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Rapa Nui. Island of Memory

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Featured EIF Publication

Rapa Nui. Island of Memory

By Georgia Lee

This delightful book, published in 2006, is aptly described as a love letter to the people of Rapa Nui and their island. Richly illustrated with photographs and Lee's own drawings, it is not a chronological account of her association with the island but rather a tapestry of tales arranged thematically around a host of characters and topics.

Georgia Lee first visited Rapa Nui in June 1981, when she was starting a new career. Her research project documenting the rock art of Rapa Nui, which formed the basis of her PhD, lasted more than six years, and produced – in addition to a classic monograph – not only an abiding and passionate love for the place and its inhabitants, but also eventually a new man in her life.

Before she arrived, the island's rock art was known from only a few sites: Henri Lavachery, during the Franco-Belgian Expedition of the 1930s, had mostly sketched motifs from horseback and reported 209 petroglyphs. Georgia and her crews, through painstaking and often arduous systematic surveys of caves, rocks, and outcrops, recorded over 4000, as well as thousands of cupules. The rock art proved to be so abundant and varied – indeed easily the richest in the Pacific.

The book highlights the changes of all kinds that Lee observed on the island over the past 25 years. At first, there were few and very primitive amenities and dirt road. Now the island is a very different place in many ways. Lee tells numerous stories, including that of the infamous Hollywood movie, to illustrate the multiple strange twists and turns of modern Rapa Nui history. There has been damage to the archaeology, such as vandalism of petroglyphs; projects like the Tongariki reconstruction; and all kinds of crazy ideas that never came to fruition, such as the construction of a lighthouse on Rano Kau to revolving restaurants and a golf course. The author's cascade of memories inevitably revolves around islanders she knew well and loved, but she maintains a healthy skepticism about their frequent tales of lost caves, etc. She vividly conveys the trials and tribulations of running a field project in a remote

location, and of the wide range of people who signed on volunteers. There are also brief accounts of major names like Mulloy and Heyerdahl, as well as some of the nuttier theories that the island's archaeology constantly has inspired. It is clear to all Rapanuiphiles that it is Georgia Lee who has become the “matriarch” of the island through her unrivalled all-encompassing knowledge of the culture, both past and present; her passion for helping the islanders, not least through the establishment of the Easter Island Foundation; and, of course, through the creation of the *Rapa Nui Journal*, unquestionably the single most important source of information about Easter Island. Although Georgia was hugely different in so many ways from the redoubtable Katherine Routledge, one can certainly say that Georgia Lee – in terms of both scholarship and concern for the island – was Routledge's true successor and her very enjoyable and readable memoir cannot be recommended highly enough.

We are offering *Island of Memory* to our members at a special price of \$20. Please note that there are a limited number of copies available.

The above review was adapted from a review by Paul Bahn published in *Rapa Nui Journal* 21(1), 2006.