valuable compendium for those of us who would like to think further about a humble tuber and its fascinatingly influential voyage through time and place in Oceania.

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Any book that attempts to cover the complete history of a Pacific island from first human colonization to the present day is almost always bound from the beginning of the project to have a patchy outcome with some areas of the past treated more thoroughly, or in a more expert way, than others. In attempting an ambitious book that has both academic weight and popular appeal, Steven Roger Fischer provides us with such a patchy account. Fischer is a linguist with a special interest in the rongorongo script of Rapa Nui (the local name for Easter Island; the people of the island are called Rapanui). He is clearly also a polymath, as indicated by a plethora of academic and popular publications ranging from the history of writing to a complete history of the Pacific. The focus on Rapa Nui is timely, as contemporary scholarship appears to be challenging some of the orthodoxies of the last couple of decades. However, this book is perhaps a few years too early in being able to present the divergent views to a wider audience.

If patchiness is a feature of this book, then it is best expressed in the first chapter, which attempts to synthesize the very difficult terrain of the history of Rapa Nui prior to European visitation (beginning in 1722) provided by archaeology and oral history (the latter written down over a very long period, including the twentieth century). This is a contested area and for the nonspecialist a very hard one to follow from the primary sources, particularly when some of the source material used is very dated indeed. In summary, this chapter continues the familiar orthodox model for environmental collapse and isolation (for at least two centuries prior to European arrival), but Fischer is at pains to point out that this did not equate with “cultural collapse.” The next three chapters detailing the recorded history of Rapa Nui illustrate both the decimation of the Rapanui as a society and population and also how elements of pre-European culture survived and were transformed through centuries of colonial and external oppression, ambivalence, and strong supporters.

The three historical chapters develop the story of Rapa Nui in a clear narrative style, and particularly strong are the discussions linking the various expeditions (eg, that by the Routledges in the early twentieth century) with major transitions in the historical trajectory of the people of the island. These discussions make clear a continuation of the importance of external influence on this supposedly isolated community (we might perhaps ask, does relative isolation make more noticeable external influ-
ence?). Much of the history makes sad but, unfortunately, familiar reading for scholars of the Pacific past.

For this reviewer, a significant strength of this book is the final chapter (chapter 5), “Museum Island.” It is here, I feel, that the real difference of Rapa Nui is best observed and paradoxically, if interpretation of the archaeology is weak in chapter 1, the contemporary relevance of the rich archaeological remains to the economy of the island, through cultural tourism and the contested nature of their ownership and presentation, is very well served. Fischer does well to point out that the current dominance of cultural tourism in the economy of the island is only likely to be another phase in the complex and rich history of the place. But in the present time, through Fischer’s eyes, cultural tourism takes on the role of a fragile resource that is as precious and as at risk as all those palm trees that the ancestors of the Rapanui supposedly chopped down. For anyone wishing to understand the contemporary role of the past in Rapa Nui, this chapter, to my mind, is essential reading.

The final chapter does have a breathless pace about it, as if the closeness of the modern period defies the narrative style of earlier chapters. But Fischer’s ability as a wordsmith is amply illustrated, for example, in his writing of the atrocities of the 1860s which reduced the population by 94 percent: “It was also then, in blood and anguish, that ancient ‘Easter Island’ crumbled—and Rapa Nui was born” (86). Another example is in his account of the last ‘Orongo Birdman competition in 1878, the well-known hunt for the first seabird egg on the offshore islet of Motu Nui: “Rapanui ‘society,’ itself an empty egg, had nothing to gain from the meaningless ritual—which now ceased to the sounds of the relentless surf breaking below ‘Orongo’ (123). Earlier this ritual is described as “one of those rare instances in human history when competitive sport determined local governance” (58).

This is not to distract from the detailed historical scholarship that makes up the bulk of this book, with detailed descriptions of the people, events, and broader political contexts that have contrived to make Rapa Nui what it is in the present day.

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Serge Tcherkézoff is a French anthropologist with considerable field experience in Sāmoa during the 1980s and 1990s. He has written extensively on the islands and, in his new book, he reviews in detail the early historical accounts of sexual contacts between European men and Samoan women in order to understand what actually occurred. His argument is direct and straightforward —much of what we thought we knew about these encounters is wrong.

Tcherkézoff analyzes all of the