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A LOOK BACK

"REPORTING CALLING AT SALA-Y-GOMEZ AND EASTER ISLANDS"

With annotations by Shawn McLaughlin

The following is a report made by Commander Bouverie Clark to Rear-Admiral Algernon Lyons, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy, based on the late 19th century visit of the H.M.S. Sappho to Easter Island and first published in the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch in 1899.

Sir —

[1.] I have the honor to inform you that I touched at Easter Island in H.M. ship under my command on the passage from Coquimbo to Pitcairn Island, and as the Sappho is the first English man-of-war that has visited the island since the Topaze was there in 1869 (as far as I can discover), and as it is much changed since then, I think it right to give you a detailed account of my visit.

2. Before arriving at Easter Island I sighted Sala-y-Gomez at midnight on the 13th, and thinking it desirable to examine it to search for wreckage, &c., I lay to till the morning when I steamed up to within half a mile of the lee side, but saw nothing except some very weather-beaten balks of timber that looked as if they had been there a long time. There was a heavy swell on, and landing did not appear at to be practicable anywhere without risk. Scott Reef was showing plainly, with occasional heavy breakers on it, and is a danger for any ship passing at night, especially as Sala-y-Gomez is so low that it would not show if very dark until close in.

3. Easter Island was sighted, distant about 30 miles, at daylight on the seventeenth day from Coquimbo (June 16th), and on getting up to the east end I intended to anchor off Mt. Topaze for the night but as the south-west swell appeared to make the landing very bad, I gave up the idea and steamed round to Cook Bay [a/k/a Caleta Hanga Roa], where I anchored in the evening. In rounding Cape South-west [Hanga Ha-have?] I passed between Needle Rock and the mainland, and I may mention here that the passage, as well as the one between the two islands, is perfectly clear and free from all danger, with deep water in both. The high cliff which towers over you as you pass makes it a very striking and picturesque sight.

4. On passing the village of Malaveri [sic; Mataveri — more a region or gathering place of clans than a village per se] I was surprised to see the English flag hoisted on a lofty flagstaff, and shortly after anchoring, I was boarded by Mr. Alexander Salmon, the agent of the "Maison Brander" of Tahiti,
who now owns the great part of the island, and from him (dur-
ing my two day’s stay) I got the information I am about to
detail. I may add that Mr. Salmon speaks the native language
thoroughly, having learnt it as a boy from Easter Island natives
employed by the “Maison Brander” at Tahiti, and therefore all
the information I got about the native names and traditions
may, I think, be relied on.

5. The “Maison Brander” have traded to Easter Island at
intervals for some years, and about four years ago bought from
the Bishop of Tahiti the property of the missionaries who were
on the island, who then left for the Gambier Islands, taking
with him about 800 of the natives of the island. There was also
a Frenchman, named Bormier, 5 who was murdered about two
years ago by the natives for intriguing with their women. His
property has also come into their hands, and they have bought
more since, so that now they own the greater part of the island.

6. They have now on it about 10,000 sheep and about 400
head of cattle; and as there are two (and sometimes three)
lambing seasons in the year, their flocks are increasing very
rapidly. The pasture is plentiful, but Mr. Salmon says does not
fatten the stock much, but wherever he has sown good grass
seed a good result has been obtained. With the present number
of sheep he gets about 18 tons of wool a year.6

7. There are enormous numbers of poultry on the island in
a semi-wild state, but all owned by natives and known by their
owners; and in fact a fleet could easily be supplied with fresh
provisions, with the exception of vegetables, which are scarce
at short notice; but as yams and sweet potatoes, banana, and
plantains grow in abundance, they also could be got in time.
Water is the only scarce article, but with that exception pas-
ing vessels calling at Easter Island could get all needful sup-
plies of fresh provisions.

8. There are now only about 150 natives on the island, and
they are not increasing, as the death rate balances the birth
rate, if it does not exceed it. About eight years ago the “Mai-
sion Brander” shipped about 500 to Tahiti to work on their
plantations there, which, with the 800 taken with them by the
missionaries, accounts for the difference of population since
Commodore Powell’s visit. I looked in vain for any traces of
the personal beauty of the race described by him; if it ever
existed the fortunate possessors must have been amongst those
who emigrated.

