

Rapa Nui Journal: Journal of the Easter Island Foundation

Volume 22
Issue 1 May

Article 9

2008

Getting to Know You: Catherine Orliac

Catherine Orliac

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/rnj>



Part of the [History of the Pacific Islands Commons](#), and the [Pacific Islands Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Orliac, Catherine (2008) "Getting to Know You: Catherine Orliac," *Rapa Nui Journal: Journal of the Easter Island Foundation*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/rnj/vol22/iss1/9>

This Commentary or Dialogue is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Hawai'i Press at Kahualike. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rapa Nui Journal: Journal of the Easter Island Foundation by an authorized editor of Kahualike. For more information, please contact daniel20@hawaii.edu.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Catherine Orliac

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Easter Island archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. When I was teaching French literature in a Paris high school to pay for my History of Art studies, I took a training course at the international site of Pincevent where I met my husband...whom I married a few years later! After accompanying him to one of his excavation sites on Tahiti, I decided to undertake a thesis on proto-history about traditional dwellings in Tahiti. I then specialized in anthracology, because my husband and I were interested in the complex relationships that the Polynesians maintained with their environment. In 1993, armed with the experience obtained in Tahiti, we set up our first project, the aim of which was to gather the maximum of data on the ancient flora of Rapa Nui after the arrival of people. This vast subject remains at the heart of my current preoccupations.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. When I worked at the site of Pincevent, the excavation was directed by Professor André Leroi-Gourhan. He had such a great influence on me that I abandoned my History of Art studies (a thesis on Joan Miró) and devoted myself to archaeology and joining his laboratory.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out to be different from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. I was surprised to discover that the terrible ecological drama that accompanied the disappearance of Easter Island's flora occurred in a relatively recent period, which we have been able to ascribe to the 17th century AD.

Q. As a renowned female archaeologist, have you found that your sex played a role in making your research projects more difficult, or perhaps easier? Would you encourage women to go into the field of archaeology?

A. The fact that I'm a woman has had no impact on my research. In fact the CNRS laboratory to which I belong has a majority of women. Consequently, I strongly encourage all women who are passionately fond of archaeology to



get involved in this fascinating "adventure".

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. Marine biologist or architect.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. Discovering, under my microscope, after hours, days and months of observation, a few trees from the extinct flora of Rapa Nui...and at last being able to imagine the landscapes encountered by the first Easter Islanders.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Easter Island in the future?

A. I still have thousands of charcoal fragments to identify....I shall not give up, and am sure I will discover some new taxa. If circumstances permit, I would like to return to Rapa Nui to collect and study the charcoal from the Poike ditch.

Q. What is your favorite Easter Island site and why?

A. Orongo; we excavated there for 15 days and it's a fantastic site. The crater certainly played a role as a natural (or sacred?) refuge for the island's ancient flora.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Easter Island would you like to dispel?

A. I am particularly vexed when I hear it said that the Easter Islanders are so stupid that they totally exterminated their island's trees. Why should one attribute such acts to these exceptional navigators, to this society that produced remarkable works of art and a writing that is unique in this part of the world. Why should one refuse to believe that the climate's bad moods played an important role in the development of Rapanui society?

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Easter Island?

A. The extraordinary adaptive genius of these people who reached this tiny island, lost, far from everything. We should never forget that the Easter Islanders are above all Polynesians, and that they maintain very strong links with nature which is entirely inhabited by the gods.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology (or these fields generally)?

A. Go to Easter Island before it is totally transformed by the consumer society; and have no preconceived ideas, and read good authors (including Alfred Métraux)

Q. *What are you currently reading?*

A. Apart from scientific publications, anything that enables me to escape my professional preoccupations: poetry, detective novels, gardening magazines, etc.

