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978-1-108-07083-6 - Ten Months Among the Tents of the Tuski: With Incidents of an Arctic Boat Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, as far as the Mackenzie River, and Cape Bathurst

William Hulme Hooper

Excerpt

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THE
TENTS OF THE TUSKI.

CHAPTER I.

Long absence of the "Erebus" and "Terror."—Consideration of Contingencies, and Plans for Relief.—H.M.S. "Plover," Commander Moore.—Sails for Behring's Straits.—Arrive at Sandwich Islands.—Description of Honolulu.—Its Inhabitants.—Beautiful Night Scene.—Departure.—Passage to Behring's Straits.—Aleutian Islands.—Russian Discoveries.—St. Lawrence Island.—Adverse Winds and Currents.—Tchutskoi Noss.—The Tchutski.

THE attention of the Admiralty having been drawn to the protracted absence of the two Arctic Discovery Ships, "Erebus" and "Terror," which sailed from England, under the command of Sir John Franklin, in the spring of 1845, and of which no tidings had been received, it was determined in the autumn of 1847, after mature consideration of the opinions of those most experienced in Arctic affairs, to despatch three expeditions as early as possible in 1848 to different quarters of the frozen sea, for the purpose of seeking, and, if necessary, relieving the missing voyagers.

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Had the expedition become checked in its earlier career, Sir James Ross proceeding up Davis’ Straits might expect to fall in with the party. Were it stopped between the eastern and western channels leading to the Polar Sea, some of Franklin’s people in that case would probably be despatched to the northern continent of America; it was necessary, therefore, to send an expedition thither; this was undertaken by Sir John Richardson. A third locality remained, which it would have been imprudent to neglect. Conjecturing the entrance and medium passage to the westward to have been accomplished, exit had yet to be made by a region little visited, of which the great opening from the North Pacific into the Arctic Ocean, known as Behring’s Strait, claimed paramount attention.

For the last-named quarter H. M. S. “Plover,” under Commander T. E. L. Moore (an officer peculiarly fitted for this charge by his previous experience in Arctic and Antarctic travel), set sail from Plymouth on the 30th January, 1848.

I do not desire to enter here upon a recital of either the fitting out or our voyage through regions interesting indeed, but already well known. Suffice it to say that after touching at Madeira and the Falklands, rounding Cape Horn and visiting Callao, we arrived at Honolulu, the capital of Woahu,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

SANDWICH ISLANDS.

3

the chief of the Sandwich Islands, on the 23rd of August, 1848, the voyage having been greatly protracted by calms and contrary winds, and the very indifferent sailing qualities of our vessel. This town presents from the outer anchorage the most picturesque type of a tropical village in all its loveliness. It extends along the sea-shore for about two miles; the houses are grouped in small clusters, surrounded by luxuriant plantations of sugar-cane, banana, and other fructiferants of torrid climes, surmounted by the lofty palm.

With the exception of the public edifices and a few of the better class of houses, which are built of brick, stone, or even slabs of coral, the habitations are for the most part only rude huts, yet neat and cleanly-looking from a distance: from their sombre hue, they present a fine contrast to the varied tints of tree and herbage here exhibited. I thought it a perfect paradise. The sweet tale of Paul and Virginia, with the description of their home, came across my memory, and I pictured their land to be such an one as this.

In the bay were numerous diminutive fishing-boats, each with an outrigger to prevent it from overturning, so narrow and frail are they. This curious balance is composed of a branch of considerable thickness, with a straight stem about five feet in length, terminating

B 2

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in a flattened fork, which ever and again, as the wee shell rocks to and fro, dips in the water and steadies her motion ; and in this way with paddle or sail, or both, they skim along over the waves.

The residents at Honolulu are principally Americans, who engross much of the trade ; there are also a few Chinese shops, where this antiquated people may be seen in their national dress and surrounded by their native products—Japanned-ware, crapes, silks, ivory carved-work, &c., for which they find a ready sale. There are several churches and meeting-houses ; also one or two large manufactories and warehouses, conspicuous from their size compared with the surrounding buildings. On the right of the town is the harbour, in which were many vessels ; among others, several American whalers refitting for their return home ; and the old “Basilisk” lies here dismantled and deserted. I regarded her with great interest, remembering the many important matters in which she took her part, more particularly in the French affair with Queen Pomaré.

Honolulu cannot certainly be lauded for cleanliness nor the regularity of its construction : dirt abundantly displays itself, and in the streets we were enveloped in clouds of dust. The natives appear finely-limbed, muscular, and of good stature. The young people have handsome and somewhat intellectual countenances, with

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FISHING BY NIGHT.

5

splendid eyes, large and sparkling, having the fire and dark hue of the Indian ; their complexions are of the richest deep brown, some approaching copper colour ; and the skin so clear, that the blood can be seen mantling in their cheeks. Old age seems to transmute all their charms into ugliness, for the few aged persons I saw were mostly hideous. At night we were delighted in viewing the natives fishing by torch-light: in the frail canoes I have before noticed brands composed of the fibrous husk of the cocoa-nut emitted a lurid glare, and being in great numbers and constant motion imparted a Salvator-Rosa-like effect to the scene ; the softened gleam upon the shore was very beautiful, throwing up the more prominent objects, whose broad shadows, rendered deeper and more perfect by the blaze, mingled with and were lost in the gloom of the background.

It was intended that in accordance with our instructions we should have met H. M. S. "Herald," which was to co-operate with us, at Panama, but the plan of our route having been changed we had not visited that port, and hoped to have found her here ; in this expectation we were, however, disappointed ; and after obtaining a plentiful supply of tropical fruits and vegetables, proceeded alone on the 25th, trusting to fall in with her in Kötzebue Sound.

