

INFORMATION ON EVERYDAY LIFE FROM HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

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Introduction

Philip Van Buskirk, a drummer on board the USS Plymouth, first visited the Bonin Islands in 1853. His ship, after having been detached from the small fleet that made a first visit to Japan under the command of Commodore Matthew C. Perry, sailed into Port Futami (then Port Lloyd) in October of that year to claim the Bonins for the United States. His initial visit was brief, and allowed him little time ashore for observation or to become acquainted with any of the settlers. Decades later, after service as an officer in the United States Navy, he returned to the Bonins, where he resided for an extended period, built a house, fraternised with the islanders, recorded much about his life and his interactions with the local residents, and compiled genealogical records for several families with whom he became friendly.

He was an ardent diarist. The three-dozen surviving volumes he compiled between 1851 and his death in 1903 hold a vast trove of information. They contain entries dealing not only with his own life, but they are filled with detailed observations on the many lands he visited during his decades of military service and afterward. As far as can be ascertained, Van Buskirk was a careful and accurate observer. On matters mentioned in his diaries that can be checked against official records (including the copious volumes published on the Perry expeditions), the correspondence is near perfect. When he copied articles from newspapers or magazines into his diary pages, he did so with hardly a comma or apostrophe added or subtracted from the original.

The observations recorded by Van Buskirk on his two visits to the Bonins are especially useful for historians and others interested in the islands' past. His lack of official standing -indeed his total disinterest in matters of government and administration - kept him from duplicating information that normally survives in standard archival holdings. Instead he wrote of ordinary people and ordinary things not from the standpoint of a detached observer but with the advantage of being an active and ardent participant in the events he penned into his diary. He wrote of individuals by name, chronicled families and relationships, and registered his insights into their interactions, habits, and character. His sampling of ordinary island life came while he lived it: the details of building a house, hiring helpers, commissioning the digging of a privy, seeking companionship, etc. were the sorts of subjects that comprised his entries. In short, his is an account from the ground up, erratic, sporadic, uncontrived, and unassuming. It is exactly the type of data once

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ignored by scholars, but now prized by social historians, museum professionals, classroom teachers, custodians of local traditions, and especially by people hoping to instill a sense of the past in children, adolescents, and in the general population of any country, province, geographical area, or ethnic group.

Introduction

Several years ago, in the fall of 2001, I received an e-mail from Professor Daniel Long of Tokyo Metropolitan University. He was inquiring after information on Philip C. Van Buskirk, a 19th-century United States Marine and a Civil War deserter from the Confederate Army. I was surprised to be getting any correspondence on the subject at all. Although I had written a book on Van Buskirk (1994), it had been out a good while by then and attracted only the usual reviews that customarily come with academic monographs. The little correspondence I had earlier received on the study had long been buried in my inactive file. What surprised me most, however, was the subject that interested Professor Long. He inquired about visits Van Buskirk made to the Bonin Islands in 1891 and 1898. His information on the visits came from an 1915 book by Lionel B. Cholmondeley entitled *The History of the Bonin Islands from the Year 1827 to the Year 1876*.^[1] I responded by explaining that while I knew Van Buskirk had been to the islands late in the century, the only visit I had dealt with at any length came in 1853. He was at that time a drummer onboard the USS *Plymouth* when the ship sailed into Port Lloyd to lay claim to the Bonins for the United States. The few events he found noteworthy in that stumbling effort at imperialism were the dropping off a plaque letting anyone who bothered to read it know of the American claim and the loss of over a dozen of the ships' crew when a squall swept across the harbour carrying away a boat they were using for a fishing excursion. In all, Van Buskirk's first sojourn in the Bonin Islands occupied only two short paragraphs on a single page in my book, and since the book ended in 1870, I had not dealt with his later visits.

Although I did not work with material past 1870 when I researched and wrote my biography of Philip Van Buskirk's early life, I knew not only about his 1853 visit to the Bonins as part of Commodore Matthew C. Perry's first expedition to Japan that year but about his return to the islands many years later. I was aware of these small events because as part of my research I had read all thirty-six volumes of Van Buskirk's diary, of one of the most unique compilations ever kept by an American seafarer, and perhaps one of the most unique autobiographical records ever kept by an American. Philip Van Buskirk's diary, or at least the earliest surviving portion of it, was begun around 1850, during his first years of service as a boy drummer in the United States Marine Corps, and continued on with only slight interruptions until his death in 1903. Not all of the volumes are available. The first is irretrievably lost, probably tossed overboard in the late 1840s by his some of his crewmates unhappy about having their activities chronicled. Neither is his record of the Perry expedition at hand. It is not with the other portions of the diary at the Allen Library of the University of Washington. It disappeared in recent years, although not before one of the librarians, the late Robert Moore, made a partial transcript of it.

