

From the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean: Three Governor's Wives in Russian America

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While some work has recently been done on native women in Russian America, very little has been written about Russian women and even less about the European non-Russian women who went to Russia's North American colonies in Alaska—the easternmost outpost of the Russian empire in Alaska—from the western periphery of the empire. This paper is about three such women, Elisabeth von Wrangell, Margaretha Etholén and Anna Furuhjelm, and their experiences as governors' wives in Russian America between 1829 and 1864. As the wives of governors, these women had a semi-official role as representatives of the Russian empire, which meant that they were expected to contribute to its civilizing mission in the colonies.

The paper aims to understand the experiences of these women as governors' wives in the light of prescriptive notions of true womanhood and of the role of women in the civilizing mission. What was it like to be a young woman in the most remote part of the Russian empire and how can these experiences be related to the cult of domesticity and the new ideal of womanhood that took form in the nineteenth century? What was expected of them as representatives of the Russian empire and how did they themselves perceive this role?

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Russian America was the easternmost outpost of the Russian empire and its only maritime colony.¹ The occupation and settlement of Alaska in the late eighteenth century was part of a long and far-reaching

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¹ For literature on Russian America, see for example Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, ed., *Istoriia Russkoi Ameriki 1732-1867* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1997-1999), three volumes; Basil Dmytryshyn, E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan and Thomas Vaughan, eds., *To Siberia and Russian America. Three Centuries of Russian Eastward Expansion* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1985-1989), three volumes; James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier America: The changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Petr A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), two volumes; Aleksandr J. Petrov, *Obrazovanie Rossijsko-amerikanskoi kompanii*, (Moskva: Nauka, 2000); Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire 1804-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gwenn A. Miller, *Kodiak Kreol: Communities of Empire in Early Russian America* (Ithaca:

process of eastward expansion that was instigated by the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the predecessor state of modern Russia, in the mid-sixteenth century. Yet Alaska differed from the rest of the Russian empire both geographically and administratively as well as in the way its resources and territory were contested by foreigners.² The first permanent settlement was established in 1784 on Kodiak Island by Grigorii Shelikhov, a rich merchant from Rylsk, who had conquered the native population with a crew of some 300 men. A number of small trading companies operated in Alaska at the time, but Shelikhov, together with his partner, Ivan Golikov, tried to secure a monopoly on all trade. In the end, it was his widow, Natalia Shelikhova, who together with her son-in-law Nikolai Rezanov, convinced the tsar, Paul I, that it was in Russia's interest to have one strong company in Alaska. Thus the Russian-American Company (RAC) was founded in 1799, under direct authority of the Russian government. In 1804, the settlement of Novo Archangelsk, or Sitka, was established, which was to become the colonial capital for the duration of Russia's possession of Alaska. Although the Tlingit Indians, who lived in the area, were defeated in the Battle of Sitka (1804), they were never completely subdued and the citizens of Novo Arkhangelsk lived in constant fear of Indian attacks.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Russia had adopted European ideas of colonisation, including the notion of cultural and moral superiority over non-Christian peoples, who were considered to be primitive.³ Closely related to these notions was the sense of a mission to bring civilization and Christianity to supposedly wild and uncivilized peoples. Cultivating the new lands of the empire and pacifying, enlightening and converting its new subjects became Russia's own *mission civilisatrice*, although the way it was expressed differed somewhat from the West European variety.⁴ This imperial ideology was applied to its colony in the new world, but as the state became more and more involved in the Russian-American Company, it became apparent that its activities in Alaska were far from civilized.

Cornell University Press, 2010); Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004); Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity Through Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Andrei V. Grinev, *The Tlingit Indians in Russian America 1741-1867* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Sonja Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2008); Richard A. Pierce, *Builders of Alaska. The Russian Governors 1818-1867* (Kingston: Limestone Press, 1986); Svetlana G. Fedorova, *Russkoe naselenie Aliaski i Kalifornii: konets XVIII veka-1867 god* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971).

² Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 6-13, 29-35.

³ Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, (Harlow: Longman, 2001); Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); D. R. Brower and E. J. Lazzerini, eds., *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁴ Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 2. See also Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, chapters 1-2.

Count Nikolai Rezanov, Natalia Shelikhova's son-in-law and chief secretary of the imperial senate, visited the colonies in 1805 as a governmental inspector. He reported that most of the Russians who came to work for the company were depraved, drunk, and corrupt; that the officers were violent and immoral, and that many colonists had sexual relations with Native and Creole women without being married. In Rezanov's view, they were not good role models. What the natives needed was good examples of family life and housekeeping but, he argued, such models were lacking since there were very few European women in the colonies.⁵ Thus, the scarcity of women, imbued with Western notions of domestic life and morality, was presented as one of the main reasons for the corrupt and uncivilized state of the colonies.

In order to improve this situation, the board of directors of the RAC decided in 1829 that the Governor of Russian Alaska had to marry before he left Europe for the colonies. In this way Elisabeth von Wrangell became the first European woman who travelled to Russian America as a governors' wife. She would reside in Sitka during her husband's five-year appointment. Eight more governors' wives followed before Russia was sold to the United States in 1867.

This article examines three of these women – Elisabeth von Wrangell, Margaretha Etholén and Anna Furuhjelm – and seeks to understand their experiences as governors' wives in the light of prescriptive notions of true womanhood and of the role of women in the civilizing mission.⁶ It explores what it was like to be a young middle- or upper-class woman in the most remote part of the Russian empire and how these experiences can be related to the cult of domesticity and the new ideal of womanhood that took form in the nineteenth century. At the same time, it investigates what was expected of them as representatives of the Russian empire and how they themselves perceived this role.⁷ While these women provide a unique insight into the life of European middle- and upper-class women in Russian America, their view is circumscribed by their limited access to the lives of native women as well as the few European lower-class women in the colonies. However, their privileged position as the foremost female representative of the Russian empire meant that they had a special obligation not only to represent the empire, but also to spread its gendered notion of a civilizing mission.

