

JOHN R. BOCKSTOCE. *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North: The Contest Among Native and Foreign Nations for the Bering Strait Fur Trade*. NEW HAVEN, CT: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009. 496 PAGES.
Reviewed by John Paul Beck

Until recently, colonial historiography has primarily examined imperialism from the perspective of Europeans and downplayed the agency and role of indigenous peoples. In *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North: The Contest Among Native and Foreign Nations for the Bering Strait Fur Trade*, John R. Bockstoce examines the interactions that occurred between natives of the Bering Strait region and foreigners as they competed for control over the fur, walrus tusk, and whaling industries. Through Russian, British, and American expansion into the Bering Strait region, the history became, as one foreign trader predicted, “White men, whiskey, guns, powder and ball, small pox, debauchery, [and] extermination” (p. 297). However, Bockstoce successfully demonstrates that natives actively sought, participated in, and altered trade in the region. Additionally, *Furs and Frontiers* details foreign explorations, expanding and shifting modes of commerce, and the lifestyle changes that occurred in native communities throughout the Bering Strait region. In clearly laying out the history of the region, *Furs*

and Frontiers is an excellent resource not only for studies of the Bering Strait region, but also for understanding the history of imperialism, globalization, and maritime commerce and exploration.

Bockstoce's methodological approach examines the Bering Strait region as a single unit of analysis in which national borders hardly help to understand the control of commerce in the region. Bockstoce also relies heavily on ethnography to derive information about indigenous people. By analyzing tobacco and alcohol "frontiers" and the origins of trade goods such as clothes, beads, and guns, he is able to determine probable trade networks, lifestyles, and inter-ethnic group relations.

Furs and Frontiers is organized into three parts, which, respectively, examine the early fur trade in the Bering Strait region, the British and Russian rivalry in Northern Alaska, and, finally, the arrival of foreign vessels and American control. Overall, the book progresses chronologically, but periods of time do overlap as the book transfers focus back and forth from British, Russian, and American initiatives in the region. Additionally, the geographic focus of the work shifts from Asia, to the Bering Strait region, to inland Alaska, and then back to the coast as European exploration and trade networks expand. Since a lack of native sources prevents the narrative from being structured around indigenous peoples, this organization around foreign nations and regions helps to clarify the acting agents in a region with many different foreign and native ethnic groups.

Bockstoce's focus on center-periphery relationships and the extent of native agency also makes *Furs and Frontiers* a valuable source for the study of colonialism and the indigenous peoples of the Bering Strait. It is clear throughout the book that imperial powers struggled to monitor and control the isolated territory of the Bering Strait. Russian proclamations of exclusive trade rights and prohibitions on the trade of alcohol and firearms, for example, were virtually impossible to enforce (p. 38, 326). Additionally, failure to understand the situation of the peripheral peoples and regions caused the European powers to constantly undersupply trading forts and to rely on the unreasonable expectation that European technology was inherently adequate to defend against aggressive natives. Most relevant to postcolonial studies,

Bockstoce demonstrates that Native Alaskans had extensive preexisting trade networks, adapted to the intrusion of European trade, actively understood the fur market, and manipulated European competition. Moreover, the various explorers' accounts of interactions with natives, which ranged from extremely hospitable to hostile, not only illustrates the variety of native responses to foreigners, but also emphasizes the need to consider the agency of indigenous people in colonization.

Bockstoce's analysis of increasingly expanding and complex trade networks also makes *Furs and Frontiers* useful for understanding processes of globalization. The global trade networks involved were extensive and included exchanges of South American precious metals, Chinese tea, cotton, and silk, as well as European and American metal utensils, tools, guns, tobacco, and, among the most important commodities, alcohol. What's more, financial demands by natives corresponded to changing Chinese and European fashion, which consequently altered the value of furs and whalebone.

Furs and Frontiers also illustrates the level of multinational involvement in the expansion of trade. For instance, Russians frequently hired Danish, English, and Chukchi explorers and, in the 1850s, whaling ships came to the region from around the world. Additionally, the Bering Strait developed its own trading language, which, as Bockstoce notes, combined "English, Hawaiian, Spanish, Dutch, and other languages" (p. 333). Further demonstrating the effects of global trade were the technological adaptations of the natives, including torsion-spring traps, guns, and even the purchasing of foreign whaling ships. Bockstoce thus demonstrates that even in this relatively isolated region, global trade networks were well established by the twentieth century.

Overall, Bockstoce clearly details the development of the fur trade in the Bering Strait region and effectively conveys both his fascination with the region's inhabitants and his devotion to its history. However, although Bockstoce's work is thoroughly researched, the introduction and conclusion feel somewhat inadequate for such a pioneering work. If there is one area in which *Furs and Frontiers* could be improved, therefore, it would be a more explicit discussion of the implications and

importance of the fur trade to world history. Despite this glaring lack of a satisfying contextualization, Bockstoe's monograph provides much-needed insight into a region previously neglected.