews

*Alaskan Voyage. 1881-1883. An Expedition to the Northwest Coast of America*, by Johan Adrian Jacobsen, from the German text of Adrian Woldt. Translated by Erna Gunther. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977. Pp. xii, 266. Illustrations, maps, autobiographical appendix, notes, glossary of place names, bibliography and index. \$17.50.

When Franz Boas began his studies of Northwest Coast Indians in the late 1880s, a large proportion of the choice cultural artifacts of these people which had existed at mid-century had already disappeared from the area — bought by British American, Russian and, above all, German traders for resale to the great museums. The result has been that, at least until recently, the best collections of Northwest Coast Indian art were to be found in Europe and America and not in British Columbia. One of the earliest and most effective agents of this commercial plunder was the substantive author of this book, Johan Adrian Jacobsen.

Born on the island of Risø near Tromsø in northern Norway, Jacobsen early developed the strength, skills and taste for arctic travel. By the time he was twenty-four he was undertaking to supply Eskimo artifacts and persuade (virtually kidnap) Eskimos to leave Greenland for Germany — all for displays by the Hamburg showman, Carl Hagenbeck, in the interests of “scientific” ethnography. Later he went to Lapland for the same purposes, and in July 1881 was commissioned by Director Bastian of the Berlin Museum to make a similar expedition of several years to the Northwest Coast of America.

Jacobsen, even by the easy standards of the time, was not a trained ethnographer. His expeditions were really looting forays in which a large range of artifacts, good and bad, was secured at the lowest possible price, to be sorted out later in Germany. There are indications that he gradually grew to be able to distinguish some good pieces, though what was perhaps his greatest coup — the purchase of a fifty-foot totem pole carved

by “Edensaw [*sic*], head chief of the north part of the [Graham] island” — was a stroke of luck. Throughout his expeditions in British Columbia he constantly complains of the high prices charged for artifacts, which he attributes to the activity of other buyers, notably Dr. Israel Powell. Later, in Alaska, he notes with disapproval that the high price that natives could get for their furs freed them from the necessity of selling their tribal artifacts. His activities included grave-robbing, for both artifacts and human remains. This practice understandably annoyed the natives (not to speak of violating the Desecration of the Sepulchre Act in British Columbia), and forced Jacobsen into some rather messy attempts to preserve “ripe” human detritus. His attempt to inveigle representatives of the “long-headed” (cranially-distorted) Quatsino natives to go to Europe as part of an “enthographic” raree-show collapsed when his principal exhibit, the chieftainess of the Quatsinos, deserted him en route. Certainly the reader easily loses sympathy with Jacobsen in his main professional endeavours.

But he is far more attractive as an adventurer and observer. The first third of the account is devoted to his travels in British Columbia in three expeditions: the first from Victoria, via Bella Bella, Port Essington and Kitkatla to the Queen Charlotte Islands; the second to the Kwakiutl villages on both sides of the Johnston Strait and the Nootka villages on the north end of Vancouver Island around to Quatsino Sound; and finally to Quatsino and the west coast of Vancouver Island. The travels include a day-long wading through a swamp on the way from Alert Bay to Quatsino and a perilous winter journey down the west coast of Vancouver Island in an open boat, during which he was twice deserted by his Indian crews. But the great adventures occur in Alaska. From Fort St. Michael he undertook a 900-mile journey up the Yukon River in an open boat in the summer (blackfly season), journeyed to the western extremity of North America at Cape Prince of Wales in midwinter (and forty-below temperatures), crossed overland to Kotzebue Sound (the first white man to do so), and finally southward down the west coast of Alaska to Cook Inlet during break-up while suffering from snow-blindness and an injured foot that should have incapacitated him. During all these adventures he endures the most severe hardships with unvarying good humour and almost insouciant courage.

Jacobsen rarely loses an opportunity to comment on what he considers to be the fecklessness, lack of hardihood or lawlessness of the native people. The Haidas suffer from drunkenness and a high incidence of venereal disease; Indians and Eskimos, especially in Alaska, are inveterate and aggressive beggars and thieves; the Eskimos suffer illness (there was a

particularly lethal epidemic of influenza in Alaska in the early 1880s) because they wear too many heavy clothes and neglect to condition themselves to the weather (unlike Jacobsen, driving his dog team in his shirt-sleeves). Like many "civilized" observers of the "primitive", he notes with surprise that the tundra dwellers, currently "shy, cowardly, fearful, obsequious" and sunk in filth and disease, "formerly had a highly developed society", erecting elaborate monuments for their dead and building superior kayaks with artistic ornamentation. Jacobsen also regards Indians and Eskimos as constantly dangerous, and threatening to the life and property of the white man. He compares favourably the situation in British Columbia, where British gunboats keep the Indians from extremes of murder, rapine and cannibalism, with that in Alaska, where the American writ does not run effectively among the mixed populations of Russians, halfbreeds, Eskimos and Indians, and his only protection from the natives is "my energetic personality" (and going armed with revolver and knife). On the other hand he has a sympathetic understanding of the natives' feasts, dances and ceremonies. He records the practices of the *hamatsa* (ritual cannibals) and shamans (both Indian and Eskimo) with great fidelity; and he perceives the finely devised relationships between the ritual world and the economic life of the native populations and the ways in which European influence is in the process of destroying those relationships. Jacobsen emerges from this account as a cheerful, enterprising, observant adventurer with a strong streak of thoroughly nasty nineteenth-century ruthlessness toward other men and animals.

The narrative was originally written by his friend and amanuensis, Adrian Woldt, in German in 1884 and translated by Erna Gunther in 1977. Woldt may have done better for Jacobsen than Jacobsen could have done for himself, but the present edition and translation is by no means a finished work. In places the English is primitive and replete with the least felicitous of American stylistic variations; the notes are sparse and frequently uninformative; there is no adequate map of Jacobsen's journeys; and the editor/translator has chosen to omit Jacobsen's photographs and field notes and some of the original sections of the narrative "that reflect impressions so closely rooted in Jacobsen's own time and culture as to be irrelevant today". So much for historical significance!

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