

# Chapter 23

## The Human Giants of Easter Island (Rapa Nui)



### Eighteenth-century Fake News and Its Significance for Understanding the Persistence of Present-day Myths

Jan J. Boersema

#### 1 Introduction: The Written Legacy of the Dutch Expedition to the Unknown Southland (1721–1722)<sup>1</sup>

In the late afternoon of 5 April 1722, Easter Sunday, crew members on board the *Afrikaansche Galey* sighted an island in the Pacific. The discovery was greeted with joy. Could this be the sandy island off the coast of the long-sought Unknown Southland, mentioned by Edward Davis in 1687? They signalled it to the *Arend* and the *Thienhoven*, the other two ships of the Dutch Expedition, and Commander Jacob Roggeveen gave the island the obvious name of Paaseiland (Dutch for Easter Island). Roggeveen and the crew of the two accompanying ships did not see the island until the next day. This explains why 6 April is often mentioned in travel reports. In the days that followed the Dutch approached the coast, saw that fires had been lit on the island, met a man from Easter Island who had managed to swim to one of their ships, and finally went ashore with 134 men on Friday, 10 April. Shortly after their landing, some sailors in the rear of the group panicked and fired on the islanders, killing ten to twelve inhabitants. Roggeveen and the other captains were angry and the petty officer involved was called to account. Nevertheless, the expedition went ahead, and impressions of this exceptional island were recorded in official logs and travel accounts. The Dutch visit lasted only one day, and at the end of that same day, the three captains and three pilots concluded in a joint meeting,

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, the publication details of all accounts of this expedition are listed in the references.

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J. J. Boersema (✉)  
Institute of Environmental Sciences, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [Boersema@cml.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:Boersema@cml.leidenuniv.nl)

chaired by Roggeveen, that this island could not be the ‘sandy island’ mentioned in Davis’s travel accounts. Having navigated around the island just in case, they finally set sail again on the 13 April, on a westerly course.

Roggeveen may have gained some notoriety for being the first European to set foot on the now legendary island, but his expedition could hardly be considered successful. In reality, his voyage, commissioned by the Dutch West India Company (WIC), continued to yield misery and disaster. Not surprisingly, the expedition never found the Unknown Southland; instead, after a terrible voyage involving the shipwreck of the *Afrikaansche Galej*, the mutiny of five disappointed sailors, the loss of a great many crew members due to malnutrition and diseases, the expedition reached the archipelago of the then Dutch Indies. Here, the two remaining vessels were seized by the authorities of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on charges of ‘transgressing the limits’, meaning: illegal trading in VOC-territory. Fellow Dutchmen or not, the VOC took the matter seriously: Roggeveen and the other captains had to hand in their logs and other documents, and the ships were confiscated and sold. After an enforced stay of several months in Batavia (present-day Jakarta), Roggeveen returned, a disillusioned man, to the Netherlands aboard a VOC ship. The fate of the seized official documents remains unclear. All we know is that they were sent to the VOC Chamber in Amsterdam with copies to Middelburg, but they were never published in the eighteenth century. It was not until 1836 that a transcript of Roggeveen’s journal—written by four different VOC clerks—was found by an archivist, Mr. Pieter Pous, in an unusual location in Middelburg. A copy of the journal of Cornelis Bouman, captain of the *Thienhoven*, showed up in 1905 in the legacy of the Rotterdam harbour baron Hudig, a distant descendant of the VOC captain who at the time took Bouman back to the Netherlands. The journal of Roelof Roosendaal, captain of the *Afrikaansche Galej*, was presumably lost when his ship sank. The log of Jan Koster, captain of the *Arend*, and that of his first mate Jacob van Groeneveld, which are explicitly mentioned in the documents of the WIC, have never surfaced.

Because no official travelogues were published in the eighteenth century, knowledge of the voyage was limited. Still, the expedition has been written about. In 1724 François Valentijn published *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Old and New East Indies), a detailed overview of the history of the VOC. Roggeveen’s journey is mentioned very briefly in this work numbering more than 5000 pages and five volumes, but there is no word about Easter Island. In the years immediately following the expedition, people had to satisfy their curiosity with oral accounts. Six years after the tragic expedition, a travel account was published by a young German crew member, Carl Friedrich Behrens. We now know that he was a prolific writer. In 1728 he produced an account in verse, which was only (re)discovered a decade ago by the Dutch historian Roelof van Gelder in the library of Regensburg University, and which is now available digitally (Van Gelder 2012). In the title, we read: *In einem Send-Schreiben an einem guten Freund mit Poetischer Feder entworffen* (designed in a missive sent to a good friend with a poetic pen), so we do not know how widely it was distributed and read at the time, if at all. In 1732 Behrens wrote, probably on commission, another report entitled: *Nader onderzoek door Karel Fredrik Behrens:*

*En bericht van zyne reyze naar de Zuid-Landen gedaan* (Closer Examination by Karel Fredrik Behrens: An Account of His Voyage to the South Lands). It is a slender volume addressed to the VOC, published in Dutch and never translated, arguing in favour of continuing the quest for the ‘great southern continent’. In 1737 Behrens published a ‘full story’ of his voyage, in prose, and printed in Frankfurt. Two years later, it received a second impression with a slightly different content and title. This is the well-known *Der wohlversuchte Süd-Länder* (On the Well-Sought for South Lands), published in Leipzig (1739), widely read and soon translated into French (1739), Dutch (1759), and finally in English (1903). A sloppily edited version in German was published by Dr. Hans Plischke in 1923; it received a second print in 1925.

The only accounts of Roggeveen’s expedition that were published by Dutch authors shortly afterwards and mentioned Easter Island were two short narratives. One of them, the *Tweejarige Reyze* (A two-year voyage, Anonymous 1728), was written by an anonymous crew member aboard *De Arend*; the other carries the initials ‘T.D.H.’ and was based on information received from a sailor who had been a crew member on board the *Afrikaansche Galey*. T.D.H. is probably a Mr. De Haze who is named in an epilogue at the end of the account by a certain Werner Köhne (W.K.). The story written by T.D.H. was reprinted four times, with different publishers, and sometimes with substantial changes in the content and the title (1727a, 1727b, 1727c and 1727d), probably as a result of ‘predatory printing’.<sup>2</sup> The first printed edition (1727a) even lacks the initials of an author, but the title and content make it clear that it originates from the same person as the other three published that same year. In this chapter, I have used the last edition, an impression, according to the title page, ‘revised anew by an eyewitness of this voyage, and augmented with necessary annotations’. The *Tweejarige Reyze* was reprinted twice, almost unchanged, in 1758 and 1764.

