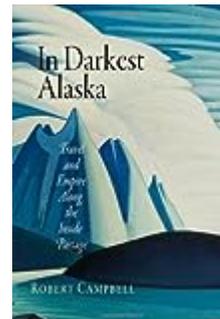




Robert Bruce Campbell. *In Darkest Alaska: Travels and Empire Along the Inside Passage.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 348 pp. Illustrations. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4021-4.



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Published on H-Travel (October, 2008)

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Nature, Culture and the Creation of 'Alaska'

Robert Campbell's *In Darkest Alaska* is a beautifully crafted book which explores how Alaska's famed Inside Passage was experienced, imagined, and described by travelers who made the adventurous trip between Victoria and Sitka during the late nineteenth century. This finely written and wonderfully illustrated book will be of great interest to western American historians, historical geographers, historians of travel and exploration, and more generally to anyone interested in how late-nineteenth-century ideas and institutions created newly Europeanized places around the world.

The book makes several enduring contributions to the literature in the history of travel and tourism. Campbell sifts through and keenly assesses a rich body of archival and published material on Alaska that has heretofore been underappreciated in either the New Western History or the more traditional histories of the American West. He reminds readers that the Euro-American phase of Alaskan history does not begin with the Gold Rush and that a great deal of Alaska as a set of ideas and landscapes was essentially constructed in an earlier era of ex-

ploration and tourism. Campbell also connects Alaska to a wider geographical world of kindred exploration and colonization (particularly to parallels he draws with Africa) as well as a larger intellectual world that both shaped and was shaped by Euro-American experiences along the Inside Passage. The end result is an elegant example of how to write history and historical geography in a way that is theoretically informed yet still centered in the richness of real persons living in and traveling through real places.

Campbell's narrative takes the reader through the landscapes of the Inside Passage by following the meteoric rise of Alaska's travel and tourism industry between 1870 and 1890. We begin by considering the emergence of Alaska as a destination in the first place. Then Campbell focuses on different aspects of the trip itself, including visits to native Tlingit villages, industrial centers (such as Juneau), and spectacular glaciers (such as those encountered in Glacier Bay). The narrative ends in the former Russian village of Sitka where most travelers completed their voyages and headed home. Along the way, Camp-

bell sifts through an incredible array of promotional materials, traveler accounts, scientific and government reports, and published descriptions of the region by notables such as John Muir.

How does Campbell connect *darkest Alaska* with the world beyond and how does he successfully center the narrative around travel and tourism? He employs six broader conceptual frameworks to shine new light on the region, to use Alaska as a window into late-nineteenth-century American society, and to offer a wider road map for other scholars to follow in their own explorations. First and foremost, Campbell places the stories he tells within the context of capitalism. We see Alaska as part of a global geography of economic transformation. Class matters just as much in Alaska as it does in New York City. Campbell reminds us that most of the travel narratives were written by upper-class elites who had the time and money to make the long journey north. Campbell also makes visible an Alaskan landscape of ordinary laborers, even though most service and industrial workers remained invisible in the promotional materials and narratives of the time. Most importantly, he explores the concrete consequences of capitalism's impact on particular places and, as the book's title suggests, how Alaska's incorporation into the world's capitalist economy paralleled experiences in settings such as Africa.

Second, Campbell reminds us that Alaska was a story of American imperial expansion and fundamental transformations of political space. What had been a complex geography of native territories had been earlier redefined by Russian colonial claims. After the American purchase of Alaska in the 1860s, native political geographies continued to be ignored, all subordinated within a new imperial order. Campbell recounts how the tourist industry helped to secure Alaska's new political identity and how its incorporation into the United States furthered that country's role as a continental and Pacific power. Campbell also notes how varied politicians and military men considered Alaska merely the first foray into the potential incorporation of all the northwestern portion of the continent into a larger United States, including British Columbia.

