
Canadian Professor of Russian, Glynn Barratt, has rescued from historical oblivion, the singular event of two Russian warships visiting Hobart harbour. What was their real mission in arriving unannounced into the fledgling British island colony in 1823? If Barratt knows, he is not telling. The residents of Hobart Town took the purpose to be peaceful “discovery”; Britain and Russia had been allies in the recently concluded Napoleonic Wars.
In May 1823, the tiny settlement of Hobart Town (now Hobart) in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) was a mere nineteen years old, with a population of less than 7,000. Nevertheless these visitors were armed with excellent Russian Admiralty maps of Zemlia Vandimena derived from the voyages of Matthew Flinders, Bruni D'Entrecasteaux and Louis de Freycinet.

In preparing the charts, Captain Kruzenshtern explained that “I give preference to names bestowed by the English, except with regard to names bestowed by Admiral D'Entrecasteaux... otherwise I hold to French toponymy only in cases when no earlier name had been given”.

Brothers Mikhail and Andrei Petrovich Lazarev skippered the two Russian warships - Kreiser and Lagoda - into the nascent Tasmanian colony. They were en route from Kronstadt in Tsarist Russia to Sitka in Russian Alaska, travelling via Terra del Fuego. They made a three week victualing and exploratory sojourn in Tasmania.

Captain Mikhail Lazarev had instructions to “provide descriptions of whatever works of art or nature, trade, and rare or interesting sights”; all Captain Lazarev’s subordinates had been instructed by the Russian Naval Ministry to keep a journal from the first day of the voyage to the last. Out of a crew of 250, “at least two dozen of the ships’ returning officers and midshipmen duly submitted their accounts of their adventures in Van Diemen’s Land... to the imperial authorities”. Four accounts - the two commanding Lazarev brothers, the surgeon Petr Ogievskii and the teenager midshipman Dmitrii Zavalishin - are presented by Barratt.

Van Diemen’s Land “clad in beautiful green” impressed the visitors favourably. “The Derwent River and the adjoining D’Entrecasteaux Channel undoubtedly form one of the most spacious and beautiful harbours in the world”; Captain Mikhail Lazarev continued his praises “the climate of Hobart Town is very healthy... nowhere do I recall our crews having so improved in health and strength as during our three-week stay in Port Derwent - and that despite their working every day, and pretty hard at that”.

Captain-Lieutenant Andrei Lazarev wrote: “A pleasant variety of nature is everywhere visible in the environs... The soil is very fertile... Landowners do not trouble themselves with haymaking, because here domesticated stock can feed year round on fresh and sweet field grass... The lot of exiled prisoners here is such that they cannot be considered unfortunates, by any stretch of the imagination”.

Only Andrei Lazarev comments, other than in passing, on the indigenous population. “The number of natives in Van Diemen’s Land is entirely unknown, because they have no intercourse whatever with other peoples and avoid even the friendliest of relations ... few settlers have ... managed to see them from afar... The reason for such alienation ... is supposed to be a lack of foresight on the part of the founder of the colony, Captain Bowen ... their bodies are not extremely black but they cover their bodies with coal... their occupation is hunting wild beasts”. He writes that he is aware of the descriptions of the
Tasmanians by James Cook. Andrei was keen to “take full advantage of the pure air”. He was aware of the historical primacy of this visit. “I did my best to collect information about a country so little known to Russians, and now being visited by them for the first time”. “The natural riches of the country itself, animal and mineral, had never been described by anyone with proper accuracy”.

Surgeon Petr Ogievskii’s report is titled “Natural Resources of Van Diemen’s Land”:

“I walked over the hilly surrounds of the town many times and always with new satisfaction ... kangaroos the size of sheep... feed on grasses and other plant forms, move in great herds, and cause harm to nobody”. He climbed Mount Wellington, tasted leaves and described timber varieties by weight and resin. “The woods abound with ... birds .... the shores abound in mussels and other shellfish, as well as sea stars ...with regard to fish, unfortunately, there is nothing much to be said, for often enough though we cast our seine net... we did not pull up a single fish ... the products of the animal and vegetable kingdoms are numerous”.

Dr. Ogievskii goes on to record how “… the mildness and beneficence of the local climate deserve our wonder. Not a tree is stripped bare by the winter’s cold, nor a blade of grass dried up by the torrid sun. And the happy effects of such a clime are also felt by the settlers who, though possibly sent out for a crime ... even praise the destiny that brought them to such a country ... where even the most seriously ailing finds relief and a complete cure”.

The fourth account Barratt presents is by the teenager midshipman Dmitrii Zavalishin. He reports trips “into regions of wilderness” and that Tasmania “turned upside down all our usual ideas about the products of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. There, everything proved to be entirely incongruous with what we had known before”; a pelt of the now extinct thylacine and many other zoological specimens were submitted to the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences. He reports the escape of five Russian seamen, one of whom was never recovered. Two years later, Zavalishin was involved with the unsuccessful Decembrist uprising, and was exiled to Siberia.

Glynn Barratt has unearthed from the archives the records the first Russians to witness Van Diemen’s Land. The Russian visitors speak for themselves, and Barratt makes generous use of footnotes for commentary. Disappointingly, the author presents no contemporaneous artwork from this voyage and the illustrations included are poorly reproduced. It is tantalizing to speculate that in some Russian archives there are yet-to-be-discovered sketchbooks or art folios of early colonial Tasmania. The author provides a useful introduction, an overview and a poorly conceived quadripartite index. This book is recommended for the reader who seeks a non-Anglo account of early colonial Tasmania.

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