To date, scholars interested in Russian imperial history and foreign policy have not paid much attention to the role of women and this is especially true for Russian Alaska.⁸ While important work has recently

⁵ Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company*, volume two, 159-73, 190-95, 225. For relations between European men and Native and Creole women, see Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, and Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages*.

⁶ For the notion of "true motherhood," see Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

⁷ For the cult of domesticity in Russia, see for example Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 87-90.

⁸ See T. S. Fedorova, "Zhenshchiny v Russkoi Amerike," in *Russkaya Amerika i Dal'nii Vostok Konets XVIII v.-1867g.*, ed. A. R. Artem'ev (Vladivostok: Inst. ist., arkh. i etn. narodov Dal'nego Vostoka, 2001), 91-103; Gwenn A. Miller,

been done on native women in Russian America, very little has been written about European women.⁹ Yet there is significant research on the Russian-American Company, the Orthodox Church, and the native population, which has focused on men's activities.¹⁰ Governors' wives were not appointed by the Russian-American Company; they were not employed and were not paid a salary. A governor's wife did not contribute to the company or to the running of the colonies in any formal capacity. Yet, she held the highest possible position for a woman in the colonial hierarchy, which meant that she was the highest female representative of empire in Russian America. In this capacity, the wives of governors certainly played a role in the colonies. They were to legitimize the colonial project by shaping an image of Russian America as a civilised colony in an enlightened European empire. Von Wrangell, Etholén, and Furuhejm were all aware of this role and tried to fulfil it to the best of their abilities. They endeavoured to establish and uphold European practices and values in their various capacities – as chatelaines and leaders of colonial society, and as role models, educators and foster mothers.

These particular governors' wives represented the Russian empire without being Russian. They belonged to the Lutheran minority of Baltic Germans and Finns, whose men held a disproportionate number of high positions in the Russian empire due to their high level of education and skills.¹¹ Many of them worked for the RAC as administrators, navigators, sea captains and doctors, but also as artisans and seafarers. Finns and Baltic Germans belonged to the most privileged minorities in the empire and they were known for their loyalty to the tsar.¹² This did not prevent them from displaying a strong

“The Perfect Mistress of Russian Economy’: Sighting the Intimate on a Colonial Alaskan Terrain 1784-1821,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann L. Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 300. For the renewal of interest in Russian imperial history, see James Gibson, “Russian imperial expansion in context and by contrast,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28 (2002): 181-202.

⁹ Recently a few collections of original sources have been published: Alix O’Grady, *From the Baltic to Russian America 1829-1836: The Journey of Elisabeth Von Wrangell* (Kingston: The Limestone Press, 2001); Annie Constance Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife: A View of Russian Alaska 1859-1862* (Århus: Aarhus University Press, 2006); D. L. Black and A. Petrov, ed., *Natalia Shelikhova, Russian Oligarch of Alaska Commerce* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010). See also Maria Jarlsdotter Enckell, “A Finnish Sawmill Bookkeeper’s Daughter’s Journey to Alaska,” *FEEFHS Journal X* (2002): 99-114; “Four North European Female Educators’ Toil in Russian Alaska, 1805-1849,” *FEEFHS Journal XI* (2003).

¹⁰ For literature on Russian America, see footnote one above.

¹¹ Most of the Finlanders in Alaska came from the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, which included both the upper and lower classes.

¹² This changed with the Russification policies of the 1880s. For the Lutherans in the Russian empire, see Alix O’Grady, “The Baltic Connection in Russian America,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 42 (1994): 321-339; Toivo Harjunpää, “The Lutherans in Russian Alaska,” *The Pacific Historical Review*, 37 (1968): 123-146; John A. Armstrong, “Mobilized Diaspora in Tsarist Russia: The Case of the Baltic Germans,” in *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, ed. Jeremy R. Azrael (New York: Praeger, 1978); A. V. Grinev, “Nemtsy v istorii Russkoi Ameriki,”

attachment to their homeland and to the Lutheran Church. What is more unexpected is Furuhjelm's strong criticism of both the Russian empire and the Russian people.¹³ Furthermore, these women's Western identity made it all the more important for them to appear civilized and cultivated.

Wrangell, Etholén and Furuhjelm are especially interesting to study from the perspective of women's and gender history. They lived in an era when the cult of true womanhood, as well as the ideology of imperialism, spread across Europe and, by extension, the world.¹⁴ They were all very young and newlywed when they went to Russian America. The journey they set out on across half the globe was simultaneously a journey to a new world and a journey into married life, and both destinations were equally unknown to them.

For these women, married life in the colonies entailed new roles and relationships. One of these new roles was that of a mother. Von Wrangell, Etholén and Furuhjelm gave birth to their first child either on route to Russian America or in Sitka. Von Wrangell, who travelled by land across Siberia had a baby girl named Marie Louise in Irkutsk.¹⁵ Etholén gave birth to a boy, Adolph Edward, out on the Pacific Ocean, near the Equator, while Furuhjelm had a little girl, Annie Fredrika, in Sitka, barely five months after arriving in the capital of Russian America. The extreme situation in the colonies made it much harder to be the good wife and mother that was expected of them, in particular because they had neither family nor friends there to support them. On the other hand, and presumably because of their isolation, they all appear to have formed close relationships with their husbands. None of the three were prepared for the feeling of isolation and the loneliness they experienced in Sitka.

