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CALLIGAN'S LOST RONGORONGO, AND SOME SHIPWRECKS

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INTRODUCTION

Rongorongo, Easter Island's indigenous script, is represented by twenty-odd known wooden tablets and fragments. Their scarcity is one of the main barriers to the decipherment of the script. Almost all had been discovered and brought to public attention by the end of the nineteenth century¹. Despite many efforts, no more tablets have been found on the island since then, with the exception of a few fragments hidden in caves and rotted beyond recognition. If any more such artifacts exist, they would be among the few that were collected in the early days of Rapanui exploration and since have disappeared. The following is an account of my attempts to locate one of them, so far without success.

CROFT'S LETTER

On April 30th, 1874, a resident of Tahiti named Thomas Croft wrote a letter² to George Davidson, President of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. The letter was a reply to earlier correspondence in which Davidson requested Croft to obtain for him actual specimens of *rongorongo*. Croft was not able to do so, but he did attach to his letter two sets of photographs of all the specimens available to him, namely those with Bishop Jaussen of Tahiti. His letter, an enthusiastic if amateurish collection of many facts and tidbits about *rongorongo*, is an important source for our knowledge of the subject.

In discussing tablets he had heard about but not seen, Croft writes:

Mr. Calligan, mate of an American vessel from your port, which vessel was lately wrecked on Easter Island, where he and his friends built a boat from the remains of the wreck, and came down in it to Tahiti, (and who now commands a small schooner sailing among the islands here) also managed to get one of the blocks, which, he has told me, (he is absent just at the present writing) he has sent to his wife, somewhere in California, I think. When he returns, I will

try to find out where, and inform you, so you may have an opportunity to see and probably obtain it, or at least obtain a photographic representation of its characters.

Later in his letter he mentions Calligan again:

Mr. Calligan, before spoken of in this letter, informs me that during his forced stay on Easter Island he kept a journal, noting down things which came under his observation, and that he has sent it to his friend, Mr. MacCrellich of the San Francisco *Alta California*, who will doubtless publish extracts from it. You will, thereby, perhaps, be able to learn much about the island, written upon the spot, with all the freshness of narrative that usually accompanies articles so written.

Nothing more was mentioned of Calligan's diary or his tablet.

Could they still exist? Imbelloni (1951) and others assumed that Calligan's tablet was destroyed in the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. Indeed, contemporary accounts (Hittell 1997, pp. 500-503) detail the materials rescued from the Academy building as the fire was reaching it. No anthropological specimens were among them. But did the tablet ever reach the Academy to begin with? In order to find out what happened to the tablet, it is best to start with Calligan's life and its consequences.

CAPTAIN CALLIGAN AND SOME SHIPWRECKS

Patrick John Calligan was born in Maine, possibly near Machias Bay, about 1837³. By 1867 he was living in San Francisco⁴, employed as Captain of the bark *Brontes*. The 1870 census lists him as married to Ellen, a 34-year-old native of Ireland, who could neither read nor write; no children are recorded. Calligan changed residence at least once⁵ during his years in San Francisco.

On March 14th, 1873, the 944-ton ship *Elizabeth Kimball*, owned by the lumber company of Pope and Talbot, sailed from Port Gamble (now in Washington) toward Iquique (now in Chile) carrying nearly 700,000 feet of lumber. Its captain was A.W. Keller. Its first mate was the 36-year-old Calligan⁶.

At the end of April⁷ the *Elizabeth Kimball* was approaching its destination, when it sprang a leak. The crew tried to lighten the ship by throwing off the deck load, and otherwise to empty the hold, but without success. The ship then made for Easter Island, some 600 miles away, and was run ashore there⁸ on May 6th. By then its 18-foot-deep hold had taken almost 15 feet of water. The ship's provisions, rigging, some sails, and perhaps other parts were salvaged; however the ship and its cargo were to be declared a total loss.

While the *Elizabeth Kimball* was setting sail from the U. S., a very similar misfortune was befalling another ship. The *William and Thomas* left⁹ what is now Washington in December of 1872, bound for Valparaíso in Chile. By December 31st it had sprung a leak, but continued on its journey with its pumps going until on March 5th, 1873, it became waterlogged some 500 miles from Easter Island. It then changed course for the island, and was beached there on March 18th. The crew saved the rigging, sails, and some 50,000 feet of water-damaged lumber. By the 26th the remains of the ship had completely broken up.

