

# Book Reviews

## Foerster, Rolf. *Rapa Nui, Primeras Expediciones Europeas*



Hanga Roa: Rapa Nui Press, 2012. 280 pp. ISBN 978-956-351-348-6. US\$25.00 (softcover). Available at [www.museumstore.cl](http://www.museumstore.cl).

Review by Cristián Moreno Pakarati, *Ahireña Center for Historical Studies*

This book is a comprehensive collection of accounts of early historical sources about Rapa Nui. It includes four accounts from the Dutch expedition of 1722, seven accounts – and instructions for the voyage – for the Spanish expedition of 1770, nine of the nineteen known accounts from the English expedition of 1774, and five accounts from the French expedition of 1786. Most of these appear as original translations for the first time in the Spanish language. These hard sources of data are prefaced by a most interesting introduction written by Professor Rolf Foerster, anthropologist of the University of Chile. It is encouraging that some Chilean scholars are finally starting to take an interest in Rapa Nui (and are willing to publish the results of their research).

The introduction spans 55 pages, starting with an overview in which Foerster presents his main thesis. This is, basically, that Easter Island narratives from this period were built in a “dialogic” way. With this, the author suggests that there was an important role of the Rapanui people in the inception of these writings, which has been neglected and forgotten. In other words, Foerster implies that we should see the eighteenth century Rapanui people as more than the subject matter of these accounts, taking into consideration their active role in the creation of a scenario for the European visitors. The result of this is a series of writings that succumbed under the aura of “mystery” and of Easter Island as an “exceptional place”. This is especially important, considering not only the differences in nationalities (Dutch, Spanish, English, and French) of these expeditions, but also their different motives: the Dutch expedition was a commercial venture, the Spanish one was political, and the English and French were more scientific.

One of the most interesting aspects emphasized by Foerster’s analysis of these sources is the difference between Rapa Nui and other Polynesian islands

regarding the indigenous views towards the early European visitors. The author brings up the fact that the Rapanui people did not overestimate the Europeans as happened in Sāmoa or Hawai‘i, for example, where some were even seen as gods. He attributes this – in Steven Roger Fischer’s words – to the secularization process undertaken by the *matato‘a* (warrior chiefs) against the *ariki* (traditional chiefs of royal bloodline), which started before European arrival. This growing irreligious behavior reminds me clearly of a metaphoric legend on Rapa Nui about the arrival of the mighty god of the sea, Tangaroa, in the shape of a seal, only to be killed and cooked by the Rapanui people.

Reality was closer to the opposite, though. Dutch and English lead bullets found themselves piercing through Rapanui skin and flesh and no European was killed during these first few visits. Foerster implies that these were hard-learned lessons that modified the behavior of the islanders against the visitors. Their attitude towards them oscillated between a “to show/to give/to trade” and a “to make invisible/not give/to take” dynamic. These different attitudes explain the differences in the content of some of the accounts, even from the same expeditions.

If one could mention one criticism of Foerster’s style, it would be his over-extensive use of footnotes. Sometimes they are relevant and clarify some things but, in several pages, the footnotes share equal space with the main text, becoming distractive and making the reading a little bit difficult at times. It is also a little strange that the author quotes some of the sources so extensively in the introduction in a way that the reader feels some sort of a *déjà vu* when re-reading them in the second part, spoiling part of the texts. But these would be minor and superficial complaints compared with the in-depth analysis of the narratives. I think the author’s argumentation shines more in his analysis of the English and the French expedition as “opposites”. It is nice to see well-built arguments in a daring introduction that, far from being neutral, take a strong position towards the sources.

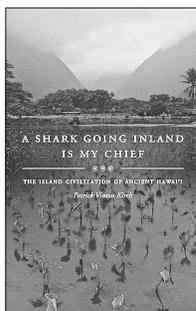
There are all kinds of narratives found in the book. Some, like the Anonymous text of the Dutch expedition originally published in 1728, sound rather comical with its giant islanders, and it is difficult to take any part of them seriously when such fantasies abound in the text. The other three texts of the Dutch expedition have different levels of trustworthiness. I think Roggeveen’s account is the clearest, but I particularly like Carl-Friedrich Behrens’ writing style. The Spanish expedition accounts have probably the smallest novelty value because some of them were published in a well-known volume translated to English by Bolton Glanvill Corney in 1908. They were also not new in the Spanish language since all of them were already published by

Francisco Mellén Blanco in a lesser-known volume in 1986. There is one new second-hand account, though; written by José de Moraleda two years after the expedition, and it is very interesting. In general, the Spanish accounts are highly descriptive and they agree with each other almost perfectly.

