

Poetry and Alaska: William Henry Seward's Alaskan Purchase and Bret Harte's "An Arctic Vision"

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ABSTRACT. On 30 March 1867, William Henry Seward, American Secretary of State (1861–69), provoked controversy both at home and abroad by signing the treaty that ceded Russian America to the United States. On the East Coast of America, reactions to the newly renamed Alaska were coloured by a personal antipathy towards Seward and the administration that he served. The British considered the cession unfriendly towards their ongoing foreign policy of Canadian confederation in British North America.

Geographically, Alaska, now under United States control, lay menacingly adjacent to the west and north of British Columbia. This potentially vulnerable British colony, which had not then entered the Canadian Confederation, quickly became the focus of conflicting territorial ambitions. For Britain, British Columbia would supply Canada with a much-needed Pacific coastline, while for Seward, it would link Alaska and Washington Territory to form a continuous Pacific coastline for the United States.

For ten fraught days, Seward fought to ratify the Alaska treaty. On the West Coast, where the economic benefits of Alaska's purchase were more immediate, Seward won the approval of the popular press. Among his less likely supporters was the American writer and journalist, (Francis) Bret Harte. Harte, author of such stories of mining life as "The Luck of Roaring Camp," and conventionally thought to be a writer of western literature, turned his attention northward with a poem entitled "An Arctic Vision."

Key words: Alaska purchase, American imperialism, Arctic poetry/criticism, British Columbia, Canadian confederation, Francis Bret Harte, William Henry Seward, Frederick Whympfer

Конспект: В тридцатое марта 1867, Вилиам Генри Сьюард, Американский Секретарь Государства (1861-1869), подписал договор, который передал США права суверенитета русской Америки. Получалась полемика. На востоке США, население не любило Сьюарда и его правительство и поэтому не хорошо относилось к договору и к так называемой "Аляске". Британцы не любили договор из-за своей федеральной политики в Северной Америке.

С точки зрения географии, Аляска, которая была под контролем США, была к западу и к северу от Британской Колумбии. Эта Британская колония, которая еще не вступила в Канадскую конфедерацию, скоро стала кругом различных территориальных интересов. Для Великобритании, Британская Колумбия была бы важным связем между Канадой и Тихим Океаном, а для Сьюарда она соединила бы Аляску и провинцию "Вашингтона" чтобы создать непрерывную береговую линию для США.

За десять дней, Сьюард пробовал утвердить договор об Аляске. На западе США, где экономические выгоды договора были очевидные, Сьюарда поддерживали средства массовой информации. Среди его менее вероятных сторонников был Американский писатель и журналист, Франсис Брет Харте. Харте, автор таких рассказов о жизни в шахтах, как "Фортуна лагеря 'Роринг'," кто часто считался писателем западной литературы, обратил свое внимание на север и писал стихотворение "арктическое зрение".

Ключевые слова: покупка Аляски, Американский империализм, Арктическая поэзия/критика, Британская Колумбия, Канадская Конфедерация, Франсис Брат Харте, Вилиам, Фредерик Уимпер

RÉSUMÉ. Le 30 mars 1867, William Henry Seward, secrétaire d'État américain (1861–1869), souleva une controverse dans son pays comme à l'étranger, en signant le traité qui cédait le territoire russe d'Amérique aux États-Unis. Sur la côte Est américaine, la réaction suscitée par ce nouvel Alaska fut teinte d'une antipathie envers la personne de Seward et l'administration qu'il desservait. Les Britanniques considéraient que cette cession ne favorisait pas leur politique étrangère en cours qui visait une confédération canadienne au sein de l'Amérique du Nord britannique.

Sur le plan géographique, l'Alaska, qui était passé sous le contrôle des États-Unis, constituait une présence menaçante à l'ouest et au nord de la Colombie-Britannique. Cette colonie britannique potentiellement vulnérable, qui n'était pas encore entrée dans la Confédération canadienne, devint rapidement le foyer d'ambitions territoriales conflictuelles. Pour la Grande-Bretagne, la Colombie-Britannique devait donner au Canada l'ouverture indispensable sur le Pacifique, tandis que, pour Seward, elle devait lier l'Alaska au territoire de Washington et former ainsi une côte Pacifique ininterrompue pour les États-Unis.

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Pendant dix journées intenses, Seward se battit pour ratifier le traité de l'Alaska. Sur la côte Ouest, où les avantages économiques découlant de l'achat de l'Alaska étaient plus immédiats, Seward se gagna l'approbation de la presse populaire. Parmi les gens les moins susceptibles de le soutenir se trouvait l'écrivain et journaliste américain, (Francis) Bret Harte. Ce dernier, auteur de récits portant sur la vie dans les mines, comme «The Luck of Roaring Camp», et que l'on classait généralement comme un écrivain «Far West», tourna son attention vers le Nord avec un poème intitulé «An Arctic Vision».

Mots clés: achat de l'Alaska, impérialisme américain, poésie/critique arctique, Colombie-Britannique, Confédération canadienne, Francis Bret Harte, William Henry Seward, Frederick Whymper

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INTRODUCTION

Pulling a favourite book off a library shelf and blowing a thick layer of dust off it can be a fairly demoralizing experience, particularly when the book (a collected volume of verse) is by an American author who in his own lifetime was highly popular. In the late nineteenth century, the individual in question was lionized across the nation and invited to the New England homes of such literary luminaries as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, to name but a few (Fischer and Frank, 1995:339).

In his biography of Bret Harte, Richard O'Connor appraised Harte's notoriety: "Bret Harte had become the most famous writer in America. Certainly not the best, nor the most distinguished, nor even the most promising, but the one whom even the semi-literate immigrant masses had heard of or listened to" (O'Connor, 1966:123–124). Although Harte produced work of literary merit, much of his vogue, as O'Connor suggests, doubtless rested with his choice of popular subject matter, which ranged from tales of mining life based on his own experiences (Pemberton, 1903:53) to humorous treatments of gambling and the Chinese.

On 3 March 1871, Mark Twain referred to Harte as "the most celebrated man in America to-day...the man whose name is on every single tongue from one end of the continent to the other" (Fischer and Frank, 1995:338). Flushed with new-found success, Harte left California early in February 1871 and headed east to Boston, the literary capital of New England (Merwin, 1967:219). Twain reported that: "his journey east to Boston was a perfect torch light procession of éclat & homage. All the cities are fussing about which shall secure him for a citizen" (Fischer and Frank, 1995:338). When Harte reached New York on 20 February en route to Boston (where he arrived on 25 February 1871), even the *New York Tribune* acclaimed "...the fame of Bret Harte,...[who] has so brilliantly shot to the zenith as to render any comments on his poems a superfluous task" (quoted in Merwin, 1967:222).

Despite his undoubted fame during his own lifetime, in the late twentieth century one may easily be forgiven for not knowing the name of (Francis) Bret Harte (1836–1902) (see Fig. 1). It is just possible that his most famous story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp," will not have entirely escaped the popular imagination. It seems doubtful, however, whether his poem "Plain Language From Truthful James," more popularly known as "The Heathen Chinee" (O'Connor, 1966:123),

