

vides helps to overcome the otherwise somewhat contrived linkage of the two quite different styles and subject matter of the two authors.

*Vancouver, B.C.*

J. D. CHAPMAN

*Continental Dash: The Russian-American Telegraph*, by Rosemary Neering Ganges, B.C.: Horsdahl & Schubart, 1989. Pp. 215, illus.

The Russian-American Telegraph — commonly known in B.C. as the Collins Overland Telegraph — was an ambitious attempt to link Europe and North America by a telegraph line through the virtually unknown lands of northern British Columbia, Russian America, and Siberia. In the early 1860s, the telegraph was the ultimate means of rapid communication and an essential element in the military, diplomatic, and commercial life of both continents. The Atlantic Ocean, however, remained an effective barrier to linking the two continental systems despite several major efforts by Cyrus Field to lay a trans-Atlantic cable from Ireland to Newfoundland during the 1850s.

The brainchild of Perry McDonough Collins, a San Francisco promoter and adventurer, the overland route was intended to solve the problem of the Atlantic and link the United States with Europe via Asia. As early as 1855, Collins promoted the idea of a land route as part of a grander scheme to advance the commercial interests of the United States in eastern Asia and the North Pacific. In his view, the United States and the expanding Russian Empire had much in common and much to gain through cooperation. Collins' travels in Siberia further convinced him of the desirability of trade between the two countries and of the power that a telegraph link through the area would bring to the United States.

Despite interviews with the governments involved and vague promises of support, Collins was unable to finance the project himself. In 1858 he gained a powerful ally in Hiram Sibley, head of the Western Union Telegraph Company, which had emerged as the giant of the North American industry after a series of mergers and acquisitions. By 1864 Sibley and Western Union were sufficiently convinced of the improbability of a successful trans-Atlantic cable that they were willing to gamble on the overland route. The company acquired the rights to construct the line assembled by Collins in negotiations with the Russian, British, and United States governments since 1856, and formed the Western Union Extension Company to undertake the work.

Exploration, survey, and construction parties worked on the project from 1865 until 1867, when news that Field had successfully laid an Atlantic cable the previous year finally reached the parties working in the far north. In the main, the work accomplished consisted of the construction of the British Columbia portion as far north as Telegraph Creek and exploration and survey work in Russian America and Siberia. The only other section of the line actually erected consisted of a few miles on the Seward Peninsula. The project had special meaning to British Columbia in that both New Westminster and Victoria gained telegraph links to the outside world once the initial sections of the line were built.

Rosemary Neering's discussion of the efforts to construct the telegraph line is not an academic study, nor is it intended as such. It is conceived and executed as popular history directed at the general reader. While some attention is given to the problems of capital formation and management decisions associated with the venture, the major focus of the book is on the trials of the exploration and survey and construction parties in the unknown North. The personalities associated with the project are considered in heroic and sometimes tragic terms as they winter in the far North, conduct scientific observations, and attempt to establish a route for the telegraph under adverse conditions.

The book draws heavily upon the travel literature published after the failure of the venture as well as upon reminiscences and diaries of the participants who worked and wintered among the natives and traders of the regions. The book reproduces many of the illustrations that graced these earlier works. *Continental Dash* is, in effect, an extension of that species of nineteenth-century literature. It assumes a romantic view of history concerned with noble undertakings and, in this case, noble failures. As such, it is not the definitive study of the Collins' Overland Telegraph. It is, however, a good introduction to the topic for the general reader and will hopefully spark further research.

The narrative provides some insight into the methods of nineteenth-century promoters and the special problems associated with their desire to extend United States influence into the North Pacific. Interest in Siberia and Alaska can be viewed as variants on the American obsession with the China market in the context of the maritime fur trade. Unfortunately, these larger themes are not discussed in any detail. Intriguing glimpses are provided into the life of the natives and traders in Alaska and Siberia as filtered through the minds of the adventurers who chronicled their time in the North. In sum, more can be asked of the topic, but Neering is not

to be faulted for her work: the book is designed as a narrative for the general reader, and it achieves that end.

*Anchorage, Alaska*

LOGAN HOVIS

*Images from the Inside Passage: an Alaskan Portrait by Winter and Pond*, by Victoria Wyatt. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1989.

Nineteenth-century photography often came about as the result of a restless, gold-digging, exploitative spirit. There was money in images of far places and peoples, and tourism fostered that market. The migration of two young Californians to Alaska in the 1890s, lured by dreams of frontier gold, was the initiating movement which was to produce the photographs here: eighty-eight plates of Indian portraits and views and some additional material selected from the archival holding of Winter and Pond's studio, which was active in southeast Alaska at the turn of the century (and did not actually close until 1956). The book was produced in association with an exhibit of these photographs at the Alaska State Library, and the manner of the text reflects a careful and somewhat pedestrian style of archival display.

Why these images were taken is an easier question to answer than how we can read and use them today. Photography, from its invention in mid-century, had provided an occupational opportunity for the person of artistic inclination who also needed to make a living. It was a new field, a modern technology but not so difficult as to be beyond the capacities of a moderately educated man. Lloyd Winter, we are told, had been an art student and portraitist in San Francisco before travelling to Alaska with romantic ideas of mining gold. He settled into photography, a secondary commercial exploitation of the region, when he bought an existing business in Juneau from a man named Landerking, who had been a machinist's mate, and brought in as partner Percy Pond, who had been a bookkeeper.

Victoria Wyatt provides these details while regretting the absence of diaries or journals which might tell us what was in the minds of this pair of photographers as they set up their shots. (Dual attribution is evidently necessary; Professor Wyatt does not venture any idea about which partner did what.) The broad motivation is not really in doubt: Winter and Pond took their Indian photographs because it was local colour — and saleable. They did not specialize exclusively in Indian photography, and they do not