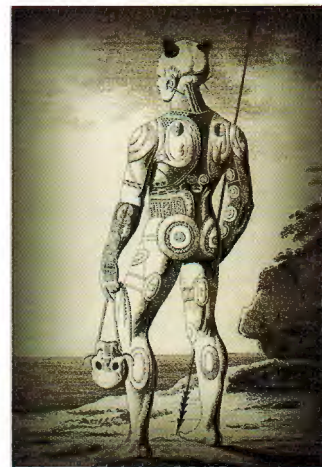


Pacific Parallels:

BY EMILY DONALDSON



Marquesas Islanders and the *Essex* Crew



Head of a
U'u club from
the Marquesas
Islands
2000.1101.18

ABOVE RIGHT:
Marquesan
warrior from
Georg Heinrich
von Langsdorff's
*Voyages and
Travels in Various
Parts of the
World, 1813*

The story

of the whaleship *Essex* is a heartrending drama set in 1820, an age when Western voyagers faced a vast Pacific of unknowns, risks, and opportunities. Forced to choose between taking refuge in the nearby Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia and making a desperate race for the shores of South America, the shipwrecked *Essex* crew in their tiny whaleboats picked the latter course and battled for months against the prevailing winds and currents. Raised on stories of “eluding cannibals in the Pacific,” many of the whalers were predisposed to avoid a group of islands that no Nantucketer had ever seen. Those whisperings proved enough to drive Captain George Pollard to consider sailing thousands of miles of open ocean rather than encounter unknown islanders.

The cruel irony is that the whalers were ultimately driven to cannibalize each other to survive their prolonged voyage. Their tragic decision begs the question: What kind of welcome would they actually have had in the Marquesas Islands? Of course, it is impossible to say. Yet a look at the islands of today illustrates how the same currents of suspicion and fear that influenced the whalers two centuries ago still linger in the consciousness of Marquesans and visitors alike. My research in the Marquesas reveals how little distance separates the cannibal stories of yesterday and today, despite the passage of time.

By way of introduction to the islands, let us imagine we are visiting them today. My second home for the past thirteen years, the village of Vaitahu is located on Tahuata, the smallest inhabited island of the Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia. At the time of the *Essex*'s fateful last voyage, Tahuata was the best known of the islands. To get there from Boston today, you fly for a total of eighteen hours to Los Angeles, Tahiti, and finally to Hiva Oa, the neighboring island. Upon arrival at