According to many contemporary accounts, the capital of Russian America was a stunningly beautiful place. At the same time, most Europeans found it a horrible place; von Wrangell, Etholén and Furuhjelm were no exceptions. The climate, although mild, was extremely dark, damp and windy. According to

Amerikanskii ezhegodnik 2002 (Moscow: Nauka, 2004): 180-198; L. E. Lempiäinen, "Finlyandtsy na beregakh Russkoi Ameriki," *Klio* 4 (2003): 126-128; E. C. Thaden, *Russia's Western Borderlands 1710-1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); August von Haxthausen, *The Russian Empire: Its People, Institutions and Resources* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), 198.

¹³ The First Lutheran Church in Russian America was founded in 1840. Margaretha Etholén, her husband, and Ferdinand von Wrangell were all influential in making this happen.

¹⁴ See for example Catherine Hall, "The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology," in Sandra B. Burman, ed., *Fit Work for Women* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979), 15-32; Erna O. Hellerstein, Leslie P. Hume, and Karen M. Offen, eds., *Victorian Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981); Hide W. Whelan, *Adapting to Modernity. Family, Caste and Capitalism among the Baltic German Nobility* (Köln: Böhlau, 1999).

¹⁵ They continued their journey when she was only four weeks old.

contemporary reports, the annual rainfall was about ninety-five and half inches a year. The Sitka sky was almost constantly overcast. A normal year had clear weather for only one-third of the year, but some years the inhabitants saw clear skies on average only every fifth day. Many visitors found it difficult to get used to the climate.¹⁶ However, it was even more difficult to cope with the isolation. Not only were these Europeans literally thousands of miles from home, but, more importantly, it was almost impossible to communicate with friends and family back home. The sole means of communication was by ship and as late as 1845, the American colonies only received letters from Europe once a year. Von Wrangell found it difficult to describe the feeling when the arrival of the mail ship drew near: "I refrain from describing the tense anticipation which seized all those whose families live in Europe! Suddenly a ship is sighted on the horizon and the whole town is in motion. It is impossible to describe the commotion that the arrival of the mail creates. For twelve months there has been absolute silence and suddenly the bustle of Europe is let in." Later, when she had returned home and sat at the table with her letters in front of her, she hardly dared open them for fear of being affected by homesickness. She also worried that they might be the harbingers of sad tidings. "At last everything has been opened and they contain nothing but good news," she sighed in relief, only to remember that the letters are old. "But oh, my heart contracts against my will. They were dated a year ago. Could they be replaced by sad news within another one?"¹⁷

While poor communications made it difficult to keep in touch with family and friends at home, it was also difficult to find like-minded friends and real companionship in the colony. The European population was small and there were very few women. To make friends with native or Creole women seems not to have been an option. The position of governor's wife only accentuated feelings of isolation and loneliness. Furuhjelm complained that of all people in Sitka the governor's wife was the loneliest, for nobody visited her. She had no company and the governor was always busy.¹⁸ In addition, there was a sense among Sitka's European population that the settlement was under siege and surrounded by a dangerous Indian population. The city's location with high, snow-capped mountains and impenetrable forests on one side and dangerous seas on the other also contributed to the feeling of isolation and of being closed in. Life in the colonial capital seemed utterly monotonous to many European residents.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Colonial Russian America. Kyrill T. Khlebnikov's Reports, 1817-1832*, translated with introduction and notes by Basil Dmytryshyn and E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1976), s. 24; original: "Materialy dlia istorii russkikh zaselenii po beregam vostochnago okeana," *Morskoi sbornik* 3 (1861) s. 30; Letter from Hampus Furuhjelm to his father, Sitka, 25 May 1852.

¹⁷ Undated letter to her parents, Sitka, fall 1831 in F. P. von Wrangell, *Ein Kampf um Wahrheit* (Stuttgart: Quell., 1938), 78, translated in O'Grady, *From the Baltic to Russian America 1829-1836*, 202.

¹⁸ Letter from Anna Furuhjelm to her mother, Sitka, 28 April 1862 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor's Wife*, 245.

¹⁹ See for example Pavel N. Golovin, *Civil and Savage Encounters: The Worldly Travel Letters of an Imperial Russian Navy Officer 1860-1861* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1983), 89, 94.

Yet, Sitka was regarded as the most urban and most civilized settlement on the North American Pacific coast until the establishment of San Francisco in 1849. The town became known for its many balls, dinners, masquerades, theatrical and musical performances. With more than a little exaggeration, it was sometimes spoken of as a “Paris on the Pacific.”

Elisabeth von Wrangell

Elisabeth von Wrangell was the first governor’s wife who accompanied her husband to Russian America and the first white woman in the Governor’s House in Sitka. She was only nineteen when she married the newly appointed Governor of Russian America, Ferdinand von Wrangell, who was fourteen years her senior. Barely a month later, the newlywed couple set off on the adventurous journey across Siberia to Okhotsk where they were to embark on a ship to North America.²⁰ Elisabeth von Wrangell did not appear to hold the virtues of true womanhood in high regard. Whether this was due to her personality or to the fact that the cult of true womanhood had not yet firmly established itself among the Baltic German nobility to which she belonged is difficult to say.²¹ Her letters make it clear that she valued virtues that have traditionally been attributed to men, such as irony, rationality, analytical ability, courage, determination, curiosity and energy.

