

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska. By William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6ss4q6n5>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 12(4)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

West, C. Eugene

### Publication Date

1988-09-01

### DOI

10.17953

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

this book with a satisfied feeling of having experienced something very palpable about an Indian community and its transitions.

*Richard Keeling*  
University of California, Los Angeles

**Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska.** By William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. 360 pages. \$45.00 Cloth. \$24.95 Paper.

A slick, glossy, and colorful publication is not always made for coffee table display and that truism applies here. *Crossroads of Continents* was the catalog for a major exhibition which opened at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. in September, 1988. The event brought together, for the first time, early ethnographic collections from the North Pacific not available in any one nation. This exhibition and monograph are the result of a decade of cooperative endeavor by the Smithsonian Institution, the Soviet Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, and several other museums. Primary focus of the exhibition was on the Native peoples of 18th and 19th century Alaska and Siberia.

The focus of the book is much broader and useful to laymen and scholars interested in Native peoples of the North Pacific region. In this sense, it was intended to be a vehicle for education and information resulting from recent scholarship and succeeds admirably. Readers are provided with a panorama of the history, culture and art of North Pacific traditional cultures from prehistoric times to the present.

*Crossroads* is organized around a logical progression of themes which outline its purpose and introduce the many native groups and cultures involved. These are followed by discussions of environment, prehistory, Euro-American historic contact, and current lifeways of Siberian peoples and Alaska Natives. The heart of the exhibition related material is composed of chapters about certain aspects of the cultures of North Pacific peoples. The final section is on the current lives of the native peoples.

Individual chapters are authored by acknowledged Soviet and American scholars of specific cultures, subject specialties (i.e. art) and historical events. Contents cover a vast span of nearly 20 thousand years, and enormous geographic distance from the borders of China to Vancouver Island on the Pacific Coast of Canada. Such an enormous scale can often lead the layman into a confusion of topics, places, names and specialized terminology. These pitfalls are avoided here with skill.

*Crossroads of Continents* has many positive attributes and few defects. Purpose and intent are clearly presented and a brief history of how the exhibition and monograph came into existence is provided in the Acknowledgements. Books which are compilations of individually authored chapters by specialists often produce a jarring effect with each change of author as the reader struggles with evident differences of style, vocabulary and purpose. Here, the editors are to be congratulated for producing a work which hangs together in narrative, illustration, and physical format.

It is difficult to access the content of so many subjects by experts in their respective fields. Translations from Russian are handled with evident expertise and technical jargon by the authors who are acknowledged experts expounding on topics of rather special interest is quite minimal. Chapters are easy to follow and understand, and, for the nonspecialist, provide new information or insight on nearly every page.

The lavish, for the most part, colored illustrations, photographs and maps are documented with full captions which add much to the attractiveness of this work. A better fit between the illustrations and the subject matter of chapters would improve the utility of the artifacts illustrated. However, for an exhibition catalog which desires to be more than the common artifact photograph and caption listing, museums may not own specimens which are intimately tied to the narrative content. The most obvious weakness of this monograph is the absence of an index. Any volume with such a wide time span, geographic range, and diverse topics as well as proper names and individual artifacts cries out for an index.

Despite this weakness, *Crossroads* is a real step forward in presentation of information about Alaska and Siberia. It most surely changes for the foreseeable future the view that Alaskan Na-

tive cultures have developed in isolation from Asian historical and cultural events. One has only to compare it to some earlier efforts to see the difference. Perhaps the best previous books with a similar scope and purpose have been the two volumes on the Bering Land Bridge (1967, 1982), edited by David M. Hopkins and the arctic and subarctic volumes of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (1981, 1984), edited by William C. Sturtevant. These were also of broad interest to a wide audience of scholars and laymen but lacked the eye catching appeal of *Crossroads*.

Other ethnographic and anthropological publications have not been remotely as good. M. G. Levin and L. P. Potapov's *Narody Sibiri* (1956) and its translation, *Peoples of Siberia* (1964), are publications nearly devoid of colored maps, photographs, or art works which are so attractive and informative in *Crossroads*. Despite the value of its contents to English readers, the translation *Peoples of Siberia* is even less attractive than the Soviet version with atrocious reproductions of original Russian illustrations. *Cultures of the Bering Sea Region* (1983) by Henry Michael and James VanStone was no improvement over the volume on Siberian peoples published a quarter century earlier. The latter is another routine paperback compilation of scientific papers in which maps, drawings and photographs are almost absent and displays little evidence that thought was given to a potential audience beyond the small scientific and historical scholarly community. Both monographs are more limited in scope than *Crossroads* and tend to perpetuate the view that the lack of commerce and interaction of the past half century extend into the past. Other examples of this genre of publication could be included. In sum, *Crossroads* is surely the best panoramic introduction to Alaskan and northeastern Siberian Native peoples and cultures published to date.

The Soviet, American, and Canadian institutions and individuals responsible for bringing together this exhibition and informative monograph are to be congratulated. They have given us a revitalized view of cultures of the North Pacific as they have never been seen before. As interrelated cultures with shared traditions, concepts, technology, and art linked across the narrow Bering Strait by trade, migration and warfare. It is hoped that *Crossroads of Continents* is just the beginning of many more fruitful cooperative scholarly activities emphasizing the unity of knowledge for the North Pacific region for the benefit of, not just

the scholarly community, but Native peoples and citizens of all the nations concerned.

C. Eugene West  
University of Alaska, Fairbanks

**John Josselyn, Colonial Traveler: A Critical Edition of *Two Voyages To New England*.** Edited and introduced by Paul J. Linholdt. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1988. xi, 221 pages. \$27.95 Cloth.

The usefulness of literary texts produced by non-Indians in providing insights and information on the Native past is a persistent problem facing historians and other scholars. On one hand, such accounts are inherently biased; on the other, the most reliable yield a solid body of indisputable evidence that the researcher with the requisite background and care can disentangle from the author's prejudices. Among the most interesting of such texts are a group originating in colonial New England that, in contradistinction to the vast outpouring of Puritan writing, make some effort to present native history and culture on its own terms. Of the authors of these texts—John Josselyn, Thomas Morton, John Smith, Roger Williams, Edward Winslow, and William Wood—only Winslow was associated with the policies of the United Colonies of New England while Josselyn, Morton, and Williams were staunch opponents. The appearance of a new edition of Josselyn's *Account of Two Voyages to New-England* (first published in 1674), prompts a reconsideration of the value of such texts as sources for Native history.

A well educated but impoverished English gentleman, Josselyn first journeyed to New England in 1638 for a stay of fifteen months and again in 1663, this time remaining for eight years. Though based at the southern Maine home of his brother, he familiarized himself with coastal New England from the Penobscot to Plymouth. The principle result of his visits was two publications, *New-Englands Rarities Discovered* (1672) and *Two Voyages*. Josselyn devotes the first book largely to descriptions of the region's natural features; the principle references to Indians are notes on the plants they use as medical remedies. But he appends "A Description of an Indian Squa" and a poem which