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978-1-108-04828-6 - Frozen Asia: A Sketch of Modern Siberia Together with an Account of the Native Tribes Inhabiting that Region

Charles H. Eden

Excerpt

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FROZEN ASIA.

CHAPTER I.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES.



PROPOSE, in the following pages, giving a brief account of that vast expanse of country, which, comprising the whole of Northern Asia, is known to us under the name of Siberia. After sketching its geographical and geological features, its flora, fauna, and such other matters relating to its natural history as I judge may prove of interest to the general reader, I shall touch upon the varieties of race to be found amongst its inhabitants, their religions, manners, customs, and amusements, and I shall insert several of the fanciful stories which may serve as specimens of the folk lore existing amongst the heathen population of the desolate tundras—wild legends replete with improbability, but highly interesting as exemplifying the belief in magical agencies still rife amongst these people.

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I shall next notice the mode in which Russia—then little advanced beyond a state of semi-barbarism—obtained a footing in this land, and the steps taken by that power to secure her new dominion, and consolidate her power therein; a page of history that in romantic interest may vie with the exploits of Cortes in Mexico, or of Pizarro in Peru, although happily unstained by the cruelties that sullied the achievements of the *conquistadores*. Blood was shed freely by the Muscovites—few territorial acquisitions are made without doing so—but I find no record of unnecessary severity practised on the natives, or of any attempt to coerce them by persecution, or other harsh measures, to adopt the religion of their conquerors. The subject tribes were reduced to a state of servitude, but the yoke of their new masters was comparatively an easy burden, and beyond maintaining order and exacting a heavy tribute, the dominant race interfered little with the people they dispossessed.

The space at my command precludes my entering into the attempts made by Western nations to force a north-eastern passage, and to penetrate to distant Cathay through the icy barrier of the Frozen Ocean, but I shall refer at length to the recent efforts made by enterprising men to open up a water communication between Europe and the mighty rivers that flow into the Arctic Sea from the very southern confines of Siberia—

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adventurous undertakings that have been crowned with the success which usually waits upon energy and indomitable perseverance. In conclusion, I shall endeavour to draw a picture of "Frozen Asia" as it is to-day.

Siberia is commonly regarded by the mass of our countrymen as a sterile inclement wilderness, rich in certain ores, and in animals producing the costly furs by which the wealthy seek to protect themselves from the rigours of winter; but beyond this—and the sinister celebrity which has attached itself to the country as forming a Russian penal settlement, where captives are popularly supposed to undergo sentences of merciless severity and life-long duration—beyond this, little is known concerning a land fraught with interest alike to the student of science, and to the enterprising merchant seeking a new field for extended commercial relations. I trust to show that this neglect of ours can no longer be excused, and that a closer acquaintance with Siberia will awaken an interest amply repaying the pains bestowed on the investigation. From the date when the Cossacks first pushed eastwards into the sparsely-peopled solitudes of Northern Asia, its modern exploration may be said to have commenced, and within three generations the grandsons of these adventurers had planted their flag on the shores of the Pacific. Neither was it long before the Russian Government recognised the value of their newly-acquired

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provinces. The lucrative traffic with China, the discovery of rich mines, and the importance of opening out routes to, and securing the sea-board of, the Pacific, led to the establishment of numerous settlements, from whence researches were pushed forth in every direction. Nor did they disdain to supplement native energy by the enlistment of foreign aid, more particularly in the domain of scientific exploration. At various times Britain, Holland, Sweden, Germany, France, and the United States have each furnished contingents in furtherance of this object, and already the results of their investigations have proved most valuable. That an increased intimacy with distant nations should be established—smoothing the path whereby the glad tidings of great joy are carried abroad, and tending to unite all races in the bonds of Christian brotherhood—is in itself no slight result; but laying matters of such deep import entirely aside, and considering the subject only from a worldly point of view, it may without exaggeration be said that there is no branch of human knowledge which has not been both benefited and augmented by the labours of these earnest explorers. Ethnology has occupied the attention of one party; ornithology and botany that of a second; the laying open new fields for commercial enterprise has taxed the energies of a third; but all have striven manfully, and

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in their different spheres added to our knowledge of this distant realm. The reader who turns over a recent volume of any of our scientific journals will at once see the attention which is now bestowed upon Northern Asia ; and although the information that I am able to present in this volume is limited, I trust to awaken the interest of all who may do me the honour of reading these pages, so far as to incite them to watch the progress of discovery in that quarter of the globe, and to fill in for themselves the outline that I have here traced. A clear knowledge of the extent and position of the country under consideration being essential in a volume of this nature, I shall commence with an account of the geographical features of the region with which we are now concerned.

That part of the continent of Asia which extends eastward from the Ural (pronounced Oo-rál in Russian) Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, and from the Arctic Ocean on the north to the boundaries of the Chinese Empire and Turkestan in the south, is called Siberia. Its western boundary is continuous with Russia in Europe, the empire to which it belongs ; and on both the north and to the east we find that Nature has placed the sea as an insuperable barrier to its further extension. But to the southward it is far otherwise. There the Muscovite dominions join the frontiers of the Chinese

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Empire, and the territories of numerous small principalities or Khanates, which are becoming slowly but surely absorbed as their inhabitants are brought into contact with their powerful neighbour. The exigencies of statecraft, and the strong proselytising spirit inherent in the members of the Orthodox Greek Church, both contribute to bring about a result which history shows us must inevitably occur when civilisation and barbarism are brought into close communion; the weaker must yield—must be displaced in accordance with the dictates of an immutable law which peremptorily forbids their co-existence.

