

William Stimpson's Journal from the North Pacific Exploring Expedition 1853-1856

By Ronald S. Vasile, Raymond B. Manning and Rafael Lemaire, published by Carcinological Society of Japan, November 2005

The United States Exploring Expedition involved a four year world circling voyage by a squadron of naval vessels led by Captain Charles Wilkes in his flagship *Vincennes* a sloop of war.

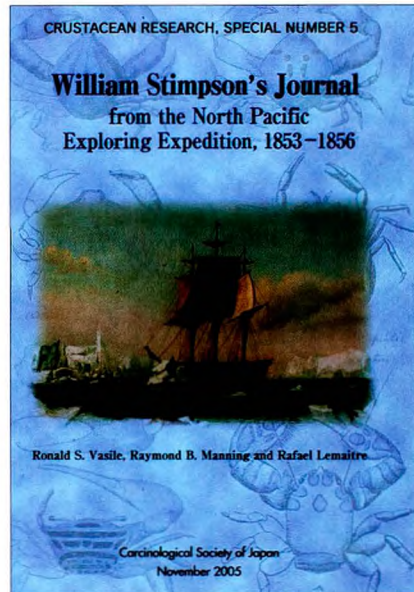
On return to the United States in 1842 a great mass of scientific material was handed into the Smithsonian Institution where it was intensively worked upon by a number of scientists, their findings eventually published in twenty volumes of Government Reports.

Ten years later the Government was planning to send a similar expedition to the North Pacific with *Vincennes* again as the flagship of a squadron of four vessels which included the brig *Porpoise* which had taken a full part in the great voyage.

Commodore Cadwaladar Ringgold, a veteran of Wilke's expedition, was in Command when in June 1853 the squadron sailed from Lynnhaven on the East Coast.

The primary Mission was to survey and chart portions of the North Pacific, Bering Strait, and north China Seas to facilitate the operations of the American whaling fleets.

Before sailing two young scientists were placed onboard, William Stimpson, a



student of marine crustaceans and Charles Wright, a botanist.

Once at sea Ringgold tried to impose severe discipline which was met with increasing opposition by the ship's company; whilst he denied the scientists reasonable opportunities for dredging for specimens. *Vincennes* was not a happy ship.

By the time the squadron reached Japan it was obvious that Ringgold was becoming deranged so it was fortunate that Commodore Perry was in Japan negotiating with that nation the opening up

of world trade. As senior officer present he was able to relieve Ringgold of his command after a medical survey appointing John Rodgers in his stead. Discipline onboard immediately improved whilst Rodgers understood the scientists requirements for dredging.

Unfortunately not long after taking over command of the squadron Rodgers sailed from Hong Kong in *Vincennes* in company with *Porpoise* into a typhoon from which the brig and her company of 52 souls were never seen again.

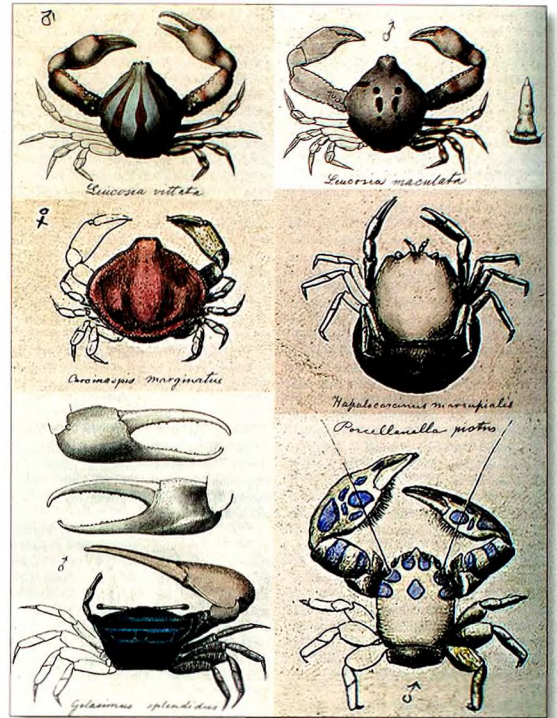
The Expedition eventually reached San Francisco in October 1855 where the remaining three ships were ordered home via Cape Horn, reaching New York in July 1856.

Stimpson's Journal and the great mass of specimens were deposited in the Smithsonian, whilst he himself began to work on a series of 8 major papers on the material which he termed *prodomus* (preliminaries) for they were all written in latin as was the scientific custom of the age.

In 1866, ten years after he had come ashore, he was appointed Director of the Museum of the Chicago Academy of Science to which he agreed to a loan of the Expedition material in the Smithsonian, virtually all of which was lost in the great Chicago Fire of October 1871. Simpson died of tuberculosis at the age of 40 the following year.

For various reasons neither of the Commanders' Journals was ever published so that 130 years after the return of this major exploring expedition only the hydrographic discoveries would be known to the Coast Survey and used in charts.

In the Foreword to this book Rafael Lemaire informs the reader how in about 1990 his two fellow authors



A page from Stimpson's Journal.

began to work on Stimpson's Journal in the Smithsonian which now, together with his copious interesting footnotes, forms the heart of this beautifully produced book.

This young man's Journal covers every aspect of this voyage which took place 150 years ago and we are reading about it for the first time... the ship's daily position, the weather, the activities onboard each day, his shipmates' visits onshore at remote places. Its all there. As a diarist he is another Darwin and quite a discovery.

Reviewed by Steve Ritchie