

REVIEW

WILD REINDEER IN THE SOVIET UNION

[Review by Terence Armstrong of Ye. Ye. Syroyechkovskiy, ed. *Dikiy severnyy olen' v SSSR* [*Wild reindeer in the USSR*], Moscow, Izdatel'stvo Sovetskaya Rossiya, 1975, 318 p.]

The reindeer has been domesticated only in the Old World. In the New World the same animal, called caribou, has remained wild, and in so far as the domesticated form is found there, it is the descendant of relatively recent imports from the Old World. But if there is no such thing as a domesticated caribou, there is a wild reindeer. In the Soviet Union, which has 80 per cent of the world's domesticated reindeer, the wild variety is becoming both a problem and a challenge. Hence this volume of papers, which results from a conference held at Dudinka, on the lower Yenisey river, in June 1970.

The problem arises because there are now believed to be well over 600 000 wild reindeer in the country (the latest detailed estimate was 608 000 in 1971), as against 2.2 million domesticated reindeer in 1974. The number of wild reindeer has grown by a factor of almost two since 1950, so that in some areas wild deer greatly exceed domesticated, while the number of domesticated has grown by only 10 per cent in that time. The most obvious questions posed are these: are the two figures interrelated, and what ought to be done about the wild animals? It had been realized that little was known about the wild reindeer, and thus the papers in this volume concern the biology of the animals, their numbers in different regions, and the ways in which the stock is at present utilized by man.

The chief editor, Dr Syroyechkovskiy of the Central Laboratory of the Chief Administration of Hunting Economics and Nature Reserves [Glavnoye Upravleniye Okhotnich'yego Khozyaystva i Zapovednikov, or Glavokhoto], Moscow, contributes an informative introductory paper on the current situation. He addresses four main issues: interaction between wild and domesticated reindeer, the significance of wild reindeer for the peoples of the north, the rational use of the stock, and the development of scientific and conservation studies. This author's outlook, and thus to a considerable extent that of the volume, is oriented to the hunting aspect, and, since he is employed by the government agency which controls hunting, his view of hunting is as an industry yielding a return to the state like any other.

On the issue of interaction with domesticated reindeer, Syroyechkovskiy finds a lack of firm evidence, but he is strongly inclined to believe that there need be no conflict, either in competition for pastures or in loss of animals from domesticated herds to wild herds. On the first point, he is contradicted by one of his contributors, the botanist V. N. Andreyev, who, writing from a vast experience of the matter, states categorically that they are in competition for pastures, and that reindeer herding is suffering from this.

The only northern people, it seems, who rely on wild reindeer hunting to any great extent are the numerically small Nganasany, who live at the base of the Taymyr peninsula and numbered 953 in the 1970 census. Their livelihood, the book maintains, must be safeguarded — as must that of the groups and individuals of other peoples who engage in the same activity. But the northerners alone will not, it is felt, be able to solve the problem. Hunters from elsewhere must help too, and the suggestion is made that foreign exchange could be earned in this way.

While Syroyechkovskiy is at pains to play down the conflict between hunting and herding (and the conference passed a resolution that the one should not be ranged against the other), it is clear that such a conflict exists and will no doubt grow as wild numbers grow. In fact, events between the conference (1970) and publication of the papers (1975) have brought this out; for the number of domesticated reindeer has fallen every year since 1970, by one to two per cent annually, and it is hard to suppose that this is not at least in part due to competition. Syroyechkovskiy makes the further point—without producing any evidence to back it—that wild reindeer utilize pastures less wastefully than domesticated. Here too Andreyev is in direct opposition, maintaining that

domesticated reindeer use food resources between five and ten times more fully than do wild ones. This is an issue that needs to be resolved.

Other interesting topics are discussed, notably the transmission of illness between the groups. Here once again the editor sees things in a rather more optimistic light than some of his contributors. The final contribution is a summary of the caribou situation in Canada by E. V. Rogacheva.

Among the recommendations of the conference was the setting up of two bodies to continue study. One, an Interdepartmental Commission for Wild Reindeer Problems [Mezhduvedomstvennaya Komissiya po Probleme Dikogo Severnogo Olenya], was to co-ordinate policy, and was duly created in 1971, with Syroyechkovskiy as chairman. The other was a Problems Laboratory for Wild Reindeer Studies [Problemnaya Laboratoriya po Dikomu Severnomu Olenyu]. It was to be set up within the Research Institute of Agriculture of the Far North [Nauchno-Issledovatel'skiy Institut Sel'skogo Khozyaystva Kraynego Severa] at Noril'sk, the largest herd of wild reindeer (386 000 in 1972) being in neighbouring Taymyr; but it is not clear if this has yet come about.

A second conference on this subject was planned to take place in Yakutsk in 1974, and it is to be hoped that an equally informative volume will result from that occasion.

POLAR VOYAGERS

[A review by Roland Huntford* of Frank Rasky's *The polar voyagers*. Scarborough, Ontario, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd, 1976, 320 p, illus. \$17.95.]

By his own account, Mr Rasky has set out to breathe life into 'the entire pantheon of major Arctic explorers'. As he points out, it has not been attempted before; and with reason. It is a daunting task. In the specialized Purgatory of recreating historical characters, the explorer is particularly elusive and diabolical. To touch him is to invite comparison with those historians of genius, Samuel Eliot Morison and Salvador de Madariaga, the biographers of Columbus.

What Mr Rasky has produced is a volume of curious gossip. This is not meant in any derogatory sense. All history is gossip. The work will help to fill in the contours of many Arctic figures; some more fully than others. Provided it is consulted with discretion, it will serve as a useful companion to the weightier surveys of Arctic history. The caveat is necessary. This is a journalist's book, with all that that implies. There is a constant striving for effect; the insistence on the snappy phrase. Research has clearly been thorough, but details are sometimes slipshod and Mr Rasky has perpetrated a number of irritating errors. It is nonetheless an entertaining book. Its greatest service may be in suggesting lines of further enquiry.

Starting with the Vikings, Mr Rasky presents the men who explored the north and brought the consciousness of the Arctic into the mind of western man. He touches the main actors: Hudson, Baffin, Barents; the 18th century explorers of Canada; Mackenzie and the Hudson's Bay Voyageurs. He also remembers the half-forgotten 17th century Dane, Jens Munk, one of the more poignant victims of the North-west Passage. They are considered not as explorers in vacuo, but as people put in the context of their times. It is an attempt to make them live as personalities.

Some of the information is intriguing and out of the way. For example, Mr Rasky tells us that: 'In Shakespeare's comedy, *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby Belch is told by a servant of Olivia: "You are now sailed into the north of my lady's opinion; where you will hang like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard." Shakespeare, who cracked many a quip at the expense of Elizabethan-era explorers, was here making a topical allusion to the icicled whiskers of an extraordinary Dutchman named William Barents.'

Mr Rasky is best on the early meetings between European explorers and the Eskimos. This was, one suspects, the theme that inspired the book, and the one which appeals to him most deeply. He is concerned to deliver the *coup de grâce* to what he would call a European racist-supremacist view. He is weakest at portraying the Norsemen and John Cabot, the 15th century explorer. This is understandable. Their mental landscapes are exceptionally difficult to grasp. The spirit of their respective times was far from our own.

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