



## KAI REINHOLD DONNER

### *Na Sibíři mezi Samojedy [Among the Samoyed in Siberia]*

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The latest addition from the Ethnos division of the Dauphin publishing house is the Czech translation of Kai Reinhold Donner's work *Siperian samojedien keskuudessa vuosina 1911–1913 ja 1914*, or *Na Sibíři mezi Samojedy* [Among the Samoyed in Siberia]. The book is a balance between a travelogue, an ethnographic study, belles-lettres of adapted field notes, and a philosophically-prognostic essay on the future of Siberian ethnic groups.

Kai Reinhold Donner (1888–1935), a linguist from a Swedish-speaking Finnish intellectual family, travels to Siberia to study Samoyedic languages as part of a broader endeavour to understand the roots of the Finnish language. He chooses to actively participate in the lifestyle of the local people, a method that would be brought to fame by Donner's contemporary Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) with his famous opus *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

Donner's participant observation consisted of almost two years in Siberia between 1911 and 1913, as he personally experienced all of the joys and sorrows of life of the Samoyed reindeer herders. His second expedition in 1914 was shorter due to the Great War. In his work the author immortalizes the Samoyed lifestyle during the last years of Imperial Russia and anticipates the changes which would be brought by the turbulent years to come.

Donner's style of narration is light and playful, and he does not lack self-irony and optimism despite his dreary prognoses about the fading cultures. The author does not waste time on lengthy descriptions of dangerous moments that threatened his life (after all, the reader knows that he survived) or at least his limbs on multiple occasions. Those events are simply mentioned as parts of his expedition and as the bread and butter of the local people. Yet, the story is captivating, as Donner effortlessly blends ethnographic descriptions with anecdotic events. This is greatly enhanced by a very good translation by Anežka Melounová. The original text is complemented with a preface by Zdeněk Justoň, footnotes and a postface by Melounová, an overview of Siberian nations mentioned by Donner including the current terminology, an index, and historical photographs borrowed from *Isän jalanjäljillä* (the book of Kai Donner's son Jörn Donner)

with accompanying captions. This clearly reflects the publisher's intention to present a complex and contextualized work; unfortunately, this is also where the flaws are found. While Donner's text flows smoothly with a clear storyline (admittedly, it mainly and simply follows the itinerary of his voyage), Zdeněk Justoň's preface does not have a clear message. It starts as an introduction into Donner's motivation and background, but then, without even mentioning his dates of birth and death, hastes to a rather cursory and superficial description of Siberia, its climatic conditions, and lifestyle of its inhabitants. An extended version of Justoň's text was published in *Kulturní magazín UNI* (accessible online via <https://www.magazinuni.cz/literatura/kai-donner-aneb-jazykozpytec-mezi-samojedy/#more-36323>), but it still is more of a book review with some complementary information, without critically evaluating or updating Donner's methodology, terminology and anthropological state of knowledge from today's perspective, more than 100 years after Donner's expeditions. With Justoň's expertise, it would be a good opportunity to shortly review Donner's work through the current discourse and with the knowledge of subsequent historical development.

Anežka Melounová's postface does offer extended information on Donner's life and some thoughts on his motivation and the academic, political and historical context of his time. The translator also names several relevant works that were helpful to her, which will be appreciated by readers who would like to dig deeper into the topic.

Historical photographs with captions, an index, and a terminology overview are an appreciated addition to the text; it is a pity that a map of Donner's voyage was not included. Unfortunately, the greatest flaw of the book concerns a number of typographic errors – mostly incorrect splitting of words at the ends of lines. This is particularly saddening as it disturbs an otherwise smoothly flowing text, and it could have been easily avoided.

Despite these reservations, Dauphin's *Na Sibiři mezi Samojedy* is a praiseworthy work. Readers will surely enjoy reading it, surrounded by an imaginary cold and vast tundra.