

Letters from the island: the Mulloy family's year on Rapa Nui, 1960-1961

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It is rare to find anyone with first hand experiences from the 1960s with Rapanui people or who has any idea of what living on Rapa Nui might have been like. My family is one of the few exceptions; we had the unique experience of living on Rapa Nui for a year in 1960 while the restoration of Ahu Akivi and other archaeological research was carried out by my father Bill. My mother Emily Ross Mulloy wrote letters that recorded some of her impressions, giving small glimpses of what life on Rapa Nui was like. Because so few outsiders had ever lived there I believe that sharing these letters can serve to inform and provide valuable insights into Rapa Nui character and culture. Emily went to Rapa Nui in 1960 with Bill and three children. I was the youngest, 8 years old at the time. There was then only one supply ship a year to the island and no other regularly scheduled communication. Emily had been dreaming of Rapa Nui ever since Bill returned from the Heyerdahl Expedition in 1956. Emily was a student of anthropology at the University of New Mexico when she first met Bill Mulloy just before WWII. She was 37 years old when a Fulbright grant allowed Bill to go back to Rapa Nui to continue his research. There was no question in either of their minds that this time, she and the kids were going with him.

Emily's first letter from the island describes their arrival by ship from the Chilean seaport of Valparaíso after 8 days at sea; aboard the yearly supply ship the *Pinto*.

We sighted Easter Island from afar early Monday morning, at first it just looked like a blue cloud low on the horizon. Later it grew until you could see the two volcanoes at each end and a low flattish part between. It is bigger than you would expect from photos and much less rugged. By noon we were sailing along the south shore and were surprised to find the slopes of the volcanoes quite green with a lot more trees. We passed the Ahu of Vinapu where Bill did most of his excavations, sailed around the three little off shore islands into the harbor of Hanga Pico. The sea got quite rough and it was raining nearby so the ship had to drop anchor far out from shore. We could see the buildings on the pier and crowds of people waiting as well as horse back riders and a few jeeps hurrying down to meet the ship. Then boats started coming out to us, some official with representatives of the government and others with natives coming to greet their families. We sat looking like immigrants at Ellis Island clutching all our belongings, while we waited for a launch to take us to shore.

She recorded her first impressions of Rapa Nui life in the busy early days getting settled on shore. These letters were sent back home on the ship when it returned to Chile and were the last that she expected to be able to send out until the annual supply ship returned a year later. Most of her letters were mailed to her parents in Michigan and her father Francis Ross carefully copied them and shared them with a wide range of family and friends.

I feel I am going to fail badly at describing this island. At least it seems very different to me from what I expected. Of course I haven't seen much yet but instead of the dry desolate picture you get from the archaeological photos, here around the village it is very green and at this time of year seems quite tropical. There are a lot of trees, mostly eucalyptus imported from Chile, but also bananas, bamboo, and hibiscus, orange and lemon trees. From our front door we can see the blue sea far down below. Looking to the left is the big volcano of Rano Kau, to the right the Poike peninsula, and by walking to the end of the porch and looking behind the house, you can see another small volcanic cone, which was the quarry for the reddish stones for the hats of the great moais. The houses have corrugated iron roofs and cement walls. They are built for multi generational families, long, low houses with a verandah running the whole length of the front and one or more doors opening onto it. There is usually a central living room, with bedrooms on either side, and a kitchen built on the back or in a separate shed. Most of the actual living is done out doors with the houses for sleeping, storage and shelter from wind and rain.

Emily saw events of every day life on Rapa Nui through the lens of her experience as a student of anthropology and wrote letters home to her family describing what she saw and experienced. The Mulloy family lived enmeshed in the Rapanui culture because of relationships that Bill had established on his prior visit there in 1955. Many of Emily's insights about living on Rapa Nui and the Rapanui people are completely unique because they record the events of daily life and have a domestic and interpersonal focus.

