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Easler Island. Archaeology, Ecology and Culture (Review)

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with the idea that, since few settlements on Rapa Nui have been excavated, "far reaching conclusions are difficult to make."

All in all, this excellent volume is both Prologue and Future, providing an impetus for extended archaeological research sometime down the road. But any future archaeologists are hereby admonished that the field work done, the data collected, and the initial meaning and interpretation of this investigation; all have set a standard that future investigators would be wise to follow.

Easter Island. Archaeology, Ecology and Culture.
Jo Anne Van Tilburg. 1994. British Museum Press, 191 pp, 126 figs, 30 plates. £20.00; ISBN 0 7141 2504 0

Review by Paul G. Bahn

"No Tern Unstoned"

I read this book on a long train journey that, by chance, took me through the town of Tilburg in Holland. Tilburg looks fairly dull. The same cannot be said of Van Tilburg's book, but not, I'm afraid, for the right reasons, because it is so full of errors of every conceivable kind that spotting them becomes a distraction while reading it. I'll return to them shortly.

The front cover has a pleasant photograph of moai on the slopes of Rano Raraku--two appear to have birds on their heads. The back cover features Van Tilburg perched precariously on a step-ladder, involved in what at first sight seems a strange bondage ritual with a moai, but is in fact an exercise in photogrammetry. She is wearing the shorts and sunglasses so familiar to viewers of the various TV shows in which she has appeared and which are listed on the dust jacket (as the instigator of the BBC Horizon/Nova documentaries that launched her Rapa Nui televisual career, I must accept some responsibility here). The dust jacket blurb calls her, with as much accuracy as modesty, "the foremost authority on the subject", and also refers to "moai hidden deep in seaside caves" (some mistake, surely??) and to her simulated transportation of a "near fourteen-ton statue" (actually 12.5 metric tons). Did nobody check this dust jacket for accuracy?

The book begins with a jolly prologue that waxes lyrical about fieldwork on the island. After that, the chapters seem to have no logical sequence, and resemble a series of separate essays thrown in at random (and with a certain amount of repetition between them). The first gives a brief account of the Routledge expedition, followed by the history and development of her own project (as if the two are somehow equal or linked--apparently Van Tilburg has now even baptized her project "In the Wake of the Mana!" [p.18]), and then a general survey of moai statistics, her field of expertise, in an updated summary of her 1986 thesis. Chapter 2 starts deceptively with a normal account of the early European visits to the island, but after Cook it veers away into missionary, traders, informants and oral traditions. Chapter 3 deals with island life, and the three phases of cultural development; No 4 focuses on the Birdman ritual, No 5 on stone structures, No 6 on society, No 7 on hunger and astronomy, No 8 on aesthetics and Rongorongo, No 9 on the moai and No 10 on moving them. Why did nobody bother to give this book a coherent structure?

Right at the beginning, (p.14), Van Tilburg states: "Katherine [Routledge] . . . was born. . . in 1880. She was a student at Somerville College, Oxford, from 1891 to 1895". I expect RNJ readers can spot a mistake here. Yet it is not a typographic error; on p.18 she states that Routledge died "in 1935 . . . aged fifty-five" (an error also published in her H.M.S. Topaze monograph, p. 5), and she says (p.14) that Scoresby Routledge was born in 1883. Van Tilburg tells us at length and with evident pride of her in-depth research on Katherine Routledge and her empathy and admiration for her. It is odd, therefore, that she could commit such blunders. She may have read Routledge's notes, correspondence and will--but had she bothered to consult Katherine's death certificate or Scoresby's will or even Scoresby's obituary in the Times (all easily accessible in London) she would have discovered that Scoresby was born in Melbourne in 1859, and that Katherine was 69 when she died in 1935. Ironically, this means that when Katherine's book appeared in 1919 she was not 39 but roughly the same age as Van Tilburg is now! This may seem a small point to belabor here, but it has very important implications: for not only does Van Tilburg ignore the fact that, in a joint presentation on Routledge at Wyoming in 1993, Charlie Love and I gave the correct dates, but a number of eminent specialists apparently read this book (p.9) without spotting the ridiculous notion of an 11-year old girl attending an Oxford college in 1891. Worst of all, the dedication page of this volume claims that it is intended to mark the 80th anniversary of the Mana expedition, and "to honour the memory of Katherine Scoresby Routledge"! It is a pity that Van Tilburg's in-depth research on her heroine did not extend to the most basic of facts, and this, I'm afraid, is quite typical of the book as a whole.

