

*The Amur River: Between Russia and China*, Colin Thubron (2021, HarperCollins)

As you may already know, Colin Thubron is an acclaimed British travel writer whose books have won many awards. *The Amur River* would well deserve a new one. It's a marvelous account of a trip following the Amur from its source in Mongolian swamps to its end in the Sea of Japan, a trip which Thubron undertook about ten years ago, when he was 80 years old. He starts on horseback, with a guide and two pack-horse handlers, for a 200-mile trek through a muddy, hilly forest-reserve sacred to Genghis Khan, where the pack horses keep running away and the men say this is the hardest trip they've ever made. He continues with different guides recruited on the spot, from Mongolia to Russia and China and then back to Russia, stopping in winter, when the Amur freezes, and returning in the spring. He travels by boat, hitch-hikes on trucks, hires drivers with their cars, takes a bus or a train where possible, and meets all sorts of men and women few outsiders would encounter: people of all ages, nationalities, and occupations, including illegal hunters and fishermen and a trader in fake antiquities. He speaks both Russian and Mandarin well enough to get along. At one point he's arrested by the current version of the KGB, because nobody understands what a European is doing poking around villages and small towns along the river.

In this border area for both Russia and China, many towns are dilapidated and many people are dirt-poor. Corruption is ubiquitous. In some places even the school children have no vision of a future life, and adults are nostalgic for Stalin or for some other time in the past. Mostly, the younger adults are fleeing to more prosperous places. The contentious history of the area, once recognized by a Russian-Chinese treaty as belonging to China, but later violently overrun by Russia, leads to worries about future conflict now that China is rising, even though the area is resource-poor and the river is too shallow or treacherous for anything but small boat traffic.

Thubron is an excellent writer, vividly describing the people he encounters and the landscapes and towns through which he travels. He provides needed historical background as part of his description of the places he visits, never dragging us through deserts of expository lessons. None of us will ever travel the length of the Amur—this is not something we would read in preparation for a trip—but I found it to be a deeply enriching experience.