Third, Campbell uses the Alaskan setting to assess late-nineteenth-century notions about race. Inevitably wed to the capitalist economy and to the nation's imperial expansion, the narrative on race nevertheless had its own rhetoric and power and Campbell deftly unravels these relationships amid a fascinating world of Tlingit natives, Russian settlers, American tourists, and Chinese

laborers. In one chapter (*Totem and Taboo*), Campbell examines the nuanced interplay between tourists and Alaskan native populations. He notes how white superiority was confirmed by examining the quaint, exotic otherness of native folk. Campbell also recounts the tourists' hunger for souvenirs and how Tlingit natives obliged, turning out mass-produced artifacts as quickly as they could. Campbell then takes these examples and places them in the broader Darwinian frameworks of late-nineteenth-century anthropology and psychology. For example, he notes how travelers and writers, when meeting native peoples in the region, saw the encounter as a kind of ethnographic museum exhibit or metropolitan-style exhibition of the time, a display that inevitably confirmed classic racial stereotypes of white superiority.

Fourth, ideas about gender are explored at several points within the narrative. In one chapter (*Frontier Commerce*), Campbell tells the story of Philip Van Buskirk, an aging mariner who goes north to find a native wife. But as Buskirk's daily journals reveal, his lifelong sexual experiences included numerous homosexual relationships as well as sexual encounters with children. Campbell uses Buskirk's particular story, one that stood outside the mainstream of society, to examine larger late-nineteenth-century ideas about sexuality and how European and native sexualities were redefined as Alaska was opened to the outside world. Prostitution, for example, became both an important sexual and economic act which wed in new ways the fortunes of Euro-American and native peoples. In addition, Campbell also examines how both male and female elites contributed to the tourist literature of the period. While offering their own impressions of people and landscapes, he argues, most elite women paralleled male experiences as custodians of bourgeois society (p. 269).

Fifth, Campbell uses the encounter between Alaskan travelers and landscapes to explore more general ideas about nature, wilderness, and scenery. Chapters 3 (*Scenic Bonanza*) and 6 (*Juneau's Industrial Sublime*) remind us of the varied scenic features encountered along the Inside Passage. Of course, the spectacle of *raw nature* was the advertised highlight of the trip and Campbell reconstructs how nineteenth-century travelers were well prepared to see what they did through the language and aesthetic conventions of the Romantic era. The search for the sublime inevitably led to these northern waters, and John Muir and ordinary tourists described Alaska in ways that reflected their prior experiences and what they had been taught to see. Specifically,

Campbell explores the representational norms of landscape painting of the period and how they fit so well with the unfolding visual panorama that greeted elite travelers as they glided up the Passage. Effortlessly, their gaze consumed the landscape as a commodity that in a capitalist economy was no less marketable than gold mines or canned salmon. In addition, Campbell reminds us that native people (selectively encountered) as well as the industrial and economic signatures of modernity (bustling mines and factories) were also recognized and celebrated parts of the scenic landscape, all part of the Alaskan experience to be savored, written about, and then recounted back home to friends and family.

Finally, Campbell explores how the language and logic of late-nineteenth-century science contributed to ideas about Alaska as well as how Alaskan geology redefined contemporary debates in science. Science provided a vocabulary that helped incorporate the geology encountered into the American experience, to effectively take control of the forces at work in these northern lands. Especially insightful is Campbell's discussion of the glacial landscape and the pivotal role Alaska played in ongoing scientific discussions about Earth's origins and evolution. More generally, Campbell reveals how science unfolds in particular places and how it is driven both by

larger economic and political imperatives as well as by the personalities of particular scientists.

The book contains an abundance of high-quality photographs and other historical drawings and images. They do an excellent job of capturing many of the landscapes and experiences Campbell describes in the text. While Campbell successfully uses several period maps (pp. 2, 37, 66-67, 104) to depict the setting (and to show how cartographers mapped the region), the book would benefit from an initial set of author-drafted maps that would simply and clearly show all of the major features and place-names encountered in the book.

Overall, Campbell has produced an important work that will be of interest to a varied scholarly audience as well as to anyone fascinated by Alaska and by the landscapes and people that have come to define it. Campbell's sojourn up the Inside Passage is both a geographical and intellectual invitation to appreciate how such places are created by the complex intertwining of nature and culture. Campbell's exploration of that joining is a lasting contribution to the historical geography of North America and a reminder that southeastern Alaska's glaciated coastline is an important part of that larger continental story.

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Citation: William Wyckoff. Review of Campbell, Robert Bruce, *In Darkest Alaska: Travels and Empire Along the Inside Passage*. H-Travel, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

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