

Letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor in RNJ Vol. 27(1) from Dr. Garry Brody, a member of the Canadian Medical Expedition to Easter Island (in 1964), brought back some great memories and I found myself leafing through several earlier items written about that expedition (Boutillier 1992a, 1992b; Reid 1965; Skoryna 1992). Although the Canadian Medical Expedition took place some 18 years before my first trip to Easter Island, their experiences were somewhat parallel to mine. Upon my arrival, many Rapanui asked me if I was from Canada and then went on to tell about the wonderful folks from Canada who came to the island and did so many nice things. I was shown (many times) the remnants of the buildings that housed the medical complex as stories were told about the time when the expedition was on the island, a revolt, and how the police tried to capture Alfonso Rapu but how he was saved by the women of the island (many of the women had the scars to prove it). In fact, at one point it occurred to me that maybe I could pass myself off as Canadian as they seemed more popular than the Yankees.

At the time when the Canadian Expedition was planned, Dr. Skoryna learned that Chile intended to build a runway capable of handling large jets, which would end the island's isolation and open up the society to many outside influences, including health issues and welfare of a previously isolated population. (No one at that time expected that the island would

end up with the longest runway in Oceania!) Thus, his project assumed more urgency, but also, the expedition had to cope with a lot of Chilean bureaucracy, vast amounts of data, and samples taken from the Rapanui and from their animals. The doctors were not beyond a bit of bribery: one of them tested oxygen uptake in the Rapanui as they rode an ergometer bicycle and then were rewarded with bars of soap.

Perhaps the welcome the Canadians received was due in part to Father Sebastián Englert who lived on the island at that time and had prepared the islanders for the coming expedition. And, as many Rapanui worked in the laboratories or in the kitchen, they bonded with the expedition members. It is a great story, unfortunately not well-known outside of Easter Island.

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References

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Greeting the marines' arrival (photograph courtesy of Garry Brody).



Juan Atán (third from left); head of expedition, Dr. Skoryna (fourth from left) and the governor (fifth from left). The other three men remain unidentified (photograph courtesy of Garry Brody).