

An Island To Oneself - A Remarkable Story

Written by Andy Owen



'*An Island To Oneself*' is the remarkable story of Tom Neale and his three stays on Suwarrow - an uninhabited island in the stunningly beautiful Cook Island group.

I first became aware of this marvellous story, over 30 years ago.

I was at my desk having a lunchtime sandwich, reading the Daily Mail and came across a story about a New Zealand guy who did something we all have dreamt of doing - living alone on a desert island.

The article was written by Noel Barber, who was then the foreign affairs journalist for the paper.

He later became a famous author, writing 6 books, including *Tanamera* and *Farewell to France*.

Barber had heard the story and the paper funded his trip to the Pacific, to visit Tom Neale on his island in 1961. He spent a couple of nights there.

I was completely taken by the story - and immediately called Noel Barber in London.

He was very gracious and we had a long chat about Suvarrow and Tom Neale.

I think he must have been taken with my enthusiasm for the story - because a few days later, a copy of the book, complete with a handwritten note, arrived on my desk.



It is, without question, my favourite book *ever*, by a long, long way.

I read it at least once a year - and have done so, for over 20 years.

Tom Neale was born in 1902, in Wellington, New Zealand. His father was English, born in Aylesbury - and his mother was a New Zealander.

They had met when his father was sent to New Zealand with the 17th Lancers. While still a baby, the family moved to Greymouth on New Zealand's South Island and then finally across the island to Timaru.

His upbringing was a happy one, living on 20 acres of land and he was an above-average scholar, with a love of geography.

From an early age, he had a love for the sea and, in his book, he said, "it always seemed absolutely natural that I should go to sea. I cannot remember ever contemplating any other way of life".

He was eighteen and a half when he joined the New Zealand Navy. He wanted to become a skilled navigator, but was very disappointed to hear he was too old to be apprenticed as a seaman.

So, he signed on as an Apprentice Engineer, starting right at the very bottom, as a Stoker.

His desire to see more of the Pacific was all-consuming, but because of his job, he actually saw very little, beyond the "confining, narrow streets of the ports where we docked".

After four years, he bought himself out of the Navy.

The next few years, he travelled around the islands, taking various jobs for a few months at a time - and then moving on.

He learned so much and saw so much - and he fell in love with the islands of the South Pacific.

He had been away from home for 10 years - but, at the age of 28, he returned to New Zealand in 1931. He stayed with the family for a few months, doing odd jobs - and then his wanderlust surfaced again.

One particular island - Moorea - was calling him. It was a small French island off Tahiti, dramatically beautiful and totally unspoiled.

Tom was very happy there and settled into a blissful existence. He referred to it in his book, as "the nearest thing on earth to paradise".

He learned Tahitian, made a few close friends and his 'luxury' was buying books. He read anything he could lay his hands on - from Defoe to Conrad, or just a simple western.

It was to be a book that changed his life.

He stumbled upon the works of an American writer called Robert Dean Frisbie, who had settled in the Pacific and written several books on the islands. Tom became enamoured by the stories and the alluring images that Frisbie created.

He read the books again and again.

Then, in 1940, a character came into Tom's life that was to change it in a spectacular way. His name was Andy Thompson. Tom met Andy, while on a trip to Papeete, just 12 miles away from Moorea.

Andy was the Captain of a hundred-ton island schooner called *Tiare Taporo* - the 'Lime Flower'.

They met regularly for the next few years and early in 1943 and right out of the blue, Tom got a letter from him. It said, quite simply "Be ready. I've got a job for you in the Cook Islands".

As Tom confessed in his book, he didn't particularly *want* a job in the Cook Islands - and he had no idea of even what the job was. But, when *Tiare Taporo* arrived in Papeete a few weeks later, Tom was waiting.

Little did he know, what adventures lay ahead. And fate had decided he was soon to meet Frisbie, who in turn, was to lead him to Suvarrow.

The job Andy wanted him for, was to run a store on one of the outer islands. The store belonged to the company that owned Andy's schooner.

His first stop was Rarotonga. Within two days of arriving, he met Frisbie, when Andy invited them both for lunch.

That lunch was to have momentous and life-changing consequences for Tom.

Frisbie clearly loved the islands and had a desire to write more about them.