It should be noted here that these wrecks, especially that of the *Elizabeth Kimball*, had a significant effect on the way of life on the island, by providing it with much scarce lumber. By the time of Pinart's visit in 1877 most of the islanders were living in wooden European-style huts, in contrast to the framework-and-thatch dwellings that they had been occupying before¹⁰.

The crews of the two wrecked ships were taken care of by Dutrou-Bornier, the manager of the island¹¹, and by their own salvaged provisions. They stayed for several more months, during which they built a small (10-ton) schooner from the *Elizabeth Kimball's* wreck, probably by fitting a surviving lifeboat with masts and rigging. On the 29th of July, at the beginning of the least stormy and coolest month of the year, Captain Keller, his wife, and seven crewmembers of the wrecked ships left for Tahiti¹². Calligan did not join them; he constructed another small schooner and sailed by himself to Tahiti, leaving at the end of August and arriving in Pape'ete on September 25th. The remainder of the ships' crews were picked up by a passing brig, the *Tawera*, on its way from Chile, and arrived in Tahiti a few days before Calligan. It was during those months on the island that Calligan found the time to keep a diary, and found and acquired the *rongorongo* tablet.

Most of the ships' crewmembers set out for the United States within days of arriving in Pape'ete. Calligan chose to stay in Tahiti¹³. Three months later he was commanding the *Stella*, a 60-ton protectorate schooner making its rounds between Tahiti, the Tuamotus and other nearby islands¹⁴, carrying to the islands cloth, lumber, flour, liquor, and other European goods, and returning with local produce such as copra and mother of pearl. Some passengers were taken on board as well. He continued to sail the *Stella* for all of 1874 and most of 1875, stopping in Pape'ete for only a week on every two-month trip.

On October 31st, 1875, the *Stella* left on its regular trip for Rangiroa in the Tuamotus. However it returned from nearby Kaukura early, on December 13th, under a new captain. The

American Consul in Tahiti reported¹⁵ two deceased Americans in 1875; one of them was "P.J. Calligan, master of the Protectorate schooner *Stella*, murdered by the cook aboard the schooner." The date of decease was December 9th. The value of his effects, turned over to the Consul by the French authorities, was reported as \$511 (about the same as six months of the Consul's salary) and they were "to be sold to pay off claims." On January 7th, 1876, the consul advertised in the *Messenger de Tahiti* for claimants against Calligan's estate to come forward within 30 days. Although the paper carried auction notices often, none was announced for Calligan's estate. It is likely that Calligan had borrowed money for purchasing the *Stella*, which thus represented most of his assets, and that he was still paying off his lenders by the time of his death. By selling and settling the ownership of the *Stella*, then, no further debts needed to be addressed.

Even the little we know about Calligan paints an image of his character. He was independent-minded, a strong personality, and an enterprising, hard-working man. These were probably the qualities which led him to write a diary and collect a *rongorongo* tablet on Rapanui while he was staying there, to sail alone to Tahiti in his own makeshift schooner, and to seek a life as master of his own ship. These qualities may have kept him from raising a family; and they also may have made him stubborn enough to put the wrong kind of pressure on a man carrying a sharp knife.

THE CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

There are reasons to believe that the tablet never entered the collections of the California Academy of Sciences. Every issue of its *Proceedings* carried long and detailed lists of its new acquisitions, even periodical issues, and including the photographs sent to the Academy by Croft. No mention was made of anything like a *rongorongo* specimen after Croft's letters were published¹⁶. Given President Davidson's personal interest in the subject, it is unlikely that such an acquisition would have been omitted.

In 1876, the explorer Alphonse Pinart, then living in San Francisco, wrote Thomas Croft in Pape'ete with inquiries about *rongorongo*. Perhaps he'd heard of Croft by reading the letter to the Academy of Sciences. Croft replied enthusiastically¹⁷:

You will find two quite lengthy papers on this subject, written by me, in the Archives of the San Francisco Academy of Natural Sciences, which they will take great pleasure, no doubt, in showing to you and allowing you to read them, and extracting from them if you wish. You will please give my compliments to Prof. Davidson, the president of said society, and say to him that I have recommended you to call on him for the purpose of seeing and reading those letters.

He also attached to the letter a set of prints made from the same negatives he made for the Academy in 1874. There is no mention of Calligan's tablet or any others.