9. There is also no trace of the missionaries’ work. The
remaining natives have no religion at all, are expert thieves,
and very revengeful, and never forget or forgive a blow, al-
though in general good-tempered. They have no religious
ceremonies or observances; a marriage is arranged by buying a
wife for a patch of potatoes, and it only holds good so long as
it will suit either, or both, to remain faithful to the other.7

10. They are divided into several small clans, amongst
which strength and personal courage is the only claim to
superiority, and their chief quarrels are over the efforts of each
clan to secure the first eggs of the “wide-awake”8 every year from Needle Rock,8 to which they attach a superstitious value.
The man who gets the first gives it to one of his clan, and
he himself has to become a hermit for a year, living by
himself, and not washing or cutting his hair or nails during that
time. As there is a heavy surf at the bottom of the cliffs op-
oposite the Needle Rock, several lives are lost nearly every year
while they are seeking for the eggs.

11. Mr. Salmon says that, after long talks with the natives
on the subject, they all say they originally landed on the north
side of the island at Anakena, and came from the East in two
canoes, provisioned with yams, taro, and sweet potatoes. The
King (by name HOTOMETVA, or “The prolific father”) [Hotu
Matu’a] was in one canoe and the Queen in the other, and on
making the land they separated, passing round in opposite
directions and meeting again at Anakena, where they landed,
and then settled on Mount Topaze, of which the native name is
Hotv-iti, 9 so called after the youngest son of the King, and not
as given on the chart. They there built the stone houses the
remains of which still exist, 10 and made the statues with which
the hill12 is covered; but the first statue was not made till some
fifty years after they landed. This version of their traditions
appears to be more likely than that given in pages 483–4–5 of
the “South Pacific Directory.” Also, the original native name
for the island was Te Pilo-Fenva (the middle of the sea; or, the
land in the middle of the sea) not Rapa-nui.13

12. The anchorage in Cook Bay appears to be very ac-
curately laid down in the chart, except that Point Roa runs
about a cable14 further than given there, so that a ship coming
in with the mission bearing east-south-east will be in 16
fathoms15 when Point Roa and the south extremes of the island
are in line.

13. The landing at Cook Bay is not very good, it being
very shallow in shore, with rocky bottom, necessitating
wading or being carried ashore; but at Hanga Piko there is a
very good landing-place, only the channel into it is narrow,
and, with any swell on, the breakers on one side are rather
alarming. However, it never breaks across the channel except
in a gale, and I had a rock blown up during our stay which will
improve the passage.

14. I was immediately struck with the fertility of the soil,
if it was only cultivated I believe it would produce magnificent
crops, and it seemed to me to be especially adapted for the
culture of the vines, of which as yet there are none on the
island. Mr. Salmon is quite along amongst the natives, and has
no time for anything but the care of his flocks and herds.

15. The extinct volcano of Te Rana Kao [sic; Rano Kau],
on the south-west corner of the island, is well worthy of the
praises bestowed on it by Commodore Powell — it will repay
anyone for a visit to the island. The bottom is not level, as
described in the sailing directions by Findlong;16 on the con-
trary, there is no bottom at 50 fathoms in the centre of the
 crater,17 but there is a carpet of decayed vegetation spread over
the water on which one can cross from side to side. There are
wild duck to be shot amongst the pools, and wild boar18 round
the edges of the water as also in the crater of Mount Topaze.

16. Mr. Salmon informed me that during the last months
large quantities of sawn planks have been washed up on the
north and south-east coasts of the island, which, he thinks,
must be from the wreck of a timber-laden ship.19 A spar20 was
also found, but the natives had cut it up before he heard of it.

17. In conclusion, I beg to suggest for your consideration the advisability, seeing that the island is almost entirely gov-
erned by an English subject, of her Majesty’s Government now extending some sort of protectorate over it. — I have,
&c.,

(Signed) Bouverie F. Clark, Commander

NOTES

1 A port city and capital of the Elqui Province, located on what is now the
Pan-American Highway, in the Coquimbo Region of Chile; it lies in a
valley 10 km (6.2 mi.) south of La Serena.

2 There is no “Mt. Topaze” on Easter Island (at least not as identifiable
today), so it’s difficult to say to what this refers. From the Sappho’s
position, this may be a reference to an anchorage off ’Anakena and
therefore one of the hills adjacent thereto (e.g., Te Puha Noa) — in keep-
ing with the description of sailing towards Cook Bay by way of the
southwest coast and the nearby islets. On the other hand, the Topaze in
1868 made anchorage at Cook Bay, but there are no hills in the vicinity
to which “Mt. Topaze” might be attributed. Or this might also be a
reference to Rano Raraku.