Both stories were retold, almost verbatim, but abridged, in a collection of Dutch travel accounts (*Nederlandsche Reizen*, Vol. 13, 1787). All these Dutch eighteenth-century publications managed to reach many readers during their printing period, but so far both publications have hardly received any attention in the scholarly literature.<sup>3</sup> This is most likely because they were considered less informative and highly unreliable. Consequently, they have never been translated. This chapter aims to explain a special piece of ‘fake news’ that appears in both accounts: the existence of human giants on Easter Island. Why was it believed back then (if it really was), and what can we learn from the proposed explanation for our current struggle with questionable or downright false information? Why are certain myths so persistent? I begin with two excerpts from the previously mentioned accounts pertaining to Easter Island.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Predatory printing was a common practice to avoid paying dues to publishers and/or writers.

<sup>3</sup> A project to publish all these Dutch eighteenth-century publications in one annotated volume is in progress.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Rolf H. Bremmer Jr. for translating these excerpts.

## 2 Excerpts from Two Accounts<sup>5</sup>

### From: T.D.H. (1727d)

(p. 9) ‘On the 6th [of April JJB], they sighted an island hitherto unknown to Europeans at 27 degrees South Latitude and 26 8 degrees of longitude. Since it happened to be Easter that day, they called it Easter Island. Here they met a small vessel patched together with chips as big as a hand, in which was a human, brown of countenance, whom they caught but also released, since they could not understand him. On the 8th they saw many inhabitants of the island swimming in the sea, and this in such a multitude that no one of the crew dared go ashore. But these people climbed on board, and marvelled about everything, especially the guns, and seemed inclined to stealing and robbing,<sup>6</sup> and did not leave the ship until they were expelled with force. When our voyagers undertook a landing on the 10th of this month, they perceived a countless multitude on the beach, who tried to prevent them from landing. But they were quickly chased off and all took to their heels, as soon as some of them felt the power of the flintlocks and were injured by the bullets; . . .

(p. 10) . . . their corpses were carried away by the fugitives. Nevertheless, it taught them politeness, and they brought all kinds of fruits, sugar, *rottingen* [sugarcane? rattan?], *janbesambes* [bananas] and a great abundance of fowl. Their clothes were of many colours and a mixture of cotton and silk. Their ears hung down to their shoulders, and provided with many and such big holes that it was possible to put through a fist. The men<sup>7</sup> were twelve feet tall, so that a European could easily pass between their legs, and were also strong of body. But the women were about ten to eleven feet tall. The men’s faces and bodies were painted red or brown and those of the women purple.<sup>8</sup> Their idols were two stones of a special size, . . .

(p. 11) . . . which they worshipped. The broader stone was on the grounds. On it was placed the other one of such a size that seven men could hardly encircle them, so that it seemed impossible that, these stones could have been moved or placed on top of each other by the inhabitants, however tall and strong they might be. For

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<sup>5</sup> Footnotes 7–10 are by the author of the excerpt.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, almost everyone who has traversed the South-Sea has confirmed that the inhabitants of these areas have glue on their hands and predatory claws.

<sup>7</sup> Many testimonies are found with authors about the exceeding and sturdy size of the people inhabiting the regions stretching towards the South Pole. I would not dare to swear on the description, according to which these people are ascribed such sizes, because I fear that the measuring has not been carried out mathematically but ‘guessimathically’. It can rightly be said: If you are told something big, from distant lands. It grows on the tongue, becomes stranger in the hands. Of writers of travelogues, who lard their work with rare accounts. And make it sweeter in their recounts. A hill is a mountain, a mountain splits the clouds. The shallows, though not deep, are bottomless swirls. A giant is oft made out of a full-grown man, *Because he pleases best, who can best exaggerate.*

<sup>8</sup> But since various authors write that these people of this climate are born brown- and copper-red, it can reasonably be doubted whether this red colour is congenital in the inhabitants of this island.

it was about the height of three men. Near the top of that rock a human head had been carved, adorned with a crown, made up of trim and inlaid with black and white squares. The name of the largest idol was Taurico, and that of the other Dago.<sup>9</sup> For with these words they called to their imagined gods, which they did with dancing, cheering, going round in circles, even with clapping their hands in almost the same manner as the children of Israel did when they sinned in serving the golden calf. When these islanders heard fire a heavy shot, . . .

(p. 12) . . . they behaved very strangely, and after many grimaces, these pointed with their fingers now to our crew now to their imagined god whom they at the same time implored for help, shouting with a loud voice, Dago! Dago!

Meanwhile, a clear wind started to gather and all three ships had almost stranded, and the Dutch would have been deprived of them. Therefore, they set sail again on the 12th of April, on a westerly course’.

**From: Anonymous, *Tweejaarige Reyze (1728)***

(p.41) ‘On the 6th of the same month, we discovered an island at 27 degrees south latitude and 26 8 degrees longitude, which had hitherto been unknown and undiscovered by any European; which is why we, according to the custom that newly discovered islands are given a name, called it Easter Island, because we had arrived precisely on the day on which the memory of the resurrection of Our Lord is celebrated. As soon as the anchors had been dropped, we perceived a strange little boat of a very ingenious shape, completely patched together from pieces of wood, hardly the size of half a foot. This little boat was steered by a single man, a giant of twelve feet tall, who vainly . . .

(p. 42) . . . did his utmost to escape from us, because he was surrounded and caught. His body was painted with a dark-brown colour. With signs and words that are spoken here and there in the South Sea, we tried to get some information from him, but could not notice that he understood anything, so that we placed him in his little boat again and allowed him to go.

