

I have only one “quibble” about this book. It would have helped if a native English speaker had read through it prior to publication. While the text is always understandable, errors in English usage could have been avoided.

Easter Island on the Air: British TV and Radio

Review by Paul G. Bahn

In Great Britain we recently had a TV show and a radio show devoted to Easter Island – they were very different in style and content, and both may be of interest to the readers of the *Rapa Nui Journal*.

Many readers must, like myself, have been intrigued by the widespread announcements in the media some time ago that a big new cave system had been discovered on the island, containing all kinds of wonders including some hitherto unknown rock art. So it was with great anticipation that I watched a TV documentary entitled “Easter Island Underworld”, made in 2009, which aired on the National Geographic Channel in Britain on 26 June this year. I assumed that it would present us with all these new finds. Imagine my disappointment when it showed us very little!

The blurb for the show claimed that the “network of dark caverns...sheds new light on the former islanders”. Er... no it doesn't. The script claimed that the cavers were “hoping to find new clues as to how the island's once vibrant community disappeared”. I can only assume that their hopes were dashed. Later the voiceover proclaimed that “caves like these are providing tantalizing clues as to what happened to Easter Island's once thriving community” – but we were shown no such clues.

Overall, the show presented a fair picture of what we know of the island's past, with some terrific visuals, as one would expect from National Geographic, and numerous dramatic re-enactments of conflict, with painted natives fighting, hiding, toppling a statue, doing the birdman race, being shot by Europeans, or dying of smallpox. I strongly suspect that the two writers, Geoff Luck and Robert Zakin, had read Flenley & Bahn very thoroughly. The account of the island's past covered everything from arrival through deforestation and religious/social change to Europeans, and scarcely put a foot wrong.

Where the new work is concerned, however, it was disconcerting to find that the “new caves” received at most only 5 or 10 minutes of footage scattered through the whole show. Andrzej Ciszewski, the “cave exploration leader”, together with “an expert team of experienced cave explorers” from Poland are shown abseiling down into cavities, or crawling through tight spaces, exploring the “underground labyrinth of caves”. In one sequence, they fix ropes to rocks on the surface (difficult, as the volcanic rock cracks easily) and descend to an inaccessible cave in a cliff face. They certainly look impressive in their caving gear, and using “lasers and other hi-tech surveying equipment to create a 3-dimensional

map of every cave they explore”. We are told at the end that they have found more than 320, and we see some of the detailed maps they have produced of some cavities and their contents. They plot artificial walls, fireplaces, and any other finds on these maps.

We are also shown divers exploring the coastal waters; but the sum total of information revealed here was that the island has no coral reef, and hence is poor in marine resources!

So what about the great new discoveries? The voiceover says of the ancient islanders that “the haunting statues they left behind dominate the landscape; but underground other equally significant relics of this once vibrant culture have survived.” And at the end of the show, we are told that “many of the volcanic caves and tunnels underground are yet to be fully explored; the most recent expeditions have uncovered a treasure-trove of artifacts.” Alas, all that we are shown in the footage is cave walls; a few artificial walls; one almost complete human skeleton lying *in situ*; a few human bones in a different cave; a freshwater pool; and a single *mata'a*! No rock art at all, no treasure-trove of artifacts, not even fireplaces (which are merely depicted on the maps). One can only assume that nothing of any consequence has actually been found, as otherwise it would certainly have been featured prominently by the National Geographic show.

The program also features three talking heads. One is Claudio Cristino, introduced as “Easter Island's resident archaeologist”, who accurately explains the main events in the island's past. Another is Sergio Rapu, who mentions caches of *mata'a* in caves, and comments on such topics as deforestation, isolation and cannibalism. Terry Hunt, in brief appearances, presents his claim that it was the rats and Europeans that did it – denying that there was any ecocide on the island: “what actually happened was genocide”!

Finally, one claim in the normally impeccable voiceover has left me absolutely baffled: “Radiocarbon dating on the remains of an early boat suggests they reached Easter Island somewhere between 500 and 1000 AD”. What on earth is this referring to? If it means some boat on a different island, what possible relevance can this have to dating the arrival of people on Rapa Nui?

By way of complete contrast, Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, is presenting a “History of the World in 100 Objects” on BBC's Radio 4. Each show is 15 minutes in length, and studies one important object from the Museum's collection, spanning the whole of the human past, and many parts of the world. Recently it was the turn of Hoa Hakananai'a, the museum's basalt *moai*, arguably the finest statue ever carved on the island. This interesting show was unfortunately marred by the fact that MacGregor always pronounced its name as “Hoa Hakanana-Eye-a”, his claim that it has been roughly translated as “Hidden Friend”, and his belief that it used to stand on a coastal platform, with other stone giants as companions, before being transferred to Orongo.