We are living with the Rapu's extended family and it is pretty primitive in some ways – they cook outdoors, wash dishes outside, a few at a time in a small basin, iron with a flatiron filled with charcoal, have an outside toilet with

rats under it and millions of flies. Pigs, horses, chickens and cats and dogs wander around more or less freely but are not allowed in the house. The love and feeling of belonging to a family, more than makes up for the primitive living conditions. The Rapus (who we are staying with) adopted Bill when he was here in 1956 and we are all considered part of their family. This is a wonderful family to belong to. The father Alejo is a handsome old patriarch, with a family of 10 children, three wives, 50 odd grandchildren, and 20 or so great-grandchildren, plus Aunts, Uncles, and in-laws, all of who regard us as their special charges. They will not permit us to pay for anything or to do any work for ourselves. Yesterday for example one of the neighbors sent word that she would wash all of our clothes, "we are of the same blood" she said because her father was an American. On our first full day here, the kids and I were given so many presents, six chickens and dozens of eggs, pineapples, tomatoes and, watermelons, as well as a baby pig two yellow kittens and the promise of two horses. This was just a typical day as we have had similar gifting every day since and are well provisioned to set up house keeping when we move down to our own home in the village.

This summer the Island has had a lot more rain than usual, so everyone has full water tanks, but at this point until the ship's stores are all unloaded, everyone is short of such things as tea, sugar, coffee, flour, cigarettes, kerosene, matches and soap. Of course all the stuff we brought of this category is still being unloaded too, and we can't get at it either so we are learning to get along with coffee made with one teaspoon full to the gallon. Food, however, is good and plentiful, plainly cooked and not much seasoning but lots of meat, fish, and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. The first meal we ate here Monday night, we had pork, chicken, and lobster, green peas, fresh tomatoes, bread, desert –a caramel custard, watermelon, and juice made from fresh pineapples.

I seem to be able to get only a little written on this at a time before being interrupted by visitors and of course at night, with nothing but candles or kerosene lamps, I can't write.

A month later she has settled her family into the small house in the village, the kids are attending the local school that only goes to the sixth grade and they are already becoming a part of Rapa Nui life. Emily, in spite of her resolve, is finding it increasingly harder to find time to write.

It's been over a month since I wrote last and the reason for writing now is that yesterday Martin showed up with a rumor that a plane is coming soon. I expect it is just a rumor but in case I want to get some of the things written down so I can send a letter if it should turn out to be true. Strangely enough several nights ago I dreamed a plane did come and had Americans on it. The Rapa Nui all believe

in dreams as predictions of the future, disaster, death, or as a way of communicating with people who are off island. Not too long ago a woman died very suddenly under the anesthetic while being operated on for a tumor. Rebecca told me afterwards that the woman had dreamed just before that she saw her daughter who is in the continent and the daughter's baby and Rebecca said that the daughter had undoubtedly dreamed about her mother at the same time. Martin while he was on the expedition with Heyerdahl also dreamed about his father and it was at that time Alejo was being operated on and nearly died. Alejo also insists that he saw Martin while he was unconscious from the anesthetics. Anyway all Rapanui take dreams seriously so maybe mine will prove to have been a true prediction also.

In a later letter, Emily gives a fascinating analysis of ships and their importance to people on Rapa Nui.

One might almost say that the inhabitants of this Island have a sort of mass psychosis about ships, which expresses itself in dreams of ships, seeing imaginary ships, especially at night, and most of all in rumors about ships. The symptoms have lately been extended to include airplanes, though these are still relatively rare.

Perhaps someday ships and planes will become such a commonplace event here that the whole population will no longer turn out to see them but I doubt it. Certainly their interest hasn't changed very much since the days when the earliest accounts were written. Ships mean so much on an island that is 2000 miles from anywhere. New faces to see, new products from different parts of the world, news from the outside, opportunity to send and receive mail, perhaps even a chance for one of the young men to stow away and actually travel to some of the fabulous countries of the world outside.

During our stay here hardly a week goes by without at least one person coming to tell us very confidentially that on such and such a date a ship (usually an American ship) was coming. Often the stories were quite detailed, even at times including the name of the ship, size and type of vessel, country of origin, exact time of arrival and number of hours or days it would stop.

At the slightest rumor of a ship children quit school, workmen lay down their tools, everyone starts rummaging under the bed for his stock of wood carvings or her supply of shell necklaces and banana fiber hats, and begin to walk, run, or ride to the shore nearest the expected point of landfall. To spread the word more quickly, some small boy would climb to the top of the family rainwater tank and shout through the pipe "Te pahi!" A ship! This imparted a fine resonant quality that carries long distances. But even without artificial enhancement, the word always seemed to spread as if by

magic. If it were daytime, the owners of small boats would hurry to get them out and into the water.

