

***Remote Possibilities: Hoa Hakananai'a and HMS Topaze on Rapa Nui.* Jo Anne Van Tilburg. London: The British Museum Press, 2006. 76 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Georgia Lee

As Jo Anne Van Tilburg acknowledges in her preface, *Remote Possibilities: Hoa Hakananai'a and HMS Topaze on Rapa Nui* is a revised edition of her 1992 publication, *HMS Topaze on Easter Island: Hoa Hakananai'a and Five Other Museum Statues in Archaeological Context*. Both publications have the same dimensions, and both feature most of the same illustrations, including sensitive drawings by Cristián Arévalo. As part of the "British Museum Objects in Focus Series," Van Tilburg also published a small book titled *Hoa Hakananai'a* in 2004. This glossy 64-page booklet has 21 illustrations.

Van Tilburg's 1992 book, *HMS Topaze on Easter Island*, contains 207 pages, 43 footnotes, 87 Figures, including maps, 1 table, and 12 Plates. By contrast, *Remote Possibilities* has only 76 pages but contains 243 footnotes, 1 table, 2 maps, and 98 "images," plus three and a half pages of unnumbered drawings. The quality of the paper stock in *Remote Possibilities* is superior to that of the earlier publication (resulting in far better detail for the many photographs and drawings), and the two-column layout is easier to read even though the size of the font is smaller. The illustrations are scattered throughout rather than gathered into an end section, as was the case in *HMS Topaze on Easter Island*. Having them incorporated into the text makes for a much more attractive and accessible book.

The target audience for *Remote Possibilities* is not clear. This book, similar to Van Tilburg's 2004 booklet, appears to be a generalist work intended for visitors of the British Museum who wish to take home more information about the famous Easter Island statue. However, this new work is somewhat too academic for the average tourist and yet not comprehensive enough to constitute an in-depth contribution to the literature.

*Remote Possibilities* includes updated information regarding the statues of Easter Island, reflecting field research conducted since the earlier book was published. New statues and fragments of statues have been discovered in the intervening time, and the author cites these as one reason for the revised version. Another factor is the addition of some excellent old photographs of crewmembers of the HMS *Topaze* (including J. Linton Palmer) as well as delightful watercolors by Palmer showing the HMS *Topaze* at sea, the Tahitian home of John Brander, and views of the island (Akahanga, Puna Pau, Rano Kau, Vinapu, 'Orongo, etc.). A sketch by another member of the crew, Lt. Matthew James Harrison, shows the statue Hoa Hakananai'a *in situ* at 'Orongo. These are priceless early images and it is wonderful to see them in print.

*HMS Topaze on Easter Island* included a good bit of information about Katherine Routledge and her research; *Remote Possibilities*, however, focuses more on the crew of the HMS *Topaze* and other sources. This may be because, in the interim, Van Tilburg published a biography of

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Routledge (2003), titled *Among Stone Giants: The Life of Katherine Routledge and Her Remarkable Expedition to Easter Island*.

As can be seen by the titles, Hoa Hakananai‘a is the focal point of these books, and so we are provided with considerable detail concerning the statue: the location in which the statue was found (half buried in an ‘Orongo stone house, its back toward the door), its discovery by the crew of the HMS *Topaze*, removal from ‘Orongo, transport to England, the reaction of the press to its arrival in London, and its installation at the British Museum.

The location of the statue, Hoa Hakananai‘a, at the time of its discovery on Easter Island remains a conundrum. What was a large late-period basalt statue doing at ‘Orongo? The author suggests a relation to the shrine at Complex A at ‘Orongo, but that seems a bit tenuous (p. 44). Not only is the Complex A shrine very small, a base of volcanic tuff remains *in situ* suggesting the former presence of a statue from the quarry at Rano Raraku. Moreover, the *ahu* (platform) at Complex A has fairly early dates: Structure 1 has been dated at AD 1420±70 years and Structure 2 “probably occurred during the early years of the Middle Period” (Ferdon 1961:248-249). There is no other known *ahu* at ‘Orongo. Van Tilburg also postulates that Hoa Hakananai‘a, as it was placed at ‘Orongo’s Complex B, marked the east-west boundary of the island (p. 44). It seems odd that, as a territorial marker, it was half-buried and hidden inside a stone house. The function of a marker is to be seen, to mark a location or a clan boundary line. If this was so for Hoa Hakananai‘a, why was it concealed from sight?

