

Book Reviews

David Moon. *The American Steppes: The Unexpected Russian Roots of Great Plains Agriculture, 1870s-1930s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xl, 431 pp. Index. \$120, Hardback.

In *The American Steppes*, David Moon—a leading scholar of the history of grasslands internationally—makes an unimpeachable case that transfers of organisms, ideas, and practices from Russia crucially shaped the Great Plains of the United States from the 1870s through the 1930s. The main contention here is easy enough to follow: settlers from Russia brought with them seeds, weeds, agricultural techniques, and approaches to soil science that became staples of the American experience. Such a claim is significant in and of itself because it overthrows stereotypes of a backward peasant Russia and reveals surprising connections in the ecological manipulations undertaken in places very far from each other. An even more impressive achievement, however, comes from the thoroughness with which Moon executes his study. Not content to draw a general outline of the transfers that he noticed, he tracked down letters, correspondence, and many other materials in numerous archives and libraries and spent much time in both grasslands to gain a deep appreciation of these places. The payoff is an incredibly rich account of transnational interactions in farming and science.

Moon is a Russian historian by training—and indeed one of the most prolific investigators of the environmental history of imperial Russia—but the book he produced here offers its most pointed intervention to historians of the United States, who have largely missed or marginalized the influence of the Russian steppes on the Great Plains. He so effectively shows the Russian impact on the Great Plains that one suspects that his contribution will quickly become common knowledge for scholars, who will be aghast at the idea that this connection might have ever been overlooked. Here his skills as a non-US historian were especially important. Clearly, one of the reasons that his discovery is surprising is that few scholars of US history read the languages and work in the regions necessary for this type of transnational history, nor find themselves comfortable trading in the historiographical expertise that Moon so fluidly does. For Russian historians, and especially environmental historians of Russia, the book also extends our

understanding of the influence of innovative approaches to and conceptions of the natural world beyond the territories we study.

The book contains two parts. The first focuses on contexts of migration and settlement patterns, limitations on interactions, and the avenues that allowed transfers to occur. Moon discusses how residents on the steppe—mostly Mennonites—traveled around the world to places like Kansas, where they put their know-how to work by ploughing up the plains and cultivating grains. Negative attitudes toward Russia first as an undeveloped and autocratic country and later as a communist menace presented obstacles to the transfers that Moon highlights, but widespread recognition of the similarities between the two environments, scientific exchange among agronomists and pedologists, and the presence of a population that had immigrated from the steppes built the bridges that enabled Russian influence to come to the United States.

In the second part of the book, Moon examines specific entities that traveled from the steppes to the plains: varieties of wheat, theoretical frameworks for soil science, the planting of shelterbelts to counter erosion, and an unwelcome icon of Great Plains culture—tumbleweed. Despite competition on the international grain market between the two countries, the arrival of Mennonite immigrants to the American plains in the late nineteenth century facilitated the import of Eurasian varieties of wheat and other cereals that became fixtures of agriculture in the region. The story of soil science speaks most directly to the profundity of Russian knowledge. Russian scientist Vasilii Dokuchaev and his progenitors espoused theories of soil genesis as a process of interaction among bedrock, vegetation, climate, and topography and developed a classification system with immense practical utility. Most significantly, American scientists belatedly recognized the fertility of the black earth, or chernozem, soil that occupied much of the plains and the steppes and began to apply this understanding to efforts to assist plain's agriculture. Rows of trees and other vegetation to limit erosion and moisten the microclimate of fields was another plains adaptation that first emerged in Russia. Finally, species transfer did not only offer a boon for American agriculture but also disrupted it. An infamous invasive species that became a scourge of plains farmers—tumbleweed—originated on the steppe.

Everything presented in *The American Steppes* compels a revised understanding of the environmental history of the Great Plains and the Russian contribution to global agriculture. I would have welcomed some more analysis of the environmental consequences of the transfers that Moon describes—a topic he masterfully details in his previous book on Russian grasslands—but the approach and argument did not require such an elaboration. To sum, this rich history of transnational exchange demonstrates the depths of unexpected connections awaiting scholars who opt to investigate them.

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David M. Griffiths. *No Collusion! Catherine the Great and American Independence*. Edited by George E. Munro. Bloomington, Indiana, Slavica Publishers, 2020. – xv, 717 p.