But no matter how many disappointments they had, the next time everyone would be just as excited, and just as enthusiastic as before. The worst disappointment was for a ship to pass by at night. Then there was no chance of taking the boats out. But then there was always the hope that maybe it will drop anchor and stay until daylight everyone would stay at the shore and watch until the lights finally disappeared for good. I myself could never understand how any ship's captain could bear to get so close to the fabulous Easter Island and not even want to stop. Whatever the explanation, few ships do actually stop.

This importance of ships to Rapa Nui in the early post contact period was reinforced for me on my visit to Rapa Nui in 2009. A Rapa Nui archaeologist, Charlie Love (a student of my father's) had just unearthed an impressive replica of a European ship, complete with Captain's fore deck and stone ballast in the hold. It appears to have been used for some form of ritual or theatrical performance, perhaps as a way to try to attract ships to Rapa Nui. Some of the same ships, that into the 1960s, would still consume the public imagination.

Emily goes on to say that...

Ships of many nations have been to Easter Island at some time or other and the islanders are very much aware that the world has many countries, with different languages and customs, though their idea of the actual geography may be very hazy. One old lady came to see us and told us that she had just found out from a grandchild's school book that "Chile and America were one island" (i.e., North and South America are connected by land) so that, if she came to Chile, it would be a simple matter for her to come and see us. The whole concept of an island too large to walk across in a matter of a day or two simply did not exist for her. In fact the Rapanui word for country also means island.

The different countries are judged by the representatives they have seen, their behavior while on shore, generosity or lack of it in trading, and the quality of goods, especially cigarettes, offered in trade. American cigarettes are especially desirable, but we did not have them, since our supplies all were bought in Chile. Still, Chilean cigarettes were far preferable to Russian ones, which the islanders had, to their great disgust, consisted of a long cardboard filter or mouthpiece and very little tobacco.

Of all the desired trade goods, tobacco was the most highly prized. There was some local tobacco grown (I remember my Rapanui grandmother Filomena rolling her own with leaves dried in the sun and old brown paper). During

the Heyerdahl Expedition workers were paid in cigarettes and they gladly worked for them. To this day, many people on Rapa Nui smoke and they joke that it is okay for them to do so because they have the cleanest air in the world and get no pollution from any other sources. On the other hand, both of my parents died of lung cancer, my father in 1978 much before he was finished with his work on Rapa Nui.

In May of 1960 a massive earthquake in southern Chile sent a huge tsunami wave crashing across the Pacific Ocean reaching as far as Hawaii's Hilo Bay and the coast of Japan. There was no Pacific Tsunami Warning System then and it was the neighborhood kids on Rapa Nui who gave the first warning, as Emily describes in the following letter.

On Sunday night we were just getting ready to have supper when some kids outside started hollering for us to come out and look at the beach. When we first looked, the rocks a little way from shore, which normally stand several meters above the high tide line, had completely disappeared. The stone pier was covered with water, and the water was level with the base of the statue standing at the end of our street. By the time we all went down to see, the water had all gone out again, and lots of little kids, and big people too, were poking around in the pools to find fish, which had been washed up. Then in about 15 minutes the water rose again and everyone ran for high ground. It never again got as high as the first wave, it continuing sucking out and coming in all that evening from seven until about midnight. Each time when the waves went out they went out much farther than the actual low tide level, so that all the area between the normal shoreline and the previously mentioned offshore rocks, was practically drained of water.

I think that by eight or nine o'clock, the entire village was down here by the waterfront, and of course we were too. People brought torches of rags dipped in gasoline, carbide lamps and flashlights and in the intervals when the sea went down they scrambling around on the exposed rocks, catching the stranded fish, lobsters, crabs and octopus. A lot of people stayed down at the beach all night, especially the old people who evidently believed that by chanting and praying they could keep the water from coming higher. No one here was drowned, and no one's home was washed away....

But on the other side of the island, perhaps because it was the side facing the continent and got the first shock of the wave, a great deal of damage was done. The first result here that anyone knew about, except of course for the big supply of fish, was next morning when it became apparent that the sea had brought in a lot of sand to the beach down here, sucked it up from the deeper ocean and deposited it on top of and among the rocks. This was a big piece of luck for the island government and also for all the private individuals who are planning construction, since you need

sand for cement, and before, it had to be hauled in from the other side of the island in oxcarts.

