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Nomads of the Wind: A Natural History of Polynesia (Review)

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REVIEWS AND PUBLICATIONS

Review

Peter Crawford, *Nomads of the Wind: A Natural History of Polynesia*. BBC Books, 1993. BBC Enterprises Limited, Woodlands, 80 Wood Lane, London W12 0TT. Hardcover, 264 pages; Glossary, bibliography and index. 136 color plates plus several early etchings, maps. Quality production. ISBN 0563 36707 5. £18.99.

Georgia Lee, Ph.D.

Nomads of the Wind accompanies the BBC television series of the same name-- and both tell the story of the world of the Polynesians. This beautifully illustrated book traces origins and voyages of discovery; it describes the relationship between the people and the islands upon which they settled. It focuses strongly on the natural history of the area and how, in the face of all odds, plants, birds, and other fauna managed to reach them in the first place.

The first two chapters deal with Tahiti--the "heart of the Polynesian Triangle." Using Tahiti as a key example of Polynesian society, the author includes information on everything from status concerns to how food was prepared; from crops to religion, and how the first arrivals changed the environment. And then the impact of the Western world.

Chapters 3 and 4 concern the islands of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga and Lapita beginnings. Crawford aptly describes these islands as "cradles of Polynesia" and stepping stones for the fauna and flora that have found their way from points farther west.

Polynesian sailing is outlined in Chapter 5, from which the book and the series takes their name: *Nomads of the Wind*. The human movement from west to east, wind patterns, and sailing techniques are all discussed, as is the dispersal of plants, animals, insects and birds into new island groups.

"Burning their Boats," Chapter 6, uses the analogy of the burning of the *Bounty* to illustrate various plants and animals which, by natural selection and isolation, have evolved to the point where they can no longer move from island to island. Examples are included from Rarotonga, Pitcairn, and Henderson.

"The Land of Man," Chapter 7, is about the Marquesas Islands and the role that island group played as the jumping off place for Hawai'i and Easter Island. In the chapter on Easter Island (Chapter 8), Crawford gives us a concise history of Rapa Nui and how the island was affected by its isolated location as well as by human settlement.

Chapters 9 and 10 deal with Hawai'i and New Zealand respectively. The final chapter, "The Pierced Sky", is a short summing-up and a warning for the future. Crawford concludes by saying, prophetically, that the most endangered species in Polynesia may now be the Polynesian. The book's message is ecological: from the original consumption of flightless birds and over-harvesting of plants and other resources by the Polynesian settlers to later exploitation by Europeans. Little by little the face of these islands has

changed and now we may be facing further losses, the demise of the distinctive cultural heritage of the Polynesians.

Books on Polynesia usually focus on the human element only. *Nomads of the Wind* is an exception, for it discusses in depth the plants and animals that also migrated to the east across vast ocean expanses and how they evolved to take advantage of a new homeland.

The Bottom Line: *Nomads of the Wind* is clearly written, readable and enjoyable. The illustrations run the gamut from great to breathtaking. There is something here for everyone--whether the interest is history or prehistory, plants or animals. I recommend it.

Review

In Pursuit of the Ordinary: Comment on Wilfred Schuhmacher's, "Easter Island as an object of economic anthropology"

Review by Grant McCall, Ph.D.

University of New South Wales, Australia

W. Wilfried Schuhmacher, 1991. "Easter Island as an object of economic anthropology" in Volume 29 (N° 90) of *Revue europeenne des sciences sociales*. Geneva, Switzerland.

Rapanui, as Easter Islanders call their land and themselves, is indeed a fruitful venue for research in many fields, including economic anthropology, but not quite in the way imagined by W. Wilfred Schuhmacher in his 1991 article, "Easter Island as an object of economic anthropology".¹

Diffusionist speculations, in particular the resuscitation of the pretty well defunct *American Indians in the Pacific*² hypothesis, is not the way to approach the island, for there are far more interesting questions that might be considered. The intention of my commentary, though, is to point out that there is no excuse at the present time for publishing the kinds of inaccurate and misleading information displayed in Schuhmacher. There is a considerable bibliography of sound historical, archaeological, linguistic and anthropological research available in most European languages on Rapanui, with the last two decades, since regular air service commenced, producing many excellent sources.³

To begin, his sketch of Inca society, stressing community, the use of food for labor payment and the maintenance of common architecture, is the same for many societies. Apart from the Inca words, the author could be describing any small scale, agrarian culture.⁴ However, it is when he ventures into the Rapanui world that the errors start to fly. His word list, alleging culture contact, ignores the Polynesian⁵ features of his Rapanui forms, with the exception of *Kumara*, to which I return in a moment.

Umunga is a common Rapanui term for any group assembled for a particular project, such as building a house or a boat, or preparing a field for planting. That is, if a relative, or anyone else, comes to work, they should be fed while they do so. If they wish to take cooked food with them