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[More information](#)

6 DEPARTURE FROM SANDWICH ISLANDS.

Having now quitted our last touching point, all our attention was directed to preparing for our winter sojourn. Warm clothing was distributed; cloaks and socks of the fur-seal skin made up, and ice gear fitted and inspected. In anticipation of boat expeditions crews were appointed, and their several supplies apportioned, strong hopes being entertained of doing something before being frozen in.

Some fine meteors were seen early in September, and black gull and whale birds observed in considerable numbers: a plover flew on board, a goodly omen, and dolphins gathered round the vessel. On the 9th we saw stormy petrels and sea swallows; and the former, true to their popular reputation, proved harbingers of a heavy gale. The weather moderating, the nautilus was seen outspreading his tiny sail.

Towards the end of the month the presence of numerous birds, as well as quantities of sea weed, indicated the proximity of land; on the 27th, at no great distance from Madenoi or Copper Island,—with the exception of Behring's Island, the westernmost of the group,—we passed between the Aleutian or Fox Islands, and the main-land of Kamtchatka.

As these islands were among the first-fruits of the discovery from the west of the western coast of the North American continent, it may not be inappropriate

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BEHRING'S EXPEDITION.

7

to introduce here some slight account of their history and native inhabitants.

The sagacious mind of Peter the Great having been stimulated by accounts collected from Kamtchadals, and transmitted to St. Petersburg, concerning the vicinity of the north-eastern point of Asia to the north-western angle of America, devised an expedition to ascertain their correctness; this, however, was delayed, by his death; but the Empress Catharine, in accordance with his written instructions, immediately on ascending the throne, despatched Vitus Beering, or, as he is more commonly called, Behring, a native of Denmark in the Russian service, to obtain information on this point. On the 14th of July, 1728, he left the river Kamtchatka in the "Fortune," with two lieutenants and forty men; and having coasted the Kamtchadal, Koriak, and Tchutskoi countries as far as $67^{\circ} 18'$ north, returned, having unawares passed but a very few miles through the Straits which now bear his name. This unconsciousness is rather curious, as he had some intercourse with people in their boats, who would seem to have been Tchutski, who inhabit a country on the coast of Asia, within thirty miles of the American continent; they, however, informed him that, their nation, although travelling with rein-deer as far as the Kovyma, or Kolyma,

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which runs into the Northern Ocean, had never attempted any passage by sea. He therefore returned home disappointed in the object of his search.

He again made the attempt in 1729, but failed from adverse winds. No further effort was made till 1741, when Behring again sailed with Tschirikof on their notable enterprise in their two vessels, the "St. Peter" and "St. Paul;" and steering to the E.S.E., and S.E. by E., reached the continent of America on the 15th of July. The precise position of the spot has been much contested, but there is good reason to suppose he landed in the immediate neighbourhood of Kayes Island, lat. 60° N., long. 144° 30' W. It again seems strange that Behring should thus have proceeded so far to the east without reaching land, as the whole range of Aleutian or Fox Islands, with the promontory of Alaska, lay directly in the course between the points of his departure from Asia and arrival in America, extending in a scattered line from America to within ten degrees of the Kamtchatkan coast. In the beginning of September, on their return voyage, the expedition fell in with the chain of the Fox Islands, and on the 6th of November landed on Behring's Island, at first supposing it to be the mainland of Avatcha; here they suffered great misery and sickness, and on the 8th of November Behring died.

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ALEUTIAN ISLANDERS.

9

The immense quantity of animal life which then existed on these islands, may be gathered from the fact that on one short expedition in 1750, the large numbers of 1781 sea otters, 720 blue foxes, and 840 young sea bears were taken, and their furs and skins carried back by one vessel to the Russian territories.

The inhabitants are described by the admirable and sagacious Steller, who accompanied Behring, as mostly young or middle-aged, of moderate stature, but tolerably well-proportioned; their arms and legs very fleshy, their hair straight and of a glossy blackness, the nose flat but not broad or large, the eyes black, the lips thick and turned upward; necks short, shoulders broad, and bodies thick but not corpulent. They wore shirts made of the intestines of whales; boots and breeches of seal-skin, stained a brown red with alder bark; and had long iron knives, apparently their own manufacture (though he throws some doubt on this point later in his narrative). They made hats of bark which were coloured red and green, and ornamented with feathers and grass; and bored holes in various parts of the face, in which they inserted bones and stones. They had little or no beard.

They seemed to migrate from island to island,

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and many to the mainland of America, and were accustomed to tattoo their faces with a red-hot needle.

Otcheredin, who made a lengthened visit in 1770, describes the Fox Islands as generally rocky, but destitute of wood, and abounding with rivulets and lakes which contain very little fish; the population, free and numerous; living principally in holes dug in the earth, and subsisting on sea animals and small shell-fish, with the wild lily-root as their greatest luxury.

Dr. Latham, in his "Varieties of Man," asserts that the inhabitants of these islands, including Behring's, Copper, Rat, Andreanowsky, and Prebulowüni, are all of Esquimaux origin; this he principally infers from the radical construction of the language.

To Captain Cook, our own enterprising navigator, belongs the merit of the true discovery of the Straits between the two continents, although, with his usual good taste and modesty, he gave to them the name of Behring, in honour of, as he supposed, the first European who ever navigated those seas. There is now, however, little ground for reasonable doubt, although the fact long remained involved in obscurity, that to Simeon Deshnew, or Deshnef, may be attributed the first passage of them by civilised man. Iseai Ignatiew,