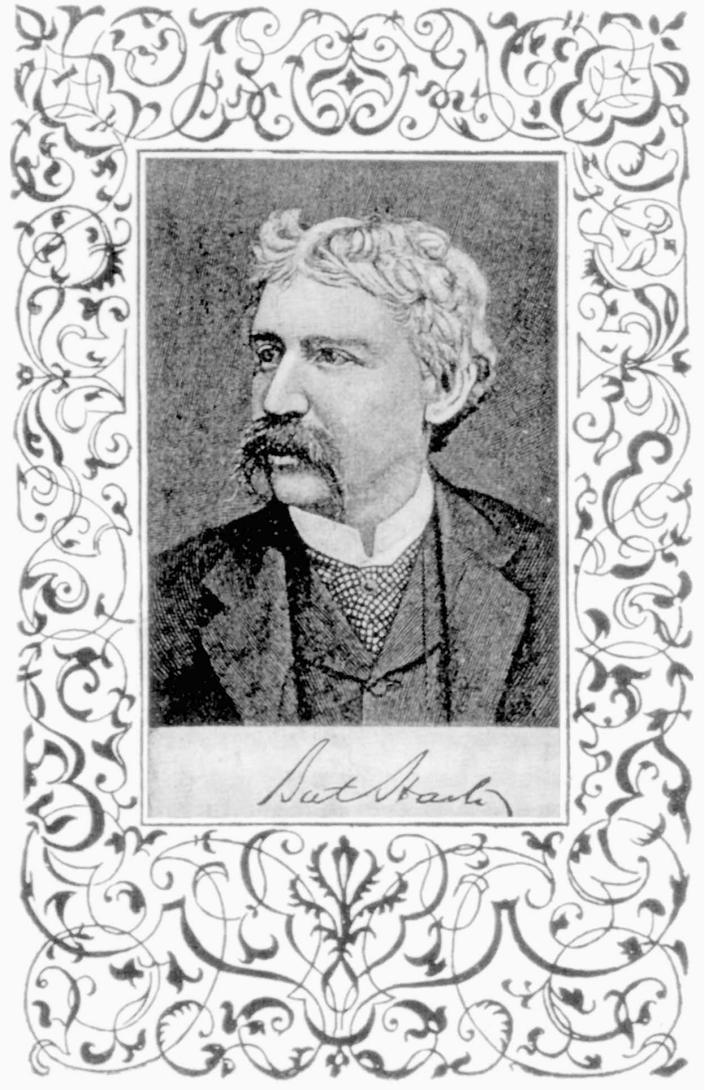


FIG. 1. (Francis) Bret Harte (Harte, 1906: frontispiece).

the cause of Twain's comments and a national sensation in late 1870, is now recited at all. This sixty-line satirical poem about a Chinese card cheat, discovered by a fellow player whose own sleeve is "stuffed full of aces and bowers, / And the same with intent to deceive," made Harte immediately famous (Harte, 1892:132). George Rippey Stewart Jr., one of Harte's biographers, noted: "Like a popular song or a vaudeville joke [it] became the property of the man in the street; picture and word of mouth carried it even to the illiterate"



FIG. 2. William Henry Seward. A Brady photograph, c. 1863 (Van Deusen, 1967: frontispiece). Reproduced by kind permission of the Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

(Stewart, 1931:179). The New York *Globe* best summed up the situation: “We venture to say that there is not a secular paper in the United States which has not copied it” (quoted in O’Connor, 1966:123).

My reason for shaking the dust from Harte’s sadly moth-eaten reputation is not sentimentality, but rather the unexpected encounter of a poem entitled “An Arctic Vision,” found while leafing through that neglected volume of Harte’s collected verse. In the past, I have written on the polar interests of such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and Jack London (Higginson, 1994), but existing biographies of Bret Harte did not lead me to expect that Harte, too, had been unable to resist the temptation of waxing lyrical on Arctic matters. Indeed, “An Arctic Vision” is important partly because it demonstrates Harte’s concern with the American North, indicating a need to query previous assessments of its author.

Hitherto, Harte’s biographers have presented both the author and his work almost exclusively in terms of the American West. Harte, perhaps unwisely, convinced his friends that it was his “ambition to become the founder of a characteristic Western literature,” and this has been seized upon as a definitive claim by his biographers ever since (Pemberton, 1903:86). Certainly more recent Harte biographies, like that written by Richard O’Connor, are still apt to stress the “Western” character of Harte’s literature to the exclusion of other possibilities (O’Connor, 1966:122). Such claims, however, undermine Harte’s work by defining it as

too narrowly focused and have deceived a legion of biographers into offering a representation of Harte’s work circumscribed by its interpretation in terms of the American West. George Rippey Stewart Jr.’s characterization of Harte as “the author of the sentimental romance of...Californian stories and poems” is typical of this over simplification of Harte’s work (Stewart, 1931:177).

I view Harte’s work as more complex than its circumscription as “sentimental romance” and “Western literature” has allowed. An account of Harte’s “An Arctic Vision,” will validate my contention. This poem about a northern locale is more inspired by national and local pride and an appreciation of Alaska’s commercial possibilities than any suggestion of sentimentalizing romance would admit. I will also examine the popular local, national, and international historical contexts that informed “An Arctic Vision.” Through a wider consideration of his poetry, I will demonstrate Harte’s enduring interest in the eastern politician William Henry Seward, the successful architect of the Alaska purchase, and elaborate Harte’s poetic views on American expansionist policy in the 1860s. “An Arctic Vision” and its specific, practical concerns with the American North allow us to build a foundation from which to reject the accepted but unnecessarily limited universalizing thesis of Harte’s work as the outgrowth of an overriding “sentimental” preoccupation with the American West.

Alaska: William Henry Seward and Bret Harte’s “Arctic Vision”

“An Arctic Vision” was one of a number of poems, some humorous and some serious, that Harte wrote throughout his career to coincide with events that he considered momentous. One such humorous piece drew its inspiration from the events of 15 May 1869, five days after the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads met at Promontory Point, Utah and drove a golden spike into the track to mark the joining of East and West (Cooke, 1973:229). Harte commemorated the occasion with a poem called “What the Engines Said,” which was published in the June 1869 edition of the *Overland Monthly* (Gaer, 1968:25). The poem features an imaginary dialogue, in which railroad engines from East and West indulge in a barely good-natured bragging competition centred on the relative merits of East and West. In contrast, other poems that Harte wrote in the same popular vein were profoundly serious. “The Reveille,” for example, is a patriotic piece that reveals Harte’s support of Lincoln and the Union cause. It was “read at a crowded meeting held in the San Francisco Opera House immediately after President Lincoln had called for one hundred thousand volunteers” for the Civil War (Merwin, 1967:314–315).

“An Arctic Vision” is a similar nationalistic piece that Harte wrote to mark the signing of the treaty that would cede Russian America to the United States. It was published in the San Francisco newspaper *The Bulletin* on 8 April 1867, and was signed simply F.B.H. (Gaer, 1968:19). The title immediately suggests a view of the Arctic on the part of the author,



FIG. 3. Sitka, capital of Alaska, flying the stars and stripes. Original sketch by Frederick Whymper. (Whymper, 1868: facing p. 73).

but closer investigation reveals that the vision could belong to a person other than Harte, and that the poem represents both of their visions. In this deliberately propagandist piece of verse for the popular press, Harte lent his support to the recently signed but not yet ratified treaty secured by William Henry Seward (1801–72, Secretary of State 1861–69; see Fig. 2) (Pratt, 1964:6).

Henry Adams, a descendant of two former American Presidents and two years Harte's junior, described Seward in 1861 as a "precious foxy old man, [who] tells no one his secrets" and who is the "virtual ruler of this country" (Ford, 1930:76, 81). Harte's attraction to the powerful Seward may be attributed to nationalist sympathies, but could also have had a more personal dimension. Although Bret Harte and William Henry Seward never met, Harte did meet Seward's son Frederick in 1877. When Harte's career took a turn for the worse, it was through the support of Frederick W. Seward, Assistant Secretary of the State Department, that Harte attained the salaried position of Commercial Agent of the United States at Crefeld, Germany (Stewart, 1931:245).

Harte described his interview with Frederick W. Seward, remarking how the "kindly" son of William Henry Seward offered him "Crefeld, near Düsseldorf...worth about two thousand dollars [perhaps to] be raised to three or four thousand" per annum (Harte, 1926:66). Frederick W. Seward was likely willing to help Harte because he was mindful of the partiality that Harte's poetry of the 1860s had shown for his

late father. Oddly enough, the intersections between the two families also had an earlier history: Henry Hart, Bret's father, had been a classmate of William Henry Seward at Union College in 1817 (Stewart, 1931).

Harte's poem "An Arctic Vision" appeared on 8 April 1867, ten years before his meeting with Frederick W. Seward. Just over a week earlier, William Henry Seward had signed the cession treaty of 30 March 1867 with the Russian Minister, Baron Edouard de Stoeckl. The acquisition of Russian America was brought to fruition under heavy fire from opposition, despite successful precedents. As *The Bulletin* (9 April 1867) remarked: "Even the magnificent Louisiana purchase, considering the poverty and weakness of the Republic when it was made...was not so clearly advantageous." Such praise was extravagant indeed, as the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, secured at a cost of about \$15 000 000 (Hawgood, 1967:81), added 828 000 square miles (2 144 512 km²) to the United States. The new lands later became the states of Arkansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota, while contributing territory to North Dakota, Minnesota, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Wyoming.

