

Obituary: Grant Edwin McCall (1943-2023)



It was a sad day for the island studies community worldwide: Grant McCall, professor of anthropology, passed away on July 22, 2023. He was 79; and just a month away from turning 80.



Grant is best known to us in island studies as the President of the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA). He led ISISA in this capacity for four consecutive terms in office (1998-2014), taking over from ISISA's Founding President, Canadian Theo L. Hils.

Grant was a well-known anthropologist in Pacific studies, recognized for his strong stance against the use of nuclear testing in the region, as well as his historical research on Rapanui.

Grant was founding convenor and then Vice-President, of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies (AAAPS). He was the founding

Director of the Centre for South Pacific Studies (1987-2003) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia; and then Director of its South Pacific Resource Centre (2004-2008). He also served on the editorial and advisory boards of various journals and non-government organisations, as well as a frequent contributor to professional

publications. Many of his numerous involvements are documented in his *curriculum vitae*, available [on line](#).



In recognition of his contributions to the communities which he served, Grant was awarded Honorary Citizenship of Jeju Island, South Korea; and Honorary Membership of *Te Mau Hatu*, the Elders Council of Rapanui. He was also appointed an Honorary Member of ISISA in 2014.

Apart from his regular position at UNSW, Grant has also lectured, or held visiting fellowships, at various universities, including those of Copenhagen, Denmark; Santiago and Valparaíso, Chile; University College London and Cambridge, UK; Hawai'i, USA; Provence, France; Jeju, South Korea and the University of the South Pacific, Fiji Campus.

He was also an invited keynote speaker at conferences in China, Japan, New Caledonia and Spain.

Above all, Grant's keen island interest was Rapanui. Here is an island seeped in myth and symbolism, and its islanders victims of the many interpretations of its history, of sheep ranchers, of tourism and of top-down governance from Santiago (Chile). He understood that the Rapanui also needed to navigate



modernity, but plausibly from some position of strength, where they could continue to assert and celebrate their own Polynesian identity. *Continuity and change in Rapanui social organisation* was the sub-title of Grant's PhD thesis, defended at the Australian National University in 1976: https://www.academia.edu/661928/Reaction_to_Disaster

Grant was the 'life and soul of the party' and the larger-than-life figure of ISISA. He helped establish the Association as the respected global clearinghouse for island studies, championing *Island Studies Journal* when it was founded in 2006, ably negotiating the multiple hosting of the ISISA biennial conference, and building a strong academic brand around these flagship events. Jovial and never lost for words, he led the association with panache and aplomb, drifting from scholarship to anecdote and back in his numerous interventions, all laced with his characteristic self-assurance. He would always stand out, not least because of his wide-brimmed hat and the colourful shirts.



Grant was, as some of you may know, my favourite sparring mate in ISISA Conferences. I joined ISISA in 1998 and attended the Mauritius Conference that year. I served as Grant's (and ISISA's) Vice-President (2010-2014) and then took over from Grant as President (2014-2022) before passing the baton to Laurie Brinklow. Grant and I

argued and debated endlessly about what ISISA should do, and how it could improve its services to the global island studies community, to policy makers, as well as to the citizens of small islands. We deeply respected each other while doing so.

He is the father of nissology and has been the 'voice' and 'face' of island studies internationally for almost two decades. His two seminal papers, from [1994](#) and [1996](#) respectively, set the stage for the identification of the study of islands which he termed 'nissology', and which he described as "the study of islands on their own terms". This definition of the scope of the field of island studies remains the slogan and key objective of ISISA: <https://isisa.org/index.php?c=isisa-objectives>

I last met Grant at the 2022 ISISA Conference in Zadar, Croatia.

Our sincere condolences to his wife Julia, his children, relatives and friends.

Godfrey Baldacchino (on behalf of the ISISA Executive) -- 31 July 2023

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In the few days after his passing was announced, we collected these poignant **testimonials** from ISISA colleagues who knew Grant:

- Vale Grant.
You were always larger than life, astute and confident to speak out on matters of justice. Your formidable intellect led the way in defining and celebrating Nissology. Your legacy will live on. We salute you. - *Jennie and Bob Teasdale, Kangaroo Island, Australia.*

- I have known Grant for over 10 years and my lingering memory of him is that he had a sense of humour and he would brighten the room with his presence. My first memory was when I attended my first ISISA conference in Tortola, British Virgin Islands (2012). He was chairing the General Meeting and one item on the agenda was the revival of the ISISA Newsletter which had been dormant for a while. When he asked for feedback, I spoke up and argued that having the ISISA Newsletter back would be a good idea to fill in the information gap between our biennial conferences. Well, he looked at me with his charming smile and said: "Yes, I agree. How about you taking it up and becoming the Newsletter editor?" I have to say that I was not expecting this; however, I did agree and I now have the honour to say that I served as the ISISA Newsletter Editor for a full 10 years. - *Anna Baldacchino, Malta; ISISA Secretary.*