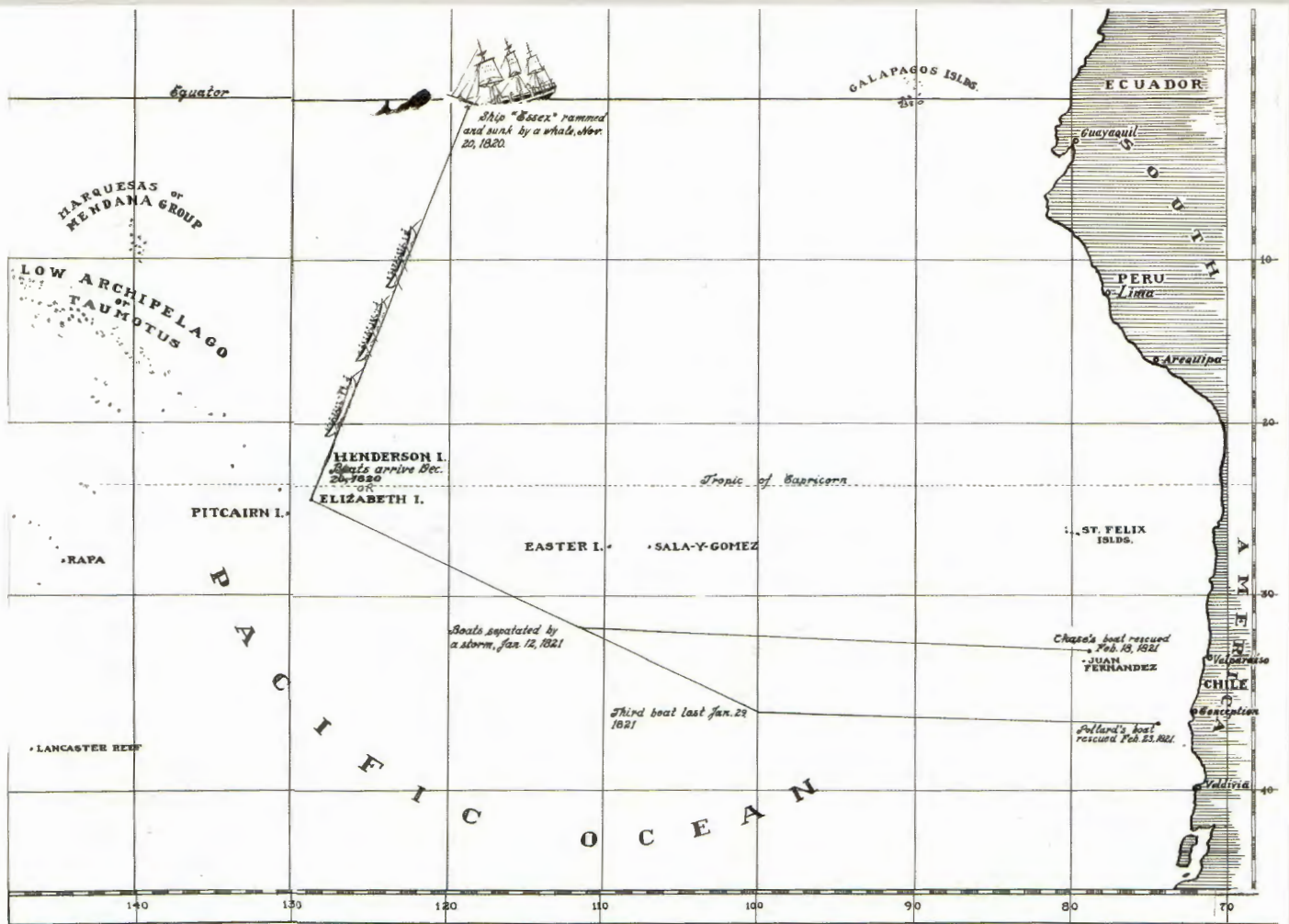


Chart of the South Pacific showing the track of the boats of the whaleship "Essex", sunk by a whale, Nov. 20, 1820

ABOVE:
Hand-drawn map of
Essex wreck site
MS1000-3-1-5

RIGHT:
Detail of Hiva Oa
and Tahuata from
Marquesas Islands
by M. Tesson, under
the orders of
M. Le Capitaine
Dupetit Thouars
of the French Royal
Navy, 1844

FAR RIGHT:
Beach at Iva Iva Nui,
Tahuata,
Marquesas Islands



PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILY DONALDSON

**AS YOU CRUISE ALONG THE COAST, CRASHING WAVES
BREAK AT THE BASE OF THE CLIFFS, STRIKING A CONTRAST WITH
THE SERENE GREEN HILLS AND TOWERING MOUNTAINS ABOVE.**

the tiny island airport, you catch a ride down to the main harbor of Tahauku, where a sprinkling of yachts from faraway places bob at anchor under the blinding sun. On shore, Hiva Oa's sole gas station bustles with a steady stream of local pickup trucks. A Tahuata fisherman, waiting on the dock, will transport you across the water. He and his teenage *matelot*, or first mate, load your bags and some groceries from town into their pitching open boat as you scramble into it. The voyage across the heaving swells of the Bordelais Channel to the village of Vaitahu takes about forty-five minutes. As you cruise along the coast, crashing waves break at the base of the cliffs, striking a contrast with the serene green hills and towering mountains above. Every so often the boat rounds a corner of volcanic black rock to reveal a sheltered bay where a beach of white sand, turquoise water, and waving palms looks like something out of a tropical dream.

Throughout 2013, I lived in the Marquesas conducting research for my doctoral thesis in anthropology. Although I was based on Tahuata, I spent much of the year visiting the other islands of the Marquesas. In that peculiar way facilitated by travel, I was alone and yet never alone, living with Marquesan families in almost every valley of the six inhabited islands and working the land and sea with farmers and fishermen. My experiences were diverse, ranging from coconut-chopping contests and dancing in an art festival to fishing for twelve consecutive hours and witnessing my first in-person slaughterings of pig, goat, and shark. I took part in a variety of local traditions, from Bingo Sundays and the celebration of All Saints' Day to storytelling and sacred *tapu* rituals. The focus of my research, which was on the relationship between the livelihoods, land-use practices, and heritage of contemporary islanders, allowed me to delve into how Marquesans interpret the stories, traditions, and mysteries of their past in their current lives and activities.