On 9 April 1867, the cession treaty was ratified and on 18 October 1867, the Alaska territory was formally transferred, and the American flag was first flown at the capital, Sitka (see Fig. 3). This event marked the successful completion of Seward's campaign to purchase a vast landmass comprising 586 400 square miles (1 518 770 km²) (Pratt, 1964:171) at

the nominal cost of \$7 200 000 (Higginson, 1917:185). In considering such an amount, bear in mind that in New Orleans in 1867, a comparable figure was to be found in “the estimated loss to the United States Internal Revenue on account of the destruction of this year’s crops of cotton, sugar and molasses by the overflow of the Mississippi, [which] is between \$8,000,000 and \$10,000,000” (*The Bulletin*, 25 April 1867). The cost of Alaska, as the *Boston Herald* reflected in 1867, was “dog cheap—there could be no doubt about it” (quoted in Hunt, 1976:35).

Northern Rivalries: The Troubled Purchase of Russian America

“Dog cheap” or not, examination of the context in which Harte’s “An Arctic Vision” was written reveals a tangled web of conflicting political, ideological, personal, and local interests within the United States. Abroad, the cession of Russian America, which bordered British Columbia, became the focal point of friction between the United States and Great Britain at a time when Britain was attempting to consolidate its North American possessions into the new Confederation of Canada. The signing of the treaty, moreover, was not a clear indication that the purchase would succeed, and at the time when “An Arctic Vision” appeared, the treaty had yet to be ratified. Hence, Harte’s poem can be viewed as being not so much a celebration of an assured success as an urgent plea that the treaty should not fail. That Bret Harte chose to support the purchase treaty shows him to be a nationalist and sympathetic towards American expansion, but his ear was carefully attuned to the demands of a West Coast newspaper audience, for whom the acquisition signalled new possibilities for business enterprise and a boost for local economies.

On the East Coast, such immediate economic benefits were less tangible, and some believed the new territory to have a plenitude of icebergs and walrus, but little else (Van Deusen, 1967:542, see also Haynes, 1909:319). The land, named *Alaska* after the native Aleutian peoples’ word *Alak’ shak* or *Al-ay’ek-sa*, meaning “the great country,” was the butt of more than one ironic comment (Higginson, 1917:vii). It was facetiously referred to by the influential *New York Herald* as “Walrus-sia” and “Icebergia” (quoted in Higginson, 1917:187–188; Whympfer, 1868:65), while the *New York Post* called it a “frozen sterile desert” (quoted in Kushner, 1975:145). The most stentorian of all Alaska’s critics was the *New York Tribune*, which viewed the cession treaty as an attempt by the administration to divert public attention away from more pressing domestic problems: “Russian-America is a good way off,” commented the *Tribune* on 1 April, “and so a good place on which to fix the public eye” (quoted in Kushner, 1975:145–146). Some opposition to the acquisition of Alaska was understandable. The lengthy, expensive Civil War had ended only two years before. Some must have felt that the \$7 200 000 Alaskan price tag could have been more usefully spent on the difficult process of Reconstruction that the Union was then implementing to heal its divisions.

Doubtless a few of his opponents, casting their minds back to 1865, would have been content had Seward never lived to see 1867. In 1865, at the time of President Lincoln’s assassination by John Wilkes Booth, Seward was confined to bed, recovering from a near-fatal carriage accident. However, this fact and Seward’s advancing years (he was then 64 years old) did not deter Lewis Powell, alias Lewis Payne and Booth’s fellow assassin, from breaking into Seward’s bedroom and slashing Seward’s face and neck with a bowie knife (Van Deusen, 1967:413–414). Despite both events and severe wounds, Seward made a recovery that must have seemed little short of miraculous.

The diversity of response to the cession of Russian America was equally dramatic. Frederick Whympfer, an English artist, participated during the period just preceding the cession in the Western Union Telegraph Company’s survey for a possible telegraph line that would connect Europe with America (Van Deusen, 1967:513–514). Whympfer’s remarkable journey was sufficient to excite the admiration of the writer Jack London, who was himself no stranger to Alaska. In “The Gold Hunters of the North” (1902), London saluted “Frederick Whympfer, fellow of the Royal Geographical Society...[who] voyaged up the Great Bend to Fort Yukon under the Arctic Circle” (Calder-Marshall, 1966:20). The result of these pioneering travels was Whympfer’s book *Travel and Adventure in Alaska*, an invaluable contemporary record published in 1868, the year after Alaska became a part of the United States.

Whympfer’s comments are particularly worthwhile because by revealing British attitudes to the cession of Russian America, they shed light on the international context for “An Arctic Vision.” Although the experiences recorded in Whympfer’s book were gained while Alaska was still called “Russian America,” they were published in the aftermath of Russian America’s acquisition by the United States. Whympfer was far from being a less partisan observer of the controversies surrounding the cession than his American counterparts. His account was written during the time of Canadian confederation, when the “British Provinces...[would] henceforth be united under the common name of ‘Canada’” (*The Times*, 2 April 1867:9). Given the prevailing British attempts to bring Canadian confederation to fruition, the American purchase of Russian America adjacent to British Columbia appeared deliberately ill-timed and ill-willed towards that project.

In the aftermath of the Canadian Confederation’s success, Whympfer’s rendering of American reactions to the purchase of Russian America was doubtless tempered for his London publishing house, John Murray, and a British audience whose newspapers viewed “the purchase of Russian America...as a sort of counter-demonstration against our supposed aggressive tendencies” in British North America (*The Times*, 2 April 1867:9). Whympfer reported the “hostile criticism, and strong political opposition” that the acquisition provoked. He noted that James Gordon Bennett, Editor of the *New York Herald*, had printed “mock advertisements—purporting to come from the Secretary of State [i.e., Seward]—[which] appeared in the daily papers...offering the highest price for ‘waste lands and worn-out colonies,’ ‘submerged and undiscovered lands’”

(Whymper, 1868:64, 65). However, he failed to mention that editorial columns in the same newspaper “urged Senate approval” of the treaty (Kushner, 1975:145). As W. Hunt remarks in his *Alaska: A Bicentennial History*, “even [Bennett] favored the purchase” (Hunt, 1976:34).

No doubt with his British audience in mind, Whymper remained gleefully “impartial” about the wrangling over the cession treaty. Even when presented with an undeniable bargain, Americans, his book suggests, were unnecessarily divisive. In Washington, much of the opposition to the treaty stemmed from an enmity in Congress towards Seward himself. Seward’s continued support of President Johnson’s Reconstruction policy, at a time when Johnson was in all likelihood to be impeached, earned him much animosity. As de Stoeckl remarked, resistance to the treaty was “not aimed at the transaction itself [so much] as from a passionate animosity which reigns in the Congress against the President and even more against the Secretary of State” (quoted in Kushner, 1987:312). Whymper himself observed that in “the House of Congress it was made a party question, and therefore the colony was on the one hand described as the tag end of creation, and on the other as an Elysian field” (Whymper, 1868:65).

Despite its indulgent irony, Whymper’s account also darkly reiterated some of the more popular fears of a British audience. He cautioned his readers: “There are...many, both in England and America, who look on this purchase as the first move towards an American occupation of the whole continent...Canada and British America generally, will sooner or later become part of the United States” (Whymper, 1868:65–66). Such an apprehension was far from unfounded, as Whymper’s evaluation merely recalled the Senate speech of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner (1811–74), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Cook, 1975:22). Although Sumner was initially reticent about the treaty, a briefing by R.M. Bannister, a scientist and, ironically, one of Whymper’s comrades on the Western Union Telegraph Expedition, evidently fired his imagination (Hunt, 1976:36). In a three-hour speech, Sumner declared that: “The present treaty is a visible step in the occupation of the whole North American Continent...By it we dismiss one more monarch from this continent...There is yet one more monarch to be retired...and that event will take place when our brother-Canadians unite with us” (quoted in Higginson, 1917:187).

