

GLORIOUS MISADVENTURES: NIKOLAI REZANOV AND THE DREAM OF A RUSSIAN AMERICA. Owen Matthews. 2013. London: Bloomsbury. xi + 384 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978 1 4088 2223 4. £20.

In 1999 there appeared in this journal a brief notice of a book, edited by Eve Iversen, in the important Alaska History series, concerning the romance of Nikolai Rezanov (1763–1807), Tsarist official and participant in Krusenstern's voyage of 1803 in *Nadezhda* to the Pacific, and Concepción Argüello, the daughter of the Spanish governor of the settlement at San Francisco (Stone 1999). This interesting volume contained an outline of the whole tale, the details of the voyage of Rezanov, who was, among other things, instrumental in the foundation of the Russian-American Company, and the reasons for his visit to San Francisco, which were largely to obtain supplies for the struggling settlement of Novo-Archangelsk (Sitka) and to undertake some fact finding, to put it politely, concerning the activities of the Spaniards on the coast. While there he established a relationship with Concepción, who was then 15, Rezanov being 42, and proposed marriage. The problem was not the age difference between the parties but that of their respective religions. After a few weeks Rezanov sailed away with the supplies and a proposed trade treaty, with a promise to return. But he died in Siberia on his way to St Petersburg. Concepción never married and eventually became a nun. This relationship has featured in literature and is the subject of a rock opera *Junona i Avos* that is very popular in Russia.

The whole story has much to invite the attention of connoisseurs of the unusual, as well as those interested in Russian America and the north Pacific. Now we have, in the present volume, an exhaustive treatment of the life and work of Rezanov, in which the romance occupies a relatively small part, aiming to set him firmly in the context of the times, with an assessment of how successful were his various endeavours, most notably those in the Pacific including his eccentric and unilateral declaration of war on Japan because of insults issued to him as Russian 'ambassador'. He seems to have been a somewhat unstable character, but once he had advanced in the Imperial service, he developed the aim of consolidating the existing isolated fur trading settlements in Alaska into a firm colony stretching from Siberia to California. And, according to the blurb of the book, 'Rezanov's ambitious plan very nearly succeeded'. There is, of course, much to doubt about that statement since the Russians were never prepared to make

sufficient investment, monetary or human, into their plan for it to have a hope of success as they wished to define it.

But it must be stated clearly that this is a very good book indeed and it breaks much new ground in the subject. The author has completed impressive research on the topic. A mere glance at the list of primary sources, including many located in Russian archives as well as probably more accessible ones in the USA and Estonia suffices to impress the reader with the amount of sheer hard work that the project must have involved. Matthews presents as full a biography of Rezanov, as is possible at this remove and comments at length on his life in the court at St Petersburg before the start of his travels to Siberia and beyond. He is on sure ground in his portrayal of the various, larger than life, characters with whom Rezanov came into contact during his travels, most notably Krusenstern himself, with whom he was a loggerheads since both believed themselves to be in command of the expedition, the naturalist Georg von Langsdorff, and the redoubtable Alexander Baranov, the Russian-American Company's manager for 19 years and whose portrait presented in the book leaves little doubt concerning his character. Then we reach San Francisco, the 'romance' and onto more familiar ground culminating in Rezanov's death on 8 March 1807.

There are very few points with which it is possible to challenge the author. He uses Iverson instead of Iversen, and this reviewer was startled to be informed that Pskov, whence the Rezanov family came, 'remains a backwater today'. It is, indeed, a small city but one full of interest. However as the author lives in Moscow and Istanbul, while the reviewer's residence is in a tiny village in the Isle of Man, differences of perspective are permissible. The greatest objection is the throw away comment that the importance of Russian Orthodoxy 'and chronic alcoholism are the two most visible legacies of Russian America'. The former is undoubtedly true but as regards the latter it is not at all obvious.

The topic of this book is really only of peripheral interest to readers of *Polar Record*, hence the brevity of this note, but for those who relish a good story and who wish to be informed about a little known subject, this book could hardly be bettered (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Rd., Cambridge CB2 1ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk)).

Reference

- Stone, I.R. 1999. Review. Iversen, E. (Editor). *The romance of Nikolai Rezanov and Concepción Argüello: a literary legend and its effect on Californian history*. *Polar Record* 35(194): 267–268.