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Another missing portion contains the entries for the first year of Van Buskirk's civil war service. It was confiscated by Union soldiers when they captured him in 1862 and sent him to a military prison in Ohio, ending his short stint as a Confederate infantryman. While I have inquired repeatedly, asking the manuscript division of the library whether the absent volume for the 1853 voyage to Loo Choo, Japan, and the Bonins had ever been located, I have not received any response to my queries. Fifteen years ago I expended considerable effort looking for the confiscated segment, but could find no trace of it in any repository holding material on either Union or Confederate soldiers. Other than these three gaps, a missing first volume, the account of his participation in the Perry expedition, and the lost 1861-1862 section, the diary spanning a half century is virtually complete. It is easily to read, printed as it is in sharp, clear letters for the most part rather than written in cursive. Since Van Buskirk was obsessive both about making regular entries and about the physical well-being of his creation, it has survived in excellent condition. The paper is untattered, few if any pages are missing, each volume of those completed in later years was professionally bound, carpenters were commissioned to build strong, water-tight boxes-within-boxes to safeguard the diary in commercial storage facilities when the author was at sea, and, with the excision of one particular passage, it appears no editing was ever done on completed volumes. Since 1905, the diary has been carefully preserved in various libraries at the University of Washington, in Seattle, where it was well cared for and little used over the last one hundred years.

Van Buskirk made navigating his journals a simple matter, for the most part. Every month's entries are preceded by a calendar page or two, listing the days, and laying out in columnar form, often with his own abbreviations, where he was each day, what he did, the state of his health, and suchlike information. Pages carry running headings with dates and ship names, the author carefully lined the blank pages before making entries, and drawings, maps, and graphs carry precise descriptive labels. He also concluded his monthly chapters with numbered notes and observations, and from time to time he wrote out extensive itineraries of where he was and where he spent the night. To discover when he was in the Bonin Islands, for example, one need not read through the entire thirty-six volumes. A check of the monthly introductory pages and the lengthy itineraries provides the information. The researcher need only turn to the proper dates.

So, when Professor Long contacted me, I could fill him in easily on Van Buskirk's first visit to the Bonins, since the stay was short and the diary entries few and abbreviated. I also discovered that in addition to his 1853, 1881, and 1898 visits, he made a short stop at Port Lloyd in 1880. It is the latter visits that are most useful. On those two occasions for he stayed longer, wrote much, and recorded more of significance for later researchers on Bonin Island history.

Van Buskirk and the Bonin Islands

When the *Plymouth* dropped anchor at Port Lloyd in 1853, it was perhaps the first

warship of the United States Navy ever to visit the Bonins,^[2] but the islands had been known to mariners at least since the sixteenth century. The Spanish in all likelihood visited their coasts as early as the 1580s, and by 1674 the Japanese had surveyed and mapped them. Japanese cartographers named the archipelago, some five hundred miles due south of Tokyo, Ogasawara-Jima. Of the approximately twenty islands in the group only ten are of appreciable land area. The name, Bonin, is a corruption of the sounds for the three ideographs *bu nin to*, indicating an absence of inhabitants. Drummer Van Buskirk first came ashore on Chichi-jima, called Peel Island by Westerners. The craggy, volcanic outcropping, the second largest in the archipelago, contained less than a dozen square miles of wooded hills, but the warm climate enabled the few inhabitants to produce fruit, vegetables, and meat sufficient for both their own needs and for trading with ships that anchored in their harbour (Robertson, 2005).

Van Buskirk's circumstances differed widely each time he came to the Bonins. In 1853 he was a teen-age drummer boy. Almost three decades later, he came ashore as a mature adult, an officer in the United States Navy. He was an old man on his last visit, retired, relaxed, financially comfortable, and having interests different than those he pursued on his second visit.

