

around them, avoiding mines, U-boats, suffering torpedo attacks, and a few unfortunate sinkings.

Lieutenant Stoke makes frequent prideful references in his letters to his family about winning rugby matches and other sporting competitions amid the serious terrors of war. All the while the young man was advancing his academic studies and earning praise from his superiors, thus advancing his naval career at a rapid pace. There are occasional breaks in the narrative where he describes his thoughts in personal letters while keeping within the confines of wartime security. In turn, Mick very humanly yearns for letters from his family and from Doreen, later his future wife. He has strong opinions about the German enemy, but also waxes mildly polemical about the French, Algerians, Egyptians, Italians, and the Americans. He expresses dismay at American racial prejudice he observed and particularly their attitude to the war. "They are mainly preoccupied with Japan and consider Germany is mostly a subsidiary war.... The newspapers concentrate so much on American news that British achievements only get attention if they are really startling and then it will be headlines for only a day" (222).

Cleverly titled, well written, fast moving, *More Lives Than a Ship's Cat* is a riveting look at British naval history from an unusual, intimate point of view. Mick Stoke's extraordinary life appears as an uncommon version of everyman. I highly recommend Stoke's work for maritime historians concerned with the Royal Navy during the Second World War.

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**Colin Thubron. *The Amur River: Between Russia and China*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, [www.harpercollins.com](http://www.harpercollins.com), 2022. 304 pp., map, index, US \$19.00, paper; ISBN 978-0-06309-969-2. (E-book available.)**

If one factors its source stream into the equation, as geographers routinely do, the Amur River is the tenth longest in the world, coursing 2763 miles from west to east. It originates in remote Mongolian bogs and carves a pair of broad, graceful arcs before finding its outlet in the Strait of Tartary, behind Sakhalin Island. For 1100 of its miles, the Amur forms the border between Russia and China, a region freighted with a difficult history (Genghis Khan, Stalin, purges) and a tense present (Putin, watch towers, live-fire exercises). Westerners rarely travel there and if they do, it is at their peril.

Colin Thubron knew this as well as anyone. An acclaimed travel writer with numerous books and awards to his credit, he owns extensive experience in both Russia and China, and at eighty-four has lost none of his grit. Indeed,

at a time when most men his age might be expected to enjoy a well-deserved retirement, Thubron embarked on a personal exploration of the Amur from source to outfall. This was no idle riverine meander, but rather, a difficult journey by horse, foot, train, car, ferry, and smugglers' boat, crisscrossing "a fault-line shrouded in old mistrust" (1).

Thubron writes beautifully, and he nicely conjures the river's many moods and personalities throughout this absorbing book. He began his odyssey in Mongolia on horseback with two guides. "Here is the infant Amur," he writes of its swampy headwaters. "It has a faint peaty tinge. Upstream it does not bubble whole from the ground, but emerges in a glinting coalescence of marshland waters, edged by fescue grass and willows" (12). Not surprisingly, the horses struggled through this morass, sunk to their withers with the "peat-laden water brimming over their backs" (16). At one point, Thubron's mount rolled over, trapping him underneath, "my ribcage screaming" (16). The horse regained its footing and lurched forward, dragging him a short distance before he wrenched his foot free of the stirrup. Thubron suffered two fractured ribs and a broken ankle, but rather than seek medical help or cancel his trip, he pressed forward, convinced that his injuries were not severe.

At Sretensk, Russia, a town "of mellow tranquility" where "nothing has overlaid the past" (73), Thubron encountered curiosity, suspicion, and virtually no commercial or recreational activity on the 400-yard-wide river. "Nobody fishes or sails on it," he observed, and "the only ship I see is a decommissioned patrol vessel set up on a memorial ramp" (74). He was briefly detained and interrogated, his explanation that he was writing a book about the Amur River only baffling the police, until higher-ups cleared him to continue. The ordinary Russians he interviewed in that remote Siberian fastness showed no energy, the young had little ambition, and everyone hated the Chinese. "There is a sour repetitiveness to everything I hear. That the Chinese can't be trusted. They are aggressive and sly. They work hard, but they have closed hearts" (122).

There is no denying that both optimism and prosperity are brighter on the Chinese side of the border. Russia's Amur population is about two million whereas China's is a burgeoning 110 million. Throughout his journey Thubron noted the glittering cities, extravagant lights, and towering buildings that overlooked what the Chinese call the Black Dragon River. In Heihe, a town of 1.2 million, he felt the contrast with Russia most keenly. "Parked beneath the grander flat-blocks, where spruce young women are walking in platform boots, I see lines of brand-new Subaru, Lexus and Toyota saloons, and Land Rovers with tinted windows" (147-8). The city's main business centre was a noisy "din of commerce" and the shops "bright-lit palaces, trumpeted in front by a raucous crossfire of loudspeakers" (148).

Along the last leg of his journey Thubron made a river run with a couple

of Russian poachers seeking caviar-rich salmon and the protected kaluga sturgeon (which can grow up to 18 feet long). They zipped along in a “tough, 25-foot sloop, whose four wonky seats have been torn from somewhere else” (241). Two policemen in a patrol boat overtook them, but they were easygoing compared to those elsewhere along the route. The officers knew the locals needed the fish to live, and they were happy to joke and sip a little vodka before departing. Away from the bonhomie on the water, however, Thubron found dire poverty, isolation, and a history of catastrophic floods. One of the poacher’s wives was blunt: “I scream every day. I forget human language. We have no television, no telephone, no radio.” She continued: “If your wife was out here, she’d be gone in two days. I’ve been here eleven years” (262).

The Amur’s mouth is largely to blame for its dearth of commerce. Thubron found it an underwhelming “labyrinth of shoals, shallows and dead ends” (267) that is iced over seven months of the year. Nonetheless, during the mid-nineteenth century, the Russians seized the area from China and established the port town of Nikolaevsk-on-Amur in hopes of developing it into a busy eastern entrepot to rival San Francisco. But the new lighthouse, log trading houses, shops selling fancy wares, and chuffing steamboats failed to overcome its natural disadvantages. A century and a half later, Thubron rambled a declining burg whose less than 30,000 people had “nobody to trade with and nothing to trade” (268).

Colin Thubron does what a good travel writer should do in this highly readable book – he introduces the reader to a little-known and less-frequented place, unfolds its eventful history as well as its stunning natural beauty, and introduces some remarkable people who inspire both fear and hope for the future. And all that with two fractured ribs and a broken ankle!

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**Steven Ujifusa. *Barons of the Sea, and Their Race to Build the World’s Fastest Clipper Ship*. New York: Simon & Schuster, [www.simonandschuster.ca](http://www.simonandschuster.ca), 2021 426 pp., appendix, notes, index, \$29.99, paper; ISBN 978-1-47674-598-5. (E-book available.)**

Before the space entrepreneurs of the twenty-first century, the railroad magnates of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there were the barons of the nineteenth-century Industrial Age – some involved with ships as well as roads. A unique group of competitors spanning the years from the 1840s through 1860s in the United States sought to outdo each other in building the fastest, finest, and most profitable clipper ships to carry cargo from Canton, China