The synchrony of the American purchase of Russian America and the process of Canadian confederation was the focus of deepening political frictions and served to highlight the gulf between British and American attitudes to the Pacific Northwest. April Fool’s Day 1867, far from being a day of merriment, was a time of grumbling remonstrance in the North American and British presses. On 1 April 1867, the San Francisco newspaper *The Bulletin* printed in parallel columns the news of “Our Acquisition of Russian America,” deemed to be “not a trifling addition to our possessions,” and “The British Confederacy Scheme.” While the newspaper omitted to note under the former heading that the acquisition could be politically troublesome, it did not scruple under the latter to

relay the information that “The popular branch of Congress has passed without discussion or dissent a resolution expressing apprehension and disapproval of the proposed Confederation of the British North American Provinces.”

Simultaneously reporting its first intelligence of the Russian treaty on 1 April 1867, the London newspaper *The Times* (1 April 1867:12) complained that “the effect of [the treaty]...will be to exclude British Columbia almost entirely from the Pacific” and that it would be necessary for “Her Majesty’s Government to remonstrate upon the subject.” Reporting London affairs the next day, the San Francisco newspaper *The Daily Times* (2 April 1867) characterized the English attitude simply as “regret...generally expressed by the press and political circles at the proposed sale of the Russian possessions in America to the United States.” Simultaneously as Americans reading *The Daily Times* learned of English “regret,” readers of *The Times* (2 April 1867:9) in London were favoured with a further article which corresponded to Whymper’s views, speculating: “It is more probable—nor is there any wisdom in disguising the probability—that it has been purchased with a view of asserting the claim of the United States to supremacy on the North American Continent. The consolidation of Canada and the Maritime Provinces into a Confederacy under the British CROWN has awakened a groundless, but not quite inexplicable, jealousy in the United States.”

The cause of this “not quite inexplicable” jealousy, the paper surmised, was a “delusion” that the British “zeal for the extension of Monarchical or Aristocratic institutions is equal to their [the USA’s] own zeal for the extension of Republican or Democratic institutions...they fancy that French Imperialists and English Constitutionalists are in a conspiracy with each other to propagate despotic principles in the New World” (*The Times*, 2 April 1867:9). Yet, *The Times* underestimated the concerns of the American people, for just as the British feared the possible loss of their North American colonies, so too did Americans feel genuinely apprehensive about what form of government the new Canadian Confederation would assume.

Passed on 29 March 1867, the British North America Act, “An Act for the Union of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, and the Government thereof” (Canadian Government Brochure, 1927:141), had beaten Seward’s signing of the Russian-America cession to the post by a single day. This preemptive Act not only formed, in principle, the Dominion of Canada, to be “declare[d] by Proclamation...on and after a Day therein appointed, not being more than Six Months after the passing of this Act” (Canadian Government Brochure, 1927:141–142); it provided that “The Executive Government and Authority of and Over Canada [was] hereby declared to continue and be vested in the Queen,” who was “The Command-in-Chief [sic] of the Land and Naval Militia, and of all Naval and Military Forces, of and in Canada” (Canadian Government Brochure, 1927:142, 143). In American eyes, not only did the consolidation of British North America into the Dominion of Canada make less likely any American hopes of annexing that region; it also created a potential

military threat on America's northern border, which was directly controlled by Britain.

There were clear international tensions. *The Daily Times* (3 April 1867) asserted in a passionate article that Britain was attempting to "violate the spirit of the [Monroe] doctrine," a principle that declared that the American continents were not to be viewed any longer as subjects for future colonization, and that further European colonial ambitions in the Western Hemisphere would be regarded as threats to United States peace and security. Russia had already received such a warning on 17 July 1823, when John Quincy Adams informed the Russian minister Hendrik Tuyll that the United States would: "contest the right of Russia to *any* territorial establishment on this continent, and that we should assume distinctly the principle that the American continents are no longer subjects for any new colonial establishments" (quoted in Kushner, 1987:301).

The Daily Times (3 April 1867) reported that "a joint resolution...in the House of Representatives...protesting against the formation of a confederation of the British North American Colonies, based on monarchical principles...[was] by no means an unwarrantable one...[because of the] statement recently made, that the Confederation was to be presided over by a Viceroy...[and to] plant a vice-royalty on the British portion of the North American Continent, or to give the new Confederation in any way a monarchical character, is clearly to violate the spirit of the [Monroe] doctrine." Such rhetoric was clearly inflammatory, and what confusion it spread among its readers is anybody's guess, especially as other San Francisco papers like *The Bulletin* (1 April 1867) were rather more calm in their analysis of the situation: "the Kingdom of Canada," it pronounced stoically, has "always been under monarchical rule."

Brushing aside the rhetoric of the Monroe Doctrine and British protestations that "'Canada' will be, to all intents and purposes, a self-governing community, with a strong resemblance to the neighbouring States of the Union" (*The Times*, 2 April 1867:9), the more immediate issue of this transatlantic debate may be found scarcely hidden in *The Daily Times* article. The extract (3 April 1867) reads: "So long as the British Colonies were left in their semi-republican condition, our Government could have no objection to any confederation scheme...[as this] would facilitate rather than retard the inevitable annexation of this British territory to the United States."

However, Britain, as an article in *The Times* (2 April 1867:9) suggests, was anything but willing to abandon its possessions in North America, unless the Canadian people voluntarily wished to become part of the United States: "We retain our hold upon Canada more to please the Canadians than ourselves; and we certainly shall not imitate the example of Russia by selling it to the Americans, we shall be happy to make it independent as soon as it pleases, and leave it to choose its future destiny for itself." British confederacy schemes and an unwillingness to abandon the continent seemed to impede American schemes of manifest destiny.

This belief that the United States and its institutions were ordained to spread over the whole continent was forced into sharp focus by the British North America Act. The Russian American purchase had enhanced American control in the North, but it was not necessarily "the destiny of [the American] republic [that] the stars and stripes...[would] wave over the whole tract from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island" (*The Daily Times*, 3 April 1867).

The Quest for a "Contiguous" Coastline: America's Coveting of British Columbia

More immediate than these overarching concerns, the crux of international rivalry centred on Britain's colony of British Columbia. Having just acquired Russian America, the United States had clear designs on the possession of a coastline of contiguous states "uninterrupted from Cape St. Lucas to the Arctic" (*The Bulletin*, 3 April 1867). As the article in *The Bulletin* suggests, the newspapers were not slow to pick up on this, and the popular desire for ratification of the Russian treaty was as much a matter of national prestige as it was one of national security and the gaining of new commercial opportunities. Only British Columbia, *The Bulletin* (3 April 1867) informed its readers, stood in the way of American control of a "coast line on the Pacific of nearly 1,800 miles." To further intensify debate, at the time of the Russian purchase there was some discussion over whether British Columbia would join the Confederation of Canada. As *The Daily Times* (9 April 1867) reported with some consequence, "the [confederation] plan, as at present carried out, did not include...British Columbia...or Vancouver's Island."

More than one American newspaper speculated on whether Britain, with an isolated possession on the Pacific Coast, might not eventually cede that possession to the United States, thus enabling the joining of Alaska with Washington Territory (Fig. 4). Not uncharacteristically, Seward actively "sought to increase American influence in British Columbia" in an attempt to win the colony over to the Union (see Cook, 1975:38), while *The Bulletin* (3 April 1867) confidently predicted that "in the lapse of time, Great Britain will find in the girdled position of British Columbia and the temper of its people a motive to cede that territory, so that our sway on this Coast shall be uninterrupted."

In the tense years following the purchase of Russian America and British Columbia's joining the Confederation, relations between Britain and the United States remained strained. Although outwardly reserved, the British were greatly piqued by the purchase. Russian America would have made a worthy addition to the Canadian Confederation, and A.R. Locke's 1855 work, *A View of Russian America in Connection with the Present War*, had in the past already fuelled "some talk in the Canadas of the desirability of seizing Russian America while the Crimean War was on so that it might be added to the territories of the proposed Canadian union" (Hulley, 1953:195).