Pinart spent a lot of effort on his Easter Island collection, which began with those photographs. He traveled to Easter Island in 1877, and stopped in Tahiti to hand-copy word lists and

other Rapanui texts then with Bishop Jaussen, and to make a set of rubbings of Jaussen's *rongorongo* tablets. These materials still exist in the Pinart collection at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. If Calligan's tablet had indeed been obtained by the Academy, Pinart would have heard about it while visiting there, or Croft would have made mention of it, and Pinart would have made some effort to obtain a photograph of it. The lack of any mention of it in Pinart's collection or in Croft's letter to him suggests that the tablet was not at the Academy at that time, nor anywhere Pinart knew about and could easily reach.

Calligan was in Tahiti for only brief breaks between his trips. It is not at all certain that Croft managed to speak to him on one of those breaks between the time of the letter to the Academy and of Calligan's death. It is also far from certain that Calligan would have wanted his wife to part with the tablet (though she might have allowed it to be photographed). This may explain why the tablet was never acquired by the Academy.

ELLEN CALLIGAN

We have to conclude that unless the tablet was lost in passage, it remained with Calligan's wife, Ellen. Here the trail grows cold. Little is known of her life before marrying Patrick Calligan. The 1870 census indicates, as was mentioned before, that she was Irish-born and illiterate. No record of Patrick's marriage has been found in Maine, and it is likely that they married in San Francisco. The 1860 census of San Francisco records about a dozen unmarried Irishwomen named Ellen of the correct age, all employed as servants. An Ellen Calligan, very possibly the same one, was employed there as a domestic in 1864¹⁸. She does not appear in the U.S. census after 1870. I don't know whether she was still living in San Francisco at the time her husband sent her the tablet. Croft wrote she was "somewhere in California, I think." Perhaps the place name was unfamiliar to him, which would place her outside of San Francisco. Perhaps he just didn't remember. She may have joined her husband in Tahiti before he died, though she doesn't appear on any of the passenger lists for his ship, the *Stella*. After his death, she may have moved in with his relatives or with her own, if there were any in the U.S. She may have remarried — though she was by then 39, childless, and used to living away from her husband — or she may have taken a job as a domestic; either would make her difficult to trace. In any event, the only productive direction in which future searches for the tablet could proceed is to find out what happened to Ellen Calligan after her husband's departure from the U.S. in 1873.

THE DIARY

Croft mentioned the diary that Calligan had kept on the island. His appreciation of its potential was justified. Unfortunately, any hopes for finding it are dim. Frederick MacCrellich, Calligan's friend and publisher of the *Alta California*, would perhaps have liked to publish his diary, since his paper was generally interested in things marine, and proudly carried its publisher's idiosyncratic articles alongside the news. All the same, a search through the paper's issues shows no sign or mention of the diary. If MacCrellich did receive the diary, he didn't publish it,

and if Pinart or Davidson reached him and saw the diary they made no mention of it.

MacCrellich died in 1882, leaving all to his wife, Mary, no doubt including his correspondence¹⁹. The *Alta California* was sold a few years later, and finally ceased publication in 1891. Its editorial archives no longer exist. Mary MacCrellich continued to live in their house²⁰ after his death, until it was destroyed in the 1906 fire, and with it Calligan's diary if it was there.

CONCLUSION

Calligan's *rongorongo* has so far proven elusive. Ellen Calligan would be the last known person to see the tablet, but she remains elusive as well. And yet, the search bore other fruit. I have shown that rumors such as the tablet's disappearance are needlessly pessimistic, unless backed by firm evidence. I hope that future research will be able to track the tablet further — perhaps to the present day. I hope that similar research would be able to track down other tablets and artifacts presumed lost, such as the tablets that Croft (1874) says were taken to Sweden, and which have not been sought since. And finally, I uncovered some small corners of history — the personality of an ingenious sailor, the beginnings of lumber construction in Rapanui — which would have otherwise remained hidden.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ The only exception is the "Paris snuffbox," discovered in a European collection in 1961.

² Croft (1874). Quoted, nearly in full, by Churchill (1912). A separate letter, dated on the same day, lists the photographs he attached and the details of obtaining them. Croft was probably American, judging by his spelling conventions in Croft (1876) and by the fact that he chose to write to the California Academy of Sciences.

³ The San Francisco register of voters of entered on him August 1st, 1867 as a 30-year-old Maine native. In the census rolls taken on July 11th, 1870, he is listed as a 33 year old Sea Captain, born in Maine. The Maine census of 1850 lists a number of people named Calligan, mostly natives of Ireland and living in various towns around Machias Bay. A Patrick Calligan, a Maine native aged 14 at the time of the census (August 31st), is recorded in the town of Whiting. He was the only Calligan of the household, probably an orphan.

