

***The Museum at the End of the World: Encounters in the Russian Far East.* Alexia Bloch and Laurel Kendall. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 230 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Alexander D. King

*The Museum at the End of the World* is a difficult book to categorize. It is not an ethnography, yet the authors are self-identified ethnographers and the descriptions and prose are clearly in an ethnographic style. It is not a history of museums and museum expeditions in eastern Siberia, but it includes some wonderful historical anecdotes on the American Museum of Natural History's (AMNH) Jesup Expedition, conducted at the turn of the twentieth century. It is not a survey of museums in the Russian Far East, but it does provide valuable descriptions of regional museums located in Providenia, Anadyr, Magadan, Khabarovsk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Esso, and Palana. It is an academic anthropological travel book, and this contradiction between the scholarly and popular genres produces both the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

Alexia Bloch was a junior anthropologist, having then just finished her dissertation based on extensive fieldwork in central Siberia. She was working at the AMNH as a postdoctoral fellow when the trip was made in 1998. Laurel Kendall is a senior anthropologist, curator of the Asian section in the AMNH anthropology department, with decades of experience in Korea and some work in China and Vietnam, as well. *The Museum at the End of the World* is titled ironically, and the authors do a good job at highlighting the cosmopolitan histories and present realities of even the small towns in the Russian Far East—nearly every town they visit has a foreign anthropologist in residence, and there are burgeoning relationships with Alaska and other parts of the U.S., Canada, China, Japan, and Korea, especially in trade. On the other hand, the authors' own troubles securing air tickets and making flights highlight the drastic contraction in post-Soviet transport infrastructure and the lessened mobility of local Siberians with the reduction of subsidies from the center. Bloch and Kendall visit regional museums (roughly in the order listed above), bringing CD-ROMs of the Siberian Jesup collection and copies of a recent catalog of the *Drawing Shadows to Stone* photographic exhibit of Jesup photographs (from both sides of the Pacific but emphasizing the Siberian collections) for museums and libraries. The book is an account of their journey, punctuated with excerpts from letters or early articles describing the travels and adventures undergone by Vladimir Bogoraz, Vladimir Jochelson, and Berthold Laufer as they investigated Chukotka, northern Kamchatka, and the Amur River area, respectively, in 1900-1902. Reading about Laufer's visa problems due to his being a German Jew and the Tsar's secret instructions to local authorities to thwart and monitor Jochelson at every step, due to his history as a revolutionary exile, puts Bloch's and Kendall's visa worries and air ticket snafus in perspective. While it may not seem so to contemporary travellers in the Russian Far East, political and infrastructural conditions for travel and research have vastly improved over the course of the twentieth century.

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Regional museums in the Soviet Union were often a “grass-roots” affair, especially in the smaller towns, and they reflect the idiosyncratic curiosities, as well as the particular intellectual and material resources of the communities that they represent. The authors were treated to thorough (if sometimes tedious) tours of *all* the exhibits in each museum, and I enjoyed the descriptions, although I would have liked a few more pictures of the displays. One of the main goals of Bloch and Kendall’s trip was to build relationships between the AMNH and local museums, and just as importantly, to connect with local indigenous communities to provide them with information about the AMNH collections and lay the groundwork for possible future projects connecting New York better with the Russian Far East. As they recount, these two objectives cannot always be pursued simultaneously. Many of the museums, especially the larger ones in cities like Magadan, Khabarovsk, and Petropavlovsk are managed by non-native “newcomers” and their priorities do not always put indigenous people and their interests first. However, we also learn that the category “newcomer” does not always reflect an individual’s social ties or political heart. For example, the director of the museum in Palana was a Koryak man, but he was so indifferent to Bloch and Kendall’s visit that he went on vacation the month they were supposed to arrive and left it to his deputy, the “newcomer” Tatiana Volkova, to receive the Americans. I can report from my acquaintances in Palana that the director’s disinterest has lead him to leave the museum. Volkova is now the director, which most of the indigenous community in Palana consider to be a good thing.

In writing a travel book, the authors have produced clear, accessible prose without the jargon and few of the preoccupations that define anthropology. It is, however, a scholarly work published by a university press, so all sources are properly referenced and the bibliography covers all the important sources on the history of the Jesup expedition and the anthropology of the region. Peculiar Russian/Soviet habits and institutions are explained, and the authors are acutely aware of the social and political ramifications of their presence in, and representations of, the Russian Far East. It is a solid work and the authors are to be commended for that. However, this reviewer wishes that the authors had been a bit more daring or experimental. The book is best read in small doses, such as from a bedside table. It is interesting but not riveting. Instead of presenting a seamless narrative of their “encounters in the Russian Far East” it may have been more engaging to present a series of discontinuous vignettes about the places or the museums and people they visited. Instead of shifting from “we” to third person to identify individual reactions, the authors could have framed their reactions as a conversation, perhaps with contrasting typefaces. I liked *The Museum at the End of the World*, and I think any museum professional or anthropologist with a curiosity about eastern Siberia will also enjoy it.

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