It is, for example, riddled with typos or spelling errors--e.g. canes (for caves, p. 185), Chippendale (3 times), courtesy (p.88), diety (p. 172), Fiqueroa (p.166), Haddingham (p.9), Marguessas (p. 87), Moto Iti (p.171), Moto Nui (p.22), Owlsley (p.106), plaforn (p.174), preceeded (p.130), Rano Kao (p.60--otherwise Kau throughout), Scripus (twice), Sommerville (p.15), trial (for trail, p. 181), etc. One or two typos are inevitable in a book, but this looks like sloppiness. Did nobody proofread this volume?

Then we have a series of words which Van Tilburg seems to think correct, but which I've been unable to find even in American dictionaries, such as arboculture (p.41), conflicted (as an adjective, p. 113), photogrammatically (p. 148). The bibliography is equally careless, with, for example, errors in titles by Adam, Forment, Heine-Geldern, Peña, Roussel and Terrell, and McCoy 1979 listed twice under different initials. Again, did nobody proofread this book?

Any volume might have one photo slip through that is the wrong way round--here, the Museum of Mankind's wooden left hand (p.120); but it takes real genius for a full-page color plate of the view to the islets from the Orongo petroglyphs--
the most classic Easter Island shot--to be printed the wrong way round (plate 11)!

Now let us turn to other factual errors: first, birds. Van Tilburg is no ornithologist. She seems to think (p. 62) that all frigate birds, rather than just males, have an inflating red pouch! Far worse, on p. 59 there is a photo captioned "Sooty Tern (Sterna fuscata) nesting on Motu Nui". It is, in fact, a fine specimen of a masked booby (Sula dactylatra). How could she get this wrong? The two birds are as alike as Foghorn Leghorn and the Roadrunner! Clearly, had Van Tilburg ever taken part in the Birdman competition, she would have picked up the wrong egg and collected a 'booby prize'!

Even more disturbing is a series of basic factual errors: for example, that the Spanish in 1770 raised "three wooden crosses on each of three . . . hillocks" (p.30)--that makes 9 crosses by my reckoning!; that Mangareva lies approximately 2,000 km to the east of Rapa Nui (p.46); on p.57 she states "The frigatebird is said to be associated with the Moris, although the distribution of frigatebird petroglyph motifs alone does substantiate that notion" (is there a word missing here?); on p.46 she claims that Chile lies 2,300 km to the east of Rapa Nui and Pitcairn 1,400 km to the west (the National Geographic map in plate 1 correctly gives these figures as miles); and on the same page she gives the island's area as 160 km2, but on p. 86 it is 162 km2 (and, as RNJ readers know from a recent issue [8.3, p.72], neither is correct--the official figure is 171 km2); and on p. 133 she claims that "only two sites, Anakena and Vinapu, have yielded fragments of moai eyes"--thus ignoring the work of Andrea Seelenfreund (she is not mentioned in the book) who in Clava 1988 (p.79) reported ten fragments of moai eyes in white pumice and white coral, plus a red disk, at ahu Tautira. Did nobody check this book for basic facts? The problem is that fundamental errors of this kind severely shake one's trust in an author's reliability in every other domain--can one trust, for example, her moai statistics or indeed anything else in this book?

Editing is another area that is highly unsatisfactory. The book contains a great deal of repetition or contradiction: for example, on p.168, in note 18, we are told that Cristina says the island has no sites earlier than AD 800, but note 21 refers to a date, reported to her by Cristina, of AD 600-800 for Anakena! On p.13, she refers to talking of the statues being "standardized" or "mass-produced" as "simplistic characterizations", but she herself repeatedly uses these very terms in relation to the moai (pp. 52,118,125). More serious is the constant assumption of prior knowledge on the part of readers: names such as La Pérouse (p. 32), Thomson (p. 33), Geiseler (p. 55) and even Motu Nui (p. 55) are thrown at the reader without the slightest explanation or identification. Even Métraux and Engler are never properly introduced. Alexander Salmon is mentioned twice (pp. 37, 46) but he is not identified in any way, and not even included in the index, so why bother naming him at all? On p. 115, the "Dong Son metal work of Roti" is cited, without the slightest explanation, as is the "Kon Tiki saga" on p. 165. Did nobody bother to edit this book?