This book can be seen through two important optics. It is a memorial to a deceased professor erected by his former student, the work unfinished by the author, but completed and published posthumously. One can only imagine how much energy and devotion it needed to get the manuscript cut and edited, to write a careful preface explaining what exactly has been done to the text, and to convince a publisher that such a book is worth publication. George E. Munro deserves much credit for this work that will significantly change our vision of not only the history of Russian-American relations, but also of Professor David M. Griffiths' (1938–2014) legacy as a scholar of the field.

The book is the result of lifelong research, as the history of Russia and America during the reign of Catherine the Great was the theme of David M. Griffiths' MA and PhD dissertations many decades ago and continued to be his study theme ever since. During his lifetime, he published several articles on the theme of the Russian policies toward the American War for Independence, but now we see that those were merely small parts of a huge manuscript on the topic. The resulting monograph is based on the wealth of the archival and published sources and deals with all of his previous historical research, but it also confronts the myths about Catherine II's policy prevailing in both the Russian and American traditions. Did Catherine refuse to send her troops to America because she sympathized with the colonists? Did she sign the Declaration of Armed Neutrality to support them? Was she consistent in her policies? Did Americans want to understand Russian policies or were they content with constructing its interpretation to lift the spirit of the patriots? All of these – and many other – questions are answered in the new book.

This is a major contribution into the field of the history of U.S. – Russian relations in the 18th century, substantially expanding and, sometimes, overturning the analysis of classic books by Nicholas Bolkhovitinov and Norman E. Saul. No doubt it will be used as a basic text for those teaching and studying the early stages of the U.S.-Russian relations and Catherine II's foreign policy.

The monograph consists of sixteen chapters divided into three parts, the first one being an analysis of the Russian side of the international equation in the era of the American Revolution, the second dealing with the American attitudes toward Russia and the beginning of Francis Dana's mission to St. Petersburg, while the third is devoted to the change in the Catherine's attitudes towards the international situation and its consequences for the American republic. The book bears the signs of the unfinished manuscript. Despite the cuts made by George E. Munro, it is sometimes excessively detailed, and sometimes repetitive, with the same ideas appearing in many chapters. However, it may help a student of the period better understand the main ideas that the author desired to deliver in the monograph.

Griffiths argues that the Russian policy toward the American colonies and nascent United States was determined by Catherine's positive attitude toward England, and at the same time, her negative assessment of George III and Lord

North's government policies; it changed with her foreign policy's head Nikita Panin's changing attitudes toward England's participation in his Northern System.

The author devotes a large portion of his book to the main paradoxes of the Russian attitudes toward America, including Catherine's tolerance of the American republican principles. One could find that Griffiths published an article about Catherine as a republican empress back in 1973, and that article uses more concise language for explaining the monarchical republicanism of the 18th century that was not yet counter-posed to monarchy, so Catherine could indeed call herself "a republican." In this book, however, the Russian Empress' change of attitude toward republicanism is duly linked to the news of the French Revolution in the late 1780s, that retrospectively forced her to reevaluate the meaning of the American War for Independence. Since 1789, it became for her an American revolution.

The book is written mostly as an exercise in traditional diplomatic history that has fallen out of focus for new generations of historians. Thus, the domestic discussions in Russia about the meaning of the American War for Independence are almost absent from the pages of the book (with only very brief mention of Alexander Radishchev on the last pages). The author claims that Catherine II began changing her perception of the American War for Independence only after the French Revolution had started. That seems to be a convincing argument. However, some other Russians did watch American events with much deeper hopes or apprehensions, and with better understanding of the significance of the event, - but they did not make it on the pages of the book. However, looking at the other side of the Atlantic, the author addresses the meaning of the quick change in the American perception of Russia in 1779, when domestic policy begins playing the decisive role. American attitudes to Russia were determined first by the British negative perception of Russia as a barbaric country plus British hopes that Russian soldiers would take part in suppressing the rebellion, but when it became clear that Catherine refused to send her troops to American soil, and especially since Declaration of Armed Neutrality, Americans turned to interpreting Russian policy as pro-American. Thus, in discussing the American side of the relations the author applies an approach close to the constructivist methodology.