Speculation over British Columbia was rife. Even *The Times* (2 April 1867:9) fell victim to the ferment, erroneously



FIG. 4. Côtes Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique et Territoire d'Alaska c. 1867. Gravé chez Erhard (Whymper, 1871: facing p. 404).

reporting the news of “British Columbia, which has so lately voted for admission to the confederation,” an event that was not to occur for another four years. Throughout, Seward remained undaunted and *The Bulletin* (24 April 1867) was soon to report that “the Washington correspondent of the *Boston Post* is accurately informed of negotiations...between the State Department and the [British] Colonial Secretary, for the purchase of a large portion of British America. Seward’s design was to get all west of the Mississippi.”

Seward’s vision was more far-reaching than the parochial concerns of the Pacific Coast newspapers, keen to boost their local economies and subscribe to the rhetoric of manifest destiny. His grand aim was to employ “Russian America as the stepping-stone to Asian markets” (Kushner, 1987:305). As early as 1852, Seward had avowed: “Commerce is the great agent of movement. Whatever nation shall put that commerce into full employment, and shall conduct it steadily with *adequate expansion*, will become necessarily the greatest of existing states” (quoted in Kushner, 1975:115). As if to add weight to Seward’s tenet, President Buchanan added in 1858: “The history of the world proves, that the nation which has gained possession of the trade with Eastern Asia has always become wealthy and powerful” (quoted in Kushner, 1975:114).

In retirement, Seward seemed more than dimly aware of the failure to acquire even British Columbia. Although out of office and powerless, in a series of speeches made in Sitka, Alaska and Victoria, Vancouver Island in 1869, he seemed to make veiled threats regarding the governance of British Columbia, while still entertaining vain hopes that it might yet

be included into the United States. Perhaps Seward still had in mind such rhetoric as that of *The Daily Times* (3 April 1867), with its notions of a “forcible annexation of the [British] Northern territory,” when he remarked at Sitka that “British Columbia belongs within a foreign jurisdiction...by whomsoever possessed, [it] must be governed in conformity with the interests of her people and of society in the American continent...If it shall be governed so as to conflict with the interests of the inhabitants of that Territory and of the United States, we all can easily foresee what will happen in that case” (Seward, 1965:15). In Victoria and on British colonial soil he seemed more guarded, adding: “I have never heard any person, on either side of the United States border, assert that British Columbia is not a part of the American continent, or that its people have or can have any interest, material, moral, or social, different from the common interests of all American nations...British Columbia, therefore, wants nothing that is not wanted also in Oregon, Washington, and Alaska” (Seward, 1965:17, 18, 20).

Seward’s hopes were not perhaps totally unfounded. In 1867, *The Times* (2 April 1867:9) had not been slow to recognize that British Columbia could quite easily become a part of the United States. The newspaper had tried to be phlegmatic about the possible fate of the colony: “British Columbia[’s]...connexion [sic] with California was already much closer than with any of our colonies, and a large portion of its inhabitants were already American. If these influences are destined to overcome the spirit of loyalty and attract it into the Union, the substitutes [sic] of the American for the Russian flag on the shores of the North Pacific will but hasten their operation by a year or two.”

However, both Seward and *The Times* greatly misjudged the mood of the province. Financial weakness since the petering out of the gold rush had made inevitable either confederation to the Dominion of Canada or annexation to the United States (see Creighton, 1967:317). In response to the worsening financial situation a petition requesting the annexation of the province to the United States was drawn up towards the end of 1869, but remarkably it “was signed by only one hundred and four people...[out] of the roughly ten thousand inhabitants of the province” (Creighton, 1967:317). Seward lived just long enough to see British Columbia enter confederation (on 20 July 1871) and all remaining American hopes for a contiguous coastline evaporate.

The San Francisco Newspapers and the Genesis of “An Arctic Vision”

Whymper’s account of American reactions to the purchase of Russian America, with its decidedly English flavouring, tended to focus on the newspapers of the East Coast, where there was less immediate, perceptible benefit from the cession treaty and therefore less support than on the West Coast. In general, the eastern journalists were far less positive than their West Coast counterparts, who were not as uniformly hostile to the purchase of Russian America as Whymper’s rather one-sided narrative might suggest. In San Francisco,

the first reports of the cession treaty were greeted with enthusiasm rather than reproach. From the outset, the San Francisco newspapers recognized that Russian America was far from being the wasteland of “icebergs” and “polar bears” that Whympers described and was in fact a storehouse of immense natural resources ready and waiting to be exploited.

Pemberton’s biography of Harte testifies that the San Francisco press was “sober, materialistic, [and] practical” (Pemberton, 1903:10), and the comments of *The Bulletin* (1 April 1867), typical among the San Francisco newspapers, certainly bear out such a judgement: “It is its [Alaska’s] deeply indented and well timbered coast, its peninsulas and archipelagos of innumerable islands, its fishing banks and hunting grounds, that make it valuable. Neither is it wanting in minerals. The Russians have worked coal in several places on the mainland and on the islands; its Indians use the native copper for ornaments; and the Western Telegraph construction party found traces of gold in almost every river they explored.” *The Daily Times* (4 April 1867) echoed *The Bulletin*: “This tract has not only all the natural sources of wealth possessed by the six New England States, but many more. Rich and extensive mines of gold, copper, iron, lead, coal, and other minerals are known to exist throughout every portion of it. Its fir and pine forests are fully equal to those of Maine; and beside all this, its fisheries are thought to be even more extensive than are those of Newfoundland, whose wealth to the nation is almost beyond comparison.”

To some degree this enthusiasm and detailed knowledge may be ascribed to wishful thinking. Exhaustive reports of a land of unsurpassed resources and opportunities seemed to conflict with the admission also made in *The Daily Times* (5 April 1867) that: “Russian America, to most other persons than a few trappers and traders, has been for centuries something of a *terra incognita*.” Looking back on the Alaska of 1867 in his 1902 “The Gold Hunters of the North,” Jack London summed up the condition of Alaskan knowledge with an astute parallel: “The interior of Alaska and the contiguous Canadian territory was a vast wilderness. Its hundreds of thousands of square miles were as dark and chartless as Darkest Africa” (Calder-Marshall, 1966:20). The contemporaneous acknowledgement by *The Daily Times* that the land had in fact hardly been explored underlined London’s later assessment and betrayed an optimistic enthusiasm on the part of the San Francisco newspapers. Yet, this tendency towards hyperbole was intelligible during the days immediately following the cession, when it was more than questionable that the treaty would be ratified at all, and ratification was recognized as imperative to boosting the local economy. As *The Bulletin* (1 April 1867) noted: “The extension of our flag to the northernmost point of the continent promises to benefit San Francisco considerably...One of the first advantages that San Francisco will gain is sole right to the cod-fisheries on the south of the peninsula of Alaska...Another advantage is that the cession must make San Francisco the headquarters of the Pacific fur trade.”

San Francisco newspapers were apt to appear as knowledgeable as possible even if some of their information

was questionable. Well over a week after the cession, other newspapers were still unsure even of the extent of the purchase, and the San Francisco newspapers were quick to savage the ignorant. Under the droll title “IMPORTANT DISCOVERY,” *The Daily Times* (9 April 1867) facetiously reprinted an extract from the newspaper, the *Alta*, that read: “Telegraphic dispatches have bought us rumors that the grant from the Russian Government will include the islands in the Behring [sic] Sea and the Aleutian Islands.” Referring to the “days of [the *Alta*’s] palmiest stupidity,” the sarcastic retort of *The Daily Times* was typical: “Now, this *is* news. If there is any one on this coast...who for a moment supposed that we were not to acquire the Aleutian Islands...we have yet to find him.”

However, the *Alta* was far from being alone in its ignorance of the details and motives behind the Russian purchase. Only a day or so before the *Alta* made its revelation, *The Golden Era* (7 April 1867), a weekly newspaper for which Harte had been first a print compositor and later a contributor (Merwin, 1967:33), made the following remarks: “No reason is publicly known to exist to account for the action of the Russian Government. The territory in question is not a burden on the Home government, nor is it the seat of any political intrigues tending to thwart the policy of the Empire. Neither is it an object of such vast importance to the United States that its possession by another government would be likely to give cause for quarrel.”