The obvious questions, then, concern what in the way of data compiled during Van Buskirk's three widely spaced visits provides material that is useful to modern scholarship or to Bonin Island residents interested in their history:

1. Most of Van Buskirk's 1853 observations at Port Lloyd concerned his official duties. He wrote brief commentaries about the ceremonies and the seventeen-gun salute and the copper plate made by the *Plymouth's* armorer informing all and sundry that the islands belonged to the United States. The incident that most concerned him during his stay was the loss of his ship's cutter with its dozen men, including a Lieutenant Matthews, one of his favorite officers. The wording of the plaque and low-grade pomp attendant to its erection have antiquarian interest, to be sure, but his observations of the island residents is certainly of more interest. He had little contact with them, but what he saw did not impress him favorably. The population of the newly established American pseudo-colony, he wrote, consisted of two male settlers, their wives, three male children, two female children, one prostitute, and one deserter from the *Plymouth*. Van Buskirk's short stay on land was spent largely looking for survivors from the lost boat rather than meeting local residents, and he undercounted the population. He also erred in classifying one of the men he met as a deserter. The man had been released from the *Plymouth* by order of the captain.

2. His next stints in the Bonins consisted of a series of stays in and around Port Lloyd during the month of June in 1880 and the following spring, in April, May, and June of 1881. His official duties at the time were three in number, to look after "coal moorings" and other US government property when his ship, the USS *Alert*, sailed on one of its various cruises, to make weather and tidal observations, and to scout out the islands'

agricultural prospects. When not looking after his assigned tasks, he moved about Port Lloyd and the surrounding countryside, recording his comments on this and that, with no particular systematisation. Whatever judgments he made about agriculture did not get into the diary, but he did write of a type of crystal rock at Bull Reach that existed nowhere else, at least according to islander Moses Webb. He also wrote that considerable amounts of pyrite could be found at Gold Mine Cove, not a comment likely to attract the attention of anyone looking for Pacific mineral wealth.^[3] Cholmondeley notes in his *History* the presence of a “Mr. von Buskirk” who took seven children back to Japan with him on board the *Alert* in 1881. The diary confirms Cholmondeley’s record, and adds a few small details. Upon arriving in Japan, Van Buskirk put his charges along with their baggage on a train to Tokyo, but not before sending a telegram to a Mr. Shaw (not additionally identified), presumably to tell him the children were coming. He also told of buying dinner for the two older boys, and recorded all of his expenses for the telegram, jinrikshaw travel, seven fares to Tokyo, and the meals. In his July 22, 1881 diary entry he included a brief glimpse of the attitudes of the *Alert*’s officers on the enterprise. They supported the endeavour strongly. The children received top-end accommodations on board the ship, and were quartered and fed by the captain’s mess and the wardroom mess. Further down the status ladder, there was less enthusiasm. Having the children in with the ship’s officers was a relief to the midshipmen of the steerage mess, who, Van Buskirk recorded, didn’t want to have to worry about doing anything for the “little nigs.”^[4]

By 1880 the Japanese presence was highly visible in the Bonins, and Van Buskirk noted their village on the eastern side of Port Lloyd harbour during his June stay. The twenty-five houses arranged around the single, short street were in the Japanese style, he wrote, with thatched roofs. The stores carried a variety of European and Japanese goods, and there was a “roomy and comfortable” Japanese hotel. The settlement also had a sake shop that took in borders at ¥10 per month, and there were prostitutes—two of them. One was kept by “a sleek-looking scoundrel,” but there was no further description of him. The other, a freelance lady, had no permanent abode, but spoke “tolerable English.” There was also a Japanese settler named Ito who was a scholar of both the Japanese and English languages, and “much respected” by the foreigners. Of the Japanese settlement, he wrote, “It is as if a suburb—a low quarter of Yokohama were bodily transplanted to this place.” “Alas for the Bonins!” he concluded.^[5] His other comments on the Japanese were more positive. He observed that a Mr. Takeda, a representative of the governor, carefully attended his duties only in the morning. He worked on his farm in the afternoon. Then there was his visit on May 12, 1880 to Dr. K. Ozi, presumably a Japanese settler. The doctor prescribed medicine for Van Buskirk’s constipation. He wrote in the next day’s diary entry that it worked on schedule.^[6] One of the features of Bonin life that Van Buskirk noticed was an island way of getting married. In 1880 he recorded that a man and his wife were wed simply by “passing their word . . . [which was] just as good as a marriage ceremony.” That evidently seemed too informal for Van Buskirk, who almost a year later asked local resident George Bravo for the hand of his kinswoman, Lydia Webb, in marriage. He added he would wait several days for the decision. Either the answer never came or it was a “no.” Van Buskirk did not mention the matter again, and neither

did he marry Lydia Webb.^[7] Probably the most frustrating diary entries from the 1880 and 1881 periods are two comments dealing with historical documents. On June 30, 1880, Van Buskirk wrote:

I had a good overhauling of old papers and letters from Commodore Perry's time down to the occupation of the Japanese. Alas! Such hopes as the Savory's built upon the words of the great Commodore have come to nought. The course of the Japanese government towards them has been one of simple robbery.