It has been argued that female travellers in the nineteenth century often tended to exude self-deprecation and underplay their own valour and the physical challenges they encountered. Instead, they tended to emphasize their femininity, for example by travelling in skirts.²² von Wrangell, however, did not worry too much about her unladylike appearance. She did not write in an apologetic, ladylike supposedly female voice. Neither did she exclude unfeminine events, or narratives of adventure. To the contrary, her story is full of adventures and she presents herself as something of a hardy adventurer hero. Her voice is much more that of an in-control male than that of a modest female. She traveled in trousers and a coat of English leather.²³

²⁰ O’Grady, *From the Baltic to Russian America*.

²¹ The cult of domesticity spread to the Baltic States from Germany. See Whelan, *Adapting to Modernity*. See also Susan L. Blake, “A Woman’s Trek. What Difference Does Gender Make,” in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 32.

²² Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 37-38; Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An analysis of women’s travel writing and colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 39, 122.

²³ Elisabeth von Wrangell, Letter to her sister Toni. Staging Post Tünülä, 40 versts east of Yakutsk, 27 July [June] 1830 in *Dorpatser Jahrbücher*, volume II, 353-74.

Her travel letters were full of ironic comments about the dangers and unpleasantness she and her fellow travellers faced on the journey.²⁴ She never complained, although the journey was at times extremely rough and tiresome. She was not afraid of taking risks, nor did she fear the unknown. Instead, she approached the world with bold curiosity and an open mind. A striking example of this attitude is when she was given a pair of boots and told that they were waterproof. She immediately walked straight out into deep water to see for herself whether or not this was true. It turned out that it was not.²⁵

von Wrangell had a penchant for the heroic and was impressed by bold and fearless actions and people who defied dangers. She was also very fond of the wild and dramatic. The perilous journey across Siberia gave her plenty of opportunities to write about dangers faced by her company. She clearly enjoyed pointing them out, often with an ironic twist at the end. For instance, when she had to wade through deep streams with strong currents, she wrote: "As we reached the most torrential part of the stream my horse stumbled and jumped over a log we had not noticed, so that I could barely hang on. I put up gladly with the jolt I had received, since it had saved me from a dunking somewhat too cold for my liking." At one point it was so bad that "a minor slip of the horse would inevitably have ended in death."²⁶

Unlike Etholén, who was not happy about having to leave Europe, von Wrangell loved the freedom of trekking through the Siberian wilderness. She felt a sense of liberation by the wide-open spaces. The free nomadic life and untamed wilderness in its infinite beauty captivated her. Her travel journal conveyed a strong craving for freedom from conventions and restrictions. Indeed, von Wrangell wished to experience adventure and unusual things.²⁷ She was fascinated by what she found exotic and showed a genuine interest in foreign cultures and mores. However, this empathetic attitude did not prevent her from expressing a degree of cultural superiority, for example when she described their Yakut guides as children. While her husband felt sorry for them and saw them as an uncivilized group of people who the authorities had neglected to educate, von Wrangell took a much more personal interest in them and wished to learn their culture.²⁸ She often tried to make sense of alien customs and habits by comparing

²⁴ Elisabeth's father published extracts of some of her letters in the Baltic German journal *Dorpater Jahrbücher für Literatur, Statistik und Kunst besonders Russland*, volume I-II as "Briefe aus Sibirien und den Russischen Niederlassungen in Amerika." Most of her correspondence is found in The Estonian Historical Archives.

²⁵ Von Wrangell, Staging Post Tünülä, 27 July [June] 1830.

²⁶ Ibid. For English translation, see O'Grady, *From the Baltic to Russian America*, 105, 107.

²⁷ See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 104, for the view that female curiosity was problematic and needed to be controlled, which created difficulties for female travelers.

²⁸ Von Wrangell, Staging Post Tünülä, 27 July [June] 1830.

them with something familiar in Europe. Although this revealed a patronizing attitude on her part, it was at the same time a reaction against the common European way of considering natives as “the other”; as alien barbarians.²⁹

Family and home did not figure strongly in von Wrangell’s writings, nor did she present herself first and foremost as wife and mother. Even though she loved her children, motherhood was at times an impediment to her. It did affect her on the journey, after her first child was born, but only for a short period before they solved the practical problems inherent when travelling with a small child.³⁰ For instance, they hired a Yakut to accompany them with a bearskin and four poles so that the baby did not have to be changed under an open sky when it was raining. They changed the order of the day in order not to reach their camp too late when it was too damp for the child. They also built a carriage so the baby could move about more freely.

Motherhood became much more of a problem when von Wrangell arrived in America. Travelling across Siberia, she challenged prescriptive conceptions of gender roles. However, when she was settled in the Governor’s House she was confined to the domestic role of wife and mother. After a while, she started to feel trapped. This is particularly evident when she had to stay at home while her husband made his inspection tours around the colonies. In a letter to Ferdinand, she wrote that “[y]ou cannot imagine how depressing and desolate the house is without you. I cannot find any peace anywhere and do not feel inclined to do anything.”³¹

While she was unhappy in her lonely life as mother and homemaker, she loved her public role in the colonial capital as a representative of the empire. Von Wrangell was a tireless charity worker. Her cheerful nature and social skills made her well qualified for this kind of work, as well as for her role as Sitka’s First Lady. She liked to meet different kinds of people, especially those who had lived an interesting life, and she was fascinated by the Sitka Tlingits.³²

Whereas the Tlingits frightened Anna Furuhjelm, Elisabeth von Wrangell saw her role as a kind of mediator between European civilization and native culture. Their “exotic” appearance mesmerized her. She wished to learn more about them, who they were behind their intimidating exterior. She noted, for

²⁹ See for example her letter to her parents. Sitka, 14 October 1830 in *Dorpater Jahrbücher*, volume II, 179-86.