The author's interpretations are a further source of problems. This is a very personal book--indeed it is riddled with the phrases "in my view", "it is my opinion", "in my judgment", etc. Naturally she is entitled to her own interpretations of the evidence but, alas, she often makes unwarranted assumptions and suppositions, and even distorts the facts. For example, in her adopted scenario (see below), the arrival of Europeans had a devastating effect on the islanders; she clearly sees the Dutch as being the first visitors, and for maximum effect she needs them to have killed Rapa Nui leaders, since the death of sacred, hereditary leadership is known to have plunged other tribal societies into immense internal crises; so she claims (p. 29) that some of those killed by the Dutch were "certainly chiefs or priests". But in fact we have no idea at all who was killed--Roggeveen, Bouman and Behrens merely mention "inhabitants" and in no way imply that anyone in authority was even wounded. She believes (p. 60) that first fruits, initiation and fertility--so crucial to the Birdman rituals--were "very likely" primary foci in the statue cult, and that the moai were linked to agricultural rites (pp. 100, 127/8); but there is no evidence for this at all. She is ingenuous about archaeology's ability to estimate population and assess how many houses were occupied at the same time, and so fails to realize that her population estimate (p. 67) is as flimsy as everyone else's; similarly, she seems naively optimistic that the "history of the hare paenga" will be fully understood after more work (p. 72) and that we will eventually know about individual responses to hunger on Rapa Nui (p. 98). She sees the palm nut as a famine food (p. 98) but no evidence is given for this. She claims the equation of mata 'a with a high level of warfare is "facile" (p. 109) and prefers to conjure up a theory of sham battles--yet fails to understand that this still indicates a huge rise in aggression.

Where her theory of moai transportation is concerned, the chapter is aptly titled "Beyond Belief". The dustjacket says her model is "exciting yet compellingly logical". In fact, she has merely been seduced by computers, and of course a simulation is far quicker and simpler than a proper experiment. Since her Wyoming presentation (see RNJ 7[3]:46) she has extended her model of horizontal transportation to coastal ahu, and realized that the statues would need to be prone and approach these ahu from the front; but she admits (p. 156) that prone transportation is very risky, expensive and complicated, and that erecting horizontal statues (p. 174, note 22) causes damage. Unlike in her recent Archaeology article, where Charlie Love's upright method is dismissed as having resulted in his moai falling, she concedes here (in a footnote, p. 174) that his method is viable although, at 45 m in 2 minutes, "slower" than the 1 m per second hypothesized for her computer method! The difference, of course, is between reality and theory. Van Tilburg proudly claims her hypothesis is "replicable and testable" (p. 158)--so why not test it? Until a facsimile moai has been moved in accordance with her model, all her figures and results remain pure fiction and should be treated as such.
Her dismissive attitude towards the experiments of Pavel
and Love brings me to the thorny topic of her treatment of
colleagues. The book is very heavily dependent on the (often
unpublished) data and advice of a few—Vargas, Kaeppler,
Green, Steadman, etc.—but is far less generous to others.
Vignes is absent, although his article on *moai* eyes is still the
only such study in print; Heyerdahl, whatever one thinks of
his views, surely merits more than the single paragraph on p.
46 (e.g. her dismissal of South American influence in Rapa
Nui sculpture on pp. 130/1 is vague and unsatisfactory, nor
does she provide any source for her New World data); and it
is simply outrageous that in a book on Easter Island, with
"Ecology" in its subtitle, the seminal work of John Flenley is
accorded one brief mention on p. 47—or the next page she
states that the *totora* reed has been on the island for over
30,000 years, but gives no source for this information, nor for
any later mentions of deforestation or lack of palm wood.