Two days afterwards the sea was covered with the savage inhabitants of this island, who swam and swarmed in such a multitude around our ship that we neither could nor thought advisable to sail to land. They clambered like cats with extreme boldness up the sides of the ships, and got on board, since they did not seem to have the least fear of us. But they showed great marvel at the size and vastness of our ships, with all the trimmings and did not know what it meant. But their curiosity was directed especially towards the naval cannon, of which they never got tired to watch, and on which they often laid their hands in order to try to lift them and take

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<sup>9</sup> It would be odd if no one of the readers of this history would come to think whether this huge and Dagon worshipping multitude were issue of the Canaanites, who amongst others served Dagon (compare Judges 16: 23–24 with 1 Sam. 5: 3–6) and who were of a very exceeding length, but expelled by Joshua. But it is more credible that these people had unintentionally arrived from the continent on these islands, or had possibly been expelled. For many and most eyewitnesses ascribe the Patagonians and inhabitants of the Magellan shores a length of twelve feet or more. But that these Phenicians and tall people would be descendants of the aforementioned expelled peoples and have traversed the Ocean to these islands, is a claim that no one can bravely maintain or deny.

with them; but when they saw that such blocks could not be moved by many of them, however tough of muscles they were, these sturdy blokes were standing very timidly, and, it seemed to us, quite unsettled.

No matter how quickly they had come into the ships, we immediately experienced that by nature they were so thievish and quick of hand as the people that inhabit the islands, which voyagers call the islands of thieves, on account of the great pleasure which the inhabitants take in stealing and robbing. Rusted nails, scrap iron, and anything they could take and seize after their liking, with which they swiftly jumped overboard. They thought it was possible for them to scratch the bolts from the ship with their fingernails, but they were fixed too firmly. These tall blokes at last came in such number into the ships, that we only with great difficulty managed to keep order and watch their movements and fast hands; so, fearing they could become too strong for us, . . .

**(p. 43)** . . . we did our best to make them leave and remove them with kindness from the ships; but they did not seem to be able to make that decision, so that we were forced to employ heavier measures and chased these savages away with force off the ship.

The 10th of April we sailed well-armed with the sloops to the island so as to make a landing and inspect this province, where an innumerable crowd of savages was waiting on the shore to defend the beach, and to prevent us from landing. They threatened us immensely with their gestures, and showed to have all good courage to wait for us, and turn us away from their land, but as soon as we (compelled to do so) discharged a volley from our flintlocks on their coarse skin, so that here and there some fell with their noses in the sand, they lost courage. They made the strangest gestures and movements in the world, and looked with the highest surprise at their fallen comrades, and the wounds made by the bullets in their bodies, upon which they quickly took to flight with scary howls, and dragged all the bodies of the fallen with them and went land inwards, so that we had cleared the beach and landed safely.

These peoples do not go about naked, like many other savages, but they all wear clothes, which are curiously sewed or woven together from silk and cotton in various colours. But nothing is more unbecoming than their ears, which are awfully long, and hang down to the shoulders of most of them, which, although they consider this the greatest adornment, made them look to us, who are not accustomed to them, very awful; the more so, because they had such excessively large openings and holes in them, that we could easily put our hands through them.

So far, my narrative will have received some credibility, because it does not in itself concern anything extraordinary; however, I must say that these savages are of a more than gigantic stature. For the men, who are at least twice as tall as one of the sturdiest men aboard the ships, stretched on average to about twelve feet, . . .

**(p. 44)** . . . so that we easily (who would not be surprised?) without bending our heads would have passed between the legs of these children of Goliath. In proportion to their length is their width, and all their body parts are on average shapely formed, so that each of them could have passed for a Hercules. But none of their women matched the men in length, and do not usually stretch to more than ten or eleven

feet. These men had their bodies painted with a red or dark-brown colour, and the women with a scarlet one.

I do not doubt, or most people who will read this travelogue will not give me credibility and easily take this account of the length of these giants for merely a fable or a figment. But this I assure that I have full consciously written down nothing against the truth, and that this people, viewed with a careful eye, are indeed so exceedingly tall, as I have described them here. Agreeing with me in this point are all famous voyagers, who have ever sailed these seas, men of good faith, whose narratives cannot be mistrusted, without doing them wrong. They concur unanimously in their travelogues that giants are being found in the lands on and in the South Sea, of a size far exceeding ours, and well in agreement with that of our islanders, as we will demonstrate in more detail in the next chapter’.

### 3 Analysis of the Content

The short narratives have many similarities but also a few striking differences. To begin with the similarities: in both we read about the naming of the island, about the first encounter with an islander and the many inhabitants who climbed on board in the following days and grabbed some loose stuff they could lay hands on and take home. The description of the clothing as consisting of cotton and silk and the painting of the skin also matches, while the pierced and stretched ear lobes appear impressive. The shooting incident is mentioned and for justification both authors argue that the islanders would have made the landing difficult. The carrying of the dead is noticed by both. The stories are also strikingly unanimous on the islanders’ gigantic stature. The alleged height of the men (12 feet) and the women (10–11 feet) is identical, including the statement that the European visitors could easily walk between their legs.

Because of the many similarities, sometimes in literally the same terms, the possibility arises that the stories stem from the same author. This conclusion is contrary to the information provided by the authors themselves in their reports. T.D.H. writes that he heard the story from a survivor of the ‘Smallest Ship’. This was the *Afrikaansche Galei*. Of the one hundred and eleven crew members, only six survived, including the man ‘to whom I owe this story’. The third impression, according to the title page, is ‘revised anew by an eyewitness of this voyage’. The author of the *Tweejaarige Reyze* writes that he was a crew member on board the *Arend*. The similarities can most likely be explained by assuming that both stories may have been influenced by the many stories that circulated about the voyage in the years after the survivors had returned. It took five years for some of these oral accounts to be put on paper. Even the author who experienced the journey himself may not have limited himself to his own memories.

