

Letters to the Editor

Although I am over a year late, I wanted to comment on the book review in the RNJ about a French book *L'Ile de Paques, Approche Historique* by Guy Chagnon, a member of CEIPP Centre d'Etudes sur L'Ile de Paques et la Polynesie.

The reviewer Paul Bahn felt that it was lacking a great many details and especially a bibliography. (There is, in fact, a limited one.) The reviewer also remarked about the author's limited knowledge of many areas of Rapa Nui life, i.e., birds, soil and archaeology.

One of the useful aspects to me of the Chagnon book is exactly the catalogue nature of it to which the reviewer objects. The value of the catalogue is that every theory is explained. I think it is very useful to have a book which reminds us of just how many theories there are about Rapa Nui and its unknown history. It seems a good starting point for further research. Ever since the first Europeans landed, people have been dreaming up ideas from aliens to DNA testing. For people who are new to the subject, they are all laid out, and in the world of the Internet, more information is readily available. While perhaps a more complete bibliography would have been nice, this is a good starting point for novices. And many readers who are familiar with the subject have a handy review in this book to provoke further study.

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Another early flight to Isla de Pascua

I thoroughly enjoyed the recent article by David Maddock (2011) about the history of Roberto Parrague Singer's earliest flights to Isla de Pascua. Prior to the construction of a proper concrete runway, there was one signature flight that was not included in his story, but I believe is of note.

I was a member of the Canadian expedition to the island in 1964/65 when Mataverí was still just an open field. This expedition consisted of a party of 22 scientists of multiple disciplines with a WHO grant to characterize the ecology of an isolated island and its population. Plans had been made for the USA to build a modern runway to facilitate direct air travel from South America to Australia and South-East Asia the following year. We were then to return to re-evaluate the changes which would occur to the environment following easy access from the outside world. (The follow up was never done due to the distraction of the Vietnam War.) The Canadian Navy supplied a frigate, the *Cape Scott*, for the 10 day voyage from Canada and we carried our own supplies so as not to stress the island's resources. This included 15 collapsed trailers which were erected

in a circle for living quarters on the beach between the jail and the hospital, just north of Hanga Roa. When we arrived, we learned that we were the first visitors to the island in eight months and the island was still on a barter economy. The ship then left us for a goodwill tour of South America before returning for our voyage home.

This flight story begins a year earlier. With the new airport construction confirmed, the American Ambassador to Chile decided on an "inspection" tour. Two DC-6B's took off with the ambassador and his party in one and their supplies in the second. Unfortunately, the first plane proved to be too heavy and bogged down into the soil of Mataverí. Unable to land, the supply plane turned back to the mainland. The Chilean Navy then supplied a ship to rescue the Americans and brought a bulldozer borrowed from the city of Valparaíso to free the plane. The bulldozer, of course, was left behind to release the plane while the ambassador's party returned to the mainland with the rescue ship.

As an epilogue, the bulldozer was allegedly only on loan to island so the *Cape Scott* was asked to return it to Valparaíso and there the drama begins. Led by the school teacher, Alfonso Rapu, the islanders immobilized the machine by hiding some parts so that it could not be moved to the ship. Their argument was that "Valparaíso had lots of bulldozers and this one was needed on the island."

This insubordination was met by sending a Chilean Navy ship shortly thereafter with a company of marines to retrieve the machine. It was again immobilized as before, leading to the arrest and jailing of Mr. Rapu. This resulted in an uprising, primarily by the women, to rescue him. As our camp was only about 25 yards from the jail, we were apprehensive witnesses to the entire "revolution". For a short time, all was chaos with angry women succeeding to immobilize the marines who were unwilling to engage them. The ladies proceeded to remove the prisoner from jail and sought "political asylum" for him in our encampment. The Chilean commander wisely backed down and allowed Alfonso to return home when he promised that he would return the next day for talks.

The next day, all was calm and anti-climatic, the Rapanui were resolute and the Navy returned to base empty handed. For all I know, the bulldozer is still on the island.

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Reference

Maddock, D. 2011. The first plane flight to Easter Island – the Roberto Parragué Singer story. *Rapa Nui Journal* 25(1):25-30.