Almost a year later, on May 8, 1881, he recorded, "I was all day today setting to rights the letters and papers of Nathaniel Savory." There is nothing of the extent of the materials, their content, or of the nature of what he did. The numbers of questions these and similar comments made later on raise are almost limitless, and, to use one of Van Buskirk's favorite words, "Alas" it is very unlikely they can ever be answered.

3. In 1898, Van Buskirk returned, and stayed several days short of three and one-half months. There were few disruptions in his life during this period. As a retired naval officer he had no official duties, and that left ample time for journal keeping. He made entries for almost every day, and produced several dozen numbered notes dealing with an assortment of matters. In all, the hand-written record for his 1898 stay when transcribed runs to approximately twenty typed pages. As is typical in all three dozen of the diary volumes, the preponderance of the material deals with Philip C. Van Buskirk, his meals, his amusements, his peregrinations, the state of his bowels, records of his nocturnal emissions, and his disputes with local businessmen. When not writing of himself, he filled blank pages with miscellaneous information: notes on minor earth tremors, weather observations, bird sightings, descriptions of the scenery, his sense of wonder at towering coconut palms, and on one January day he recorded wandering near what he called an *old* [my italics] Japanese cemetery. In addition, he penned occasional commentary on the island's architecture, geography, poor roads, and good mail delivery service. The latter positive evaluation came on the morning April 20th when he received six issues of the *Army and Navy Register*. That afternoon the letter carrier returned with another copy of the *Register* and eight postcards for him. Sandwiched between such entries, he included the names of people he met, did business with, accompanied him to dinner, and become his friends. Then, too, he commented at length on the islanders' habits, reading preferences, and interactions. As, always over the course of his adult live he expended considerably energy befriending children. By the time of his final sojourn to the Bonins, the interest in youngsters appears to have been largely avuncular, his unseemly concern for young people in earlier years having diminished almost to the vanishing point. He commented on childrens' amusements, in one case their torturing of captured seagulls. There was also a game they played that he found distasteful. They often gathered in small groups when a foreigner approached, then, when he came very close, they scattered in mock fright. In a particularly moving observation he wrote of four Japanese girls on board his ship destined for employment on Hillsborough Island, where males in the population of 2,577 outnumbered females by a three-to-two margin:

Two were professional courtesans—one could see that in their faces and deportment; but not so the other two; little creatures they were, young, delicate and gentle, with the air of innocence about them unmistakable. . . . They were weeping bitterly: one could see that. . . . When the landing of the girls was effected, each of the little ones held the hand of one of the others, and staggered along the wharf, as if ready to fall at every step, and their faces were pictures of shame, terror, and grief. I feel sorry, too—very sorry.^[8]

It is unlikely Van Buskirk assessed the two girls' predicament incorrectly. As a naval officer with twenty-five years service in the Far East, he had long experience with Asian prostitutes, both adult and juvenile. His diaries are filled with narratives of illicit encounters he engaged in on solitary forays to brothels or when accompanied by mess companions (Burg, 2002).^[9]

On other local employments of a more respectable sort, there were superficial notes. He commented on the sugar plantations that covered the hillsides and the proliferation of sugar camps. Some of the men he met engaged in fishing and turtling. In addition to sugar, exports included preserved turtle, and preserved pineapple. Locally manufactured handicrafts might also have figured in the island's trade. He wrote of baskets made from leaves of the lawala tree, and when he departed in May, the gifts he received included a small platter carved from ax-handle wood and a woven basket cigar holder. The only indication of island imports in Van Buskirk's diary came in the wish expressed by one of his women-friends that when he returned from Yokohama he would bring her "flower seeds, toy tea cups, marbles, and a portmonnaie."^[10] Work away from the islands also provided a boost for the economy. Van Buskirk recorded the departure of eight men for Yokohama to join seal hunting expeditions.

On the basis of his shipping observations, there seems to have been only limited trans-oceanic commerce with the Bonins. He wrote of one and sometimes two vessels in the Port Lloyd harbour. Never more than that. Occasionally there were no ships present. Some idea can be gleaned of price levels in 1898. Van Buskirk rented a cabin at ¥5 per month. After waiting for fourteen days for a Japanese carpenter to come by and install five glass windows, he gladly paid the man ¥3.5 to have the job completed. Both of the skilled craftsmen whose services he hired during his stay were Japanese. The islanders, he implied at one point, were not particularly industrious.

