

Ireland and Rapa Nui – The Mulloy Connection

By Brigid Mulloy (2014)

Rapa Nui, also known as, Easter Island, is a tiny speck of land half way around the world from Ireland that surprisingly shares a similarly tragic history. Rapa Nui's people, like the Irish were descendants of megalithic stone builders who oriented their sacred temples to the winter solstice, they were disenfranchised, impoverished and lived among the ruins of their once complex and dynamic civilization. Early in the 20th century their Island was rented to an English sheep company and they were forced off their clan lands to live in a small village they were prohibited from leaving. Their population was drastically reduced and culture almost destroyed due to conflict with outsiders, slave raids, epidemics, land seizures and economic exploitation.

The future of Rapa Nui was profoundly changed in 1955 when Bill Mulloy, grandson of Irish famine survivors Patrick Mulloy of Donegal and Mary Neylon from County Clare, spent six months there as part of an international archeological expedition. Mulloy was a well-respected American Indian anthropologist who connected deeply with the Rapanui people and their predicament; he was motivated and subconsciously drawn by his Irish cultural heritage. He saw in the Rapanui Islanders and their story a parallel to his own family's Irish experience. He greatly admired the Rapanui and they recognized in him something that was rare in the outsiders they experienced; Bill respected them as equals and wanted to learn from them. He leveraged all available resources on their behalf with the intention of helping them reclaim their history and cultural pride. He was adopted into a Rapanui family and embraced by the Island community

Back in 1955 when there was just one supply ship a year; Mulloy envisioned creating an outdoor cultural museum that would attract visitors from around the world. He saw how restoring ancient sacred sites could secure an economic base and sustainability for the Islanders. He returned to the Island 13 times bringing archeological restoration projects that provided jobs, education and development grants. In 1960 the whole Mulloy family lived for a year on Rapa Nui while he restored the now world-famous seven statues of Ahu Akivi, the magnificent restoration that began the Rapa Nui cultural renaissance. For the remaining 23 years of his life, Bill Mulloy focused his substantial intellect, determination and personal resources on archeological projects including restoring the legendary ceremonial village of Orongo, and numerous statue and ceremonial complexes.

Rapa Nui today has a dynamic and thriving visitor economy. Young Rapanui are extremely proud of the accomplishments of their ancestors. Rapa Nui is an outdoors museum, featuring a multitude of impressive archeological restorations. Every Rapanui guide, including one who is Bill Mulloy's granddaughter, will tell you how Bill Mulloy, grandson of the Irish Diaspora, dedicated his life's work to Rapa Nui and how that changed their future. A plaque that marks his final resting place on Rapa Nui says;

“By restoring the past of his beloved Island he also changed its Future”