- Sorry and sad to learn of Grant's passing. Grant inspired and empowered innumerable island representatives and participants involved in small island studies. Meetings in Honolulu and on Maui helped academics in Hawai'i appreciate Hawai'i's place in the middle of the Pacific as an iconic island chain. Grant's interest in our islands sparked and reminded local academics and scholars of our islands' unique place and attributes. His leadership and friendship will continue to be appreciated by our Hawaiian island colleagues who came to know him. - *Clyde Sakamoto, former Head, Maui Community College, USA; former Executive Member of ISISA.*

- Grant McCall, the founding Interim President, and then Vice President, of the AAAPS passed away last week. Grant specialised in Rapanui and Rabi social and cultural anthropology, but also contributed to Pacific History and the promotion of Pacific Studies generally in Australia. He was active in the PHA, ISISA, NZSA and ASAO, gave regular conference presentations and coordinated a professional development program for Pacific Island History teachers, the TTPF from 1995-2001. After a doctorate at ANU, Grant taught at USP and UNSW, and after retiring was an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Sydney. Rest In Peace. (Photo taken by his son Eddie in Suva, Fiji, two weeks before his passing, while Grant was delivering a workshop.) - *Max Quanchi, The University of Queensland, Australia.*



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- Indeed, very sad news. I fondly remember Grant giving me great support, guidance and encouragement whilst he was ISISA President as well as Chair of the Global Islands Network (GIN) Board of Directors. His name pretty much spells out his character, interests and professions as I remember him:



G Genial
R Raconteur & Rapa Nui
A Anthropologist & Ethnologist
N Nissologist
T Teacher & Tutor

M Mentor & Moai Expert
C Conciliator
C Candour & Conviviality
A Antipodean with Australian Bush Hat
L Lavalava & Leather Satchel (battered) from which he gave me presents such as Cape Breton whisky, Cuban cigars, Belgian chocolates & Vanuatu shell necklaces
L Leader & Lecturer



R.I.P. my friend - *Graeme Robertson, Scotland; ISISA Secretary 2002-18; GIN Executive Director, 2002-15.*

- He has donned his hat for the last time.

(Photo by Ilan Kelman - Anegada, British Virgin Islands, 28 May 2012). – *Ilan Kelman, University College London, United Kingdom.*



- I first met Grant McCall at the ISISA 2002 Conference, which was my first with the organisation and one that I remember with great fondness overall. Grant was such a wonderful character: jovial, warm-hearted, caring, welcoming, provocative in the best sense of the word, deeply committed to island studies, and especially kind to early career academics; doctoral candidates among them. Over successive conferences and many years, he continued to grace those meetings and to support the field and those in it with his caring and engaging ways. His dedication to his own field and the peoples with whom he worked also bear remembrance and celebration; but that is for others to remark on. I shall miss him always and treasure the nickname he gave me that long gone summer. – *Elaine Stratford, aka Dory, University of Tasmania, Australia.*

- The first time I met Grant was in Nassau, Bahamas, in 1992, where the Third 'Islands of the World' Conference and the first General Meeting of ISISA took place. During the meeting, Theo Hills was elected as the Founding President of



ISISA, with executive members including Grant, myself, among others. It was at this gathering that I proposed to hold the first ISISA conference on Okinawa Island in 1994. Grant came up with the theme for the conference, "Island matters, Islands matter." The Okinawa conference was jointly held with INSULA, represented by Pier Giovanni Ayala, the Secretary-General of INSULA. When drafting the ISISA Charter, Hills and Ayala had disagreements on certain critical points. I asked Grant to

mediate between them, and he settled the dispute with his inherent charm and enlightened wit, leaving everyone happy. Grant introduced the term 'nissology' to us during this conference. In 1998, the Japan Society of Island Studies was inaugurated, and Grant was invited as a keynote speaker. I may soon join him on his heavenly planet – *Hiroshi Kakazu, President Emeritus of the Japan Society of Island Studies.*

- *In memoriam* for Grant McCall

(Original French) Je me souviens. Il m'en souvient qu'en 1991 à Honolulu, nous conversâmes plaisamment avec Grant à propos d'îles et d'archipels posés là sur les cartes et sur les mers. Suite à cela, il devint le chantre de la nissology/nissologie qu'il porta sur les fonds baptismaux des *island studies* quelques années plus tard.

Ce ne fut qu'en 2014 lors de la conférence ISISA 2014 à Taipei que je le revis. Il eut l'amabilité de m'apporter du miel de bois de cuir (*leatherwood*) de Tasmanie dont il savait que j'étais grand amateur.

Entre temps en 1997, Joël Bonnemaïson, le père de l'Îlétité, nous avait quitté lors d'une mission de terrain en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Grant en était fort affligé car Joël était un ami tout autant qu'un collègue.