In a letter of May 25, 1865, Shanghai pilot E. Bramel wrote to Nathaniel Savory of the quiet homes and peaceful lives lived by the Bonin Islanders. Van Buskirk's record of considerable of strife among the residents indicated otherwise. His view is confirmed in both volume and detail by Cholmondeley. The alcoholism, mayhem, family feuding, suicide, suspected poisoning, divorce, and a murder to which Van Buskirk alluded also appeared *The History of the Bonin Islands*, although Cholmondeley was more circumspect than Van Buskirk's in his observations in at least two instances. As a cleric writing for publication, discretion was more important for him than for Van Buskirk, who only penned observations in a private diary. Cholmondeley, at one point, merely

suggested rather than affirmed that a case of accidental drowning might be infanticide. Later in his book, he deleted what was probably the sexual assault of a woman (Cholmondeley, 1915: 140, 141, 155). Van Buskirk wrote on April 25th of “Heat, mosquitoes, piss-mires, and sand flies [that] take away all comfort,” adding that the proliferation of disagreeable insects combined with infectious germs lessen the Edenic nature of life in the Bonins considerably. He wrote also of a small epidemic of “chills and fever” and of one case of diarrhea.

Van Buskirk had no nostrums to offer for either the chills or the fever, but as an old navy veteran, he could assist with the loose bowels. He had one of his acquaintances whip up a hot eggnog to give to “Old Charlie” Vier for his diarrhea. In case that failed to halt the exodus, he also sent him a bottle of wine.^[11] The islanders took Davis’ Pain Killer, with which Van Buskirk was quite familiar from his time in the navy, and they customarily used a hot needles to cure toothaches.^[12] Mental illness, too, existed among the residents. The diary contains a tantalising note on a mad woman who lived in a cave, but provided no details of her condition.^[13] The locals also managed to amplify the miseries inflicted by nature by manufacturing disagreements of their own, Van Buskirk reported. Relationships between women were sometimes suffused with back-biting, gossip, and recrimination.^[14] “The women here worry each other a great deal with inventions of this kind,” he mused.^[15] There were even a few crimes of violence to upset affairs in the islands. A woman named Caroline told Van Buskirk of an assault upon her father and of the murder of a man known as “English Bob.”^[16] Unfortunately, he provided no more information on either crime.

In most cases the material Van Buskirk recorded is so fragmentary and detached that it is difficult to draw generalisations from it. On matters of religion, his observations were more complete, and they do provide a picture of the progress of Christianity, or more accurately, its lack of progress, among the several thousand island residents. Reverend A. F. King, an Anglican cleric, came to Japan in 1888 as a missionary from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and called at the Bonins on occasion to assist in the work of converting the inhabitants to the brand of religion he learned at Keble College, Oxford. Those present at the services King conducted on his 1898 tour included Van Buskirk, who noted that the number of congregants never reached forty, and that was to hear a distinguished visiting minister preach. At a service conducted on March 2 by Joseph Gonzales, after King’s return to Japan, only twenty-three attended, two of who were “squalling babies.”

King became a sort of a guide and companion for Van Buskirk during his stay. He accompanied him on a visit to the governor and provided the retired American officer with conversation and companionship. King also allowed Van Buskirk to make an abstract of some notes he had accumulated. The abstract, preserved with the three-dozen diary volumes, is, in terms of Bonin history and genealogy, probably the most significant piece of data preserved by Philip C. Van Buskirk. It contains the names of over six dozen early residents of the islands, some information on their origins and histories, and

considerable material on their marriages and on their descendants.

In mid-April, as his stay drew to a close, Van Buskirk got involved in another historical project. He began what he called an “overhaul” of the Savory family papers. The work took him approximately three days, and unfortunately he did not set down any information on the nature of the family papers, why the family involved him in the project, or what he did with them, except to note that he made an abstract. Another of his comments on the project concerned a letter he discovered among the documents. It was addressed to him and dated November 7, 1880. He did not record who sent the letter, what it contained, or why (or if) the Savorys had had it in their possession for the preceding eighteen years.

