

THE GREATEST SAILORS EVER by Michael Chia

When you ask the modern mariner why he does it, he would leer and sneer and say, "To get away from a nagging wife" or "To find more compliant women".

But the ancient mariner lived in a different world; it was a world filled with magic and wonder; there could be no trivial answers to such a serious question.

This is a story steeped in terrible reality. The whole Truth is unknowable. The principal ideas are original; the rest can be gleaned from many learned books.

MChia

And God said to man, "Go forth and multiply". And they did – from a few to millions and then billions, filling the earth to its remotest Four Corners. You can find them everywhere – from comfortable habitats to the harshest environments – the hottest, the coldest, wettest and driest lands. For most of two million years, the existence of the near-humans was an integral part of the biological food chain; eat or be eaten, kill or be killed. When they got to the top of the chain, they hunted and preyed on each other. 'Going forth' means tribes running away from each other, constantly looking over their shoulders, avoiding their most proximate human predators; searching for safer lands where no man has ever gone before. The smartest and strongest tribes live in the most comfortable habitats; the others were driven to live in the remotest marginal lands, barely able to support any kind of life. The end is not difficult to predict. Dreamtime

Some researchers believe that the Polynesians and Micronesians descended from the South East Asian *Homo erectus*. Australia was accessed by the Aborigines by foot 60,000 years ago; rising water later closed this method of migration. The Melanesians travelled by large canoes to the crescent shaped group of islands north and northeast of Australia. The most remarkable are the Polynesians and Micronesians who occupy almost the entire Pacific Basin. Amazingly, you find them or evidence of their visits everywhere you go; even the most remote islands. The territories of the Polynesians stretch from Nukuoro in the east, Hawaii in the north, Easter Island in the east and New Zealand in the south. The Micronesian Island comprises the island block Marianas, Carolines, and Kiribati.

The dangers of long ocean voyages in tiny flimsy vessels without modern navigation aids must be enormous. The motivation for the Polynesians to take these terrible risks must also have been enormous. They are frequently subject to speculations by modern researchers. Whatever the motivations, they cannot equate with modern-day attitudes and values. But the one thing that is clear to me is the fate of the Easter Islanders* (see epilogue) and this may be the most important indicator of what really caused the Polynesians to plunge into the mighty ocean into unknown lands, risking death, constantly searching for sustainable environment. Most of the little islands cannot sustain life for many generations. The necessity to keep on going is a matter of survival; nothing less than this is enough explanation. The need to get that adrenaline rush or to demonstrate to his fellow men, the value of his worthless life, is the addiction of the modern man. The ancient mariner is driven purely by the need to survive. All life on earth, including human life, has a built-in propensity to multiply to the limit that his environment will support. Predation is nature's method of population control. Failing predation and endless wars, migration is the necessary alternative. And so when the land could not sustain them for long, they continued to look forever-greener gestures; even to the very end of the earth.

The Pacific Ocean is the largest and deepest of the Earth's five oceans, covering more than a third of its surface. The maximum distance west east (Panama to the Malaya Peninsula) is 11,000 miles, the maximum distance north-south (Bering Strait to Antarctica) is 9,600 miles. Not far from the continental landmass, there are more than 20,000 islands in the territories known today as Indonesia and Philippines. Imagine a prehistoric man standing at the western edge of the Pacific Ocean several thousand years before the birth of Christ, gazing at the vast expanse of the sea in awe. Dreamtime may paint a dramatic scene of a native staring in awe at the vast expanse of the ocean. But the reality is that all he saw were lots of little islands within easy reach

and ready for exploration. And everywhere he looked on the land around him were the raw materials from which he could build boats. Cutting tools and weapons could be made from obsidian, natural adhesives could be made from animal and vegetable fats, proteins and fibres; ropes from coconut fibre and Manila hemp; the latter can also be woven into cloth for sails. But he had no magnetic compass to show him the way and so he invented the sidereal compass, which is nearly as good, the weather permitting. And then he had to learn how to read the swells of the ocean, changes in ocean currents, the wind and waves, the clouds and the flight of birds. A little native ingenuity, lots of practice and experimentation and many generations later, they were ready and able to launch their double-canoes and outriggers into the great unknown. The initial outward journey was easy - no charts and no particular destination; therefore, no problem; but the return journey was the problem and those who succeeded became master mariners and magicians. The art of navigation became the secret of the esoteric, the shaman, and the witch doctor. Hindsight, a thousand years later, caught the imagination of the European sailors who looked at the achievements of the Polynesians with wonderment.

No one knows when the Polynesians started out on their epic journeys across the Pacific Ocean from the Asian mainland. Those were the times before the Egyptians built the Pyramids; the Chinese, the Great Wall; the Romans their great Empire; a long time before Jesus Christ was born. But they arrived in Samoa in 1000 BC, Hawaii sometime in the first millennium AD, Easter Island in 400 AD and, last of all, New Zealand in about 600 AD. But they never found that huge landmass located just further west – Australia.

*Epilogue:

The story of the settling and decline of Easter Island carries a dire message to the whole wide world. The island is only 150 square miles in area (little more than half the size of Singapore), two thousand miles from South America and 1,500 miles from Pitcairn Island; totally isolated from everywhere. When the Polynesians arrived on the island, there were just a few of them. The population reached its peak at seven thousand and then began to decline. A once flourishing country had turned on itself; barbarism had taken hold. When the islanders came close to exhausting the natural resources of the island, they began to build huge stone images of their ancestors, pleading to their gods to save them from extinction. All the trees had been cut down to build and transport the statues. None was left for building boats. No one could escape from the island. And then their ancestors and gods heard their pleadings. Help came in the form of Dutch Admiral Roggeveen in 1722 – the civilised world finally learned of their very existence. In the years that followed, much of the population was taken off the island, maybe to become slaves to other people. Civilization came too early for the Easter Islanders – it could have made them into little balls of fat – like the Nauruan; or huge balls of fat - like the Samoan and Tongan.