The "No collusion!" title did strike me at first as a bit too topical, derived from the recent debates about Russian meddling into American affairs in the 21st century. However, upon reading the book, I found that one of the main conclusions made by Professor Griffiths was indeed about the absence of collusion or meddling from Catherine's side. The title finally did not look too artificial.

Historians and sociologists of history frequently discover half-ready manuscripts in the archives of the past generations' scholars. Sometimes, they are still relevant, but in many cases they are obsolete due to the development of the research. In this case, the book is not a matter of history's past, but is destined to produce an impact on our understanding of the early period of Russian-American relations.

Amanda Brickell Bellows, *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020, xiii. 304pp. Index. \$29.95, Paper.

During the past decade, Russia and the United States marked the 150th anniversary of the abolition of serfdom (1861) and the abolition of slavery (1864), respectively. Although these institutions of unfree labor were abolished within mere years of one another and continue to have lasting influences on the social imaginaries of both societies, very few scholars in any field have concerned themselves with direct comparisons of Russian serfdom and American slavery. With the notable exception of Peter Kolchin's landmark book *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (1987), most scholarly volumes have focused on only one of the two institutions. Within the discipline of history, however, the emergence of dynamic fields such as postcolonial studies and global history have spurred innovative inquiries into "comparative emancipations" and "post-emancipation studies" all over the world. Moreover, although originally the domain of historians, studies of serfdom and slavery have more recently been undertaken by a wave of literary scholars. Similar to Dale E. Peterson's *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (2000) and Marcus S. Lee's *Slavery, Philosophy and American Literature, 1830-1860* (2005), Amanda Brickell Bellows's *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination* both builds upon and contributes to these new, interdisciplinary directions in the study of systems of bondage and their post-emancipation aftermaths.

Bellows' book analyzes similarities and differences in how cultural production in Imperial Russia and the United States of America depicted serfdom and slavery from the mid-19th century onward. The key word in this study is "imagination." Bellows uses this term to denote the varying and competing ways in which different segments of Russian and American society "disputed the meaning of emancipation and advanced particular visions of abolition in writing and art that alternatively ignored, celebrated, or critiqued the reforms" of the post-emancipation era (222). Unlike literary scholars who have recently tackled the comparison of serfdom and slavery, Bellows does not rely primarily on literary novels to make her analysis. Rather, her meticulously researched study draws on a wide array of historical artifacts of cultural production, including historical fiction, illustrated periodicals, lithographs, advertisements, and oil paintings. Ultimately, Bellows argues that, in addition to the well-researched issues of class divisions, labor relations, gendered policymaking, and racial tensions, sites of cultural production also "influenced the absorption of formerly bonded populations through analogous processes of mass communication" that affected public opinion (4).

A definite strength of the book is its thematic and chronological organization, which relates in fascinating detail the changes which images of serfdom, peasants, slavery and freedpeople underwent from the eve of emancipation up to the onset of World War I. Chapter one chronicles the pre-emancipation fight to agitate for abolition through the creation of empathetic and humanizing literary depictions of emotionally complex Russian *narod* and black folk. The plays and short stories

of writers such as Aleksei Pisemskii and Louisa May Alcott “helped audiences envision a post-emancipation era in which the former dynamics between owners and bonded laborers were but a distant memory” (43). However, as chapter two details, this radical literary impulse was already being challenged in both societies by popular but nostalgic historical fiction published in the years immediately following emancipation. These works misrepresented serfdom and slavery as “essential” and “beneficial” social systems under which laborers had “received ample support from their landlords,” with whom they also shared “fond, brotherly relations” (55, 62). The subsequent three chapters follow the continuing battle over the collective memory of these institutions of bondage and the evolving understandings of national identity that were promulgated in more visual fields of cultural production. In both Russia and America, illustrated periodicals and lithographs “disparaged peasants and African Americans” far more often than they “criticized members of the Russian nobility” (102). However, by the dawn of the 20th century, oil paintings and advertisements in America “did not depict black culture as representative of American national culture,” while Russian artists and merchants seemed mostly to acknowledge that “peasants’ traditions and institutions were essential to national development” (140, 184). The final chapter and brief epilogue interrogate the “efficacy in using fiction” and other sites of cultural production to make an impact on the process of assimilating new subjects or citizens in the post-emancipation era (206).