Van Buskirk’s Bonin Island diary also provides occasional clues to the use and dispersal of languages he encountered. It seems from his entries that the indigenous islanders not only spoke English, but that they spoke it very well. He did not comment on their competency levels or accents, but his failure to do so suggests that he found nothing noteworthy in the many meetings and conversations he had in his three-month visit. His contacts with Japanese officials were not nearly so easy. Time and time again, as he met with them for courtesy calls or to take care of official business relating to his residence, passport information, or similar administrative matters. He made clear his frustration at their deficient English. On at least one occasion Van Buskirk took an islander with him to one of these meetings to serve as an interpreter. How the high level of English language competency came to be and was maintained by the islanders poses a raft of interesting questions for which the diary might be able to provide some assistance in answering. At least six local boys were sent to Kobe to be schooled by a Mr. Foss, he wrote. Their course of study evidently included both Christianity and English.

Van Buskirk’s abstract of King’s notes reveals that the minister was interested primarily in collecting genealogical material, but he also included in the process nodules of peripheral information embedded scatter-shot fashion amid the lists of residents, records of marriages, and rosters of offspring. There is considerable data on the ethnic roots, racial composition, and national origins of Bonin islanders. Foreign-born residents came from around the world, from places as diverse as Japan, Mauritius, England, Spain, Portugal, the United States, France, perhaps Sweden and Italy, Germany, Bermuda, Saipan, Hawai’i, and several other Pacific islands. When they emigrated, they went to places somewhat less diverse, places in the Pacific or on the Pacific rim: Japan, Guam, Saipan, Hawai’i, California, and Peru. Then, too, there is information on migrations within the Bonins, but it is not sufficient to reveal patterns or trends, or indicate why residents went from one island to another.

As is the case with the diary, there are in King’s genealogical notes enough random nuggets to indicate the Bonin Islands provided no tropical paradise for their inhabitants. The various plagues that bedevil civilised society everywhere were present there as well. Alcoholism, suicide, suspected poisoning, divorce, and murder can all be found threaded

through the family data. There was even a feud among the residents, and while it appears from available evidence that no blood was shed, it was serious enough to cause four members of one family to flee into the bush and remain there for eleven months. As might be expected in any source containing a profusion of disassociated factoids, there are nubbins of charming trivia. In King's notes there is the information that one George Washington, who hailed from Mauritius, killed the one snake ever found in the Bonins, at least up until 1880. The abstract also confirms what the crew of the *Plymouth* learned in 1853 when they lost a number of men to a squall while anchored in what they thought was the safety of in Port Lloyd harbour - Bonin Island weather can be treacherous. The notes contain several references to people lost in canoes or small boats while traveling along the coasts or sailing from island to island.

In assessing the value of Philip Van Buskirk's diary for the history of the Bonins, and, incidentally, another diary from Commodore Perry's day kept by seaman John Glendy Sproston, a key element is the context provided by the accumulation of data from the various sources. Virtually everything in Sproston's brief commentary on the Bonin Islands can be found in Perry's compendious account of the expeditions to Japan. In any case, Sproston's journal is familiar to all of those dealing with the islands, having been published by Sophia University in 1940 and reprinted in 1968.

Van Buskirk's material is far different qualitatively from Sproston's, not only for having spent the last century in file cabinets and shelves at the University of Washington libraries almost entirely untouched by researchers, but because it contains much that can be found nowhere else. To be sure, there is information in Van Buskirk's diary than can be confirmed in Lionel B. Cholmondeley's 1915 history, which is all well and good, but the difficulty is that both documents, the unpublished diary and the obscure book, leave much to be desired for anyone inquiring into the Bonin Island's past. They are fragmentary, idiosyncratic, impressionistic, and lacking in systematisation, to mention only a few of their defects. Yet despite their imperfections they are about all we have that preserves the memory of the westerners and Pacific islanders who lived in the Bonins before the arrival of the Japanese and during the earliest years of their presence. Though the data consist for the most part of mere tid-bits, snippets, dribbles and dabs, the only course is to make do. The emphasis on the failings of Cholmondeley and Van Buskirk as historians is not to disparage their work, but only to express of frustration that there is not more, that fire, war, and tsunami had not destroyed so much of the record, and that they had preserved greater segments of what they saw and heard. Perhaps the few Savory letters included in Cholmondeley's book will give modern researchers cause for at least a modicum of perverse cheer. They indicate that if any lost letters were like those preserved in print, they would not have revealed much anyway. The published letters came mostly from Savorys in New England. Much of their contents consisted of family news and neighborhood gossip. In one of these Nathaniel was chided for his failure to write home – a bad sign for anyone hoping that somehow, someday, some day a trove of his correspondence might be discovered. Other letters involve business dealings with various sea captains, traders, and scoundrels, and might be quite useful in a wider context

encompassing seaborne commerce in the Pacific during the period. Unfortunately, they shed only the faintest glow over Bonin history.