There are also some notable differences. For example T.D.H. lists a few products that the islanders offered to the Dutch after the shooting incident. Among them are two that are difficult to identify. He makes mention of *rottingen*, here translated

as ‘rattan’, but which can also be an abbreviation of *rottingsuikerriet* (sugar cane stalks), and about *janbesambes*, probably (sweet) potatoes or another root vegetable.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, T.D.H. pays much attention to the *moai*, the large statues of Easter Island, which, curiously enough, are completely absent from the description of the *Tweejaarige Reyze*, even though the anonymous author of this document himself experienced the journey. T.D.H. describes two statues, both their base (the *ahu*) and their headgear (the *pukao*). He also mentions the names by which they are called: *Taurico* and *Dago*, names that are attested nowhere else in eighteenth-century Easter Island accounts. He thinks the statues are idols because the islanders’ behaviours—dancing, clapping, and shouting—reminds him of the way in which the Israelites, according to the biblical book of Exodus, worshipped the golden calf in the desert. The comparison reveals the author’s mindset and his time.

Aside from inaccuracies in observation (cotton or silk clothing), interpretation (impediment to landing) or in listening (names of statues), the most remarkable thing is that these accounts tell us that there are giants on Easter Island. They report men and women up to ten or twelve feet tall. The travel reports of Roggeveen, Bouman, and Behrens are silent on this point. From what we know of the osteological records, the report is totally beyond reality, not only with respect to Easter Island, but everywhere in the region or on earth. How should this eighteenth-century ‘fake news’ then be explained?

## 4 Explanatory Framework

To this end, the theoretical work of British environmental scientist Mike Hulme and the empirical studies of Yale psychologist Dan Kahan may be helpful (Hulme, 2009; Kahan 2010, 2012, Kahan et al. 2011). They independently investigated the effect of (science) communication. Why do people arrive at different evaluations based on the same data? Why is certain information considered to be reliable? In his book *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*, Hulme points out the importance of the underlying philosophy of life, the way people give meaning to their lives. This world view forms, as it were, a substrate for the interpretation of reality. We must not only talk about the facts, thus Hulme, but also try to probe and address this deeper and tougher layer. In his view, climate change is also a cultural problem, which has consequences for communication. Piling fact upon fact or ‘explaining the matter well again’ will not help in the short term to change someone’s mind if there are fundamentally conflicting world views. In one of his empirical studies, Kahan and his collaborators described how the interaction between facts and this substrate can work. They had ideologically mixed groups judge book proposals by three (fictional) male scientists (Kahan et al. 2011). Business information about this trio

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<sup>10</sup> Prof. Nicoline van der Sijs, personal communication, January 2021.



was provided. They were scientists with resounding bios, including a membership of the National Science Academy (NAS) in the USA and solid scientific reputations. The intended books would address major societal questions in their own field: nuclear energy, climate change, and gun possession, respectively. The subjects had to assess the author's expertise and reliability on the basis of a substantive abstract of each book. They were not asked for an opinion on the actual content and tenor of the proposal. What they did not know was that two versions were put into circulation that contrasted strongly with each other. For example there was an abstract in which climate change was characterized as a major risk that necessitated action and also one in which many of the presumed dangers were called 'premature'. In short: there was a fairly progressive, alarming version and a conservative version. What turned out? The stronger the agreement between the subjects' own views and the proposal concerned, the more expert and reliable the author was found. There is apparently a cultural bias in the way people judge apparently factual information, Kahan says. Their own basic attitude tainted the perceptions of the information giver and distorted the perception, sometimes unconsciously. And this bias can be significant.

## 5 Application to the Case

Hulme and Kahan both point out the importance of an underlying world view, the role of experts who inform us—whether they are considered to be reliable or not—and the (biased) perception. Precisely these three ingredients play a role in the 'observation' of giants on Easter Island. This becomes clear when we compare the two stories on this point. There is no difference in the details with which the huge people of the island are described (10–12 feet in length, walking between the legs). Both authors also refer to 'testimonies' of 'experts', in this case travellers who have visited these regions before and also reported the presence of giants. However, T.D.H. questions the expertise of all these witnesses in a footnote. He wonders whether the correct method was used for determining the length. Was it mathematically or 'guessimathically' (translation of the Dutch pun 'wis-konst' or 'gis-konst'), he asks rhetorically? In his own worldview, such problems are apparently to be solved with the help of measurements, science. The author of the *Tweejaarige Reyze* can well imagine that the readers are questioning his statements about giants, but he nonetheless relies on the expertise of previous travellers. These were unanimous in their testimony to the presence of giants elsewhere in those southern regions. And they were 'men of good faith', you just cannot dismiss their accounts. The author feels the need to justify his opinion in a separate chapter. The title of this chapter already brings out from which ideological source he is

drawing<sup>11</sup>: the Bible. His way of arguing is clear enough. In the biblical stories, we come across giants. They existed, according to the book of Genesis, in primeval times (Gen. 6: 1–10) and also in the land of Canaan. When the twelve spies explored this land, they saw not only very tall men, such as Goliath, but also taller ones, called ‘sons of Enak’—giants, in whose eyes they looked like grasshoppers (Numbers 13:32, 33). But once the people of Israel have conquered the land, these giants disappear from the biblical stories. Where did they go? In the Christian West, where the Bible was an authoritative book, a widespread belief prevailed that these giants had moved to the ‘edges of the earth’. When the great European voyages of discovery began in the sixteenth century, it was hoped that they would still be found somewhere. Such a (re) discovery would, of course, give the finder tremendous status and once again underscore the reliability of the Bible.