³⁰ Von Wrangell, Staging Post Tünülä, 27 July [June] 1830; Ferdinand von Wrangell, “Putevye zapiski Admirala Barona F.P. Vrangelya,” *Istoricheskii Vestnik* 18 (1884) 163-80.

³¹ Letter to Ferdinand von Wrangell, Sitka 7 June 1832, translated in O’Grady, *From the Baltic to Russian America*, 207.

³² W. von Wrangell, ed., *Acta Wrangeliana*, 30 (Stuttgart, 1968), 57; Letter from Kyrill (A) Khlebnikov to Baroness Elisabeth v. Wrangell née de Rossillon, *Syn Otechestvo* 32 (1838): 1-17; Von Wrangell, Sitka, May 1831.

instance, that many of their slaves from other tribes had “very fine features” despite being painted “in a fearful manner.” The Tlingits appealed to von Wrangell, partly because she was fascinated by their exotic appearance, partly because she associated them with an idealized version of a free and unrestricted life. She also saw features in them that she admired, such as heroism, strength and pride. These were virtues she admired in both men and women, although in slightly different ways. Hence, they were not clearly gender specific.³³ It is difficult to know why von Wrangell valued virtues traditionally seen as masculine, but it probably had to do with her free-spirited personality.

The Tlingits were not the only interesting people in Sitka. There were also a number of eccentric individuals from different parts of the world, whose exciting life von Wrangell envied. “A résumé of our conversations would certainly make a vivid story of a voyage around the world,” she once remarked.³⁴ Like most frontier societies, Sitka was dominated by men, who lived a rough life characterized by drinking, gambling, and prostitution. But their behaviour did not horrify her. Instead, she wrote admiringly about the company officials, describing them as heroes of a kind. “The officials are energetic people – tough characters,” she said, “they have to be, for simpletons and weaklings would not make it out this far.”³⁵ Nor did she comment on the widespread sex trade taking place in the colonies.³⁶ Unlike her successors, “the immorality of frontier life” did not upset her. Perhaps the reason for this was that she was not particularly interested in the virtues of “true womanhood,” which included assuming a position of moral superiority. This allowed her to be less judgmental and more sympathetic to the natives, the Creoles and the Russian fur-traders.³⁷ In contrast to many other pioneer women (for example, Elizabeth Simcoe, Lady Dufferin, and Frances Simpson), von Wrangell openly expressed her desire to get to know the native inhabitants and learn about their way of life. She invited local chiefs and one chieftainess to her house, showing them hospitality and kindness. In addition, she socialized with Creole women and included them in colonial society. RAC officials appreciated her attempts to improve the relationship between natives and Russians, as well as her effort to form a “civilized” society. As there were only two or three European women in Sitka, Creole women constituted an important part of Sitka’s society.

³³ Von Wrangell, Sitka, 14 October 1830.

³⁴ Sitka, May 1831, translated O’Grady, *From the Baltic to Russian America*, 162.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dmytryshyn and Crownhart-Vaughan, *Colonial Russian America*, 71.

³⁷ Children with a Russian father and a native mother were called Creoles.

Margaretha Etholén

Etholén, the next Lutheran governor's wife in Russian America, was a well-educated young woman from Finland. At the age of twenty-four, she married the newly appointed governor, forty-year old Adolph Etholén, in December 1838. Two-and-a-half months later, the couple embarked on the RAC ship, *Nikolai I*, which would take them all the way from Turku, in Finland, to Sitka.³⁸ Madame Etholén was neither very interested in the exotic, nor in bravery or heroic escapades. She did not care for adventures and given the choice, she would have preferred to remain in Finland instead of going to America. She was a cerebral woman, an intellectual. She was also a devout Christian and devoted much space in her diary to religious issues.³⁹

Etholén set high standards for herself as wife, mother, daughter, and a good Christian, but had a hard time to live up to these demands. After two weeks on board *Nikolai I*, she reproached herself for her homesickness and foul mood.⁴⁰ The main problem was her strong self-identity and independent mind, which she found difficult to stifle in order to be the submissive, gentle, and modest wife that she believed was expected of her. She was better educated and much more cultivated than her husband, which created a problem even though she made sure to never show off in front of him.

When they arrived in Sitka, Etholén continued to blame herself for not being a good enough wife, although she played the public role of governor's wife very well, educating Creole girls, raising orphans, and maintaining European practices:

Which valuable, sacred duties have you, Heavenly Father! not given me to fulfil. I am a wife: Have I, as You commanded, brightened the days of the husband You gave to me? Have I tenderly and lovingly tried to make his home a quiet place where he can forget the unpleasantness, the anxiety that the outer life necessarily entails; where he can gather strength to go back to toil and work and find rest and peace after having performed his duties; have I, as You commanded, bowed to the word that a moment's disheartened mood provoked, and not myself been the reason for this dispirited mood; have I humbly received corrections and

³⁸ For the Scandinavian Lutherans in Russian Alaska, see Enckell, "Four North European Female Educators' Toil"; Maria J. Enckell, "The Finnish Migration to and from Russian Alaska and the Pacific Siberian Rim 1800-1900," *Siirtolaisuus - Migration* 4 (2002): 16-22; Toivo Harjunpaa, "The Lutherans in Russian Alaska," *The Pacific Historical Review* 37 (1968), 123-146.

³⁹ The diary of Margaretha Etholén has not been published. It is found in the Archives of Åbo Academy University Library, Manuscript Collections.

⁴⁰ Etholén diary entry, 29 September 1839.

remained free from suspicion and bitterness? How must I truthfully answer these and similar questions?⁴¹

The feeling of guilt became much stronger when her little son, Edward, died after a short period of illness and she took the blame both for his death and for not being able to recover from it.