Even worse is the complete absence of Steven Fischer's
1993 edited volume *Easter Island Studies*, the most up-to-
date survey of the subject—this was not caused by its date,
since her book contains photos and personal communications
from 1994; and the *Rapa Nui* Journal merits only two
mentions—one for an 8-line obituary she sent in (p. 166), the
other for a 1993 article by Finney. Apparently this "foremost
authority" sees nothing of any value—not even Chris
Stevenson's excavation reports—in what Grant McCall, in the
2nd edition of his excellent book, *Rapunui*, calls "the
foremost serial publication in Easter Island studies." Why?
It's another of Easter Island's mysteries.

Yet by taking these decisions, Van Tilburg has shot herself
in the foot. For example, since George Gill's recent work is
only available in RNJ articles and the Fischer volume, her
osteological data for endogamy (p. 110) are given no source,
and the craniometric data (p. 104) come from an abstract
more than ten years old! By omitting Gill's latest results,
however, she can agree with Green (p. 43) that it is
"extremely doubtful that Easter Island was settled from the
Marquesas".

It is not easy to write a book that is both popular and
scholarly and Van Tilburg has failed on both fronts. Her book
is not popular because it assumes far too much prior
knowledge (see above), and it will alienate readers through
her love of obscure and pretentious verbiage like "metonymic
connection" or "theophanic construct", and her often dry
anthropological discussions and diagrams. And for all its
trappings of detailed footnotes and references, this is not a
scholarly work because of its myriad errors and its
extraordinarily pusillanimous treatment, and Heyerdahlesque
ignoring, of other researchers.

The book does have good points, such as some fine
illustrations, many of them old and little known; and the
footnotes and the links/comparisons made with other parts of
the Pacific are not without interest. But in the end one has to
ask oneself why the book was produced, what is its *raison
d'être*—and the answer seems to be merely that its author was
determined to write a book on Easter Island. She was hitherto
known simply for her thesis, a few articles and a small
monograph on the island's statues, which she has measured
and described in detail. Writing a book on all aspects of the
island's archaeology and culture, however, is a very different
matter. Her book has little new information, and no real
message except that the islanders were Polynesians, their
culture shows lots of Polynesian traits, and they coped well
with change. Nothing very new or controversial there.

Yet she seems desperate to offer off-beat views such as (p.
82) that the toppling and reworking of the *moai* might be
religious rather than due to aggression, or that the *mata'a*
do not necessarily denote violence (see above). She seems
primarily concerned (p. 164) to shift the blame for cultural
collapse onto the "fatal impact" of the Europeans, but it
remains a fact that the island was deforested and in deep
doubt by the time they turned up. Van Tilburg emphasizes
and sees the islanders' cultural achievement rather than
failure (p. 165)—but contrary to her claims, nobody "ignores
or denies" the social restructuring and readjustment
strategies of Rapa Nui (see, e.g., Bahn and Flenley p. 218).
She insists that Flenley's model "remains to be
demonstrated" (p. 174)—of course it does, like any other
model in archaeology including that of *moai* transportation,
but at least Flenley has solid scientific data on his side, and
Steadman's new information seems to fit the picture well.
Van Tilburg, on the other hand, is merely vague, even about
population levels, and her book is remarkably muted about
the details of ecological devastation.

It is paradoxical, therefore, that despite her determination
to see the islanders through rose-tinted sunglasses, she
accepts all rumors of cannibalism without a hint of doubt—
she claims (p. 109) that "the archaeological evidence for
cannibalism is present on a few sites" and that (p. 110)
"apparent remains of cannibalistic activities are known on
Rapa Nui from both ceremonial and non-ceremonial contexts";
but she never tells us what this evidence is—hardly
surprising, since of course apart from highly ambiguous bits
of burned and/or cut bone there is no real archaeological
evidence for the practice on the island, merely oral traditions.
The perpetuation of unsubstantiated and reckless
interpretations of this kind is simply irresponsible and
symptomatic of the book as a whole. One is left wondering
why on earth the British Museum Press did not get the
manuscript written, checked, edited and proofread to an
acceptable and competent standard.

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In our review of Grahame Walsh's book *(Bradshaws: Ancient Rock Paintings of North-West Australia)* RNJ 8(4):109-10, the address of the publisher should read PO Box 1827, 1277 Carouge, Geneva, Switzerland (not PO Box
1204). For a refreshing change, this was the publisher's
misprint, not one of our (many) glitches.