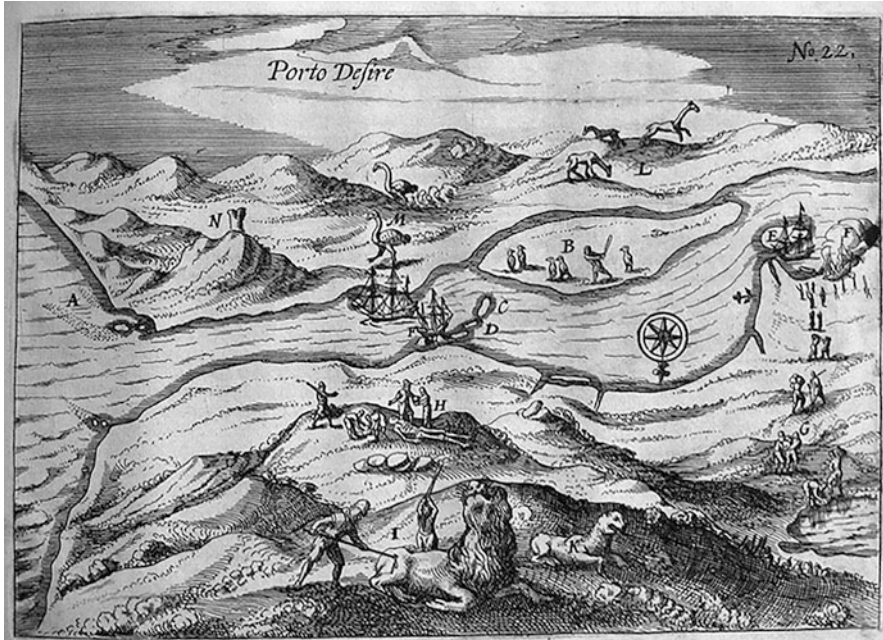
And sure enough . . . the giants appear. Magellan saw them on his world tour in Patagonia, the extreme southern point of Latin America. The chronicler of this voyage, Pigafetta, describes the find in 1519 and the region is marked *Regio Gigantes* (region of the giants) on maps (Pigafetta 1874).<sup>12</sup> A century later, the Dutch captains Schouten and Lemaire also arrive on their journey around the world (1615–1617) in this region and confirm the presence of the giants in their travelogue. Although they did not see them in person, they did find graves with gigantic bones. These graves and the bones are recognizable on an engraving in Schouten’s journal (Schouten 1945).<sup>13</sup> According to the caption, the skulls were so big they could be put over one’s head like a helmet. Other witnesses follow. English travelogues show pictures of European sailors next to giants, which are almost twice as long.

Two centuries later, when Roggeveen set sail in search of the unknown Southland, the *Regio Gigantes* is still indicated on maps of Patagonia. Although fewer and fewer travel reports mention their existence, belief in their existence is far from gone. The giants might still be there, somewhere down under. And why not on islands in the Pacific? This is the mindset of the writer of the *Tweejaarige Reyze*, and we recognize in his ‘proof’ the three characteristics of Hulme and Kahan. There is a philosophy of life, and there are witnesses who have seen things that fit this philosophy and thereby confirm it. But while in Magellan’s time the Bible was still very generally used in Europe as an ideological basis for the view of reality, this was less so in Roggeveen’s time. The Reformation had paved the way for an independent role for ‘the book of nature’ as a second source (apart from the Bible) to obtain reliable knowledge of God and His creation (Harrison, 2001). Scientific methods proved most suitable for the study of the book of nature, especially mathematics, according to Galen. In the worldview of T.D.H. natural science had also acquired a place as a frame of reference in addition to, or perhaps even instead of the Bible. Perhaps he had also started to read some parts of the Bible differently, less

<sup>11</sup> First sentence of the title: ‘Dat’er Reuzen zyn word bewezen uyt de H. Schriftuur en de beste Reyzigers’ (The existence of giants is proved by the Holy Scriptures and the best travellers).

<sup>12</sup> ‘He was so tall that the tallest of us only came up to his waist’, Pigafetta (1874, 50).

<sup>13</sup> The name of the engraving is *Caerte van Porto Desire*. In: Schouten (1945, 162).



Number 22 is Porto Desire.

Met de verclaringhe sommigher aenvyffinghen in dese volghende Caerte.

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| <p>A. Is de Spieringh-bay daer vvy door (misverstant in ghesylt zynde) een nacht laghen in seer groot peryckel vant Schip te verliesen.</p> <p>B. De plaetse daer vvy met de Schepen aende vval dreven, en drooch bevielen, soo datmen onder het lacht drooch voets mocht door loopen, seer ysselfick om sien.</p> <p>C. Het Vogels-Eylant, daer vvy veel lange vogelen kregen.</p> <p>D. Het Leeuvven Eylant.</p> <p>E. Het Konincks Eylant, daer vvy met de schepen achter oft binnen gheset laghen.</p> <p>F. De plaetse daer onse Lacht Hoorn op die clippen stont, ende ten anderen verbranden.</p> <p>G. De plaetse daer vvy nae langh en veel foecken versich vwater vonden, dat vvy met cleyne vaetkens tischeep moesten dragen.</p> | <p>H. De begraffenissen van seer groote menschen, daer van vvy de ghebeenten vonden thien ende elf voeten langh synde, de Hnofden daer van (onder open ghemaectt synde) couden over onse Hoofden heen gheset vverden als gelyck Helmen.</p> <p>I. K Zyn afbeeldinghe van de Zee-Leeuvven ende Zee-Leeuvvinnen, daer van vvy eenighe vinghen ende aten.</p> <p>L. Een soorte van beesten by na als Herten, maer hebbende halten soo langh als haer gheheele lyven, syn seer snel loopende dieren, sulcke sghen vvy daghelycks veel op het Gheberchte.</p> <p>M. Struyssen die vvy hier oock veel sghen.</p> <p>N. Is een steenen mick, vande natuerce aldaer vvonderlyck ghemaectt, schynt van verre een Caep oft vvarder te syn die met handen ghemaectt is.</p> |
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Caerte van Porto Desire, after Schouten 1945, 162

literally and hence changed his ideological base. This might explain the difference in interpretation and weighting of the 'facts'. T.D.H. is careful and clearly does not want to sneer at his informant. He simply writes down in the main text what he has heard, but asks questions about the method in a footnote and adds a rhyme to render implicitly his own explanation: exaggeration to please the readers.

## 6 Outside of Reality?

Although it may be clear from the above why in the travel stories the stated height of the residents has taken on giant dimensions, towards fable or, as we are now inclined to say, ‘fake news’, the question remains whether there was any reason for this claim in reality. Would there have been anything on display in Latin America or Easter Island that justified or evoked the exaggeration? This turns out to be the case. Relevant indications can be found in the literature on both regions. The first concerns South America and comes from none other than Charles Darwin. On his famous voyage with the *Beagle* (1831–1836), he also passed through the Strait of Magellan and described the inhabitants of Patagonia as follows: ‘on an average, their height is about six feet, with some men taller and only a few shorter; and the women are also tall; altogether they are certainly the tallest race which we anywhere saw’ (Darwin 1910, 229).

