

## Book Reviews

**Terra incognita. The world on the eastern edge of Russia.** Piero Bosco. 2015. Pinerolo: Alzani Editore. 239 p, hardcover, illustrated. ISBN 978-88-8170-517-7. 79€. doi:10.1017/S003224741500087X

I was initially sceptical about the title – for how long should ‘the world on the eastern edge of Russia’, or indeed any other place on the planet, remain in the realm of unknown? *Terra Incognita*, however, is a title of intent. As I was reading the book, the feeling of exploration remained with me.

*Terra Incognita* by Piero Bosco takes the reader on a journey of discovery to the Russian Far East. The book’s unconventional format – a bulky 30.5 by 30.5 centimeters volume works well to accommodate nearly a hundred of visually stunning photographs by the author. Images, in fact, form the core narrative of *Terra Incognita*, as they eloquently weave their way through textual accounts. Piero’s photographs further reveal the degree of intimacy with landscapes, people and animals that the author has established over fifteen years of travelling to the Russian Far East, first as part of organised tours and later as a guide himself.

The book has a general introduction to the region, followed by six chapters on the Kuril Islands, Kamchatka, Komandorski Island, Koryakia, Chukotka and Wrangel Island accordingly. The choice of the specific parts of the Far East is somewhat arbitrary and appears to reflect the author’s personal experiences, as the Russian Far East comprises of more territories, both according to the administrative structure of the Russian Federation and in people’s common perception. For example, the island of Sakhalin is a classically iconic place in the Far East of Russia, which nevertheless did not find its way into Piero Bosco’s volume. The author’s claim to have described ‘all the different regions of the territory of the Russian Far East in one text’ (page 5) is not strictly accurate.

Each chapter has the same five subsections throughout the book: *History, Geography and geology, Flora and fauna, Peoples* and *Drops of memory*. The first four subsections present factual data, whereas the ‘drops of memory’ tell about the author’s personal experiences of the area. Sections on *Geography and geology* highlight the dramatic history of the volcanic origin of islands and peninsulas in the Far East, outline geological eras and give detailed descriptions of physical features of landscapes, seas and coastlines. It would have been helpful if the author had provided information on the succession of geological periods more systematically. This would have enabled the general reader to better visualise physical events on a historical timeline.

Sections on *Flora and fauna* provide passionately nuanced portraits of the Far Eastern animals and plants, revealing the author’s deep knowledge of species’ distribution range, exterior features, their behaviour and feeding patterns. A particular highlight of fauna sections are glimpses into the history of human-animal relations in the Far East and the effect of human

presence on species. *History* and *Peoples* sections situate the Far East within a wider context of both Russian and world history. The strongest part of *History* sections is Bosco’s accounts of geographic discoveries in the Russian Far East. The author provides vivid details on courageous and ambitious expeditions, biographies of prominent explorers, and extracts from their travel diaries.

Sections on *Peoples* comprise mainly of early travellers’ historical accounts of indigenous people of the Far East. Although very illuminating, these historical sources hardly reflect the contemporary situation in the region. Bosco’s descriptions of *Peoples* could have benefitted from a vast body of existing ethnographic literature on the Far East. The author’s unfamiliarity with this literature might explain a somewhat simplistic view of indigenous people’s history. The author speaks of indigenous population of the Far East as ‘Stone Age Peoples’ (page 175), ‘still living in a primitive way’ (page 86) at the time of their first contact with the Cossacks and Russians. Bosco does mention on one occasion that such views might be due to ‘the canons of the newcomers’ (ibid.). Yet his descriptions of some indigenous people’s early beliefs as ‘confused’, or as nothing ‘more than a superstition’ (ibid.) reveal a Eurocentric bias, which – however unintentional – gives a misleading tone to his otherwise compassionate portrayals of local inhabitants.

*Drops of memory*, the final section of each chapter, provides insights into personal circumstances of the author’s travels to the Far East, revealing his aspirations, emotions and strong feelings of affinity with early explorers. These sections include accounts of Bosco’s interactions with his fellow travellers and local people.

Despite the abundance of scientific data and a methodical use of Latin terms for animals and plants, *Terra Incognita* is not a strictly scientific book. There is a bibliography at the end, but there are no references throughout the text. A positive addition to the book is an extensive use of old historical maps of the region and sketch maps by the book’s illustrator Alison Kerr. At the same time, *Terra Incognita* would have benefited from the use of contemporary maps drawn to scale with a more detailed geographical context.

The use of language is inconsistent throughout the book. Sketch maps have both English and Italian words within a single drawing, which is confusing for the reader. The editing results in occasional difficulties deciphering the meaning of the text. These minor editing discrepancies do not however detract from the overall charm of the book’s rather poetic narrative.

*Terra Incognita: the world on the eastern edge of Russia* by Piero Bosco is a perfect read for the audience who know nothing or very little about the region as it covers a wide range of topics, providing just the right amount of detail to give a good general idea about the place and to trigger the reader’s further interest in a variety of directions. (Maria Nakhshina, Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, Edward Wright Building, Dunbar Street, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK (mnakhshina@abdn.ac.uk)).