

OBITUARY

VERONICA DU FEU
(1926-2009)

Easter Sunday, the 12th of April 2009, saw the sad loss, following a sudden illness at her home in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, U.K., of one of the world's experts in Slavonic languages and the Rapanui language of Easter Island. Veronica Du Feu, born in London in 1926, had many a hair-raising tale to tell from her teenage years during the Blitz that harrowed Great Britain's capital during World War II. She obtained her PhD in Spanish and Slavonic at the University of London, and also gained a "Licence en Philologie Slave" at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium. Teaching for many years both Russian and Slavonic at the University of Manchester, she thereafter lectured in General Linguistics at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. She was also Affiliated Lecturer in Slavonic Studies at the University of Cambridge, U.K.



(Photo courtesy Alastair Graham Bryce.)

The author of many significant papers on Slavonic linguistics, Veronica gained an interest in the Rapanui language of Easter Island when teaching a seminar on "multilingualism" at the University of East Anglia early in the

1980s. A retired teacher in her course happened to mention that there was a "Chilean political refugee" there in Norwich by the name of Erena Araki, and wondered whether Veronica might wish to meet her and record a bit of her language — the Rapanui language of Easter Island. The historic encounter eventually led to Veronica and her husband Alastair Graham Bryce journeying to Easter Island on their own recognizance in 1983 to conduct linguistic research with the Araki and Riroroko families. The fruit of this considerable investment was the important study "The Phonology of Rapanui", University of East Anglia Papers in Linguistics, 1985: 21-23 and 36-55. Two years later, financed by her husband, the University of East Anglia, and the British Academy, Veronica returned to Rapa Nui to conduct field work once again, with Avelina Riroroko and José Fati (Piri), the result this time being the significant study, "The Determinants of the Noun in Rapanui", *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 96:473-495 (1987).

My wife and I came to know Veronica well over the next few years, and cherished her sharp intellect, warm personality, and engaging charm. Her enthusiasm for Easter Island, its language, and its people was infectious. After my wife and I celebrated Veronica's 65th birthday together with her at a linguistics conference in Honolulu in 1991, Veronica and I co-wrote a paper, "The Rapanui Language", *Easter Island Studies* (Oxford 1993, pp.165-168). We then met up with her again, at a linguistics conference in Holland, in 1994. This was when she divulged to us that she was heavily committed to her *magnum opus*, which turned out to be the world's first professional grammar of the Rapanui language: *Rapanui: A Descriptive Grammar* (Routledge, 1996). The seminal tome was dedicated to Erena Araki's mother Avelina Riroroko, whom Veronica affectionately called "Nua". In a review of this work in the *Rapa Nui Journal* 10:47-49 (1996), I identified it as "the only professional comprehensive description of the Modern Rapanui language in existence". Though I critically addressed her unique achievement, I stressed that "Veronica Du Feu is to be heartily congratulated on this labor of love that budded so long but then blossomed all the more beautifully for it". Her grammar continues to be bought and used as a reference by people researching in Polynesian studies and linguistics.

Only a handful of adequately trained linguists have addressed the Rapanui language. Veronica Du Feu's engagement with this and the island's people was not only rare, but inspirational. She gave so much more than she took. Those who knew her personally will miss that sparkling personality of hers.

Always very close to her husband, she concluded her "Introduction" to the book *Rapanui* with the words: "Alastair, many, many thanks". May we be able to say to Veronica, perhaps now gone but forever present in what she has bequeathed us: "Veronica, *maururu*".

— Steven Roger Fischer