The second clue comes from the journal of a Spanish expedition to Easter Island in 1770. The Spaniards saw a lot of tall men on the island. Gonzalez, the expedition leader, writes that most men are taller than 8.5 Castilian *palmos*. Out of curiosity and entirely in line with the enlightened *zeitgeist*, they measured two men precisely. The tallest male turned out to be 9 *palmos* and 3.5 *pulgadas*, while the other one measured 9 *palmos* and 2 *pulgadas*, which equates to 1.97 and 1.94 metres, respectively. Two ‘giants’, certainly compared to the visitors from Southern Europe, who at the time had an average height of around 1.6 metres (about 5 cm less than in Northern Europe, Steckel 2001). Tall people existed in both Patagonia and Easter Island, so tall that there was evidently a great temptation to see descendants of the ‘lost’ Biblical giants in them.

To summarize: people are not blank observers, they look, sometimes unconsciously, at reality from certain ideological perspectives. If they then see or hear something that seems to fit and confirm their philosophy of life, it receives selective attention. The tendency to then exaggerate the evidence is considerable and, depending on the context, may sometimes assume fabulous forms and so become ‘fake news’.

## 7 Relevance for our Present-Day Debate

The above analysis of the eighteenth-century report about giants also seems to me relevant for interpreting the discussions conducted held today about the history of Easter Island. To exemplify this assumption, I take the ‘collapse theory’, in the version that has gained worldwide fame through the work of Clive Ponting and in particular the mega bestseller of Jared Diamond (Ponting 1991; Diamond 2005). The core of this theory is the assertion that Easter Island experienced a complete collapse of island culture as a result of the over-exploitation of natural resources, a few decades before the arrival of Dutch visitors. Deforestation is said to have

washed away fertile soil, causing hunger, war, cannibalism, and mass mortality. The first visitors would have found the meagre remains of a once thriving culture. Initial support for this theory has all but disappeared among Easter Island researchers. I refer to my previous publications for a thorough substantive treatment and refutation of the theory (Boersema 2002, 2011, 2015, 2015a, 2017, 2020; Boersema and Huele 2019). Here, in this chapter, the important question is in what context the theory originated and why it remains so popular in certain circles, even though it has long been proved untenable.

For the ‘collapse theory’ to emerge, we have to return to the beginning of the environmental crisis in the 1960s. Partly because of the work of Rachel Carson, people began to worry about the negative effects of industrial development and the growing use of toxic substances. The realization dawned that there was more to it. Alarming studies pointed to disappearing nature, diminishing resources and an exponentially growing world population (one among many: Paul R. Ehrlich 1968). It may be that in all this the New Testament stories about an apocalypse resonated, whether or not in a secular Malthusian version.<sup>14</sup>

The publication that made the most impression was the Report to the Club of Rome of 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972). This report described an advanced world model for the time that simulated what would be in wait for us, if policy remained unchanged. The graphs produced by the computer at MIT in Cambridge, MA, were unsettling. The over-exploitation of natural resources would lead to depletion and reduce carrying capacity. The population size would decline dramatically. Without measures, we faced a social disaster in the middle of the twenty-first century, a real collapse. The launch of the report caused a shock. It created a new state of mind on how to evaluate the state of the planet. Scientists, and in their wake worried citizens, wondered what to expect. The causal mechanisms behind the model seemed plausible, but they remained theoretical. Could the past lend some support? Perhaps mankind had experienced something similar on a smaller scale previously in history? This question also puzzled the American archaeologist William (Bill) Mulloy. Mulloy was a member of Thor Heyerdahl’s Easter Island expedition in the 1950s and later returned to the island, including for the restoration of the Tahai complex. Mulloy studied not only the turbulent history of Easter Island but also the environmental literature. The latter changed the way he viewed the world. He was impressed by the gloomy studies and wondered: ‘could something have happened on Easter Island’?<sup>15</sup> His pessimistic worldview made him sensitive to reinterpret and combine certain phenomena in the past. Since the island’s history was full of unsolved riddles, it left room for diverging, even speculative, scenarios. This might explain why the serious and well-respected scientist he was, Mulloy published a popular article describing a ‘Club of Rome-esque’ scenario, including a full-scale civil war and mass starvation, which would have taken place in the late seventeenth

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<sup>14</sup> This has also been suggested for Easter Island. See: Ingersoll and Ingersoll (2013, 47–52).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with his daughter, Briged Mulloy, July 2012.

century. A real pre-European collapse (Mulloy 1974).<sup>16</sup> It was a pretty wild story, the evidence was paper thin, but it marked the birth of the collapse theory for Easter Island. Mulloy had been handed collapse spectacles that matched his own deeply felt worries about the ongoing environmental degradation. He looked through these spectacles at the past and thought he saw confirmation of it. Subsequently, the Easter Island collapse story began a ramble in which it successively ran into the deep-sea diver Jean Y. Cousteau, the Dutch Committee for Long Term Environmental Policy CLTM, Clive Ponting and, finally, Jared Diamond (Cousteau 1983; CLTM 1990; Ponting 1991; Diamond 2005). It is unclear whether they were aware of each other's publications, for none of them mentions a predecessor. Today, the theory is mainly linked to Jared Diamond, as the most famous scientist on the list. In this short description, I am not concerned here with assessing the evidence, but above all with the demonstrable link between the deeper-lying belief that 'the earth is not doing well' and the perception of reality that is influenced by it, in this case the historical reality.

The same link plays a role in the continued popularity of the Easter Island collapse theory. A striking example is presented in a statement by the economist and Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz. Like many responsible citizens of the world, he is deeply concerned about climate change and the role of humans in it. Over-exploitation, inherent to capitalism is to blame, according to Stiglitz, who continues: 'it reminds one of Jared Diamond's story of collapse on Easter Island where they cut down the last tree and they were unable to paddle to any other island and they'd destroyed their future'.<sup>17</sup> Stiglitz is an exceptionally good economist, but there is no evidence that he has studied the recent literature on Easter Island. He is sensitive to the idea that a collapse in the nearby future is possible, presumably because he shares Diamond's and others' pessimistic world view. Additionally, Diamond, being an Ivy league scientist, is considered a reliable witness. In the words of the writer of the *Tweejaarige Reyze*: 'a man of good faith'. Stiglitz takes the Easter Island story to illustrate and underline his own deeply felt concerns and economic advocacy for change without checking Diamond or the facts.