Sir Anthony Caro, the eminent British sculptor, was on hand to comment on the statue's "marvelous mass and strength and power." He felt that the sculptor had invested the stone with some sort of emotive power, some sort of presence: "What the Easter Island sculpture does, it gives just the essence of a person. Every sculptor since Rodin has looked to primitive sculpture because all the unnecessary elements are removed. Anything that is left in is what stresses the power of the stone. We are down to the essence - its size, its simplicity, its monumentality and its placement - those are all things that matter."

MacGregor himself described the statue's "rare combination of physical mass and evocative potency". He briefly presented the history of the island culture's rise and decline, and the radical change in its religious and social system, which led to the carvings on the back of Hoa Hakananai'a. Referring to the motifs on the back, he commented that "this carving could never have been very legible as sculpture; we know it was originally painted in bright colors, so that this cluster of very potent symbols could be easily recognized and understood. Now, without its color, the carving looks to my eyes feeble, fussy, diminished, a confused and timid postscript to the confident vigor of the front".

His conclusion was eloquent: "It's not often that you see ecological change recorded in stone; there is, I think, something very poignant in this dialogue between the two sides of Hoa Hakananai'a, a sculpted lesson that no way of living or thinking can endure forever. His face speaks of the hope that we all have of unchanging certainty, his back of the shifting expedients that have always been the reality of life. He is everyman, and everyman is usually a survivor..... He's a supremely powerful statement of the fact that all societies keep looking for new ways to make sense of their changing world and to ensure that they survive in it."

Articulating Rapa Nui: Polynesian Cultural Politics in a Latin American Nation-State

Riet Delsing. Ph.D. Dissertation,
University of California, Santa Cruz. 2009. 450 pp.
(Available from UMI, ProQuest. Dissertations and Theses).

Review by Steven Roger Fischer

Doctoral dissertations are very much a double-edged sword. Over two millennia ago the Roman poet and satirist Horace entreated every serious author to *prodesse et delectare* ('teach and entertain'). Yet while that is perennially the goal, so very few of us successfully accomplish it.

How refreshing then – and how immensely profitable for everyone concerned with the deeper story of Easter Island – to encounter a tome of such scholarly substance and energy. Even as we glean countless sheaves of insight from this instructive opus, we cannot help but delight at the same time in Delsing's polished prose.

Born and raised in Holland, Riet Delsing emigrated to

Chile in 1973. Fascinated by her adoptive country and its vibrant palette of peoples, she eventually chose anthropology as her vocation, and in 1996 was finally able to undertake her first protracted study-visit to Rapa Nui. The magical isle captivated her, and over the next decade Delsing became a frequent – and best informed – European visitor to the island.

In the end, she has penned Pascua's most erudite paean. As "Articulating Rapa Nui" is the ultimate distillation of an almost unprecedented scholarly commitment, so, too, is it a legacy to a people Delsing has come to regard as her own.

It is a weighty work, its 450 pages investigating, illuminating, and exposing the often troubled, and always complex, relationship between the Rapanui people and the powerful, paternal, daunting, Chilean nation-state. The study emphasizes the Rapanui people's ever-increasing sense of a special cultural difference. In this regard Delsing minces no words: "My main contention is that cultural politics, together with simultaneously occurring global phenomena, are shaping the (re)construction of a Rapanui identity, in discourse and in practice, and a growing desire for self-determination." She shares this heroic "*J'accuse*" with lucidity, crystalline composition, and a prose that occasionally approaches poetry.

The dissertation is in two parts, the first diachronic (historical) and the second synchronic (contemporary). Part One, "Challenging the Nation-state," elucidates Chile's ambivalent relationship to Rapa Nui, from 1888 up to the present day, and makes such copious use of rare Chilean archival material that a seasoned historiographer of Easter Island must quietly bow in admiration. Part Two, "Polynesian Cultural Politics and Global Imaginaries," treats of a variety of contemporary forms of what Delsing terms "cultural politics." It is in this latter part of the dissertation that Delsing's passion takes wing, for long enough has she witnessed – indeed even participated in – those cultural performances, Tāpati festivals, political free-for-alls, even loud demonstrations in Hangaroa's streets, and so cannot refute the obvious. "This emphasis on cultural politics," she writes, "reveals the existence of ambivalences and tensions between the Rapanui – who wish to live their difference as a people – and the Chilean nation-state, which rather stresses its relationship with the island in terms of sovereignty."

The sheer breadth of Delsing's scholarship overwhelms any trivial critique. Her advantages of maturity, European background, decades of residency in Chile, and obvious personal flair for making herself an active part of the local Hangaroa community, have all contributed to rendering her vantage point unique, one that has permitted a particularly cogent verity. Delsing thus transcends the Eurocentric eyrie by acknowledging – and in many ways becoming an advocate for – the Rapa Nui mandate. She does not shy from calling a *mata'a a mata'a*: particularly in her political analyses and judgments, her frankness and integrity are praiseworthy. She stands in fact between both worlds, interpreting Rapa Nui with the mind of an educated European but with the spirit of one who knows, intimately and profoundly, the Rapa Nui psyche and ways, both the *roro henua* and the *huru henua*.