The section about the English expedition is probably the core of the second part of the book. It contains nine accounts of varying degrees of value: from Andrew Sparrman's one paragraph text to the rich narratives of Georg and Johann Reinhold Forster which, to me, represent the peak of this compilation. Of all the eighteenth century visitors, these two had probably some of the most lucid interpretations of what they saw on the island. Almost at the same level is La Pérouse's account of the French expedition in 1786. The other highly valuable text from this expedition is Bernizet's geographical information and detailed measurements of platforms and *hare paena* which should be of great interest for geographers and archaeologists. Again there is a one-paragraph account by Paul Méréault Monneron mentioning briefly that Rapa Nui was worthless and no European country would be interested in taking it.

The edition has the trademark Rapa Nui Press square book design and it is fully illustrated in black and white. Maps and iconography of the four expeditions support the contents of the volume wonderfully. I believe that Rolf Foerster's introduction is going to be cited in the future by scholars studying the early historic period of Rapa Nui. The book appears as a valuable contribution to scholars but also to general Spanish-speaking readers, since most of these accounts were rather obscure and difficult to find even in their original languages, and now they are readily available in a nice looking package that delivers an almost full picture of what Europeans thought they saw on Rapa Nui during the 18th century.

### Kirch, Patrick V. *A Shark Going Inland is My Chief: The Island Civilization of Ancient Hawai'i*



Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 368 pp., 8 color illustrations, 17 black and white photos, 4 maps. ISBN 978-0-520-27330-6. US\$45.00 (hardcover).

Review by Mike T. Carson,  
*Visiting Scholar, the Australian National University*

In his latest book, *A Shark Going Inland is My Chief: The Island Civilization of Ancient Hawai'i*, Professor Patrick V. Kirch marshals his decades of research

toward answering a singular question, posed by Captain James Cook in 1778: "How shall we account for This Nation spreading it self so far over this Vast ocean?" The "Nation" in this case referred to the people across the Asia-Pacific who shared a common ancestral language and cultural background. The question arose specifically after Cook's first encounter with the Polynesian inhabitants of the Hawaiian Islands, who perpetuated the language and culture of their "Nation" in a remarkably remote archipelago.

Professor Kirch probably is the most qualified among us to answer Captain Cook's question today. He draws on his decades of research in Hawaiian archaeology and cultural history, as well as his experiences farther afield in the Pacific Islands. Equally important, the author writes from his heart about the islands that he dearly loves. The result is a priceless gift of autobiography infused with both literary flare and scientific fact.

As many social scientists may expect, the book's driving question has no singular or succinct answer, but rather it fuels the engine for taking readers on a journey in pursuit of multiple answers. In this case, the journey itself truly is more important than the destination. Along the way, other questions arise, all equally fascinating and important, about how Polynesian culture developed and what specifically happened in the Hawaiian Islands. Professor Kirch further draws a distinction between questions of proximal "how" and ultimate "why," with richly variable answers.

The book's chapters are organized chronologically, in terms familiar to most students and practitioners of Asia-Pacific archaeology. Ancient roots of Austronesian society are mentioned in southern coastal China, Taiwan, and Island Southeast Asia, but the book's primary focus really is about much later events in Hawai'i, as expressed clearly in the book's title. The deeper background is covered as needed for a proper footing, and then the author takes us on a thrilling full-speed ride as the book progresses forward in its time-line.

The author hits his best strides when he addresses questions about how (and why) the historically known Hawaiian Kingdom came to exist. This discourse dominates the pages of the book. Hawaiian ethnohistory necessarily acts as the primary source of information, although it is greatly augmented (or some might say transcended) by the author's experience in archaeology, his familiarity with historical linguistics, and of course his work in islands outside Hawai'i. He thus gives readers a powerfully educated account that otherwise would be missing in narratives that favor only one of these lines of evidence.

For all its inherent scholarship, this book is intended for the general public, much like the products of Brian Fagan. Much the same style is used and