

REVIEW

AN ALEUTIAN ETHNOGRAPHY

*By Lucien M. Turner, edited by Raymond L. Hudson, 2008. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks
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After the purchase of Alaska by the U.S., American military and government scientists and explorers flocked north to take stock of the exotic new territory. Among the larger and better-known expeditions are those of Lt. Frederick Schwatka (1883), Lt. Henry Allen (1885), and the Western Union Telegraph Expedition (1865–1867). The Smithsonian Institution under Spencer Baird sent naturalists on these expeditions to make collections and observations for the museum. These men included Robert Kennicott, William H. Dall, and Henry W. Elliott. At the same time the U.S. Signal Corps began collecting meteorological information in the territory. Manning these weather stations were naturalists recruited by the Smithsonian, including Edward W. Nelson and the mostly overlooked Lucien M. Turner.

Turner set up a meteorological station at St. Michael and manned it between 1874 and 1877. After a brief stay at the Smithsonian cataloging his natural history collections, he returned to Alaska. Until 1881 he lived and worked in the Aleutian Islands as a meteorologist for the Signal Corps. Over more than three years in the Aleutians, he spent almost eighteen months in Unalaska, four months on Atka, and eleven months on Attu. While on Atka and Attu he was a lone outsider, but he learned to speak Russian and Aleut and shared the daily lives of the villagers.

I was familiar with Turner's work from "Contributions to the Natural History of Alaska," published by the Signal Service in 1886. Although primarily concerned with the natural history of the Yukon Delta and Aleutian Islands, it contains numerous ethnographic tidbits. The details presented made me wish Turner had written an ethnography

to accompany his natural history. Sometime in the 1990s, I met Ray Hudson, who had discovered the unpublished Turner ethnography in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian. Actually the manuscript was a "Descriptive Catalog" of the artifacts Turner excavated from prehistoric middens or acquired from his hosts. It is liberally sprinkled with ethnographic observations and Turner's thoughts and speculations on Aleutian culture and history. Hudson expressed an interest in publishing this manuscript, but the long, rambling account, obviously a very rough first draft, needed considerable editing.

After many years the manuscript is at last published. Hudson has done a wonderful job. He is a gifted writer, and his clear prose is enjoyable reading. He is completely familiar with Turner and with the Aleutian Islands and their people. He has organized Turner's manuscript by editing the sometimes rambling thoughts of the original into topical chapters. These are supplemented by information from Turner's published works, and together provide some of the most complete information available on specific aspects of nineteenth-century Aleut technology and life.

About one-fifth of the book is a biography of Lucien Turner. Dr. Lydia Black always stressed to her students the importance of understanding the background and biases of ethnographers and historians. Hudson does an outstanding job of bringing Lucien Turner to life. He also provides a valuable critique of Turner's work and compares it to the well-known works of Dall, Elliott, and Ivan Petroff. All in all, Turner comes off well in the comparisons. He is an honest and reliable observer and genuinely

liked and respected the people he lived with. Hudson lists several aspects of Turner's sojourn that make his work particularly valuable. He learned both Russian and Aleut and could communicate directly with the people. He also spent considerable time living, often as the lone white man, in isolated communities. His observations make clear he participated in the daily lives of the people. He spent more continuous time in the Aleutian Islands than did any of the other observers. Turner's work provides the only observations on life in the villages on Atka and Attu.

Ethnographies of the people of the Aleutians are rare. Ivan Veniaminov (Veniaminov 1984) wrote the most detailed and extensive. Although he included information on the Central Aleuts (Atkhans), his information mainly concerns the eastern Aleutian Islands and specifically Unalaska Island. Most generalizations about Aleut traditional culture since Veniaminov are based on his work. Later ethnographic information in Jochelson (1925, 1933), Lantis (1970), Laughlin (1980), and Liapunova (1987, 1996) are also strongly biased toward the eastern islands.

That said, Turner's work is not a complete or standard ethnography. He does not systematically describe the culture of the Aleuts of any community. Instead the work is a collection of observations on aspects of the people's lives. His observations are punctuated by explanatory comments, either offered up by his hosts or from his own speculations. It is not always possible to tell which. The result is a personal narrative with very human glimpses of both the Aleut people and Turner living with them.

After the introductory biography of Turner, the book opens with a brief description of the Aleutians, the Near Islands, and the existing communities. The next five chapters elaborate aspects of the material culture—houses, boats, clothing, weaving, and fire making. Some of this information is invaluable, for example the descriptions of gut sewing, preparation of bird skins for sewing, and fire making. Of particular interest for an archaeologist are his correlations of the tools excavated from a prehistoric site with these activities. Chapter 8 is a description of hunting tools and techniques, again correlating archaeological specimens with the activities. His archaeological collections included materials ranging from fully formed, well-executed objects to broken, incomplete, and crudely made or expedient examples. He also provides a brief account of the introduction of European items into the world of the Aleut.

Following the general Hunting chapter are chapters entitled Mammals, Birds, Fish and Invertebrates, and Plants. Again these are not complete and comprehensive accounts of hunting these animals. Instead aspects of the tools, technology, and especially the attitudes and beliefs of the people are described and discussed. Hudson supplements these sections with information from Turner's other work, especially the natural history. The chapter on mammals is limited almost entirely to whales. The all-too-brief account of Steller's sea cows is unique. Some of the information on birds, and on fish and invertebrates, is quite detailed and also not to be found elsewhere. Tucked into the text are bits of information on the preferences, opinions, and usefulness of species from the Aleut point of view. Turner gives full credit to his Aleut consultants for their knowledge and experience. He also includes women and children in his descriptions of community life, who are often missing from the other sources.

The last few chapters range more widely, from language and origins, politics, social relations, warfare, to slavery. None is complete and they leave only a garbled picture, but all offer fascinating glimpses of life in Aleutian villages in the nineteenth century. They also offer the perspective of the Aleuts themselves on aspects of their past and former beliefs. The weaknesses of Turner's work are most obvious in these chapters. Nevertheless they contain information that will fill gaps left by other ethnographers and result in a more complete picture of historic Aleut life.

In all, this is a welcome addition to the literature on the Aleutian Islands. It presents a variety of new information and is easy to read. It offers a personal glimpse of life in the islands in the late nineteenth century and almost uniquely lets the voices of the Aleut people peek through in a way most ethnographies, especially from that era, do not.

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