

## REVIEW

### *BEFORE THE STORM: A YEAR IN THE PRIBILOF ISLANDS, 1941–1942*

By *Fredericka Martin*. Edited with supplemental material by *Raymond Hudson*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks, 2010.

Paperback; xiv + 385 pages, maps, photographs, notes, appendices, bibliography, index; ISBN 978-1-60223-076-7

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Of all Alaska Native communities, it is likely that none has experienced a longer or harsher history of exploitation than the Pribilof Island villages of St. Paul and St. George. Known in precontact time to Aleuts (Unangan) of southwestern Alaska, the islands were uninhabited until Russian fur hunters located them in 1786 and 1787. Within a few years, competing companies had set up camps at several locations on each island to harvest northern fur seals, millions of which came to the islands each summer to haul ashore and give birth. Unlike the various species of hair seals, fur seals have an unusually dense and soft double layer of fur, giving them high value on the international marketplace. Russians first brought Aleuts to the Pribilofs as laborers for the sealing industry on a seasonal basis and later settled them into two permanent villages, one on St. Paul and one on St. George.

In 1799, the Russian-American Company took sole control of fur hunting and other business ventures in Alaska until the territory's sale to the United States in 1867. From then until the cessation of commercial fur sealing in 1984, the U.S. government directly or indirectly oversaw the sealing operations. During much of this Russian and American history, tens of thousands of fur seals were harvested each summer, although at times over-killing resulted in the suspension of commercial sealing for some years. Throughout this entire history, it was Aleuts who provided the bulk of the labor for harvesting and processing the fur seal skins as well as for many other island tasks. Unfortunately, most aspects of the Aleuts' lives were controlled by the businesses and governments in

charge, for whom the profits from sealing were always a far greater concern than was the welfare of the Aleuts.

It was in this context that Samuel Berenberg was hired in 1941 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to serve for one year as the physician for St. Paul. His wife, Fredericka Martin, thirty-six and a trained nurse who had travelled widely, accompanied him. Although they had had only one month's notice that they would go to St. Paul, Martin arrived on the island enthusiastically determined to learn all she could about the geology, animal and plant life, weather, and, importantly, the people of the Pribilofs. As her narrative makes clear, she hit the ground running. Before she left the island in 1942, she had already begun writing an account of her stay, which she finished in the next year. *Before the Storm* is that manuscript.

Following Hudson's helpful Introduction, which sets the stage for Berenberg's and Martin's sojourn on St. Paul, Martin's account is composed of forty-three short chapters, each focused mostly on a single topic or experience. Overall, they follow the course of Martin's year on the island, ending somewhat abruptly with her departure from the island in the company of the Pribilovians themselves, who were being removed to internment camps in southeast Alaska following Japanese incursions and bombings in the Aleutian Islands.

While Martin delighted in the natural environment of St. Paul—"our personal northern Eden" (p. 328)—it was the oppression of the Aleuts by the government that aroused her greatest passion. Housing, education, and health shortcomings on St. Paul are all confronted by

Martin, and time and again she underscores the ways in which the lives of the island's Aleut residents were manipulated by the government and how Aleut life "was far removed from the rarefied atmosphere of the [Fish and Wildlife] Service families" (p. 97).

Interspersed throughout the book Hudson has placed brief sidebars, most excerpts from Martin's own journals. These are nice additions, providing color and immediacy to the main text. In his Afterword, Hudson does an excellent job of outlining the essential elements of Pribilof history from the war years to the present, including, importantly, details of the internment experience of the Pribilovians and other Aleuts and of the Pribilovians' subsequent struggle for independence from government control.

Three appendices round out the book: the foreword written by Martin to her original manuscript of the book, excerpts of the medical report written by Samuel Berenberg of his year on St. Paul, and a list of men from St. Paul and St. George who served in the military during World War II. Of these supplements, Berenberg's report is an especially enlightening document in its own right, for, as Hudson notes, the concerns he raises are presented in a larger historical and social context and often mirror those brought up by Martin.

As it turned out, Martin's year on St. Paul came at the beginning of the end of seventy years of unbridled U.S. government oppression in the Pribilof Islands, what Dorothy Jones described in her account of the astonishing U.S. treatment of Pribilof Aleuts as "hidden, internal colonialism" (Jones 1980:84). With the World War II internment in southeast Alaska of Aleuts from the Pribilof Islands and elsewhere came military service, employment off of the islands, and increased contact with the outside world. Empowered in part by these experiences, Pribilof Aleuts began to seek greater control over their lives once the war was over.

Martin's interest in the Pribilof Islands was no passing fancy. Within two years after leaving, she had edited linguist Richard Geoghegan's *Aleut Language* (Geoghegan 1944), for which she wrote the introduction, and published *The Hunting of the Silver Fleece: Epic of the Fur Seal* and *Sea Bears: The Story of the Fur Seal* in 1946 and 1960,

respectively (Martin 1946a, 1960). She also remained a fierce advocate for the rights of the Pribilovians. As Hudson writes in his Afterword, Martin "called for the obliteration of 'social caste barriers' between islanders and white employees, for 'just cash wages for all their work,' and for 'the sealers' right to a voice in settling their own community problems and casting their votes as citizens'" (p. 322, quoting Martin 1946b).

Martin's account will certainly be of interest to a wide audience, including students of Alaska political and economic history, Native cultures, women's history, medical history, and the natural sciences. Particularly because so few books about the Pribilofs have focused on the people of the islands, *Before the Storm* offers an especially welcome perspective to our understanding of the unusual history of the Aleuts there. Hudson, an artist and writer who for several decades has contributed substantially to our appreciation of Aleut culture, is to be commended for doing such a fine job in bringing Martin's contribution to its long-awaited publication.

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