⁴ That is his earliest appearance in the City Directory, and his only one in the register of voters. Possibly he moved to San Francisco at about that time. However, as a mariner, he may not have been often available to be contacted by the Directory. One P. Calligan is recorded as having arrived in San Francisco from Mazatlán aboard the *Comet* on October 14th, 1850 (Rasmussen 1966, II, 54) though our Calligan would have only been 13 at the time.

⁵ The City Directory lists him at 328 Main in 1867 and 1868, and at

the NW corner of Laskie and Mission from 1871 to 1873. All the Directory listings mention only him, but typically only the head of the household was listed. Both residences were destroyed by the fire of 1906.

- ⁶ Atwater 1873b, a report of the wreck and of expenses for the relief of the crew and passengers; Atwater 1873a, an account of the wreck to the Secretary of State; Anon. 1873b, a news item based on an interview with Captain Keller on his arrival in San Francisco. Van Hoorebeeck (1979) says Calligan's ship was the 26-ton *Caroline*, from San Francisco. He does not provide any evidence in support of that claim, and neither McCall's (1990) catalog of ship arrivals in Rapanui nor any other source I've seen mentions that ship. He may have confused it with the schooner *H. Caroline*, wrecked on the California coast in February 1874 (Mitchell 1879.)
- ⁷ April 30th according to Anon. 1873a, April 20th according to Anon. 1873b.
- ⁸ May 6th according to Anon. 1873b, Atwater 1873a, and Atwater 1873b. May 8th according to Anon. 1873a.
- ⁹ The *William and Thomas* was a Salvadoran-registered ship, under Captain Ellis. Anon. 1873a states that it left from Port Blakeley on December 1st. Anon. 1873c, a news item based on an interview with Ellis, says it left Port Townsend on December 6th — possibly as an additional stop before leaving for Chile.
- ¹⁰ Pinart 1877, p. 209. Métraux 1940, p. 200. According to Pinart, the new huts were concentrated in the village of Mataveri. The *Messenger de Tahiti* (quoted in McCall 1990) mentions another timber ship, the *Huntwell*, wrecked on Easter Island in early 1871. It carried a crew of ten, as compared with the *E.K.*'s 14 and the *W&T*'s seven. Like the *William and Thomas*, it is not mentioned in *Lloyd's Register* or any ship directory I could find. I assume it was considerably smaller than the *Elizabeth Kimball*, and its contribution of lumber lesser as well.
- ¹¹ Atwater (1873a) writes that Dutrou-Bornier "supplied them [the crew of the *E.K.*] with the necessities of life during their stay on the island." Incidentally, Anon. 1873b, in its only comment about Easter Island itself, says, "Easter Island is inhabited by two Frenchmen and two hundred kanakas, who are ruled by the Frenchmen." The other "Frenchman" may have been the Dane Christian Schmidt.
- ¹² The schooner, named *Laura* (after Captain Keller's wife), arrived in Tahiti on August 23rd. The *Messenger de Tahiti* (also quoted by McCall 1990) mistakenly gives the Captain's name as "Bella." The weight and speed of the boat are consistent with a 20-foot (6m) lifeboat — a somewhat tight arrangement for 9 people.
- ¹³ Tregear (1892), p.101, mentions that "one [tablet] was taken by the mate of a ship to San Francisco." He evidently misquotes Harrison (1874) who mentions that "From information, however, which has recently been received, [...] one, obtained last year by the mate of a vessel wrecked on the island, is said to have been taken to San Francisco." Harrison was aware of Croft's letters, and had received copies of his photographs. He may have been paraphrasing Croft.
- ¹⁴ *Messenger de Tahiti*, ship arrival and departure tables. These generally listed the contents of the cargo of each ship, the names of its non-native passengers, and the total passenger count.
- ¹⁵ Atwater 1875.
- ¹⁶ Hittell (1997) is an even more detailed account of the Academy's activities, based on the manuscript minutes of its meetings, and fully indexed. The only references to the Easter Island script it shows are the receipt of Croft's letters and photographs, and an unpublished 1886 talk on the subject by Hans Hermann Behr, the Academy's vice-president.

¹⁷ Croft 1876.

¹⁸ San Francisco City Directory. The address is given as 600 Sutter Street.

¹⁹ MacCrellish died on October 31st, 1882. His obituary is in the San Francisco *Alta California* of November 1st. The text of his will is in the November 9th issue.

²⁰ Their house was at 907 Pine St. (San Francisco City Directory, 1891 through 1907)

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