One such mystery is cannibalism, whose power and scope were demonstrated to me on a sunny weekday in Vaitahu last year. I was swimming with some friends at the village dock when a young couple came motoring in from their yacht. We struck up a conversation, and before long we were chatting about the islands. "Is this where that German guy was eaten a



Emily Donaldson shells coconuts in a contest during the 2013 Bastille Day celebrations in Vaitahu, Tahuata.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARYJANE SHERWIN

few years ago?" the man asked. I paused, stunned and saddened. Where to begin?

The story he referred to brings the brevity of nearly two hundred years into sharp relief. In 2011, a German man named Stefan Ramin and his girlfriend stayed on their yacht in the Marquesas for several months. Just before their departure, they stopped in Nuku Hiva, and Ramin decided to go on a goat-hunting trip with a local islander. He never returned, and a search party found his charred bones among the coals of a campfire a few days later. No evidence exists to indicate that Ramin was eaten, and the events leading to his death remain unknown. But reading about the incident on my computer at school in Montreal, I cringed. European newspapers instantly tagged it as a potential case of cannibalism, with flashy headlines like "Missing German sailor eaten by cannibals" and "A case of cannibalism in the Marquesas Islands?" Without a shred of proof, the international media thrust these remote, little-known islands back into their shadowy past, inflicting a lasting and insidious slur on Marquesan Islanders.

Historic confirmed instances of cannibalism are extremely



PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILY DONALDSON

The Catholic church of Hakahetau with the peaks of Ua Pou in the distance.

difficult to prove. There are no eyewitness accounts from the Marquesas, and some have argued that abundant secondhand stories were intentionally propagated to terrorize Westerners. Still, the frequent appearance of cannibalism in both historic accounts and the tales shared with me by today's islanders lead me to believe that at least some form of cannibalism probably occurred in the Marquesas, historically. More important, cannibalism remains alive and well in the imaginations of not only visitors to the islands but Marquesans as well.

My research took me into homes and isolated valleys where stories of cannibal feasts and raids for human victims animated faces with disgust, fear, and humor. When I asked about historic sites, islanders responded with their knowledge of their ancestors' lives. The extent to which these ruins represent both mystery and danger became clear as our topics

ranged from evil curses to ghosts, and sometimes cannibalism. Voices would drop or switch to Marquesan when talking about certain sites inhabited by spirits. By contrast, many islanders speak easily about cannibalism, even if a grandmother or grandfather happens to be the subject of the story. Others joke, tossing around shocking tales to tease naughty children or amuse eager tourists. Still, I found myself wondering, do they actually believe cannibalism happened? By the end of last year I was convinced that many islanders do.

According to the accounts of missionaries, researchers, and other travelers, islanders once practiced a ritualized form of cannibalism that contributed to the stability of Marquesan social and political structures, helping to maintain social relations within and between tribes. In nearly all the cases described, cannibalism was used to exact revenge and symbolically appropriate the enemy's power. Most of the

stories told among Marquesan families today portray a different type of cannibalism.

Instead of the more ordered, socially integrated cannibalism described by some historians of the islands, these tales depict a dark, unpredictable, and isolated practice. In order to obtain fresh water, one tribe from Puamau, Hiva Oa, was forced to deliver babies to an enemy tribe, who then ate them. A similar story is told about the historic population of Haoipu, Tahuata: “You want water, you give them a child! The children were money back then,” joked one islander. In the village of Hanatetena, Tahuata, people spoke of an old man who once lived in the neighboring valley and used his young nephew to lure children to his house, where he would kill and eat them. Elderly men and women elsewhere spoke of how, as children, they avoided the house of “the last cannibal” in town. The subjects of these stories are often evil, haunting characters, some more fantastical and fictional than others. In one tale from Vaitahu, the last cannibal was a grizzled man who received his food through a tiny window in a house with no other windows or doors. In another discussion, an old woman from Hane, Ua Huka, casually mentioned that her grandfather, who was still alive when she was a child, was a confessed cannibal.

In general, the individuals described to me as cannibals were lacking in humanity, their terrible dietary tendencies fueled by a kind of involuntary animal desire. For Western observers, this question of whether the practice was voluntary has carried great importance. For the *Essex* survivors and other whalemans, eating one’s shipmates was a real and acceptable possibility in the face of starvation and impending death. Yet, observers of cannibalism among the “natives” of the Pacific and elsewhere generally interpreted the practice as voluntary and a firm indication of the savage, barbaric nature of the islanders. Despite the fact that cannibalism in the Marquesas does not appear to have featured the kind of random, wild acts of violence that played in the imaginations of some visitors, this perception of the islanders remains today. It fuels Marquesans’ ideas about their ancestors even as it influences their understandings of ancient sites and historic places.