As a minor flaw, the book does not discuss the author’s driving aim in comparing post-emancipation imaginaries of serfdom and slavery. Bellows merely states that, through this comparison, “we glean useful information not apparent from the separate study of each country” (3). But what is the object of this usefulness? Will it be useful to recognizing the boundaries of emancipation in the construction of post-bondage societies, as Cooper, Holt and Scott once suggested in their book *Beyond Slavery* (2000)? Or will it be useful in gaining a better understanding of processes of citizenship, belonging and assimilation as broader categories of social phenomenon?

Another minor imperfection is that, while the writing is more than engaging, at times the analyses drawn from the comparisons are too quick to elide nuanced similarities between the cases. For example, Bellows argues that American urban and commercial aesthetics boasted “eclectic sources” of nationalist inspiration, as opposed to Imperial Russia’s hegemonic “Style Russe” (161). Yet this ignores the fact that ancient Greece and Egypt were part and parcel of the European enlightenment’s legacy of classical, Greco-Roman education, of which the American founders consciously strove to be a part. Recognition of this would make the choice of names for the literary figures Uncle Remus and Uncle Julius take on a new and interesting light in Bellows’ analysis, for example.

One subtle yet useful thing that can be gleaned from a direct comparison of slavery and serfdom is the extent to which some of their most important similarities and differences reflect both American and Russian questions of civilizational belonging vis-à-vis Western Europe, on the one hand, and the desirability and

feasibility of “absorbing” former serfs and slaves into that narrative of civilizational belonging, on the other. Consideration of the comparison from that perspective may shed light on at least one major difference that Bellows observes late in the book: that there was not widespread “mob violence” against former serfs as there was against formerly enslaved people in the United States (213). Bellows mostly attributes this difference to the fact that freedpeople were a minority in the United States, the question bears further examination.

Overall, this book is a welcome and fascinating new entry into the comparative study of emancipations, generally, and the direct comparison of American slavery and Russian serfdom, specifically. While easily assignable to undergraduate students on a chapter-by-chapter basis, in its entirety the book undoubtedly speaks to history, literary and cultural scholars of all levels.

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Elizabeth Atwood. *The Liberation of Marguerite Harrison: America's First Female Foreign Intelligence Agent*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2020. 288pp. plus illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. Hardback \$ 32.95.

Marguerite Harrison was a product of the upper-class life of Victorian era Baltimore, but the middle part of her life was one of adventure, travel, and intrigue. Elizabeth Atwood has published the first biography of a fascinating woman who broke many social and cultural norms while maintaining her status in Baltimore's high society. She was the daughter of a shipping magnate who seemed to be moving through a fairly conventional life until her husband died suddenly in 1915. For the next decade or so, she would spy for the United States in postwar Germany, be caught and imprisoned twice for spying for the United States in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s, travel through Asia and the Middle East more than once, write several books and many articles about her adventures, and help make one of the world's first documentary films. Atwood's biography asserts that Harrison was a liberated woman even though her own views of feminism were ambiguous.

This study chronicles Harrison's life from birth to death in a relatively short space. The first third of the book covers Harrison's early life until the death of her husband, Thomas Harrison, in 1915. Atwood relies on new information about Harrison from US and Soviet/Russian archives about her work in early Soviet Russia during her two spying and prison experiences in the early 1920s. The author also relies heavily on Harrison's autobiography, *There's Always Tomorrow*, written in the mid-1930s while she sparingly uses the subject's firsthand account of her first Russian adventure, *Marooned in Moscow* and does not mention at all Harrison's second book on her Russian adventures, *More Tales from a Russian Prison*. While parts of both books are reproduced in her newspaper articles and

in her autobiography, both books add a lot of depth about Harrison's views of Russia and Russians. These are some of the most fascinating parts of Harrison's works that are not addressed in much depth in this study.

The later part of the book addresses her adventures with Merian C. Cooper into Persia to make a film and perhaps spy further for the United States and her later life. Atwood's thesis is that Harrison was a spy for the United States not only in Germany and Soviet Russia, but also in the Middle East. However, Atwood's study poses many questions that are speculative, but are not necessarily confirmed. While the possibilities of what Harrison's motivations and life are really compelling, much of this is just speculation.

While a full biography of Harrison is long overdue and Atwood's study is a welcome addition to the literature on spies and Russian-American relations, it is missing an analysis of some of Harrison's most interesting views on Russia during her two trips.

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