The sudden death of her first-born child and her subsequent deep depression coloured Etholén's stay in Sitka. Since such feelings were socially unacceptable and there was no help for her in Sitka, she used her diary as a therapy tool. Etholén was well aware that a true Christian woman was meant to bear her sorrow with patience and resignation. She knew that it was her duty to accept that God had taken her son and that she should submit to His will, but she found this difficult to bear.⁴² She could not accept that she "never again on this earth will embrace...the one I have seen being lowered into the dark womb of earth; the son who taught me to feel maternal bliss – the purest and most sublime of emotions."⁴³ Etholén believed that her grief was not only ungodly, it was also selfish. She had no right to miss her child so, or to think that she had a special relationship with him; that motherly love was of any value compared to the love of God. However, she could not understand how motherly love could be the highest and purest form of love and at the same time something sinful. She struggled, therefore, not only with the terrible loss of her son, but also with the loss of the comfort and support she was supposed to find in God. She knew the right path, but could not bring herself to take it. She desperately wanted peace, but she could not find it. It was not because she was searching for the light. God had allowed her to see the light of the world and through her dark depression she held on to her faith. This made her doubly guilty: "I can see the good path that leads to the light and salvation," she wrote "and...yet do not walk it."⁴⁴

Etholén had two more sons in Alaska, but she continued to grieve. The preoccupation with the loss of her first son meant that she constantly lived with a bad conscience towards her husband for not giving him a happy home. Every wedding anniversary, remorse seized her for not being the woman her husband married. Five years after her marriage, she still did not feel that she fulfilled her role as a wife and she prayed to God to help her to be a worthy spouse to him: "Why must I feel that I still am not

⁴¹ Etholén diary entry, 30 August 1840. Translations from Swedish are made by the author.

⁴² Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13, 119-142; Pat Jalland, *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History 1840-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 71, 137-39; Mrs John Sandford, *Woman in her social and domestic character*, Sixth American edition (Boston: Otis Broaders, 1842), 42; Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, *A Woman's thoughts about Women* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1858), 284.

⁴³ Etholén diary entry, 11/29 July 1842.

⁴⁴ Etholén diary entry, 3 July 1842.

[worthy]? How well did he not deserve a spouse whose heart without pain and reproach could wholly belong to him – whose conscience was without wounds? But, it did not fall on my lot to be able to fulfil a wife’s duties.” Etholén did not feel worthy of such happiness. Her husband was right when he told her that he could give her everything except one thing – “the sole thing that would bring bliss to both of us – peace with myself.”⁴⁵

Etholén did not only feel remorse towards her husband but ever since Edward’s death, she had been feeling guilty towards her mother. She had not lived according to the faith that her mother had given her. Indeed, she covered her mother’s portrait with a piece of cloth, because she did not consider herself worthy to behold her mother’s beloved features. In this time of sorrow, when she needed her mother most, she was unable to receive the comfort of her love. Every day, she prayed to God that she would once more be worthy to meet her gaze. On 3 November 1844, she removed the cloth, not because she now felt worthy of her mother, but because her prayers were no longer followed by despair. “I have...felt a growing trust in the grace and mercy of my Saviour invigorate my previously disheartened soul,” she wrote in her diary.⁴⁶ Above all, she strongly felt that she had a role that she wanted to work towards fulfilling – to teach her children the true way to fear and honour the name of the Lord and to teach them his will. This willingness to perform what she saw as her duty shows that she began to regain her confidence. Previously, she did not think that she could manage such a task, partly because she felt so weak, partly because she was in conflict with God. Now, she felt that this was not only something she was capable of, but also something she herself wanted. Furthermore, the role of religious educator was one that her own mother had assumed. To take on the same role as her mother made her feel connected to her.⁴⁷

There was a discrepancy between Etholén’s private and public life, which was not evident to most people in Sitka. To them she appeared as a highly competent governor’s wife, who took her civilizing role very seriously. There is no doubt that she was a highly effective director of the school for Creole girls, who were taught Russian grammar, history, geography, needlework, housework, and social skills. In her effort to turn the Creole girls into good European style housewives, she held classes on Saturdays at the Governor’s House, training them in conversation, dancing, social etiquette, and basic French. Etholén also exercised strict social and moral control. Some of Sitka’s inhabitants found her too zealous in her pursuit of form and etiquette, and they described her as insensitive and moralizing.⁴⁸ However,

⁴⁵ Etholén diary entry, 9 January 1845.

⁴⁶ Etholén diary entry, 3 November 1844.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See for example Uno Cygnaeus letters from Sitka, Finland’s National Archives, Cygnaeus Collection 1839-1845; Reinhold Ferdinand Sahlberg, *En resa kring jorden 1839-1843. Anteckningar från Sydamerika, Alaska och Sibirien* [A journey around the world 1839–1843. Notes from South America, Alaska and Siberia] (Helsinki: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 2007).

her diary reveals a very sensitive, reserved, lonely, and above all, deeply unhappy woman, whose life fell apart when her son died, and who struggled with feelings of guilt towards her husband, her mother, and God. To some extent this inconsistency was due to the contrast between the woman she wished to be, or believed she ought to be – dependent, submissive, modest, and the woman she actually was – independent, critical, intellectual, resolute and strong-minded.