On one aspect of island life, the work of Van Buskirk and Cholmondeley is mutually reinforcing. Both testified to the weakness of the hold religion had on the citizenry. Van Buskirk's figures on church attendance, Cholmondeley's notes on the casual nature of Maria Savory's two marriages, and the fact that Ann Burbank Savory Gonzales never received baptism all indicate the halting progress of evangelisation (Cholmondeley 1915: 155-156, 158). Still, there existed at least among some on the islands certain rituals or expected behavior surrounding betrothal and marriage. As mentioned earlier, Van Buskirk requested a woman's hand from a male relative, and Cholmondeley told how C. H. Richards went to Nathaniel Savory to ask to marry his daughter. Neither man went directly to the woman he hoped would be his future wife, although, admittedly, at the time Richards pursued her, Agnes Savory was only a girl of thirteen (Cholmondeley 1915: 133-134).^[17]

On the material that cannot be checked against any other sources, Van Buskirk is the final authority, and what he wrote is probably a good depiction of what he saw, despite his undercount of the population and an erroneous reference to a navy deserter in 1853. Where his work can be checked it is accurate, and in a diary kept for his own purposes he had little motive to fabricate or enlarge. Again, some of what his diary preserves from the Bonin Islands is scarce and scattered, but is available nowhere else. If it is inadequate by itself or even with all other available sources to produce a solid history of the islands in the 19th century it is nonetheless important as a large piece of a very small pie. In a line Reverend Cholmondeley would recognise from the Bible's Ephesians (5:20), historians dealing with the Bonin's in the 19th century should be "Giving thanks always for all things."

Similarly, Bonin Islanders with an interest in their past should also be thankful for such scraps, not because they are part of all things, but because they are the only things, the only scraps left. The genealogy that Van Buskirk copied from Reverend A. F. King provides them with at least some family background, particularly if King's original is lost. One Bonin family has already learned from the list that an ancestor came from the Maritius. This is not only of interest to them, but it provides a basis for further investigation. Mauritius has some of the best genealogical records found anywhere in the world. They have been well cared-for in a wonderful, modern research library, they are in beautiful condition, and the government encourages research in them. Who knows what else the family might find in their past if they decide to investigate further. Of other domestic matters, the diary records the usual strife found anywhere: fights, divorces, marriages, and children, many children. And Van Buskirk recorded youngsters' ages when he met them, so from his records their birth dates can be recovered. Moreover, in the future there may be even more to be thankful for. Professor Long informed me in March 2003 that a German geneticist had worked in the Bonins in the 1930s or thereabout, and boxes of his field notes and photographs survive. Given the nature of

what is available, his work is almost certain to expand the current state of knowledge dramatically.^[18]

As might be expected with something like Van Buskirk's diary, it not only provides information, but offers up a few puzzles as well. Commodore Perry hoped to plant a coaling station at Port Lloyd, and purchased land with money from his own funds for that purpose from Nathaniel Savory, but there is no indication the United States Navy ever established the station. The diary, on the contrary, indicates that in the early 1880s such a station existed. This puzzle could probably be worked out with a little time in Record Group 45 at the United States National Archives and Records Administration. My next research trip is to the Public Records Office in London this summer. Maybe in 2006 or 2007, when I hope to be working in Washington again, I will check it out.

Another intriguing mystery is what Van Buskirk did when he "overhauled" Savory family papers on two occasions. Unfortunately he wrote nothing about what he actually did. Professor Long asked me some time back if, hopefully, there might be copies of some Savory materials in the diary. I responded that I did not think so. I have read all thirty-six volumes in their entirety, and I don't recall seeing anything that fit the description. On the other hand, my trek through the diary was two decades ago, and I was not looking specifically for Bonin Island or Savory family material at the time. In responding to Professor Long over the past several years, I have sought out information from Van Buskirk's itineraries, his monthly summaries, and his yearly compilations of events rather than by going through the volumes page by page. So, there might be more material, but I am quite certain that if it is there, the quantity would be very limited.

Most surviving documents indicate that when Bonin Island youths went to Japan, they went to Kobe for their education. Van Buskirk writes of sending seven children to Tokyo, where presumably they were taken in tow by a Mr. Shaw. What do we know of Shaw? Did he run a school or a mission, or what? I suspect he and his activities can be tracked through Japanese records, but that is only a suspicion since I know nothing of the nature of archival holdings on any governmental level in Japan. Certainly though, it seems to me in my utter ignorance, that Shaw could not be operating some manner of school without coming to the notice of officials and being entered into one sort of record or another.