Nor is it a result to be deplored. The civilising influence of Russia may leave much to be desired, but no one can deny that it is a grand advance on the savagery and heathenism at present existing throughout many of the Central Asian Khanates. If Christianity does not reach these people precisely in the form that we should wish, still some of its beneficent influences are brought to bear upon them—*some* rays of light are admitted where all has hitherto been darkness.

Into any considerations of the justness of this absorption of lesser states by a greater, and of the political complications arising therefrom, I shall not enter, my object being gained when I have pointed out the differences that each year makes in the southern boundary of Siberia, involving an advance of frontier

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that only a map of large dimensions could explain minutely. Thus, in preference to stating each turn and bend of the ever-shifting line of demarcation between Russia in Asia and her neighbours, a plan which would probably weary the reader unacquainted with that little-known locality, I content myself with saying that, roughly speaking, Siberia is bounded on the south by Turkestan and the Chinese Empire, a definition answering all practical purposes, as this volume will treat chiefly of the northern portion of Russia's Asiatic territory, reserving Khiva, Bokhara, and the other Khanates for another occasion.

Siberia lies (roughly) between the 45th and 77th parallels of north latitude, and extends from the 60th to the 190th degree of east longitude. Its most northern point is Cape Severo, or North-East Cape, a tongue of land between the estuaries of the great rivers Yenisei and Lena; Cape Vostotchni, its eastern extremity, is distant only forty-eight miles from Cape Prince of Wales in North America, from which it is separated by Behring Strait. Its greatest length from East to West is about 3,600 miles, and its greatest breadth from North to South a little less than 2,000 miles, forming an area which exceeds that of Europe by more than one million square miles.

An almost unbroken uniformity of surface charac-

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terises nearly the whole of this vast tract of country. Bordering on the Arctic Ocean, which except for a few months in the year is frozen, lies the Great Northern Plain, the largest level expanse of land on the face of the globe, which, embracing nearly the whole of Northern Asia, advances eastward into Europe, reaching to the mainland opposite the coast of Great Britain. It is stated that a traveller departing from London and journeying eastward between the 52nd and 53rd parallels of north latitude as far as 85 E. long., and from thence between 55 and 56 N. lat. would arrive on the banks of the river Lena, in long. 130 E., without encountering any mountain range except in one place, near the Ural River, where a chain of hills rises to a height never exceeding 2,000 feet. This unbroken journey would have extended over one-third of the curvature of the entire globe. Indeed, the Great Northern Plain would extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, had Nature not planted at its two extremities barriers which protect it against the encroachments of the sea. The Scandinavian Mountains form its western boundary, whilst at the east, with which we are chiefly concerned, arise the Stanovoi Mountains, which run from the eastward of Lake Baikal to Behring Strait, following a north-easterly direction. Throughout the whole length of the Kamtchatkan Peninsula runs a

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range containing some twenty active volcanoes, the loftiest of which—Kliuchev—attains an altitude of 16,131 feet. The fact that the mountains terminating both extremities of the Great Northern Plain are actively volcanic—for Iceland may be included in the Scandinavian Range—is worthy of notice.

To bring the surface features of Siberia more closely home to the reader I follow the plan adopted by many geographers, and divide the whole country into three parts, namely :—Western, Central, and Eastern Siberia.

The first-mentioned, which lies between the Ural Mountains and 85 E. long., consists of one unbroken plain, which may be divided into five regions :—The *Steppe*, which extends from the south to the 55th parallel ; the *Agricultural District*, stretching from thence to 60 N. lat., a tract of country well-watered and very fertile ; the *Mining District*, embracing the south-eastern part of Western Siberia, and including a portion of the Altaï Mountains ; the *Wooded Region* lying north of the latter, unadapted to cultivation, the whole extent being clothed with varieties of the pine and fir species, amidst whose gloomy forests the fur-bearing animals find a home ; and the *Tundra*, the most northerly portion of Western Siberia, a low level plain, destitute of trees, where the uniformity of the landscape is unbroken, save by a few stunted bushes cropping up from the

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moss-covered surface, that are barely able to extract the means of existence from the frozen soil.

Central Siberia is situated between 85 and 105 E. long., and includes the greater portion of the Altaï Mountains; the hilly country east of the Obi River; the valley of the Upper Yenisei; the Plain of the Lower Angara River; the Wooded Region; and the Tundra. *The Hilly Country* extends to the banks of the Obi, which separates it from the Steppe of Baraba, and is almost entirely covered with fir-trees, the cones of which form an article of commerce with the more western countries; the soil, however, being sandy but little cultivation is possible. East of the river Tom the country improves, spreading out into a table-land intersected by numerous rivers with depressed bottoms, where the soil is fertile and the villages, in consequence, numerous. To the northward of this runs the river Ket, which marks the limit of cultivation in this district. *The Valley of the Yenisei*, being inclosed by mountain ridges, was considered at one time the warmest, as well as the most fertile part of Siberia, but many travellers now award the palm to the land in the vicinity of the Obi. Westward of the Vale, between the 88th and 89th degrees of E. long., rise the Teletskoi Mountains; to the southward lie the Mountains of Sayansk, uniting the Altaï Mountains to the range called Erghik Targak Taïga, and separating