

BOOK REVIEWS

ALASKA, AN AMERICAN COLONY

BY STEPHEN HAYCOX. (SEATTLE: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2002, ISBN: 0295982497, \$29.95). CLOTH, 392 PP., ILLUS., MAPS, BIBLIOG.,

Reviewed by Don E. Dumond, University of Oregon

After I began seasonal visits to rural Alaska more than four decades ago, I was telling myself that local social dynamics involved the interrelationship of three communities that were separable in at least ideal classificatory terms. These were, first, the completely permanent residents, including both Native and others who had come to identify themselves with the country, all of whom based their entire living on local conditions; second, members of active exploitative enterprises — chiefly canneries, in the area I was familiar with — who identified with the local region as they provided the capital that benefited themselves and the villages, but who seasonally withdrew profits to the lower forty-eight or elsewhere; and third, what I called to myself the remittance people, those who served locally and identified with local welfare, but were paid from outside the local economy and in most cases would leave after their terms of employment ended. These latter included the bulk of federal employees, but also many employed by the state, including schoolteachers. As I came to know them, members of the first two categories were heavily tilted toward development, the third more oriented toward conservation.

This book, a new history of Alaska, is a history in a relatively global framework of the development of an Alaska that could be described in that oversimplified way.

An introductory chapter sets out the geography of the north pacific region, including the distribution of Alaska's Native people when Russians arrived. Parts of this may seem the weakest of the book, although it is certainly not its real focus and can be thought a necessary orientational bow to the reading public, including Alaska Natives. I confess to some surprise at being told that except on St. Lawrence Island the Yupit people (Yuit in the author's term) were matrilineal — an obvious misunderstanding, but a point of no particular importance to the intended thrust of the work.

Chapters that follow present the relatively familiar story of the Russian discovery of land and furs, their ex-

pansion through the Aleutians to Kodiak with incorporation of Natives as hunters, and on to Sitka and problems with the more recalcitrant Tlingit. Then, the competition between Russian entrepreneurs and the foundation of the Russian American Company and its monopoly. There are the relations with England, Spain, and the United States, the marginal attempts to develop an agricultural base to the Russian colony, including establishment of the short-lived Ross settlement in California, and some success in exporting ice. With the extended supply route, over-hunting of furbearers, and concurrent failure to pursue successfully avenues of exploitation such as local (but poor quality) coal and a whale fishery, by the mid-nineteenth century revenues began to be outstripped by costs. With Russian weakness demonstrated by the Crimean War, with the end of the U.S. Civil War and the expectation that the United States would continue its westward expansion with a shift to the Northwest, Russian America was put up for private sale to the U.S. — as a neighbor less objectionable to Russia than her Crimean War enemies, the British.

The lesson brought out here, in the context of international relations, is the difficulty of economic success in an exploitative enterprise with an over-extended supply line and an equally extended pathway to lucrative markets. But these problems to Alaska certainly did not vanish with the American purchase.

With almost no Americans resident in the newly bought territory, there was no incentive to provide the administrative infrastructure it would require. These investments were not made until after the discovery of gold, which not only provided some exportable wealth — although never very much in terms of the costs of government expansion — but also attracted settlement. As the population grew with outsider non-Natives, measures toward infrastructural development were finally taken, and Alaska came to be governed as a part of the United States. This was at the beginning of the twentieth century, concurrent with the developing fishing industry in southern

and southwestern Alaska that quickly outstripped gold as a source of exploitative revenue and attracted additional population. World War II brought even greater governmental expansion in the need to protect American shores.

The final expansionist jump was the discovery of oil and the establishment of means of its exploitation. Attendant on it, and not unrelated, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act pacified land claims, at least for a while, and ANILCA divided lands between those to be developed and those to be conserved.

And so the situation arrives that we are all familiar with: burgeoning non-Native population; oil revenues plowed into the Permanent Fund, channeled into village education networks, and directed to more and more administrative infrastructure as the former pre-oil tax base is abolished. Then the cost of state government expansion comes to exceed revenue from the dwindling oil cow, but is coupled with insistence on retention of the annual per-capita distribution of Permanent Fund income and resistance to the reestablishment of an income tax. Meanwhile, the value of the wild fishery resource shrinks in the face of international competition and fish farms.

A majority of permanent residents and members of exploitative enterprises combine to fight for more development; some permanent residents and probably a majority of those employed in the corps of federal employees stand up for less development and more conservation. At the same time, unlike the situation under the Russians in which the rural villages remained at a subsistence level, modern villagers crave everything the urban residents have in the level of living and services — for they, like all of us, are members of the modern world.

And Alaska? It continues with a sole economic hope pinned on development through capital imported from outside. There are still rural-urban differences, brought clearly to the fore by the subsistence issue and arguments about whether rights to its resources belong especially to rural people or equally to all Alaskans. And, of course, there is the fight over possible oil exploration in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge — a dispute in the gulf between exploitation and conservation. These disputes so tellingly illustrated by the author are among the communities I thought I recognized in the 1960s, and that they must ultimately be settled for the Alaskan good is clear.

But their settlement will do nothing to change the colonial status assigned by Stephen Haycox to Alaska as a peripheral fragment of the United States — and so, the profound import of his title.