3 This is no doubt a reference to Motu Kao Kao owing to its pinnacle-
shape; in Rapanui kao kao means “slender”.

4 Jean-Baptiste Oníxime Dutrou-Bornier, a French sea captain and former
officer in the Crimean Army.

5 According to McCall, Dutrou-Bornier’s reign ended when islanders
murdered him over a dispute about the making of a dress for his Rapanui
wife. Routledge relates that he was hastily buried on a hillock near the
cliff just outside the plantation, his grave marked by a circle of stones:
“To those occupying a French warship that arrived almost immediately
afterwards, the islanders explained that Bornier had been killed by a fall
from a horse”.

6 The peak annual yield was at least 30 tons and possibly upwards of 50.

7 Reports of theftery by Easter Islanders are rife amongst accounts of
many early visitors but these events reflect differences in the value of
ownership of material objects — something that was difficult for out-
siders to understand. While the judgment of the importance of marriage
may have been accurate during Clark’s visit and variations on this
cavalier approach were similarly reported by Roussel, within ten years
both religious rituals and marriage ceremonies became more widely
known and appreciated, making one wonder about the difference
between what Clark reported and what was actually going on. As with
the “thievery”, it wouldn’t be the first time that an outsider misunder-
stood what he was seeing or even experiencing.

8 This term is used synonymously with the Sooty Tern (formerly Sterna
fuscata now Onychoprion fuscata effective 2005) or manutara bird. It’s
derived from a sailor’s description of the cry the bird makes.

9 The recovery of the egg was effected from Motu Nui, not Motu Kao
Kao: the passage also makes it sound as if “Needle Rock” refers to all
three islets as one.

10 The geography seems confused here in so far as “Hotiti” — most
likely “Hotu Iti”, at the south end of the neck of the Poike Peninsula
where a bay shares this name — is 5 mi. (8 km) southeast of ’Anakena.
The “stone houses” here could be referring to the remains of ahu at
’Anakena and its environs, for the only other commonly described stone
houses are those at ’Orongo, and this most certainly wouldn’t apply
given the location of the exploration party.

11 Rano Raraku, most likely.

12 “Te Pilo-Fenva” = “Te Pito Henua”; the name “Rapa Nui”, however,
wasn’t assigned to the island until Tahitian sailors in the 1860s gave it
this name to distinguish it from Rapa Iti in French Polynesia.

13 A spit of land jutting westward into the ocean south of Caleta Hanga
Roa. A cable equals 200 yd., so the distance here is 200 yd. or 183 m.

As 1 fathom equals 6 ft. or 1.82 m, 16 fathoms equals 96 ft. or 29 m.

This name, if it is a proper name, does not seem to appear in any of the
known literature about Easter Island. It’s possible the name is misspelled
or refers to a proper noun rather than a person’s name, but its origin and
existence remains unidentifiable at present.

A depth of 50 fathoms is equal to 300 ft. (or 91 m), yet, as of 2006, the
estimate for the depth of the water in the crater lake was 30 ft. (9 m).
Depending on one’s position around the crater rim, the distance down
to the surface of the lake is anywhere from 626 to 820 ft. (200 to 250 m) —
but, regardless, even if measurements were being made from the rim of
the caldera, it does not seem likely that 270 ft. (82 m) of water in the
crater has disappeared in a century and a quarter. Or perhaps the lake
was really deeper then because less of the interior talus of the volcano
had fallen in and filled in the bottom of the crater?

It’s entirely possible wild boar was on the island at this time but
domestic pigs were a more common introduction. La Pérouse attempted
to introduce goats, pigs, sheep, and seeds of orange and lemon trees,
maize, and other cereals — but the islanders, owing no doubt to their
desperate need for improved diet, especially where protein is concerned,
tended to devour any such introductions before they had a chance to
propagate.

Ever since the deforestation that wreaked havoc on the island’s eco-
system and culture, wood has been a valuable commodity on Easter
Island. A shipwreck in 1882 near the island resulted in the washing
ashore of sawn planks which were enthusiastically put to good use
immediately. As recently as July of 1983 a freighter carrying a load of
wood bound for mills in Australia ran aground off the island’s west
coast near Tahai. The crew dumped the cargo in an effort to save the
ship and the wood was salvaged by the Rapanui who put it to unprece-dented use in tourist carvings. And in September of 1996, the
Praga, a Chilean merchant ship loaded with supplies for the island, was
lost at sea after an overloaded cargo shifted during heavy waves and
strong winds. Among its holdings? Wood. Indeed, the word rakau —
meaning “tree”, “wood”, or “timber” elsewhere in Polynesia — means
“riches” or “wealth” on Easter Island.

A stout pole or piece of timber, especially used in nautical contexts to
refer to a post made of any material used as the mast of a ship.

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