Towards the end of the lunch, Frisbie mentioned Suvarrow.

Tom had heard of the island, as the stories about it told of a great lagoon, with a coral reef stretching nearly fifty miles around it. The island had almost a mystical feel to it, as it was way off the trade routes and very isolated.

The three of them were on the veranda after lunch, sharing a bottle of rum, when Frisbie said, "Tom Neale, Suvarrow is the most beautiful place on earth and no man has really lived, until he has lived there".

As Tom got up to leave, he looked at Frisbie and said "That's the sort of place for me". Frisbie smiled and retorted, "Well, if you feel that way about it, why don't you go there?"

It took him 5 years to feel the special sand of Suvarrow between his toes.



Andy Thompson had received orders to take some stores to five coast watchers on Suvarrow, on his way back from Manihiki. Andy asked Tom if he would like to join him on the trip as an engineer - and to quote Tom "I was aboard the *Tiare*, before Andy had time to change his mind".

The coast watchers were so called, as they had been on the island during the war, to keep an eye open for enemy ships and aircraft - and report anything important by radio.

In 1945, there were still 2 new Zealanders and three native helpers there, but they were due to leave very soon.

The trip went well and the *Tiare* arrived at Suvarrow during the late evening. Andy would not chance the reef in darkness, so they anchored up well off the atoll.

Tom could hear the faint, faraway boom of the sea breaking over the reef and he felt emotional. He fell asleep dreaming of tomorrow.

They approached the island carefully and entered the lagoon. Tom described it as 'floating on vast pieces of coloured satin".



After meeting the five men, Tom went off on his own to explore the island. In the evening, they all had supper - and Tom found himself evaluating what was there.

There was what looked like a soundly-built shack, solid water tanks full of good water and a fine garden that the men had created.

The next day, Andy and Tom sailed across the lagoon and had lunch. When it was over and they started back, Tom turned to Andy and said, "Andy, now I know this is the place I've been looking for all this time".

Sadly and incredibly, it took him another 7 long years before his dream came true.

That's simply because it took that long before another ship from Rarotonga passed anywhere near Suvarrow. It's hard to imagine this, but easy to understand, when the island's location is revealed.

Suvarrow lies almost in the centre of the Pacific, 513 miles from Rarotonga and the nearest inhabited island to it, is Manihiki, over 200 miles away.

Fast forward to 1952. Tom had, by now, reached middle age.

Enter an independent trader in Rarotonga - Dick Brown - who had a ship called the *Mahurangi*. It was an old submarine-chaser that had been converted into an inter-island trader.

And her next trip was to Palmerston and Manihiki. The route passed close to Suvarrow.

It was a very unusual route and Tom recognised it was a fantastic opportunity and one that might never come his way again. The ship was due to leave in 2 weeks.

Tom approached Dick. "How much would it cost for you to divert to Suvarrow and drop me off?" He thought for a minute and replied "thirty quid".

Tom had just £79 in savings. "Done", said Tom.

He had two weeks - and £49 - to gather everything he would need to survive on an uninhabited coral atoll for an indefinite number of years.

Tom made detailed lists and started to stockpile supplies. He bought large quantities of flour, sugar, kerosene, and coffee beans. He bought tools, seeds and many other key things he knew he was going to need.

And a large supply of books.

As word spread around Rarotonga about his grand plan, many villagers offered gifts and some even offered companionship. Tom politely refused the advances of several women who asked to accompany him, because he felt it would not be long before he came to resent their company.

He did, however, sail with two non-human companions: a cat named Mrs Thievery (named after her favourite hobby) and her kitten, Mr Tom-Tom.

After 6 weeks at sea, Tom and the two cats, arrived at Suwarrow on October 7th 1952. He was 4 weeks away from his 50th birthday.

The island was uninhabited.

Tom was keen to see how the main buildings and other elements had fared in the years since he last saw them. Would the shack still be standing? What about the water towers and the garden?

He hurried up the path, past the tangled undergrowth and creepers and a curtain of flowers - and suddenly the main shack was there right in front of him.

His heart sank. He had forgotten what nature could do in 7 years.

The roof of the main shack was hardly visible because of the lush creepers covering it. The outbuildings appeared similarly strangled. Upon closer inspection, the main roof was holed.