Ce fut à Zadar, lors de la conférence ISISA 2022, que nos pèlerinages scientifiques se croisèrent à nouveau. Il eut l'amabilité de m'apporter une fois du miel de bois de cuir dans leurs magnifiques pots noirs en métal donc venant de la Terre de van Diemen.

Homme de science certes, mais aussi homme de cœur, Grant était animé d'un "mana" apprécié où qu'il aille depuis Rapa Nui jusqu'à Arran, l'île de ses ancêtres écossais .

Merci Grant pour ce que tu fus et sera toujours en nos mémoires.

(English translation)

I remember how, in 1991 in Honolulu, Grant and I had a pleasant chat about the islands and archipelagos that lay there on the maps and on the seas. After that, he became a champion of nissology, which he brought to the island studies movement a few years later.

It wasn't until 2014, at the ISISA conference in Taipei, that I saw him again. He was kind enough to bring me some Tasmanian leatherwood honey, which he knew I was very fond of.

Meanwhile, in 1997, Joël Bonnemaïson, the father of Îlétité, had left us during a field trip in New Caledonia. Grant was deeply saddened, for Joël was as much a friend as a colleague.

It was in Zadar, at the ISISA 2022 conference, that our scientific pilgrimages crossed again. Once again, he was kind enough to bring me some leatherwood in their magnificent black metal pots from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).

A man of science, yes, but also a man of heart, Grant's *mana* was appreciated wherever he went, from Rapa Nui to Arran, the island of his Scottish ancestors.

Thank you Grant for what you were. You will always be in our memories. –
Christian Depraetere, Montpellier, France.

- Dear Grant,

Some people you meet during your life make an unforgettable impression. You are one of those people I will never forget. Not only in your appearance unique, but as a person authentic, open-minded, curious, and so much fun!



Our first acquaintance was in Oahu, Hawaii in 2006. I was still young, just finished my studies in Cultural Anthropology and had done my fieldwork on Rapanui. That I had the chance of meeting you, was one of the most valuable moments for me during the ISISA conference. Hearing you talk passionately about *Te Pito O Te Henua* made my heart jump and you had so much to tell! I loved listening to your stories and theories.

We also met at a few other conferences. Another one was in Leiden during winter time. It had been snowing and the streets were very slippery. I supported you on the way to your hotel. We had a big laugh!

You will be missed... No doubt you will leave your footprint behind. Rest in peace. A big hug - *Debbie van den Berg, The Netherlands.*

- Sailing with Grant

'Can we get there from Amsterdam by boat?' This was the question that Grant asked me after the decision was taken that the next ISISA conference was going to be held on Terschelling in 2018. My answer: 'Of course we can. Sailing with an old cargo ship is the perfect way to travel to such a destination'. And so it happened. With a small group of participants, we sailed from the Central Station in Amsterdam to Harlingen across the IJsselmeer.

Grant really enjoyed the two-day trip. It allowed him to closely observe the coastline with its little old towns and villages partly visible behind the dykes. He also experienced the hard work in a team to sail such an old ship with its modest passenger facilities. But in particular he enjoyed the company of the ISISA friends and the crew with their stories. Grant himself was in good shape, with his provoking way of starting a discussion, but above all with his warm personality and his sincere interest in other people. - *Gerard A Persoon, University of Leiden, The Netherlands.*



- I will never forget Grant McCall.

When arriving for the *Islands of the World* meeting on New Providence, Bahamas, in 1992, I was young and had no experience of international conferences. I was nervous: what was it going to be like, to mix with scholars, scientists, professors? One of the very first persons I met, however, dispelled all my worries. He was very kind, very funny, very knowledgeable, very special, very Australian – and we talked about Easter Island and Pitcairn and islandness ... and the 1992 *Islands of the World* meeting turned out to be a success not only because of the decision to form ISISA but also for me, personally, since Grant made me – an “interested person”, rather than a researcher – feel so welcome.



We only met sporadically after that: the last time was at the island conference in the Netherlands in 2018. But I will never forget him - *Anders Källgård, Sweden.*

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- Calling people ‘larger than life’ can be a lazy, clichéd characterisation; but not regarding Grant McCall: given his big hat, long, improbably blonde hair, gravelly Australian voice and, of course, the inevitable Hawaiian shirt, worn on even the most formal occasion. Looking through photographs I have of Grant from our long acquaintance, I was surprised to find one in 2004 of him wearing a humdrum, blue polo shirt. However, the hat and the hair depicted the usual Grant as did the two big smiles as he shook hands with a farmer on Kinmen Island, Taiwan: two cobblers, best mates though they had only just met, given Grant’s ability to put people at ease. Another picture ten years later has Grant in full regalia, his blue Hawaiian shirt a protest against atom bomb testing in the Pacific. Taken at an island studies conference in Taiwan, Grant grins, arms stretched wide, trying to encompass the others around him who had just been presented with awards. This was Grant: the warm, generous, islophile; centre stage - *Steve Royle, Emeritus Professor of Island Geography, Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK.*



Farewell, old friend