The trio of Cholmondeley, Van Buskirk and a Miss. Black (mentioned by Cholmondeley but otherwise unidentified) pose what might be a problem for historical linguistics. Neither the reverend nor the naval officer comment on the use of English by the descendants of western immigrants they met and interacted with in the Bonin Islands. The assumption made from this lack of any notice of speech patterns or peculiarities was that none existed. In contrast, Miss. Black, who visited the islands with a Mrs. Black (maybe a mother or sister-in-law, or some other relation) from December 1894 to April 1895, wrote down a tale told her by Nathaniel Savory's oldest son that indicates

something different. The subject is parental discipline. Running only about a page, it is clearly written in dialect:

The ole man mos' allus let us off if we spoke up and didn't try to hide what we done. . . . We used to get our drinking-water in a demi-john, them bottles what have got like a basket outside o' 'm. . . . Well, one day Jane, she goes to get water from the river and somehow lets the demi-john slip out of her hands so that, of course it got all broke up. "Never yer say noding," ses she, "I hand't say who done it," she ses, and she taken it home and put it in the middle of the table same as allers (Cholmondeley, 1915: 159-160).

The passage represents about one fifth of the story told by the son, but it is clear that Black is trying to capture the way he spoke. It is difficult to tell how accurately she replicated his speech patterns on the page, and knowing nothing about her, her background, or her educational level probably makes it impossible to go very far with any type of analysis. Even then, without deciphering the details of Miss Black's dialect transcription, it suggests that at least one Englishwoman or American (in all likelihood she was one or the other), thought young Savory's speech sufficiently divergent to take written notice. My perspective on this, of course, is limited by my own training as a historian. Perhaps there is more in this piece of material for linguists.

Conclusion

In summary, then, what does Philip Van Buskirk tell us about the Bonin Islands in the late 19th century? He offers no coherent panorama of society, culture, customs, or the economics of local life. A good deal of what he observed is also available in Commodore Perry's volumes, Sproston's commentaries, and Cholmondeley's history, fragmentary and irregular as it is. I am not sure, as I said before, whether the genealogical notes copied from Reverend King have been published or are otherwise available. Perhaps someone here could fill me in on that. If the original notes are lost, then Van Buskirk's transcription and preservation of their contents is a truly fortunate event. As vague as they are, they hold some very basic and valuable information for Bonin Islanders who descended from the earliest settlers. Van Buskirk's observations of Japanese settlement number less than a handful, and he is frank, although not specific, about his dislike of what he saw. Still, there is little else in western accounts of their presence. Cholmondeley writes much of his history of the islands almost as if the Japanese did not exist. Whatever else survives of their early residence will probably come from records in Japan since anything been kept in the islands would have been destroyed by war and weather.

Van Buskirk's notes on daily life, then, provide a picture of some aspects of the routines, practices, and predilections of the residents he knew. Again, they are not comprehensive, but concern only his own activities. Still, some are interesting, others fascinating, a few hilarious, and a number certain to offend. But such is his contribution, limited to be sure,

but in the absence of a larger corpus of historical record, his jottings assume particular importance.

Endnotes

[1] Van Buskirk recorded reading what was very likely a draft of the book in his 1898 visit to the Bonins (“The Diary of Phillip C. Van Buskirk,” Manuscripts and University Archives, Allen Library, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, February 23, 1898. Hereafter referred to as VBD).

[2] The *Dolphin*, a United States Navy surveying brig, stopped briefly at the Bonins in 1849 or 1850 (Robertson 2005).

[3] VBD, MAY, 1881, *passim*.

[4] VBD, July 22, 1881, Note 50, 1881.

[5] VBD, June 29, 30, 1880.

[6] VBD, May 12, 13, 18, 1880.

[7] VBD, June 30, 1880, May 17, 1881.

[8] VBD, February 8, 1898.

[9] The two smaller girls were later redeemed when a group took up a collection to pay the “debt” that consigned them to prostitution. They were returned to Yokohama with “happy faces” (VBD, February 15, 1898).

[10] VBD, May 3, 1898.

[11] VBD, April 1, 1898.

[12] VBD, April 3, 1898.

[13] VBD, March 29, April 1, 14, 17, 21, 23, 25, May 1, 1898.

[14] VBD, March 18, 23, May 2, 1898.

[15] VBD, March 18, 23, May 2, 1898.

[16] VBD, March 13, 1898.

[17] VBD, May, 1881.

[18] Personal communication with Daniel Long, March 25, 2002.

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