On the other side of the Island in the bay of Hotu Iti, which is on the coast between the volcanoes Rano Raraku and Poike, the sea had risen 13 meters above its normal level and covered a very large area, going in some spots as much as 700 meters inland. It completely destroyed the largest, and previously one of the best preserved ahus on the island, Tongariki. It had 15 huge stone statues or moai, all in very good condition though tipped over, and a high masonry platform of at least seven courses of stones. Because the population of the island is confined to the village of Hanga Roa no one was hurt or even witnessed the damage. It was a few days later that someone got over to that part of the island and reported the devastation. More regret was expressed by the Rapa Nui people for the missed opportunity of gathering up the hundreds of lobsters and thousands of fish than for the destruction of the impressive ahu site.

In November of 1960 an unexpected ship did arrive and Emily describes the big event in her letter.

Yesterday was a big big event for the island. A ship actually came! A destroyer "Gronigen" from the Royal Dutch Navy stopped here on Rapa Nui for the day. About 5 in the morning we were awakened by the people bringing their fishing boats down to put them in the water. About 7 the ship passed Hanga Roa and then turned around and headed back toward the pier at Hanga Piko. We couldn't see it from our house as it was anchored so close in. We all went over to Hanga Piko about 8 am and right away Bill was invited to go on board with some of the Navy officials. Kathy, Brigid and I watched the launches coming ashore and started talking to some of the Dutch sailors. They nearly all spoke English so we were in demand as interpreters for the people who wanted to trade woodcarving for cigarettes and blue jeans. The Dutch were here 5 years ago and won the reputation of being very hardheaded bargainers and this certainly seemed to be true. It gave me a very strange feeling to see all these blond and blue-eyed men, though there were a few Indonesians were among them. After a year of knowing everyone on the island and mostly speaking Spanish, it was a shock to deal with a new group of faces and to speak English.

Later the Dutch officers went on a tour of the island with Bill, and in the afternoon we were invited on board the ship for a drink, good Dutch beer was a treat and good Edam cheese even more so. We were given chocolate candy, which our children certainly appreciated. Bill and Father Sebastian both had a chance to fill up on their favorite sauerkraut, when they had dinner aboard the ship before it sailed that evening, after only about a ten hour stay.

At the end of that wonderful year, when events were already becoming part of myth and memory and our time on Rapa Nui was getting short, Emily drew from her anthropology background to record some of her impressions from having lived a full ship to ship cycle on the island.

Being part of the Rapu family meant we were included in the distribution of everything they had (mostly food of all kinds, raised locally) but also that we were supposed to reciprocate by providing them with the things they lacked from our supplies. Cigarettes, kerosene, matches, clothes, shoes, kitchen ware, tools, pretty much everything we had. The idea of rationing supplies so as to last out the year is quite foreign to their nature. You use it as long as it is available, and then do without. And we have found it quite amazing the number of things we have been able to live with out quite comfortably. As the year draws to a close and we run out of one thing after another, it is surprising how often the system goes into reverse and we are given carefully hoarded supplies from our Rapa Nui family's secret stores. This system of social reciprocity works to redistribute resources and we find the Rapa Nui people to be just as generous with us as they had expected us to be with them when we first arrived with a full stock of exotic goods.

Actually our way of life is much closer to the Rapa Nui way. Naturally we are accustomed to doing our own work and enjoy roughing it, when we go out with the natives we cook things over the open fire and eat with our fingers off banana leaves, they always seem surprised we adapt so well to such things. I think we have a lot more fun and we are respected by the Islanders. This is partly because Bill said he would come back and actually did. Apparently an awful lot of people say this but few actually make it. All of us would like to stay not the least in my case. I have the idea that the people here are about to enter a new period of development and I would like to be here to see how it turns out.

The main focus and motivation for our family's excursion to Rapa Nui was Bill Mulloy's archaeological research. He worked with a local crew, going everyday on horseback out to the field on an impressive project. Ahu Akivi was the first ever complete archaeological excavation and restoration of an Rapa Nui *ahu* complex. The statues were re-erected on the platform using ancient methods and only manual labor. Emily describes this work at the end of our year there.