On a daily basis, the West Coast newspapers oscillated between reports of the treaty’s failure and reports of its imminent success. In the midst of the crisis, *The Bulletin* and *The Daily Times*, ever mindful of the possible benefits of the purchase to San Francisco, continued overtly to promote the benefits of the treaty well beyond their actual knowledge. Bret Harte, a San Francisco resident, enthusiastically joined them, becoming Alaska’s first propagandist in verse. On 8 April 1867, the day that Harte’s poem “An Arctic Vision” appeared in *The Bulletin*, the paper’s Second Despatch reported that the “lobby influence is pressing the Russian treaty vigorously. It is probably doomed to defeat,” while the Third Despatch later reported that “Public sentiment is growing in favor of the Russian treaty. The Committee will probably report favorably.”

To add to the confusion, these conflicting reports and Harte’s nationalistic poem appeared on the same page of the newspaper, literally inches away from one another! In the event, Harte’s poem appeared in print the day before the treaty was due to be confirmed or rejected by Senate. On the day of the vote, *The Bulletin* (9 April 1867) reported a “special” from the *Chicago Republican*, dated 8 April, which read: “Mr. Seward considers ratification certain tomorrow [sic] or Wednesday. It is claimed that 32 Senators will vote for the ratification, and perhaps more.” In fact the treaty was approved “by a vote of 37 to 2,” which was everything that Seward had hoped for (Van Deusen, 1967:543).

Harte’s motivation for adding such vigorous support to the cession treaty springs from a variety of sources. In his local

context of San Francisco, Harte as a journalist would have found it difficult to ignore such newspapers as *The Bulletin* or *The Daily Times* with their popular daily messages that the Russian treaty would greatly benefit the economy of San Francisco. The nationalistic appeals of these papers were crucial to his composition of "An Arctic Vision" and account for his inclusion of that poem in the pages of *The Bulletin*. The poem was also the beginning of a special interest in the later career of William Henry Seward: "An Arctic Vision" was followed by "St. Thomas" and "California's Greeting to Seward." These poems respectively record Seward's purchase of Russian America, his failed negotiations for the acquisition of the Danish West Indies, and finally, on Seward's retirement, a retrospective of his career. Harte's inclusion of these poems under the heading of "National Poems" in the author's copyright edition of his complete poetical works demonstrates that they were for Harte more than ephemeral compositions.

"An Arctic Vision"

"An Arctic Vision" has been described as "a playful poem" (Stewart, 1931:8) and this is an intelligent insight into a poem whose audience was the readers of a popular newspaper. The poem was, after all, a creation of the moment; it repeated many of the contemporary beliefs and myths concerning Alaska that had appeared in the newspapers. It targeted that popular newspaper audience and for the most part (although not exclusively) employed a scheme of rhyming couplets. Its four verses are characterized by a pronounced rhythmical metre common in Harte's popular poetry. Harte used this combination of rhythm and rhyme scheme in his treatment of northern and western subject matter. It was for the poet appropriate to subject matter as diverse as Alaska, an imaginary conversation between American railway engines to be found in "What the Engines Said," and the "The Lost Galleon," a composition steeped in legend.

"An Arctic Vision" is a celebration of the Russian American purchase, an inventory of the natural resources of Alaska, to a lesser extent a panoptic travelogue, a prophecy of the future of the country under American control, and finally an invitation to join in the exploitation of the new territory. It begins with a pair of whimsical couplets designed to show that even a territory as forbidding as Alaska could be appealing:

WHERE the short-legged Esquimaux
Waddle in the ice and snow,
And the playful Polar bear
Nips the hunter unaware; (Harte, 1892:52)

This fanciful introduction is followed by a triplet rhyme and further rhyming couplets that provide more factual, but still moderately humorous descriptions:

Segment of the frigid zone,
Where the temperature alone



FIG. 5. Where the temperature alone / Warms on St. Elias' cone (Whymper, 1868: facing p. 97).

Warms on St. Elias' cone;
Polar dock, where nature slips
From the ways her icy ships;
Land of fox and deer and sable,
Shore end of our western cable, - (Harte, 1892:52)

Harte's initial chilly line, "Segment of the frigid zone," acknowledges that nearly one-third of Alaska lies within the Arctic Circle and that it is mountainous and in part volcanic (see Fig. 5). In 1867, Alaska provided a harbour only for Harte's metaphorical "nature's ships" (drifting icebergs or pack-ice); nevertheless, despite its hostile appearance, Alaska was well qualified to supply the site of a "Polar dock." The San Francisco newspapers readily speculated on Alaska's potential as a strategic military port and dockyard (see Fig. 6). *The Daily Times* (5 April 1867) referred to Alaska's "desirableness for the location of a military and naval depot....With a Government naval and military establishment at some suitable locality on its coast, ship building and ship repairing might be carried on to an indefinite extent." An earlier edition of *The Bulletin* (1 April 1867) had even named specific locations: "Probably one of the Aleutian Islands will be selected as a permanent military and naval station...New Archangel or Sitka Island will also, it is understood, be a military and naval station."

Harte's optimistic view of Alaska as a "Land of fox and deer and sable," closely mimicked that of Seward and the San Francisco newspapers (Harte, 1892:52; Van Deusen, 1967:543). Alaska did indeed have many fur-bearing animals, great mineral wealth, fishing potential, and whaling possibilities. However, Harte's designation of the recent purchase as the "Shore end of our western cable" (Harte, 1892:52) was somewhat premature. Harte's reference recalled Whymper's reason for being in Russian America and repeated the popular rhetoric that Russian America was invaluable to the 1865 survey for the New York–Paris landline telegraph route through British Columbia, Alaska, over the Bering Strait, via Siberia and St. Petersburg. However, Harte either did not know or else did not see fit to mention that the plan to construct the telegraphic route through Alaska had already been abandoned before his poem was published.



FIG. 6. Polar dock, where nature slips / From the ways her icy ships (Whymper, 1868: facing p. 94).

On 3 April 1867, *The Bulletin* had reported that in New York the previous day: “The Western Union Telegraph Company...assigns as a reason for the discontinuance of the Russo-American Telegraph enterprise, the success of the [British] Atlantic Cable.” The second Atlantic cable had been completed and successfully tested on 13 July 1866 (Field, 1893:319). By the time of *The Bulletin*’s announcement, the new cable had been operating successfully, albeit with one or two fault interruptions, for about eight months (Bright, 1910:193). A repeat of the failure of the 1858 Atlantic cable, which had functioned briefly between mid-August and mid-October 1858 (Smith and Wise, 1989:669–670), now seemed unlikely. Moreover, the cable that had broken and was lost in 1865 was grappled to the surface by members of the 1866 expedition, who repaired it and found it to work well (Smith and Wise, 1989:682).

Further work on the American project was rendered superfluous. The failure of the Russo-American overland line, only days after the cession treaty was signed, proved to be a great disappointment. This unfortunate news left Seward in an awkward position and with no option other than to put a brave face on it. However, that the successful Atlantic submarine cable enterprise, as well as previous unsuccessful attempts, had derived financial assistance from the American Cyrus W. Field, at least allowed President Andrew Johnson and Seward to congratulate Mr. Field (Field, 1893).

Nevertheless, *The Bulletin* (3 April 1867) reported that “Mr. Seward says he is profoundly disappointed at the suspension of the Russo-American telegraph enterprise...he abates nothing in his estimate of the importance of the work, and does not believe it is in vain.” American feeling towards the successful British telegraph was best summed up by Field: “England had had a larger share in the later than in the earlier expeditions” (Field, 1893:374). In short, the successful Atlantic cable was owned by a British Company and both “the cable of 1865—as well as that of 1866—was provided for out of English pockets” (Bright, 1910:177). That it was landed at the aptly named Heart’s Content, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, was unlikely to make the United States particularly contented. Given that the cable was possibly to be further

routed through the newly confederated Canada made it unlikely to be as popular as a United States national telegraphic enterprise would have been.