Anna Furuhjelm

Furuhjelm was twenty-two years old when she met her thirty-seven year old husband-to-be at a Christmas ball in Helsinki. One month later, they were married and immediately after the wedding lunch Furuhjelm took leave from her dear mother, who she would never see again, and embarked on the long journey towards Sitka via St Petersburg, Dresden, London, Panama, and San Francisco. To Furuhjelm, the entire journey, as well as the arrival in Sitka, was like a fairy tale. She could not get over the fact that Hampus, her beloved husband, had chosen her as his wife. Furuhjelm, who until recently was “a little obscure lady” was now “such a grand Lady” and treated with such distinction. In fact, Furuhjelm proudly told her mother, she and Hampus were “le roi et la reigne des Colonies [the king and the queen of the colonies].”⁴⁹

When Furuhjelm arrived in Sitka, she was thrilled and filled with great expectations. She was not primarily excited about the new world she encountered, however. Rather, her excitement was caused by the new home she would finally be able to arrange for her Hampus after many months of travel: “It was such a delightful feeling when he came home last night, and I went to meet him at his door,” she wrote. “[H]e said ‘Ack, hvad det är skönt att komma hem till sin hustru’ [Oh, How lovely it is to come home to your wife].”⁵⁰

In the beginning, Furuhjelm was enthusiastic about everything: the stately Governor’s House with its fantastic views in different directions; the lush green garden with its benches and tables and pretty pavilions; the weather, which she believed was going to be very mild⁵¹; the school for orphan girls, where she looked forward to witnessing the progress the girls would make and where she planned to distribute Bibles and “good books.” She told her mother that “though you are lonely here, and have to

⁴⁹ Anna Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka, 20/4 October 1859 in Åbo Academy Library, Manuscript Collections, published in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

⁵⁰ Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka, 5 July 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

⁵¹ When Anna first arrived at the Governor’s House, she was upset that all the windows were hermetically sealed “as if we were living in the Arctic regions, instead of in a place, where everyone tells me, there is scarcely any winter.” Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka, 5 July 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

make a sacrifice in many respects in coming here, you can be perfectly happy – Your wishes are in every way attended to as if you were a king or queen.”⁵²

Yet within a few months, it was evident that things were not altogether well. Furuhjelm was not at all prepared for the foreign world that she encountered in Sitka. Everything was strange to her; the Tlingits, the Creoles, the Russians, the Orthodox Church, the landscape, the climate, and the wilderness. The wilderness scared her, as did the Tlingits with their painted faces. She did not dare to walk alone in case she met them. She found the Russians less civilized than Western Europeans. In her view, they were not as particular with cleanliness; they did not appreciate the sacredness of marriage, and were too careless. In addition, she was appalled by the immorality of frontier life. “[I]t affects your heart & soul,” she told her mother. “Over & over again I ask myself, can nothing be done to ’turn them from unrighteousness.”⁵³ She had never seen anything like it. The rough life of the frontiersmen and their native consorts affronted her religious upbringing. It contravened her notion of true womanhood. She was raised to believe in the purity of women. Virtuous and refined women were supposed to keep men from low pleasures and pursuits. Furuhjelm was most concerned with the behaviour of the Creoles, who she found indolent and promiscuous. She was also very upset that the Orthodox Church had converted so few of the natives, “O when will those poor heathens be converted...? Never, I am afraid, as long as they are under Russian power! & [sic] therefore it would be already much to be wished that England or America had been the possessors of our Colonies.”⁵⁴ Furuhjelm felt that it was her Christian duty to rectify the situation. However, she did not know what to do, nor how to do it.

When the weather changed for the worse Furuhjelm realized that the climate might not be as nice as she was first led to believe. The bad weather dampened her spirits, so did the loneliness and isolation. She began to feel abandoned by her mother, from whom she had not heard in months. “O! That such miles and miles of sea should lie between us, & hinder our correspondence.”⁵⁵ This feeling of abandonment grew worse when she learned that Hampus had to go to San Francisco on business and she realized that he would not be back until *after* the birth of their first child. She would thus be on her own when giving birth, “[d]uring the hours of danger and pain – an hour which may at the same time be my last, he, my hearts Beloved, will be absent from me, and I shall be alone, in a strange and distant Country, amongst a people, whose language is not my own!”⁵⁶ “The whole wide, vast tempestuous

⁵² Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka, 5 July 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

⁵³ Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka, 4/16 October 1860 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

⁵⁴ Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka 1 January 1861 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

⁵⁵ Sitka 25 November/7 December 1860 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

⁵⁶ Furuhjelm, Sitka 3 July 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor’s Wife*.

ocean will separate me from him," she wrote.⁵⁷ Hampus's journey clearly came as a complete shock to her. It made Furuhjelm feel the separation from her family and especially her mother, more strongly. "If I could but have you to nurse me my own Mother!" she wrote in despair.⁵⁸

It was at this moment that Furuhjelm began to doubt her ability to fulfil what she took to be her obligations as a governor's wife. She felt young and inexperienced and very concerned about her lack of knowledge of pedagogy and education in general, which made her work in directing the girls' school difficult: "I am young, ignorant & unexperienced – But I pray God will help me, for it is my most ardent desire to be of use – to do some good."⁵⁹ She wished to improve the school, but did not know how. She felt helpless in the face of the moral depravity around her and put off by the Orthodox priest, who would not allow her to hand out Bibles, or to be involved in religious education.⁶⁰ Nor did she feel confident in her role as Sitka's First Lady. In the company of Sitka's other ladies, she felt young and timid. Her insecurity and dependence also made it difficult for her to handle her servants, including her little orphan girl from Siberia. She did not trust any of them, with the exception of her German maid, Ida.