A second example—underscoring the importance of the link—comes from my own experience. In 2019 the Dutch journalist and historian Rutger Bregman published a book with the telling title *De meeste mensen deugen. Een nieuwe geschiedenis van de mens* ('Most people are good. A new history of humankind' translation JJB). It became a tremendously successful book and has sold well over a two hundred thousand copies in the Netherlands. Translations into English and German followed suit and also became bestsellers (Bregman 2019, 2020). In his book, Bregman has analysed and summarized a large number of studies that show that people are more likely to commit themselves to others and to the common

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<sup>16</sup> It includes a pre-quote from Ehrlich's book stating that 'The battle to feed the world is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now' (Paul R. Ehrlich 1968, xi).

<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian*, 4 November 2018.

cause than to self-interest. Altruism is not a thin veneer. Some of the studies were well known but misread for a long time. For sure, a remarkable collection. The book is written from an optimistic view on humankind, and the selected studies seem to support but also justify this message. Bregman himself speaks of a realistic view on human nature. My interpretation of Easter Island's ecological history (no collapse, but adaptation and resilience) is one of the studies that were included in Bregman's book. It became the core of Chap. 6. I was honoured and gained a new audience. From then on, I have found myself often in 'one of two worlds', when I lectured about my Easter Island research. In these lectures, I tried to stay as close as possible to my reconstruction of the past. The tenor was always: there is no evidence of a collapse, the population showed resilience. It remains to be seen if 'Earth Island' equals Easter Island (Bahn and Flenley, 1992). Before the publication of Bregman's book, when my audience consisted mainly of environmentally minded people, I often received very critical questions and many in the room were not inclined to give up the idea of a collapse. Apparently, it was thought that a (less) dramatic reading of the history of Easter Island would have implications for the assessment of the current environmental crisis. This was also explicitly stated: 'We need such a story, don't we, Jan'? During lectures to an audience of Bregman readers, I was asked the opposite question: whether I saw no support in the events on Easter Island for an optimistic view of the crisis today. People liked to see that hopeful view nurtured and confirmed by the history of this remote 'model island'.

In these examples, we recognize the triad of Hulme and Kahan: a pre-existing philosophy of life, expert witnesses, and the selection and interpretation of the facts. Their work has proved helpful in understanding apparent incongruities. It also points to a possible solution: involve the underlying world view in the analysis.

### **Accounts of the Expedition of Jacob Roggeveen 1721–1722**

Anoniem (1728) *Tweejaarige Reyze Rondom de Wereld, Ter nader Ontdekkinge der Onbekende Zuydlanden. Met drie schepen, in het Jaar 1721, ondernomen, door last van de Nederlandsche Westindische Maatschappij, Waar in het wedervaaren en de Rampen op de Reyze verhaald, en de bezeylde en nieuw ontdekte Landen en Eylanden, met der zelve Bewoonders, beschreven worden. Nevens de Reyze van het Oostindisch schip BARNEVELD, Uyt Holland tot aan de Kaap der Goede Hoop, in 't jaar 1719. Behelzende Een verhaal van de langduurige tegenspoeden en zonderlinge voorvallen op het Eyland Madagascar, by de Woeste Souklaven. Met een naauwkeurige Beschrijving van de vreemde Gewoontens, Godsdienst en Zeden dier Volkeren. Verciert met een Nette Reyskaart en Prentverbeeldingen.* Te Dordrecht, Gedrukt by Joannes van Braam, boekverkooper, 1728.

(Anonymous (1728) A two-year voyage around the world, For a Further Discovery of the Unknown SOUTHLANDS. With three ships, in the year 1711, undertaken at the order of the Dutch West Indies Company, In which the experiences and disasters are related, and the sailed and newly discovered lands and islands, with their inhabitants are described. Together with a voyage of the East Indies ship Barneveld, from Holland until the Cape of Good Hope, in the year 1719, Concerning A Story of the long-lasting misfortunes and strange events on the

island of Madagascar, with the savage Souclaves, with an accurate description of the strange customs, religion and mores of these peoples, adorned with a precise itinerary map and pictures Dordrecht. Printed by Jannes van Braam, Bookseller, 1728.)

Other editions: Van Braam, Dordrecht (1758), H. De Koning, Dordrecht (1764), and retold in *Nederlandsche reizen*, Volume 13 (1787), Petrus Conradi, Amsterdam/V. van der Plaats, Harlingen.

Behrens, Carl Friedrich (1728) *Reise nach den unbekandten Süd-Ländern und rund um die Welt / Nebst vielen von ihm angemerckten Seltenheiten und zugestoßenen wunderlichen Begebenheiten. Unbey eine wahrhafftige Nachricht von der Insul und Historie des Robinson Crusoe. In einem Send-Schreiben an einem guten Freund mit Poetischer Feder entworffen*. Frankfurt und Leipzig.

(1732) *Nader onderzoek door Karel Fredrik Behrens. En bericht van zyne reyze naar de Zuid-Landen gedaan, in dienst van de E: WEST-INDISCHE, COMPAGNIE, in den Jare 1721 enz. Thans volgens eigen ondervinding, ten beste opgedragen aan de E: OOST-INDISCHE COMPAGNIE van Hollandt*. † Amsterdam, gedrukt voor den Autheur.

(1737) *Karl Friderich Behrens selbst gethane Reise und Begebenheiten durch die bekannte und unbekante Südländer und um die Welt. Worinnen Die die Canarische und Saltz-Insulen, Brasilien, die Magellanische und Lameerische Strassen, Küste von Chili, die neu-entdeckte Insulen, gegen Süden und unterschiedene Plätze in Asia, Africa und America; Wie auch deren Einwohner, Lebens-Art, Policey, Commerciën, Gottesdienst und dergleichen beschrieben werden*. Gedr. Bey Joachim von Lahnen, Frankfurth.