In the poem, the ill-fated Russo-American telegraph project is followed by a series of couplets in which Harte calls upon Alaska itself and its animals to be joyful at the news that the land and its inhabitants have become the property of “Uncle Sam:”

Let the news that flying goes
 Thrill through all your arctic floes,
 And reverberate the boast
 From the cliffs off Beechey’s coast,
 Till the tidings, circling round
 Every bay of Norton Sound,
 Throw the vocal tide-wave back
 To the isles of Kodiak.
 Let the stately Polar bears
 Waltz around the pole in pairs,
 And the walrus, in his glee,
 Bare his tusk of ivory;...
 Know you not what fate awaits you
 Or to whom the future mates you?
 All ye icebergs make salaam, -
 You belong to Uncle Sam! (Harte, 1892:52–53)

In an imaginary panoramic spin, Harte reels off as much Alaskan geography as he can muster—from “arctic floes” and “Beechey’s coast,” to “Norton Sound” and the “isles of Kodiak.” There is also a tentative personification of the sea, most obviously felt in the phrase “vocal tide-wave” and the pun on the word “tidings,” which refers both to the news of the purchase and the coming and going of the tides themselves. All of this merrymaking in the poem leads to the ultimate “tiding” that Russian America has been purchased by the United States and the request to greet the news with “salaam.” The unusual demand to make the respectful Oriental salutation of peace is rendered more intelligible, however, in the context of Seward’s aim to make Russian America the gateway to Asia and eastern trade.

In the next segment of the poem, Harte stresses the importance of American colonization of the land and introduces the idealized and “strik[ing]” character of the American pioneer, a “form” that seems sufficient to impress both “Russ[ian] and Esquimaux” alike:

[There] Stands a form whose features strike
 Russ and Esquimaux alike. (Harte, 1892:53)

The description is intriguing because it connotes both a single physical “form,” or character, and, more crucially, a composite American “form,” or typology. For Harte, the American form is an amalgamation of the many recognizable features of American expansionism and exploitation coupled with enthusiasm, energy and tenacity. Thus, Harte’s pioneer arguably is not intended to represent any single American class or locality, so much as it is symbolic, standing

collectively for Americans and their enthusiasm for expansion and commercial exploitation in general.

Such a contention is reinforced by American attitudes to previous failures to exploit fully the commercial potential of Russian America. These deficiencies were viewed in the San Francisco press as quite simply a failure of civilization: "The Russian Fur Company could not be expected to have much higher ideas of life and its responsibilities than its British co-laborer in the cause of non-civilization" (*The Daily Times*, 6 April 1867). In 1867, America's society and geography were still evolving and the ardour to "civilize" held paramount importance. This priority, however, was apt to be misunderstood. To citizens of nations with defined geographies and accepted social traditions and practices, American nation-building was sometimes synonymous with avarice. As one "Russ[ian]" Minister, Edouard de Stoeckl, had noted prior to the sale of Russian America: "the fish, the forests, and several other products...have not escaped the lust of the Americans" (quoted in Kushner, 1987:306).

Harte's stress on territorial ownership by Americans was probably a response to the American desire to civilize and improve through commercial enterprise as well as a faith in the contemporary rhetoric of American manifest destiny. In common with many other Americans, Harte may have believed that possession of Alaska by America was inevitable because it had been prophesied by such founding American figures as John Adams, who had proclaimed in 1787 that the United States was: "destined to spread over the northern part of that whole quarter of the globe" (quoted in Kushner, 1975:151).

Harte makes his territorial prophecy more concrete and impressive by giving it an arcane lineage:

He it is whom Skalds of old
In their Runic rhymes foretold (Harte, 1892:53)

Harte's "vision" of the "He," or pioneer, of the above couplet is steeped in references to archaic oral court poetry, and his use of "Runic" may refer either to the earliest Germanic alphabet used by the Scandinavians or to Finnish poetry. Hollander (1968:4–6) notes that the Skaldic form originated in Norway and was developed chiefly by Icelandic poets (Skalds) from the ninth to the tenth centuries. Commenting on poetic form, his study remarks that "skaldic poetry is fundamentally alliterative," a convention that Harte's couplet follows with his rendering of "Runic rhymes" (Hollander, 1968:7).

Given Harte's Scandinavian allusions, the hardy American pioneer, "Lean of flank and lank of jaw," is linked to the mythology of that locale (Harte, 1892:53). He is "the real Northern Thor!" (Harte, 1892:53)—a master of the environment—a god of thunder, the weather, agriculture, and the home (see Davidson, 1969:15, 57–73). Thor is often depicted with his hammer "Mjollnir," a tool of protection and a weapon of destruction (Davidson, 1969:57–58), and Harte thoughtfully supplies this accessory

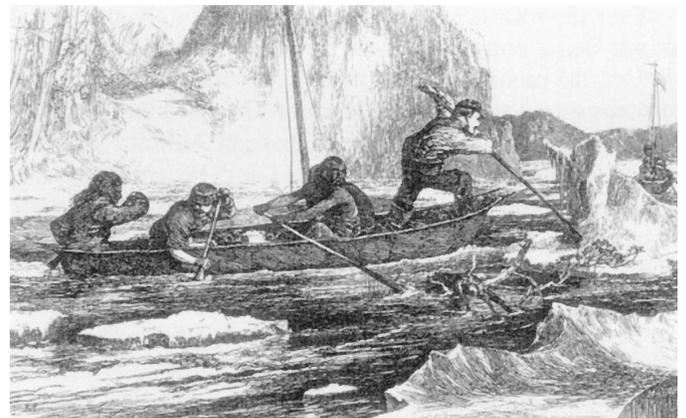


FIG. 7. Breaking ice on the Yukon. Original sketch by Frederick Whymper (Whymper, 1868: facing p. 197).

(now a tool of profit in American hands) for his American pioneer, who is portrayed "Leaning on his icy hammer," which he has evidently put to work in breaking ice (see Fig. 7; Harte, 1892:53).

The "hero" of Harte's "drama" draws: "the ice crop's pretty sure" (Harte, 1892:53–54) which serves not only as a witty comment, but also as a reference to the serious business of ice production. *The Bulletin* (1 April 1867), shortly after the cession, mentioned the value of "Kodiak, the island from which all the ice used in San Francisco is brought," and *The Daily Times* (5 April 1867) followed up on this theme by commenting: "The ice trade, if there were no other commercial consideration involved, would justify this purchase. An acre of ice, frozen fifteen inches in depth, will cut one thousand tons [of ice], worth probably from two to three dollars per ton on the ground, as it is worth from four to five dollars in Boston."

In the midst of this icy commercial paradise, Harte's pioneer, the dynamo of exploitative "American energy" envisaged by *The Daily Times* (6 April 1867), cannot forbear referring directly to the recent "dog cheap" American purchase—with remarkable litotes—as being not a bad bargain:

'Tain't so very mean a trade,
When the land is all surveyed. (Harte, 1892:54)

He spits tobacco juice and extols the virtues of Alaska for the business-minded readers of *The Bulletin* as though he were part of an advertisement for colonization:

There's a right smart chance for fur-chase
All along this recent purchase,
And, unless the stories fail,
Every fish from cod to whale;
Rocks, too; mebbe quartz; let's see, -
'Twould be strange if there should be, -
Seems I've heerd such stories told;
Eh! - why, bless us, - yes, it's gold! (Harte, 1892:54)

Even the walrus's "tusk of ivory" is seemingly mentioned as not being entirely without value. In extolling Alaska's virtues, the pioneer's allusion to the fur trade, fisheries, and mining served to remind readers of *The Bulletin* (9 and 11 April 1867) that the purchase of Russian America was of a "territory free of all incumbrances [sic]" because "government [had] paid upwards of \$200,000 to extinguish private franchises." The repeal of all former trading rights and rights of exploitation in the territory left the area wide open for American "enterprise."

The remainder of the poem is devoted to the development of the land by the industrious American, thought by the newspapers so much more capable than his European or Russian counterparts at exploiting and making profitable the natural resources of Alaska. Discussing the trade of the Russian Fur Company, *The Daily Times* (6 April 1867) wrote: "The trade of Russian America, with all its vast and deversified [sic] resources, is even now but a mere bagatelle...With American energy the very first year of possession would give us a trade worth at least a million of dollars."