Then, he saw the boat. It was upside down with two quarter-inch cracks running along her bottom. It was useless - and he had brought no caulking with him.

But, things were about to improve. He cautiously opened the front door and went inside the main shack and, as he walked around, he was excited to find a good solid bed, tables, chairs, a food safe and the carcass of an old refrigerator.

And, the shelves contained loads of books...

The bath-house was badly overgrown, but nothing he couldn't fix.

The two water tanks were in good condition. One, built of circular corrugated iron, held 300 gallons. The other, a square galvanised tank, held 400 gallons.

He turned on the taps and excellent quality water gushed out.

And, one final surprise greeted him. An old hen, surprised by the new visitor, sprang out of the shadows and ran into the bush. Eggs might be on the menu soon!

The garden was another blow. It was overgrown and the topsoil had long blown away. Tom knew this was going to be a major problem.

But, he soon fell into a routine, spending his daylight hours building, repairing and cleaning, plus working on the garden that would be so important to him.

Slowly he started to get on top of things and he felt delighted with his new home.



As day turned to evening, he would sit on a wooden box at the beach, watching the magical sunset while drinking a bowl of tea.



But bad luck was always shadowing him and the book tells of a number of incidents that were major setbacks. The most serious one was when he dislocated his back and it took four excruciatingly painful hours to crawl back to his shack and his bed.

He needed a miracle.

He got one.

It was in the form of Peb and Bob, two American yachtsmen who stopped in at the atoll while en-route to Samoa. (Peb was better known as James Rockefeller Jr., a member of one of the United States' wealthiest dynasties.)

They were astonished to find Tom on this 'uninhabited' island.

They stayed with him for two weeks, fed him, massaged his back and returned him to decent health. Then, they left with a pledge that they would send a ship to fetch him.

Two weeks later, the promised ship arrived, plucking Tom and the cats from their two-year life of island solitude and took them back to Rarotonga.

When he had fully recovered, Tom wanted to return to Suvarrow, but the government wouldn't let him go. Disconsolate and very unhappy, he took a job in a warehouse.

In June 1956, Tom married Sarah Haua Marsters in Rarotonga. In November of that year, his son Arthur Frederick was born in Auckland, New Zealand. In February 1958, daughter Stella was born on Palmerston, Cook Islands.

It had been six long and frustrating years since he had been on his beloved island.

He craved to return. Then, a friend with a 30-foot boat offered to take him back to Suvarrow. Tom arrived back on Suvarrow in April 1960. He stayed for two and a half years, only leaving when pearl divers from Manihiki suddenly started to visit the island with increasing regularity.

He became angry and frustrated that his idyllic solitude had been broken.

He remained in Rarotonga for three years, during which he wrote '*An Island To Oneself*', which, incidentally, has no mention of his wife, their marriage and the two children.

Suvarrow kept on calling him. And, in July 1967 he returned for his final, decade-long stay on the island he loved.





His daughter visited him in 1969. She went again to see him in 1976. His wife had divorced him in 1972.

In March 1977, the yacht *Feisty Lady* visited Suvarrow and found Tom to be seriously ill with stomach cancer. They informed Rarotonga and the schooner *Manuvai* came and evacuated him from Suvarrow for the last time on 11th March.

Tom Neale died on 30th November 1977, age 75. He is buried at the RSL Cemetery in Rarotonga, across from the airport.

Despite his long stretches of solitary living, Tom claimed he never felt lonely. The few times he wished someone was with him, he wrote in his memoirs, were "not because I wanted company but just because all this beauty seemed too perfect to keep to myself."

Because of Tom, Suvarrow has become one of the best-known atolls in the whole of the Cook Islands - and with today's more powerful yachts, people often visit to see where Tom lived. His shack and outbuildings are kept furnished just as they were when he lived there.



Today the island is cared for, by a caretaker and his family.

This wonderful book has become a South Seas classic and Tom's memory lives on.

If you only buy or read one more book for the rest of your life - make sure it's this one.

It is one of those books that is quite capable of leaving a mark on you for life. It certainly has with me.

I'll leave the last words to Tom:

"I chose to live in the Pacific Islands because life there moves at the sort of pace which you feel God must have had in mind originally, when He made the sun to keep us warm - and provided the fruits of the earth for the taking..."

