

making his study more than just a paean to a vintage piece of frontier-busting.

One wonders whether anything worthwhile remains to be said about the Alaska Highway (as distinct from a series of parochial discussions of its impact on individual communities). If any aspect has been under-studied, it is the Alaskan portion. This reviewer has made a modest contribution by addressing (in a study of Alaskan engineering projects) the role of frontier images during promotion and construction, the environmental impact, and those who felt that the drawbacks of an overland link with the rest of the USA outweighed the benefits. Yet we still don't know enough about its impact on Alaskan natives.

*North to Alaska!* is aimed at increasing number of Southlanders who take the road to Alaska in response to the call of the wild. Author and publisher no doubt hope this book will grace motel lobby coffee tables and gift shop shelves as often as libraries. For those vicarious, summer pioneers searching for the last frontier in their motor homes and luxury coaches, it will prove the most useful and durable of souvenirs. (Peter A. Coates, Department of Historical Studies, University of Bristol, 13–15 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TB.)

**OTTER SKINS, BOSTON SHIPS AND CHINA GOODS: THE MARITIME FUR TRADE OF THE NORTHWEST COAST, 1785-1841.** James R. Gibson. 1992. Montreal, Kingston, and London, McGill-Queen's University Press. 422 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-7735-0829-5. £29.95.

The sea-otter or maritime fur trade was an international economy that developed in consequence of Captain James Cook's third voyage of exploration to the Pacific and his visit to Nootka Sound and the Gulf of Alaska in 1778. For the previous half century, the Russians had kept the secrets of the trade from the wider world. By the last decade of the eighteenth century Boston traders had come to dominate a trade that had been, for a short time, British led. Until the 1840s an ever dwindling trade in sea-otter pelts connected the northwest coast of North America to the ports of London, Boston, and Montreal. The depletion of these sea mammals ended the trade, whose major market, unlike the beaver, was in Canton and Macao, where Chinese mandarins used sea-otter pelts for decorating clothing. For a brief period of time, therefore, 'the ermine of Asia,' as the sea otter was known, played a substantial role in Pacific Ocean history and in the interrelationship of Russian, Boston, and British traders, northwest coast native peoples, and Chinese consumers and traders.

Gibson's study is international in its scope, and it begins with an assessment of northwest coast native practices and trade. The pre-contact internecine trade was changed by the coming of Cook and other European traders, and it went through several changes as Russian, British, and American ships came to the northwest to trade. The author describes the fluctuations of the trade, and explains how ascendancy passed from trader to trader and even from nation to nation. Using the very large corpus of

ships logs, hitherto unused in such a systematic way, he has reconstructed the main features of the trade, from the offshore islands of British Columbia and Alaska to the Pacific Islands, where ship crews would rest and replenish supplies, to Canton and Macao where sea-otter pelts would be exchanged for porcelain, tea, silk, and other commodities, and to Boston and London, where oriental produce would be offloaded and hardware and other merchandise loaded for the Pacific Northwest. The author documents the several phases of this trade, and he explains how smaller, more economically operated American vessels had a distinct advantage in out-trading rivals from other countries. Moreover, he demonstrates that British traders were frequently hindered by circumstances of war (1792-1815) and by chartered corporate restrictions possessed by the East India Company. Hitherto unexploited Russian sources add a valuable dimension to the story.

Of his numerous tables and appendices, that entitled 'Trading and hunting vessels on the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841' may be singled out in value. It lists by nationality and year each and every vessel engaged in the trade; it is based on a wide array of cited sources. Other tables recount the value of American exports to the northwest coast, the value of American fur sales at Canton, Hudson's Bay Company ships in the coast trade, British and American sea and land fur returns, number of foreign ships at Canton during 1787-1833, furs imported by American vessels at Canton, prices of sea otters in Canton, and commodity composition by value of American imports at Canton. This book is richly illustrated, fulsomely footnoted, and has an excellent bibliography and index. It is only to be regretted that there is no ships' names index.

Many years ago Judge F.W. Howay began the laborious research of describing and analysing the maritime fur trade. While Howay's research will always be central to our understanding of this branch of commerce, it is important to note that Gibson has provided the first scholarly assessment of an international economy. He does not strain for any final thematic explanation, but his treatment of subthemes, such as muskets serving as trade items for Pacific Northwest natives, adds significantly to the discussion of this contentious subject and enriches our understanding of natives aspect of the trade. This is an important and original book and a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of the sea-otter trade and of the human activities that ensued as merchant mariners sought to carry pelts from Nootka to Canton, and in the process brought the wider world into an interrelated trading network. (Barry Gough, History Department, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada.)

**THE AURORA WATCHER'S HANDBOOK.** Neil Davis. 1992. Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press. 230 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-912006-60-9. \$20.00 (US).

The aurora (northern or southern lights) is one of the most spectacular and awe-inspiring of the many optical phe-