For many islanders, ancestral spirits haunt certain areas and hassle people walking alone at night. Trudging up the road to my house in Vaitahu on a pitch-black night, this is easy to forget. The village is quiet but for the chirping of crickets and the stars are a magnificent, vast, and twinkling blanket overhead. In all my time living here I have rarely felt unsafe, and serious crime is extremely rare. Still, I know a number of



Taawattaa.

Taawattaa, priest of Nuku Hiva, from *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean, by Captain David Porter, 1815*

grown Marquesan men who are not at ease in the dark due to the threat of malign spirits. People around the world tell ghost stories for various reasons, but for Marquesans, their stories of cannibalism are more immediate and real. Adult men and women have looked me in the eye and told me that the stories they shared were true. In many cases, they were experiences lived by a grandparent or great-grandparent. Others were careful to preface their stories with “I have heard” or a similar caveat. True or not, the mystery and fear associated with cannibalism have given it a unique power in the imaginations of many islanders, young and old.

The events of history have also contributed to the way contemporary Marquesans view their past. Contact with trading vessels and colonial powers in the nineteenth century introduced myriad diseases that, together with ongoing tribal warfare, brought drastic change to the islands. By the 1920s, the Marquesan population had dropped to about 2,000,



LEFT: Wooden paddles carved with traditional Marquesan motifs, made by Ernest Teikipupuni of Hapatoni, Tahuata.



RIGHT: The Catholic cross of the village cemetery stands out against the mountains of Hanavave, Fatu Hiva.

reduced from an estimated 80,000 a century before. Vast valleys once inhabited by thousands emptied out. Tribal chiefs, priests, and elders disappeared from communities along with their critical political and spiritual guidance. This massive loss affected every aspect of the islanders' lives, from religion to subsistence. Traditional practices of all kinds, once carefully categorized and controlled by a system of *tapu*, or sacred rules, were ripped from their moorings and left to drift on an open sea like the men of the wrecked *Essex*. As their social context dissolved, the daily rituals and habits of an entire population foundered. In place of the priests and chiefs that had once served as their compass, Marquesans came to rely on the guidance of Christian missionaries who worked actively against the perpetuation of Marquesan dance, tattooing, music, and language.

These events, and the historically biased perspective of Western missionaries and other visitors regarding the "savage" cannibal practices of the islands, contribute to the foundations of today's Marquesan stories. Islanders' apprehension about their ancestors springs in part from tangled roots that combine the overlapping influences and accounts of outsiders and local villagers. As they continue to debate the truth of the cannibal stories, Marquesans also navigate the meaning of such tales for their contemporary lives and identities. Activities like preparing and administering traditional remedies, performing Marquesan dances, and depicting classic motifs on wood, bone, barkcloth, or skin, each call upon the past. Here and in their interaction with tourists and one another, islanders are constantly asked what their history means. In some cases, their responses avoid the uncertain or uncomfortable. Thus, public celebrations of Marquesan culture tend to avoid overt references to sacrifice,

cannibalism, or evil spirits. This is closely linked to the ongoing power of the Catholic church as well as to the fact that these topics remain shadowed by the unknown. Severed from their social and cultural foundations by the chaos of the 1800s, islanders are still trying to regain a meaningful and positive connection to their past.

So, who are the castaways and who the cannibals? The cruel irony of the *Essex* whalemens being driven to consume one another, after avoiding French Polynesia for fear of being consumed, echoes the tragic story of the Marquesan culture metaphorically shipwrecked not by a vicious whale but by the advance of colonialism. One thing is certain: no one savors a heritage of cannibalism. Like the people of Nantucket in the years following the *Essex* disaster, Marquesans continue to struggle with an ambivalence about their past, perpetually cautious in where, and how far, to venture into local history. Feelings of regret, shame, and discomfort complicate cultural revival and efforts to build a Marquesan future. As the tragic story of Stefan Ramin illustrates, forgetting is not an option for Marquesans.

Indeed, the same lines of reasoning that prompted the *Essex* crew to avoid French Polynesia remain unsettlingly clear today. They are the sinister, insidious rumors that fuel Marquesan ghost stories and uneasy jokes; that lead to the labeling of a mysterious death as cannibalism; that spark a glimmer of anxiety (or excitement?) in the visitor's eye; and that hover silently over local observances of historic traditions. For better or worse, they are the whispers of a history not yet past, or at peace.

EMILY DONALDSON, a PhD student in anthropology at McGill University, recently returned from a year of fieldwork in the Marquesas and authors the blog *Marquesan Now*.