Feeling inadequate and incompetent, Furuhjelm tried, as far it was possible for a Governor's wife, to opt out of the whole imperial project, at least in terms of commitment. She took refuge in the private sphere – her home and family. While both von Wrangell and Etholén took pride in their involvement in the colonies, educating local girls, engaging in charitable activities, and maintaining European practices, Furuhjelm invested her energy in the private sphere. Having failed in her public role, she hoped she would succeed in her role as wife and mother. She wrote to her own mother that she was no longer interested in the social world. Her world – her sphere and mission – was now her home, her husband and her children:

⁵⁷ Furuhjelm, Sitka 5 July 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor's Wife*.

⁵⁸ Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka 6 August/25 July 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor's Wife*. In the middle and upper classes, young women were commonly assisted by their mother and sometimes by an older sister during childbirth. See for example Angela Rundquist, *Blått blod och liljevita händer. En etnologisk studie av aristokratiska kvinnor 1850-1900* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2001). Sylvia Van Kirk writes that it was during pregnancy and childbirth that European women in North America missed their female relatives and familiar surroundings the most. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980), 198.

⁵⁹ Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Sitka 9/21 September 1859 in Christensen, ed., *Letters From the Governor's Wife*.

⁶⁰ Furuhjelm, Sitka 4/16 October 1860; Letter to Wilhelmina 28 September/10 October 1861 in Åbo Academy Library, Manuscript Collections.

When you have entered upon marriage... & have felt in the depth of your heart, that your whole heart's love will ever be your husband's, the world, which before bore so bright an image... is indeed changed & you feel, you have your *own World*, your husband's heart! Your Home! Your children! [T]here is your new world; your *real* world!⁶¹

In this sense, among the three governors' wives Furuhjelm was the one who had most clearly internalized the contemporary cult of domesticity and the virtues of true womanhood, according to which a woman's place was in the home and her mission in life was to care for and honour her husband, to raise their children and arrange a comfortable home.⁶² For this reason, she felt a deep sense of failure when she was not able to breastfeed her first-born baby. What she wanted more than anything else was to be a perfect wife and mother so that her own mother and husband could be proud of her. But when she failed to perform one of the basic tasks of motherhood, she felt utterly useless and disappointed. She also felt guilty, because of her conviction that only bad or unhealthy women were unable to nurse their own babies.⁶³ When her second child was born, she was finally able to breastfeed and she wrote to her friend Wilhelmina: "How exquisitely sweet to feel your own child drawing its nourishment from yourself, and to see how all tears & troubles cease as soon as it comes to its mother's breast."⁶⁴

The mid-century ideals of true womanhood which Furuhjelm tried to fulfil were not at all fitted to frontier life. The virtues of sensitivity, refinement, subordination and dependence were an impediment in a place like Sitka. Women here needed to be strong, independent and assertive. When Furuhjelm came to Russian America, she was an extremely insecure and immature woman, almost completely dependent on her husband. However, life in Sitka made her realize that she was in fact capable of dealing with difficult situations by herself. Her experiences in the colonies thus turned her into a more independent, assertive woman.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Furuhjelm, letter to her mother, Kodiak 24/12 July 1860, *ibid.*

⁶² For the cult of domesticity, see Welter, *Dimity Convictions*. For criticism of this notion, see Leila J. Rupp, "Women's History in the New Millennium: A Retrospective Analysis of Barbara Welter's 'The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,'" *Journal of Women's History* 14 (2002): 149-173.

⁶³ Anna consulted Dr Bull on all questions of pregnancy, nursing, and child care. He stated that it was the duty of the mother to nurse her infant: "[T]here is no nourishment so well suited to the constitution of the individual child as its own mother's milk." Thomas Bull, *Hints to Mothers for the Management of Health during the Period of Pregnancy and in the Lying-in Room: With an Exposure of Popular Errors in Connexion with those Subjects and Hints upon Nursing*, nineteenth edition (London, 1877), 220.

⁶⁴ Furuhjelm, 1 January 1861; Letter to Wilhelmina, 24 March/5 April 1861.

⁶⁵ See Anna Furuhjelm, *Människor och öden* (Helsingfors: Söderström, 1932) for Furuhjelm's further adventures.

Conclusion

This study confirms previous findings that point to the significance of gender to colonial projects. It shows that the Russian empire assigned a similar role to European women in the new world as the British empire did, although race was not as important a category in Russian America as in places like the Indian subcontinent. However, by focusing specifically on the notion of a gendered civilizing mission, it appears that European women, and especially governors' wives, took a more active part in the colonization project than merely caring for husband and children, or throwing parties at the Governor's House. Above all, they were fully aware of their obligation to uphold and promote European norms and practices and they worked actively to fulfil it, even though they sometimes failed. These women, who were often confined to a submissive domestic role in their home country, had greater opportunities in the colonies to create a semi-independent position for themselves. This is especially true of those women who took on the role of educator. Although they did not question gender norms, they took on a role as intellectual leaders outside of the home which gave them a professional identity of their own.

Furthermore, the study shows that women's colonial experiences differed from men's, not only in the sense that they were assigned different roles, but also because they experienced the colonies and its inhabitants in a distinctive fashion. This means that women's experiences as colonizers cannot be separated from their experiences as women. Not only did they have a certain function in the colonies because of their gender, it was also the case that their notions of womanhood and gender roles informed their encounter with and experiences of the new world. Hence, in order to understand the position of European women in the colonies, it is not enough to study their colonial circumstances; we also have to study the gendered conditions of life in this specific context.

Finally, this study confirms previous findings that the cult of domesticity and its associated ideal of womanhood spread across Europe in the nineteenth century. However, it questions the notion of a unified nineteenth-century conception of womanhood. We need to know more about how rapidly this ideal spread and when it was established in different countries before we may confidently state whether women like von Wrangell broke with an established norm or not.