It took forty men from the HMS *Topaze* to tear down the stone house at ‘Orongo and dig up Hoa Hakananai‘a. According to R. P. Gaspard Zuhmbohm (1880), it took ropes, levers, 300 sailors, 200 natives, and a great deal of difficulty to transport it downhill and out to the ship (see also Bahn and Flenley 1992:195); Van Tilburg rightly suggests that these numbers seem excessive. Moving the statue downhill had the benefit of gravity. However, one can only imagine the labor involved in transporting this statue uphill to ‘Orongo, excavating a hole of sufficient size to accommodate it, putting it into the hole, and then building a stone house around it. And, we may ask, *why?*

From the drawing by Harrison (image 57), showing the statue’s head, a hole broken into the ceiling of the stone house, and two figures inside, there seems little room to accommodate any sort of group that might collect around it. Edwin N. Ferdon (1961:250) speculates that the statue was in a “long and excessively wide house ... [that] may have been for the purpose of housing the Hoa-haka-nana-ia statue and to give ample room for native ceremonial participants who presumably gathered around it. When structural failure resulted, the special quarters for the statue were of necessity reduced and, since its original position within the previous large building had, in all probability, been a central one, the figure was housed in R-13.”

We know that Hoa Hakananai‘a likely stood, at one time, on an *ahu*. The statue’s eyes had been carved (opened), an action that indicated its erection on a platform. There is no *ahu* at ‘Orongo that might have held a statue of this size and grandeur. Might the statue have been a war prize, taken during one of the many conflicts between tribes? Van Tilburg mentions this possibility (p. 36). If so, its name, “stolen friend,” would certainly apply (Fischer 1991:50).

There remains the question of why Hoa Hakananai‘a was hidden in a house, and why its back was to the doorway (the only source of light). One cannot appreciate the circumstances of the stone houses at ‘Orongo from reading the literature. The houses are claustrophobic crawl spaces with low stone ceilings that leak when it rains; interiors are dark and dank and often muddy. There is no light source other than a tiny doorway. That groups might gather around a statue in such a space seems highly improbable.

If the statue had been captured during one of the island’s many skirmishes, it may explain why it was brought up to ‘Orongo and secreted inside a house. What better way to enrage a defeated enemy? The author discusses the carvings on the back of the statue in detail, comparing them with motifs found in petroglyphs, tattoo, body painting, *hami* (loincloth), initiation ceremonies, and fertility and hereditary power (pp. 38-40). Perhaps, rather than an ideographic commemoration of ‘Orongo’s ceremonies as Van Tilburg argues, the petroglyphs that were added to the back of Hoa Hakananai‘a represent the insignia of its new owners, a form of “gotcha” graffiti.

The story of Hoa Hakananai‘a thus remains incomplete despite three books on the subject. The entire ‘Orongo phase seems particularly intriguing to archaeologists in so far as it was the last truly ancient phase before profound influences from various European visitors emerged. I realize that there are many Easter Island mysteries that may never be solved. However, I had hoped that this third book would come closer to answering questions about this outstanding statue and its strange placement at ‘Orongo.

Hoa Hakananai‘a is not the only statue discussed in *Remote Possibilities*. The author describes statues in many other museums around the world, providing an excellent overview of what and where they are, and the circumstances of their acquisition. *Remote Possibilities* does not provide all the answers regarding the famed statue, although we now have more factual information for asking questions. It appears that the rationale for Hoa Hakanana‘a being brought to ‘Orongo and concealed inside a stone house may be amongst those things that we are not likely to ever know for certain--yet one more mystery of Easter Island!

Other aspects of this publication balance out any deficiencies, and *afficionados* of Rapa Nui will find much to enjoy and ponder in *Remote Possibilities: Hoa Hakananai‘a and HMS Topaze on Rapa Nui*. The collection of photographs and drawings are of particular interest and to have them compiled into one publication is a rare treat for anyone interested in Easter Island and its past.

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*Georgia Lee is a founding member of the Easter Island Foundation, a not-for-profit originally established to create a research library on Rapa Nui to house the collections of the late anthropologist William Miulloy and to encourage objective study and research about the island. Today the library is a thriving research center, and the Foundation has moved forward with a scholarship program that provides promising Rapanui students support for advanced academic studies. The Foundation also works toward conservation and preservation of the island’s heritage and environment.*