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Rapanui: Tradition and Survival on Easter Island (Review)

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REVIEWS

📖 Grant McCall, *Rapanui: Tradition and Survival on Easter Island*, 2nd edition. University of Hawaii Press, 2840 Kolowalu Street, Honolulu, HI 96822. 1994. Paperback, 207 pages, 2 maps, several B&W photographs. ISBN 0-8248-1641-2.

*Review by William Liller
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Grant McCall has been pondering Easter Island for over 20 years. An American who has lived in Australia during most of this period, he chose Rapa Nui as the subject of his Ph.D. research in Anthropology, which he defines as “the study of man at all times and in all places”. With fieldwork carried out over an 18-month period 1972-74, he subsequently wrote his dissertation, was awarded his degree, and accepted a position at the University of New South Wales where he is today. In 1979 he completed the manuscript of the first edition of this thesis-based book, published two years later.

McCall returned to Rapa Nui in 1985, and it was then and there that I first met him. What puzzled me was that he never seemed to do much. I usually saw him chatting away (in fluent Spanish) with just about anyone who cared to pass the time of day with him. Once or twice, when I had to ask Governor Sergio Rapu for an official favor (I was working with NASA photographing Halley’s Comet), I found him in the Governor’s office studying maps or discussing the demography of the island with Don Sergio.

He has been since back to the Island several times for shorter stays, and during in-between times, he has kept close contact with Rapanui goings-on via letters and conferences, through a newspaper clipping service in Santiago and of course by reading *Rapa Nui Journal* which he ranks as “the foremost serial publication in Easter Island Studies”.

Those not familiar with the first edition missed a significant contribution to the literature of the Island; now they have a second opportunity. Don’t miss this chance; put in your order for the new version right away. This, like the first edition, is an important book.

In the first third of *Rapanui*, McCall gives the reader a quick lesson in the Island’s history. He then turns his attention to how the Islanders survived the often incredibly difficult times of days past, and how they now live and get by in their isolated colonial status. He is at his best describing and commenting on the slave raids of the past century having spent a considerable amount of time in the National Libraries in Lima and in Santiago and elsewhere, reading contemporary accounts in the newspapers and magazines. But he is also very good at telling us all the fascinating things that he learned from frequent and often lengthy conversations with learned islanders and from all those many street-side chats that I puzzled about. As he puts it, “anthropology is a story, and everyone loves a good story”.

When I first read the earlier edition, I was especially

interested in McCall’s views regarding the 1973 Military overthrow of Chile’s freely-elected and never quite impeachable Marxist President Allende. McCall raises political eyebrows by paraphrasing Karl Marx early in the book (page 11, 2nd edition), and later he tells with obvious rage the story of a young Rapanui girl studying in Santiago who was allegedly raped by a band of Pinochet’s soldiers. But then he writes, “Whilst a misery for most Chileans, the Pinochet years were very favorable for the Rapanui”. Having visited Easter Island frequently since 1984, I cannot fully agree: things have never been very favorable for the Islanders. They could have been worse, of course--much worse--and generally speaking, conditions have improved. It’s true that during the Pinochet years, the first street was paved, the number of tourists rose, and the epoch of military governors ended. But high unemployment and alcoholism continue, and there exists a general feeling of isolation caused by the lack of a promised deep water port and the monopolistic policies of the now-privatized national airline and the Chilean government.

But it’s easy to criticize. The point I really want to make is that no one else in recent years has written such an in-depth look at the island and its people. McCall gives us a perceptive and intelligent analysis of the Rapanui, their problems, beliefs and their many positive characteristics. As his comments on the Kevin Costner-produced movie attest, the book is very up to date. (See also the marvelous photograph on page 199 taken at the 1993 *Rapanui Rendezvous*).

Two quibbles: I found myself annoyed with McCall’s frequent generalizations: He often starts off sentences with phrases like “Many Rapanui believe...”, “Children expect...”, “Some Rapanui still prefer...”, and so on. It would be nice to know if by “many” or “some” he means tens, or hundreds, or thousands. (Yes, thousands: in the new edition McCall informs us that there are over 3000 Rapanui in various parts of the world today, up from “about 2000” at the end of the first edition.) The other complaint: no index. A book as important as this one should have one. Please, Grant, include one in the next edition (A.D. 2009?).

📖 Walsh, Grahame L. 1994. *Bradshaws: Ancient Rock Paintings of North-West Australia*. Edition Limitée, PO Box 1204, 1277 Carouge, Geneva, Switzerland. US \$80; Australia \$120; UK £50.

Hardcover, 285 pages, exceptional quality throughout. Maps, diagrams, bibliography and 99 color plates. Each color plate has an opposing black and white rendition of the key figure(s) which are isolated to show important features that are lost in layers of superimpositions.

Review by Georgia Lee

This stunningly beautiful book describes and illustrates some remarkable rock paintings found in an inaccessible and little-known wilderness area of the northwest coast of Australia and is an overview of the research so far