A second print (1739) *Der wohlversuchte Süd-Länder, das ist: ausführliche Reise-Beschreibung um die Welt, Worinnen von denen Kanarischen und Saltz-Insuln, Brasilien, der StraßMagellanus und Lamer-Küste, Chili, und neu-entdeckten Insuln gegen Süden, ic. Deßgleichen von den Moluckischen Insuln und verschiedenen Plätzen in Asia und Africa, als auch ihren Inwohnern, Lebens-Art, Policey, Handel Wandel und Gottesdienst gehandelt wird. Nebst einer accuraten Charte der ganßen Welt, und andern Kupffern entworffen von Carl Friederich Behrens*. Auf Kosten des Autoris, zu finden bey Joh. Georg Monath, Leipzig.

Translation in French (1739) *Histoire de l'Expédition des Trois Vaisseaux, Envoyés par la Compagnie des Indes Occidentales des Provinces-Unies, aux Terres Australes en MDCCXXI*. Par Monsieur de B. 2 tom. Aux dépens de la Compagnie. La Haye. Vertaling in het Nederduitsch, Amsterdam (1759) en Engels (1903) Hakluyt Society, London.

Behrens, Carl Friedrich (1923) *Der Wohlversuchte Südlände. Reise um der Welt 1721/22* Nach den Originalausgaben bearbeitet von Dr. Hans Plischke, F.A. Brockhaus, Leipzig (2de druk 1925).

Mulert, F.E. baron (1911) *De reis van Mr. Jacob Roggeveen ter ontdekking van het Zuidland (1721–1722)* Verzameling van stukken, deze reis en de daaraan voorafgaande ontdekkingsplannen van Arend Roggeveen (1675–1676) betreffende. Werken uitgegeven door de Linschoten Vereeniging IV, Martinus Nijhoff, 's-Gravenhage. (Journal of Cornelis Bouman, pp. 178–205).



Mulert, F.E. baron (1911) *Scheepsjournaal, gehouden op het schip Tienhoven tijdens de ontdekkingsreis van Mr. Jacob Roggeveen, 1721–1722*. J.C. en W. Altorffer, Middelburg. Overgedrukt uit: Archief uitgegeven door het Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen, (1911), 62–180.

*Nederlandsche reizen, tot bevordering van de koophandel, na de meest afgelegene gewesten des aardkloots. Doormengd met vreemde lotgevallen, en menigvuldige gevaaren, die de Nederlandsche reizigers hebben doorgestaan. (1784–87) Petrus Conradi, Amsterdam /V. van der Plaats, Harlingen (in Volume 13, 1787 the stories of the Tweejaarige Reyze and T.D.H. are retold).*

Roggeveen, Jacob (1838) *Dagverhaal der ontdekkings-reis van Mr. Jacob Roggeveen met de schepen Den Arend, en De Afrikaansche Galei in de jaren 1721 en 1722*. Met toestemming van zijne excellentie den minister van koloniën uitgegeven door het Zeeuwsch genootschap der wetenschappen. De gebroeders Abrahams te Middelburg.

Anonymous (T.D.H.?) (1727a) *Kort en nauwkeurig verhaal, van de reize, Door drie schepen in 't Jaar 1721 gedaan, op ordre van de Ed. Heeren Bewindhebberen van de West-Indische Compagnie in Holland, om eenige tot nu toe onbekende Landen, omtrent de Zuid-Zee gelegen, op te zoeken*. (a 4 page pamphlet; no author, no publisher. Title identical to T.d.H.1727b, text shorter and slightly different).

T.D.H. (1727b) *Kort en nauwkeurig verhaal, van de reize, Door drie schepen in 't Jaar 1721 gedaan, op ordre van de Ed. Heeren Bewindhebberen van de West-Indische Compagnie in Holland, om eenige tot nu toe onbekende Landen, omtrent de Zuid-Zee gelegen, op te zoeken*. Te Amsterdam, bij weduwe Jacob van Egmont, boekdrukster en verkoopster op de Reguliersbreestraat in de nieuwe drukkerij.

T.D.H. (1727c) *Kort en nauwkeurig verhaal van de reize, door drie schepen in 't jaar 1721 gedaan, op ordre van de Ed. Heeren Bewindhebberen van de West-Indische Compagnie in Holland, om eenige tot nog toe onbekende landen, omtrent de Zuid-Zee gelegen, op te zoeken*. Te Amsterdam, by Johannes van Septeren, Boekverkoper op de Leydse straat, tusschen de Heere en Keysersgragt. (with the same Publisher in 1727 a second print).

T.D.H. (1727d) *Het Waare en Nauwkeurige Journael der Reize, gedaan door drie Schepen, op ordre van de Ed. Heeren Bewindhebberen van de West-Indische Compagnie, om eenige tot nog toe onbekende Landen, omtrent de Zuid-Zee gelegen, op te zoeken. Waar in alles wat haar op de Reize is wedervaren, wert verhaalt en aangetoont; als ook de wonderlyke manieren, gewoontens, en zeden der ontdekte volkeren, en hoe deze Reizigers op eene wonderlyke wyze te Batavia zyn aangekomen etc.* Den Derden Druk, van veele Drukfeilen verbeterd, op nieuws nagesien door een ooggetuyge van dese Reize, en met nodige Aantekeningen vermeerderd. Te Amsterdam, by Johannes van Septeren, Boekverkoper op de Leydse straat, tusschen de Heere en Keysersgragt.

(The True and Accurate Journal of the Voyage, made by three Ships, by order of the Hon. Directors of the West Indies Company, to search for some hitherto unknown Lands, situated nearby the South Sea, in the which everything that

they experienced during this voyage is related and shewn; as well as the strange manners, traditions and customs of the peoples discovered, and how the Voyagers arrived in a curious way at Batavia etc.

The Third Impression, with many printing errors purged, revised anew by an eye-witness of this voyage, and augmented with necessary Annotations. Amsterdam, Johannes van Septeren, bookseller, 1727).

Valentijn, François (1724) Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën, vervattende een Naaukeurige en Uitvoerige Verhandeling van Nederlands Mogentheyd In die Gewesten. In vyf deelen Te Dordrecht by Joannes van Braam/te Amsterdam by Gerard onder de Linden. (volume 3 mentions Roggeveen's expedition).

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