Q. *Date and place of birth?*

A. 14 March 1950 at Le Raincy, in the suburbs of Paris, France.

REVIEWS

Frommer's Chile and Easter Island,

1st edition

by Stephan Küffner and Kristina Schreck
Wiley Publishing, 2007, ISBN 978-0-470-12816-9, US\$22.99

Moon Handbooks Chile, including Easter Island, 2nd edition

by Wayne Bernhardson
Avalon Travel Publishing, 2007
ISBN 978-1-56691-754-4; US\$22.95

Reviews by Shawn McLaughlin

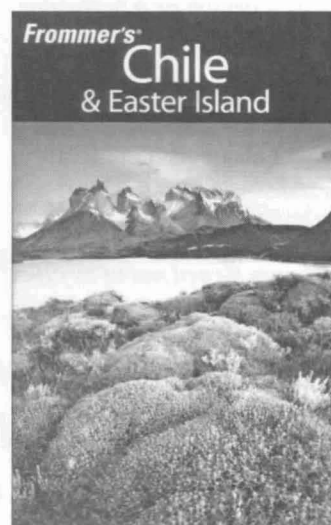
THE RELEASE OF FROMMER'S first edition of *Chile and Easter Island*, and a second edition of *Moon Handbooks Chile, including Easter Island*, by Wayne Bernhardson offer readers coverage of Chile and Easter Island, though in keeping with many such guidebooks – Lonely Planet among them – there is an inadequate and disproportionate percentage of space devoted to Easter Island despite the fact that “Easter Island” shares half the books’ title. As for *Frommer's* coverage, 12.5 pages out of 483 are devoted to Easter Island, only 2.6%. Compare this with *Moon Handbooks Chile and Easter Island* at 3% and *Lonely Planet's Chile and Easter Island* at 3.7% and it doesn't seem too out of line. However, there's more to coverage than numbers of pages. Despite the absence of “Easter Island” in the title of *Moon Handbooks South Pacific* or *Insight's Chile*, the number of pages devoted to Easter Island in these works is much more generous. Even looking at more than half a dozen major recent guidebooks by number of pages shows that *Frommer's* is below the 17.4 page average.

As a new entry in guidebooks with Easter Island coverage I'm inclined to be forgiving, except it appears the authors of *Frommer's* failed to learn from earlier and better works on the subject, such by David Stanley or Wayne Bernhardson – authors who seem to have a handle on what Easter Island is *about*, not just what it is to visit the place. Thus, what is particularly damning about this first *Frommer's* edition is the relative absence of anything about the

people of Easter Island; it is informational about a visit, but little more. Still, the text is reasonably well written and informative and appears to be fairly up-to-date, except for a few gaffes (they pluralize some Rapanui words like “*moai*” by erroneously using an “s”; they make the same statement many authors make about Ahu Akivi being the “only *ahu* facing out to sea”; there is an inane reference to the Te Pito te Kura stone as being magnetic, which is sensational at best because much of the geology of island has magnetic properties; and they employ the usual blather about the stonework at Vinapu giving rise to theories about South American connections to Easter Island – without explaining why such theories are not only incorrect, but have been abandoned.

The authors wisely recommend that visitors rent a vehicle to get the most out of the island rather than relying solely on local guide services, though they appropriately heap high praise on Ramon Edmunds and Josie Nahoe Mulloy of Haumaka Archaeological Tours – and they rightfully observe that even four days is barely enough time to see what the island has to offer. As with other similar guidebooks, this one divides accommodations by price, though they do not divide dining this way, despite the fact that there are big differences from, say, Merahi Ra'a and Te Moana. As is typical with many tour books about Easter Island, they rave about La Taverne du Pêcheur probably because it has become chic to do so rather than acknowledge its pricey food, pathetically slow service and its needlessly surly owner. The book also subdivides the island into sections, with routine if woefully brief information as to what's available to see in these regions, and, with only a

single page devoted to rudimentary maps of the island and Hanga Roa, one hopes the visitor will have other resources to turn to before planning a trip to the island. There is brief mention of the Biblioteca William Mulloy, the Museo Antropológico P. Sebastián Englert, and outdoor activities like horseback riding and scuba/snorkeling, though the statement that, because vehicular access to places like Terevaka has been prohibited, “some locals



still sneak up” to Terevaka “in a 4x4” is irresponsible to mention, as if it were a tacit encouragement to violate the prohibition.

This first venture by *Frommer's* barely meets the minimum standards for coverage of Easter Island, despite such high billing in its title. The shallow depth of information contained in this guidebook will ultimately make for a