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Inventing [Easter Island](#)

By Beverley Haun

[University of Toronto Press Inc](#) 2008

Pp: xxii + 332

Price: US\$22.50

Inventing Easter Island could well have been called Inventing Australia, or Inventing Tahiti, or inventing any place inhabited by indigenous people at the time of 18th and 19th century European colonisation. The comprehensive and critical case study of Easter Island (Rapa Nui) focuses on the impact of imperialism on peoples generally not able to defend themselves at the time, in this case, the Easter Islanders (the Rapanui)

The compilation of texts and photos constitutes over 300 years of what author Beverley Haun calls 'shaped truths' about Easter Island 'invented' by often illiterate writers in early years, who designed

the Rapanui image after only a few days or even just hours on the island. The recounts were generally biased, arrogant and patronising, and were published to either justify the purpose of the colonial voyage (the quest for land, resources, power and political statements), to inform the audience that would read the accounts (usually the institution that funded the voyage) or to document the physical needs of the expedition at the time (food, fuel, individual ambition). Ongoing perceptions of the Rapanui were also distorted by what had actually happened to the Rapanui as a result of colonial contact: disease and depopulation.

The historical narratives and the way images were drawn, Haun writes, were shaped as well by a European cultural shift from discovery and wonder to the sublime and enlightenment, when the Pacific went from being a peaceful paradise of 'noble savages' to an unpredictable and dangerous place where the 'natives' could not be trusted. And over the centuries these embellished tales were all told from an entirely white European male perspective.

While Haun's research into the evolution of exploration, conquer and travel writing is in itself absorbing, *Inventing Easter Island* takes the reader through the tragic history of Easter Island from where the first 'colonial' Polynesian Easter Islander settlers came from, through a catastrophic post-contact history of 'killing, enslaving, or pushing aside the inhabitants to secure those lands and their wealth for European empire', while 'writing over the space and culture' of the Rapanui.

The Dutch, she wrote, sought new lands and new riches; while the Spanish, who converted the islanders to Christianity and infected them with disease, claimed the island as a strategic stopover to protect their trade routes through the Pacific to Manila; and the British and the French sought resources, trading partners, knowledge and to expand their empire (the French added enlightenment to their stated travel objectives).

These textual analyses make up the majority of the book. Only in the final chapter does Haun look at modern Easter Island and how the myths developed throughout the 18th century persist in popular and academic narratives referencing Rapa Nui today. Myths such as the one perpetuating the 'mystery' of who built the Moai, 'disassociating modern Rapanui from their Moai-making ancestors', with writers like Erich Von Daniken in his *Chariots of Fire*, claiming aliens built them. Even the well-known environmentalist Jarred Diamond has fallen into the trap of perpetuating the fallacy of a people who were solely responsible for their own annihilation, committing ecocide by chopping down the last tree, in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Viking, 2005).

These texts Haun says are based on folklore perpetuated by previous writers and not anchored in scientific evidence, as who knows if the ancestral Rapanui knew anything about the role of trees in an ecosystem, or the carrying capacity of their island, and if they did, whether they knew how to practise natural birth control? Today we measure the earth's carrying capacity by the number of planets we need to sustain us at our current rate of consumption and although we know we currently exceed the carrying capacity by 2-3 planets are we as a species doing anything decisive about our exponential population growth and the rate at which we consume finite resources, in order to save ourselves from an ecosystem breakdown?

Did the Rapanui have any control over being decimated by foreign diseases unknown to their natural immunity, or being enslaved by armed Peruvian slave drivers? Did they have any say when the Chilean government allowed a Frenchman to turn the entire island into a giant sheep farm? Why can't the Rapanui of today divest themselves from Chile, or prevent themselves from being outnumbered by immigrants, or decide on how much land is going to continue to be sectioned off for the privilege of foreign archaeologists, when clearly the whole of such a tiny island is an archaeological dig? Even if archaeological studies have helped to unravel some myths such as whether or not cannibalism actually occurred at the peak of the first environmental collapse, which according to Georgia Lee of the Easter Island Foundation, is unlikely given the archaeological evidence.

These questions may well support Haun's assertions that the Rapanui had little control over their destiny, claims for which she is also criticised.

Haun hopes that her book will 'form the basis of a curriculum project, an impetus to changing understandings, attitudes and expectations', and she seeks 'a public education in a post-colonial narrative'. She describes her viewpoint as post colonial and postmodern (therefore subjective), and as

such her stated intention is to deconstruct historical and contemporary narratives of Easter Island (and of indigenous history in general one may assume). Haun says she seeks to develop a new postcolonial consciousness, so that indigenous cultures may negotiate their future as equals and at the pace and manner they choose.

It is for this reason that Haun, a postdoctoral research fellow at McArthur College, Queens' University, has been accused of not being academically or scientifically objective, and of selecting data to suit her arguments, just like the authors of the historical texts she references.

But it could be argued that were it not for subjective academics, there would be no Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the United Nations General Assembly only two years ago, on Thursday, September 13, 2007, which had to be preceded by not only one UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples from 1995-2004, but a second such UN International Decade, currently under way and extending to 2015. This global determination to defend indigenous people from ongoing exploitation and in some countries, a type of genocide, seems to underwrite Haun's assertions. Her examples, however, are limited to western Europeans, making no reference to the former Soviet Union, and she only refers to the United States and Canada as having shed their colonial past from the English as opposed to how the indigenous nations in both countries fared under British colonisers and their progeny.

Inventing Easter Island will resonate with anyone who enjoys social science discourse and sophisticated literature in general, as her arguments are well organised, highly articulated and researched, and it is supported by a thorough reference list. From a historical point of view, it is a comprehensive compilation of colonial contact with Easter Island and anyone with keen interest in Easter Island will find it a fascinating read.

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