

TOM NEALE, THE *Robinson Crusoe* OF SUWARROW ATOLL

By Randal Lockie

The warm remote Palm fringed Frangipani scented Isles of the South Pacific have always attracted their fair share of 'oddball characters' and the Cook Islands proved to be no exception to the rule.

Many of these characters were either dreamers or schemers, and sometimes both. Often these 'identities' were shaped or influenced by happenings in their upbringing or other events in their lives.

Tales of Tahiti for instance from the pen of Nordhoff and Hall's famous book "Mutiny on the Bounty" would have sent many a young man's heart racing. "Robinson Crusoe" written by Daniel Defoe and first published in 1719 was a story about a castaway and was believed to have been based on the real life experiences of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish castaway who spent four years on a Pacific Island, was also a very popular read. Treasure Island from the pen of Robert Louis Stevenson is a story for the ages and also conjures up pictures of deserted tropical islands.

This brings me to Tom Neale, Tom could be best described as a 'self-made' Castaway, who for many years made his home on the remote Northern Cook Island of Suvarrow.

Tom was a New Zealander who left home at eighteen and enlisted in the New Zealand Navy in 1920. Early in his career he spent four years travelling



▲ Tom Neale the 'self-made' castaway

throughout the Pacific on Naval vessels. Tom then left the Navy and spent six years wandering independently through the 'islands' that he had grown to love.

He worked in a multitude of short term jobs, clearing bush, planting bananas, and working on inter-island trade ships to support himself. In 1928 Tom returned very briefly to New Zealand before travelling and settling in Tahiti where he lived until 1943, again supporting himself by doing odd jobs and enjoying life.

It was around this time that Tom was offered a job as a relieving island trader/storekeeper in the Cook Islands, a position ideally suited to him and one he enjoyed. In Rarotonga, Tom met with the famous but mildly eccentric American author, Robert Dean Frisbee.

Tom recounted the meeting and conversation in his autobiography *"An Island to Oneself"*, "That afternoon Frisbee entranced me, and I can see him now on the verandah, the rum bottle on the big table between us, leaning forward with that blazing characteristic earnestness, saying to me, "Tom Neale, Suvarov is the most beautiful place on earth, and no man has really lived until he has lived there." (*Suvarov is the former name of Suvarrow*)

Frisbee had written of his life living as a trader/storekeeper in the remote Northern Cooks in the book he wrote titled *"The Book of Puka-Puka"*, after the island of the same name. The book was published in 1929 and was an instant success, particularly in America during the depression years.

Frisbee told Tom tales about Suvarrow, an atoll he himself had lived on for a while with his family.



▲ Suvarrow Atoll, Cook Island

In fact Tom already had a passing acquaintance with Suvarrow when in, 1945 a ship he was crewing on, dropped off stores for World War II coast-watchers living on the atoll.

Tom had by now made up his mind that Suvarrow was the idyllic place where he wanted to live and in October 1952, when he was 50 years of age, he got his wish having booked a passage on a ship passing close by to Suvarrow. Tom was dropped off on the island

▼ Tom Neale catch of the day



with two cats he had brought along to take care of the rats, and some stores that he had scraped together.

Suvarrow had not been occupied since the end of the war, seven years previously. There was a rough hut with water tanks and the coast-watchers had left chickens.

There was also a collection of books and a broken down boat that Tom repaired. Someone had also introduced pigs to the atoll and these ran wild, and according to Tom, ate every new green shoot that appeared in his garden and on the atoll.

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The pigs therefore presented a few problems for Tom and his survival on the atoll, and in due course they were duly dispatched.

Tom's diet consisted mainly of fish and crayfish, which of course he caught, chicken, eggs, paw-paw, coconut and breadfruit made up the balance - what more could you want in 'paradise'?

Tom by his own admission was not keen on vegetables! Clothing wasn't ever an issue as Tom hardly wore any, as a result his body became 'bronzed' by the sun and he became very fit with all the energy and the strenuous exercise used to survive. Tom's first visitors arrived by yacht 10 months after he had been alone on the atoll. He had run out of tobacco by then and I have been told that his first conversational words were "have you got any ciggies" (cigarettes)! - such is life.

In May 1954 Tom injured his back throwing the anchor from his boat. Fortunately another passing yacht found him in a bad state and alerted the officials in Rarotonga who sent a Government boat to pick him up and then take him back a few weeks later.



▲ Splitting coconuts

Tom's second stay on the Atoll was in 1960, after having tried desperately to return earlier without success. This time he stayed until 1963 after no less than eleven Manahiki pearl divers had descended on Suvarrow and "turned his heaven into hell". Tom's third and last stay on Suvarrow was in 1967. He remained on the island until 1977, when once again he was found ill on the Atoll by another passing yachtsman and taken to Rarotonga. Tom was now 73 years of age.

Tom went into hospital in Rarotonga. He had stomach cancer and was treated by the infamous Mr. Milan Brych (that's another story). Tom died eight months later, in 1977 and his grave is in the RSA cemetery on Rarotonga, opposite the airport. Tom had a remarkable innings of sixteen years on Suvarrow.

The Cook Island Government declared Suvarrow a National Park in 1978 - so if you are thinking of following in Tom Neale's footsteps - sorry, no one other than official park rangers are intermittently allowed to stay on the Atoll these days!

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