Naturally, Bill accomplished the year's most spectacular work. He was sent to the island together with Gonzalo Figueroa, the young Chilean archaeologist. Their project was a joint one, to excavate, study and if possible restore, one or more of the several hundred ahus or temple sites

with which the island is dotted. These were stone platforms of varying size, on which in prehistoric times the famous stone figures were set up. Most of these were destroyed by vandalism and intertribal warfare at about the same time that the island received its first European contacts. They selected a structure known as Ahu Akivi, which originally had seven statues standing on it. These had been pushed over and four were broken, while erosion had almost covered the platform, ramp and plaza in front of it. When we left at the end of the year, all seven statues were repaired and standing once more in their places, the entire structure restored to its original condition, and a striking sight it is. The standing statues, between 3 and 4 meters in height, can be seen from the ship several miles out to sea. One can imagine the impressive sight which must have greeted the first explorers in the 1700s, with many of these visible.

Emily continues to say....

It is possible that the restoration projects will be continued in future years, with an attempt to restore more ahus. There is work for any number of archaeologists on this alone, and it would be well worth while from not only the scientific viewpoint, but because the tourist potential of the island will develop with the completion of the airfield. We have heard that the officials of the Chilean National Airline (LAN) expect the airstrip to be completed adequately for their plans by 1963. Then Easter Island will become a stop in a projected air route from South America to Tahiti and New Zealand.

The natives who worked for Bill and Gonzalo on the reconstruction project became the most enthusiastic and extremely able workmen and in fact the whole population was quick to grasp the advantages to the island of the project. It was something that could give them pride in both their ancestors and themselves, something that stayed on the island instead of being carried away to some faraway museum. We also tried to promote the idea that future archaeological finds should be preserved on the island rather than being sold to tourists or used as building stones.

And of course many of these things that Emily wrote about have come to pass. The airport that can receive large jets, over 50,000 tourists visit the island every year, and there is a beautiful museum that includes the Mulloy Library and archaeology lab. A national park that now protects the numerous archaeological sites, including the many village and *ahu* sites restored by Bill Mulloy during his over twenty years of work there.

For me, the amazing thing is that Emily wrote letters from Rapa Nui at all and that we have them now 50 years later. Life on Rapa Nui then was so full of people; just

getting daily tasks accomplished was so much more complex and having any privacy was almost impossible. Writing letters was so contrary to life on Rapa Nui, which was so concentrated and inwardly focused. After leaving Rapa Nui, my mother would futilely complain that no one from there ever wrote letters. It was as if leaving the island was actually a kind of death. Most people who left never came back and the life of the island went on without them. In not so ancient times if you sailed away from a Polynesian island you would never return. In 1960 it was so and modern Rapa Nui is no different even though there is a plane to take you to and from the island several times a week. It's kind of like what they say about Las Vegas, what happens there stays there. Partly because it is so out of context "no one would believe this" and partly because it has a life fully of its own that is self-referent and self-contained. Like its geography, so is the life of the island, independent and isolated.

It is not recorded in any of my mother's letters but I remember leaving Rapa Nui in February of 1961 after a year, a month and a day. We waited down at the Hanga Piko pier all day as the ship was loaded. My mother had sewn me a dress and my brother a shirt from the red plaid fabric of our kitchen curtains since all our clothes had been out grown or worn out. Almost everyone on the whole island came by to say good-bye. Circling our necks with shell necklaces and hugs, pressing all manner of gifts into our hands, small woodcarvings and the beautiful white kitten my mother said we could not take on the ship. Martin, Rebecca, Alejo, Filomena and all the aunts and cousins waited with us, crying and hugging in a state of grief and despair. For us kids there was the excitement of actually getting to go on a ship but the pictures taken that day tell the tale with long faces, tears and us clinging to our Rapanui families. We weren't Rapanui but we had become part of the life of the island and leaving was painful for all of us.

Emily foresaw many changes that would come to the island in the next 50 years and wrote of them in her letters from that first amazing experience. The arrival of planes full of tourists who would travel to Rapa Nui specifically to see the giant stone statues standing on restored temple platforms was one of many changes that have taken place since 1960. Rapa Nui's now educated and prosperous people manage the tourist businesses, run small hotels and guesthouses and lead archaeological tours. Rapanui people have become archaeologists, priests, teachers and governors. Emily's own Rapanui grandchildren share with visitors to the island, the story of their grandparents, Bill and Emily Mulloy who are now part of the great Easter Island Story. Emily returned to the island many times in later years and now both she and her husband rest above the sea overlooking the beautiful restored ceremonial site of Tahai, honored by the Rapa Nui community as were the elders of old.