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An Island Robbed of its History

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An alternative history of Easter Island, the book meticulously lays bare the layered and often overlooked violence unleashed by outsiders: a slow devastation wrought through enslavement, killings, introduced diseases, missionary incursions, and extractive regimes.

In the southeastern Pacific Ocean lies an island so remote and lonely that it is often described as standing at the edge of the world. For much of its history it remained windswept and empty of human life, a speck of volcanic rock surrounded by an immensity of water. Then, around a millennium ago, Polynesian navigators, among the greatest seafarers in human history, crossed the vast Pacific in their ocean-going canoes and made landfall there. Believing they had reached the land's end, they came to call their new home *Te Pito 'o te Henua*-often translated as "the navel of the world" or "island at the end of the world"-and it would come to mark the easternmost point of the Polynesian Triangle.

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In 1722, the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen arrived there while searching for the fabled southern continent of Terra Australis, making landfall on Easter Day. Europeans would thereafter call it Easter Island, though its Indigenous inhabitants know it as Rapa Nui. Roggeveen's arrival marked the first recorded European encounter with the islanders, leaving the Dutch astonished. The landscape was punctuated by colossal monolithic ancestral stone figures (moai)-carved from volcanic rock, many rising nearly ten metres high. In the decades and centuries that followed, the island underwent profound and disruptive changes.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, three more European expeditions reached the island: those led by Don Felipe González de Haedo in 1770, James Cook in 1774, and Jean-François de La Pérouse in 1786, sailing under the flags of Spain, Britain, and France. González's voyage was part of Spain's effort to claim Rapa Nui on behalf of King Charles III, while Cook and La Pérouse arrived in the course of broader expeditions of exploration, mapping, and scientific inquiry.

Confronted with an almost treeless landscape, European visitors struggled to comprehend how such monumental statues had been quarried, transported across rugged terrain, and raised in a setting where timber appeared scarce. They questioned not only the methods involved, but also the people behind these feats, and their motivations. From these uncertainties emerged one of archaeology's most fascinating enigmas, explored with depth and subtlety by the British archaeologist Mike Pitts in his compelling book *Island at the Edge of the World*.

Pitts first arrived on Easter Island in 1994, when Ahu Tongariki-the great ceremonial platform once crowned by fifteen of its statues-was being restored after a devastating 1960 tsunami had scattered them inland. It was here that he found himself drawn into the remarkable work of the English couple-anthropologist and archaeologist Katherine Routledge and her husband Scoresby Routledge-whose early twentieth-century expedition excavated not only the island's archaeological past, but something closer to its cultural soul.

Retracing their footsteps, Pitts turns his gaze as much toward the Routledges as toward the island they studied-probing their partnership, ambitions, and the personal and political currents that shadowed their work. He lingers especially on Katherine Routledge, whose painstaking and pioneering scholarship-at once revelatory and indispensable-was, over time, overshadowed by later narratives shaped in part by colonial attitudes, biases, and a preference for more speculative interpretations.

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Drawing on a wide-ranging archive of archaeological, ethnographic, historical, and environmental evidence, Pitts pieces together a narrative that, in his own words, "offer[s] an alternative history of the early Islanders' extraordinary achievements as well as of their eventual downfall." Aptly subtitled *The Forgotten History of Easter Island*, the book meticulously lays bare the layered and often

overlooked violence unleashed by outsiders: a slow devastation wrought through enslavement, killings, introduced diseases, missionary incursions, and extractive regimes. Taken together, these forces pushed the Indigenous people of Rapa Nui to the brink of demographic collapse, even as Europeans recast the island as a cautionary tale of ecological failure-obscuring, in the process, a far more troubling history of colonial violence and dispossession.

Pitts traces how the Indigenous inhabitants of Rapa Nui came to be cast as architects of their own ecological ruin, and how this powerful "collapse" narrative gained remarkable traction over time. Its articulation can be traced to 1786, when La Pérouse attributed the island's "devastation" to the "imprudence" of its people in felling their forests. In later retellings, the island-much like Nauru, often described as "the country that ate itself"-became a cautionary emblem, invoked by scholars and statesmen alike. For instance, Margaret Thatcher, in a speech to the United Nations, cited the "tragedy of Easter Island" as a warning about deforestation and global warming.

Yet it was Jared Diamond-the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*-who most powerfully entrenched this narrative in the popular imagination. In his 2005 book *Collapse*, he framed the island's history as a stark parable of societal self-destruction: "The parallels between Easter Island and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious… When the Easter Islanders got into difficulties, there was nowhere to which they could flee… nor shall we modern Earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our troubles increase."

In 2021, Pitts notes, Penguin Books republished Jared Diamond's Rapa Nui chapter as part of their twenty short book series celebrating "the ideas that have changed the way we think and talk about the living Earth," titling it *The Last Tree on Easter Island*. Such work blurs the line between scholarship and fable. Compelling yet ultimately misleading, it strips the islanders of their history-recasting them not as victims of colonial violence, but as the architects of their own ruin, and thereby obscuring the forces that truly devastated their world.

What distinguishes Pitts' work is its rigorous triangulation of archaeological, historical, environmental, and ethnographic sources, coupled with a lucid awareness of their limits. Practising methodological restraint, he places competing explanations in careful juxtaposition, allowing their tensions to remain visible rather than forcing premature closure.

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Interestingly, Paul Cooper, in his popular podcast *Fall of Civilizations*, while challenging the ecocide theory, offers an alternative explanation for the island's collapse. He suggests that the arrival of Roggeveen at Easter Island introduced diseases that devastated the population, reducing it to a few hundred within five decades. According to Cooper, this catastrophic demographic collapse precipitated a sudden cultural rupture: the islanders, having encountered Europeans, "lost faith in their ancestors." In what he describes as a "fit of puritan iconoclasm," they dismantled the ancestral statues, believing that "it was time for a new and purer religion."

While Cooper's theory is compelling, Mike Pitts contests its evidentiary basis. He argues that there is no conclusive proof that Roggeveen introduced disease, nor that the islanders abruptly abandoned their ancestral belief systems. Instead, Pitts advances a more measured interpretation grounded in a careful reading of the available evidence, offering a layered and capacious perspective that resists hasty conclusions and leaves readers with productive uncertainties, inviting them to question and probe further.

Island at the Edge of the World is a rigorously researched and deeply thought-provoking work. Densely layered with micro-histories, anecdotes, and archival detail, it can at times feel overwhelming; yet it is precisely this abundance that constitutes its intellectual richness. Pitts' meticulous attention to detail opens up richly textured contexts, drawing the reader ever deeper into the island's many pasts.

Through the heart-breaking history of Rapa Nui, he powerfully illustrates Michel Foucault's insight that "power and knowledge directly imply one another," reminding us that history is never merely about the past, but about the regimes of truth that shape how the past is made to speak.

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