Thus the final stanza of the poem fittingly leaves the "hero of this drama" hard at work:

While the blows are falling thick
From his California pick,
You may recognise the Thor
Of the vision that I saw, - (Harte, 1892:54)

Harte's last lines to his California audience once more reinforce the message that Alaska is there for those with the energy to take advantage of what it has to offer. Accordingly, the "hammer" has now become a "pick" axe, but not just any "pick" axe: it is a "California pick." Harte addresses his local audience and asks that they use their own vision. "You may recognise the Thor," he suggests, urging his readers that they too might recognize in his stereotyped pioneer, qualities that they possess and which single them out as Alaska's future pioneers and part of Seward's vision.

Harte's emphasis on the natural resources of the Alaskan wilderness—furs, ivory tusks, ice, and gold—doubtless did as much to fire the popular imagination in this regard as the extravagant West Coast newspaper articles. Indeed, such enthusiasm proved not to be ill-founded: gold had already been found on the Stikine River six years before the purchase was finalized, and when it was discovered again at Juneau in 1880, at Fortymile Creek in 1886, and again in the Atlin and Klondike placer gold fields in 1897–1900, all derogatory Alaskan epithets were forgotten as the full extent of Alaska's resources became evident. The perception of Alaska as a "barren, worthless God-forsaken region" was forever eclipsed by a new appreciation of the land as a venue for "get-rich quick" schemes as Alaska transformed into an opportunists' paradise, "its valleys yellow with gold, its mountains green with copper and thickly veined with coal, its waters alive with fish and fur-bearing animals" (Higginson, 1917:185).

Postscript. An End to Seward's Expansion: "St. Thomas" and "California's Greeting to Seward"

In the summer of 1867 Seward, encouraged by his Alaskan success, attempted to finalize further territorial purchases in the West Indies. Throughout his Alaskan negotiations he had also given his attention to the Danish islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John as a naval base for the United States. This proposition was more coolly received than his Alaskan proposals (Van Deusen, 1967:526–527), and Seward lamented the fact, writing in 1868 that public attention "continues to be fastened upon the domestic questions which have grown out of the late civil war. The public mind refuses to dismiss these questions even so far as to entertain the higher but more remote questions of national extension and aggrandizement" (quoted in Pratt, 1964:11).

Seward's scheme "secured the approval of not a single member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations" (Haynes 1909:319), although he did obtain Cabinet approval for an "offer of \$7 500 000 for all three" islands. It soon transpired, however, that Denmark required twice that figure; for only half of its asking price, it was prepared to sell St. Thomas and St. John, but not St. Croix (Van Deusen, 1967:527). Despite Seward's idealism, and in view of the price paid for Alaska, the purchase price of \$7 500 000 for the islands seemed disproportionately high and drew "considerable adverse comment" (Van Deusen, 1967:527). In the event, while the treaty was pending the islands were wrecked, in a matter of a few days, by a hurricane, an earthquake, and a tidal wave, effectively putting an end to plans during Seward's lifetime (Pratt, 1964:9; Van Deusen, 1967:528). It was not until 1917 that the United States purchased the three islands for \$25 000 000 (Morison and Commager, 1934:808; Pratt, 1964:112).

On 25 April 1868, Harte, still following Seward's career, published a poem entitled "St. Thomas" in *The Bulletin* (Gaer, 1968:19). This time Harte mentioned "William Henry Seward" by name (Harte, 1892:55).

Then said William Henry Seward,
As he cast his eye to leeward,
"Quite important to our commerce
Is this island of St. Thomas" (Harte, 1892:55)

Although Harte recognized Seward's commercial aspirations, he was less than enthusiastic about his designs in the West Indies. The poem, following the same scheme of rhyming couplets employed in "An Arctic Vision," begins auspiciously, but, in the context of the rest of the poem, ironically:

VERY fair and full of promise
Lay the island of St. Thomas: (Harte, 1892:55)

In the second verse, Harte personifies "Mountain ranges" to betray an antipathy to Seward's further territorial speculations:

Said the Mountain ranges, "Thank'ee,
But we cannot stand the Yankee (Harte, 1892:55)

Curiously, in this poem Seward is no longer the "visionary" of "An Arctic Vision." Instead, he is a "scheming mortal," whose plans to extend American interests beyond the North American continent and tame recalcitrant Nature in the Caribbean are vigorously repulsed:

Said the Sea, its white teeth gnashing
Through its coral-reef lips flashing,
"Shall I let this scheming mortal
Shut with stone my shining portal,
Curb my tide and check my play,
Fence with wharves my shining bay?
Rather let me be drawn out
In one awful waterspout!" (Harte, 1892:56)

The remainder of the poem is devoted to a vociferous, personified tidal wave, volcano, and hurricane that, to quote Harte, left the island "Just a patch of muddy water" (Harte, 1892:57). Mark Twain, too, could not resist joining in the ridicule of Seward. He wrote a hasty piece about an uncle who is chased out of Alaska by bears, goes to St. Thomas, where his money is stolen, and then announces his intention to try Porto (now Puerto) Rico, if only the government would do him the courtesy of buying it (Van Deusen, 1967:528).

Despite his opposition to the Danish negotiations, overall Harte remained respectful of Seward's achievements. His final poem dedicated to Seward, the affectionate "California's Greeting to Seward," was published in *The Bulletin* on 12 July 1869 (Gaer, 1968:18). By this time Seward was no longer in public office, having retired as Secretary of State when Ulysses S. Grant became President on 4 March 1869 (Van Deusen, 1967:551). In his tribute, Harte, no longer writing in rhyming couplets, made a final oblique Alaskan reference:

The world-worn man we honour still...
While History carves with surer stroke
Across our map his noonday fame...
The one flag streaming from the pole,
The one faith borne from sea to sea: (Harte, 1892:37)

Harte's last assessment of Seward remained positive, although his poem "St. Thomas" clearly demonstrates that his praise was not unconditional and had to be earned by sound judgement. Harte, in common with other Americans, may not have been in favour of excessive territorial expansion outside of the North American continent. Indeed, "St. Thomas" echoes the comments of the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* at the time of the Russian America purchase: "The principle the purchase will establish is that it is a part of the duty and a good policy for the Government to hold distant colonies for the improvement of commerce" (quoted in Kushner, 1975:147).

Despite Seward's extended territorial schemes, Harte's support in the case of Alaska turned out to be justified. In purely economic terms the territory more than paid for itself and, unlike Seward, Harte lived just long enough to witness all of the major Alaskan gold strikes. Seward did not overstate the case when he called "Alaska — in the near future the great fishery, forest, and mineral storehouse of the world!" (Seward, 1873:35–36). He regarded its purchase as his single most important political act, although he added cautiously: "It will take the people a generation to find out" (Bancroft, 1959:747). In his own lifetime, Seward was far from being alone in his appraisal of Alaska's worth. Cassius Clay of Kentucky, abolitionist and Minister of the United States to Russia (Korngold, 1955:124, 188), believed the new territory to be worth at least \$50 000 000 and uttered a nation's recognition of the extraordinary negotiations that Seward had performed to secure Alaska: "Hereafter [wrote Clay] the wonder will be that we got it at all" (Van Deusen, 1967:544). In retrospect, Seward was more than justified in his gamble.

It is intriguing to speculate that had Seward not survived a carriage accident and later a knife attack, the United States might never have become the possessor of its Alaskan prize—and Bret Harte might never have developed the facet of his work that now claims our attention. Harte's poetic interest in Alaska and its commercial possibilities provides a basis for a refined understanding of the rest of his work. Just as surely as the purchase of Russian America augmented the dimensions of the United States, so too does Harte's treatment of the event contribute an added dimension that takes his work beyond the confines of "sentimental romance" and "Western literature" (Stewart, 1931:177; Pemberton, 1903:86). "An Arctic Vision" renders such a narrow representation of Harte's work untenable. However brief his interest in Alaska, Harte too should be entered into the catalogue of writers on the American North alongside such recognized practitioners of Arctic literature as Jack London and Robert Service.

DEDICATION

This piece stands in grateful recognition of the continuing work of Alistair Cooke. His radio programme, Alistair Cooke's "Letter From America," has brought wit, wisdom, and a taste of America to two generations of listeners. It has now been broadcast since 1946 and is still to be heard every Sunday on BBC Radio 4. Long may he continue.

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