


An Island to Oneself: The Story of Six Years on a Desert Island

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What we have all now and then dreamed of doing, Tom Neale did: go and live alone on a desert island. For years while storekeeping in the South Pacific, he planned, read and talked until the great day when he was landed on his little kingdom, aware of (but undismayed by) the fact that he would have to struggle with the full strength of body and mind to survive. Neale's gripping account of his years spent alone on Suvarov is an unforgettable tale of peril, beauty, and solitude.

An Island to Oneself: The Story of Six Years on a Desert Island Details

Date : Published September 25th 1990 by Ox Bow Press (first published 1966)

ISBN : 9780918024763

Author : Tom Neale

Format : Hardcover 255 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, Autobiography, Memoir, Adventure, Biography, Survival

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Nettle says

I'm on a desert-island-book kick at the moment, so when I saw this was available for free, I grabbed it.

I really liked this. It's not an overly long book, but it's well written and in a way a complete opposite to the last book I read of this type, Castaway. The one thing that really stands out is just how *happy* he is on the island.

There's no real hardships apart from a couple of bouts of fever and a rather poor diet, and even after 14 months alone he's still happy and content, but that adds to the atmosphere, and when he has to leave you can truly sympathise with him.

This is one of those books that's really worth reading

Amerynth says

Really compelling story of Tom Neale, who marooned himself on a desert island in the South Pacific and made it his home for more than six years. The book covers Neale's first two stays on the island as he battled the jungle, established a garden, a fowl run and tried to put aside the need for companionship and living by the clock. His story is warm and engrossing, making this quick read a book to remember.

Phobos says

Life is stranger than fiction. No really! It is. This is one man's story about pretty much every little boy's dream of living alone on a desert island where he builds a shelter and hunts for fish.

Tom Neale didn't wash up on the island, he went there willingly like Thoreau did to his pond at Walden. Neale is from New Zealand but travelled the islands of the Pacific for many years.

This is a great adventure book. It's stranger than fiction. The Tom Hanks movie "Cast Away" has nothing on the drama Neale faces on this island. There are hurricanes, pigs, castaways, injuries and visitors from abroad. There's really never a dull moment.

I wonder if anyone owns the movie rights to this story. It would make a great movie. Maybe it's too soon since "Cast Away" but Tom Neale really gives Tom Hanks a run for his money.

Neale was on the island during two different stays, from 1952-1956 and 1960-1964. He also came back in 1967 but this isn't detailed in the book.

Kay says

Island of Desire

Terrific book for would-be hermits or just those of us who long for solitude. Neale spent years in the South Pacific dreaming of finding a deserted island before he finally took the plunge, so he had plenty of time to prepare. Still, there were all manner of unexpected setbacks and challenges to face, including a severe bout with fever and an epic storm.

One thing I particularly liked about Neale was how doggedly he clung to his dream. While living an unfulfilling life as a shopkeeper in the Pacific, he became enamored with the idea of one particular islet, Motu Tuo. He dreamed about it for years, and obsessively sought out information about it, even paying a brief and inspirational visit to it at one point.

He clung to his *idée fixe* for seven years before he had the chance to act on it. He was fifty when he moved to his island, and considering that he was truly on his own for the next six years, completely cut off from the outside world, his feat seems even more impressive. His sojourn took place during the early 1950s, before such conveniences as cell phones and GPS locators, so there wasn't really any safety net for him. On the occasions when he was ill or injured, he really had to keep his wits about him to survive.

Writing in a straightforward and honest manner, Neale recounts his bouts of loneliness, daily routines, irritations, struggles, and fixations. Obviously a man who enjoyed a challenge, his character and quirks come through in this highly readable, almost breezy account. If you've ever casually wondered how YOU would fare on a desert island, then this book might give you something concrete to think about.

Jamie Krehbiel says

Tom Neale decided to live on an island by himself in the South Pacific. He managed to do so for about 20 years. This book was written after the first 10 years. It is interesting to read about how he did it. Plus who doesn't love beautiful islands? It is definitely a fun read.

Pat says

Written by New Zealander Tom Neale, this book was about Neale's time spent on a desert island for about 17 years. Not a hermit or recluse, Neale was just someone who dreamed of living on a desert island, and that dream came true for him at the age of 50. While most people that age are not even remotely thinking of doing such a thing, Neale did so and seemingly never regretted it. His years on the island were interrupted by a few trips back to the mainland mostly for health reasons, but Neale always returned to what I suspect felt more like home to him than the mainland. One trip back to civilization though, was not so much for health reasons as it was his advancing age and his desire to not face one thing alone -- death. This in fact is where the book ends, but it was not to be the end of the story. Thanks to two postscripts at the end of the book, a little more light is shed on the story. Bitten by the bug of living alone, Neale actually did return to the island one last time. Although there were several words here and there that are totally foreign to the English reader, one is able to make sense of what they are reading and get the main gist of the book.

Sandy says

Couldn't find this one anywhere so I ordered it from Amazon. If you've ever wished you could retreat from your hectic lifestyle and find a calmer existence this is the book to read. What an adventure! Wonderful!

Steve Van Slyke says

You don't have to be a sailor to love this book because it isn't really about sailing. It's about being comfortable being completely alone, and surviving without a grocery store a doctor or a dentist for hundreds of miles. Tom Neale was an amazing guy and he tells an amazing story of what it is truly like to live alone on a tropical island. I desperately wanted to stop at his island (Suvorov) on our way from Bora Bora to American Samoa, but unfortunately there was a dengue fever outbreak amongst the crews of the sailboats already there so we had to pass it by. So Suvorov will have to exist only in my mind as described by Tom Neale.

UPDATE: An opportunity presented itself to perhaps have another go at Suvorov (or Suvarrow as the Cook Islander now call it). A friend wanted me to help him sail his boat to Samoa from Tahiti. I agreed to go if we could stop at Suvorov. It's an amazing place, and although I have visited dozens of other Pacific atolls, this one is special, because of its history and because of its remoteness. Tom's old radio shack is still there and there is also a bust of him on the trail from the beach to the park rangers' headquarters (two Cook Islanders are now always there during the cruising season). If you're headed there, you must, must read his book.

Jim says

Going in I knew I was going to rate this book 5 stars. This is my kind of story. Someone who knows what needs to be done and goes out and figures out a way to do it on their own. There's not much excitement. Just a simple book explaining how to live life on your own. I really want my deserted island now.

Justin says

Ever wanted to move to a deserted island alone? This guy did, and makes a pretty convincing argument for it. Very good, but there was not enough "action" to make it great.

Josh says

I love this book. Tom Neale's decision to live for years on deserted island by himself is one of the boldest, weirdest feats I've ever heard of. Going Robinson Crusoe on purpose seems to me even more audacious than the acts of bravery I usually read about -- climbing Everest, sailing solo around the world, surviving shipwrecks, etc. A more delightful loner you'll never meet. At least on the pages of this book. When I

stopped to think about how Neale had parents and (a quick search reveals) a wife and kids, it almost broke his charming spell. Almost. I still love his idea of having an island to oneself, even if I want it only for a week.

Theresa Sivelle says

What a great book. My cousin recommended it and I have to say I really did enjoy this book. Amazing reading about surviving on an island for years by oneself with very little. He did have a head start in that some things were already on the island, but still very amazing. Even not being sure about some of the things he talked about as he is/was from New Zealand the story was still great and very interesting. Thanks for the recommendation cousin Karen. :-)

Scargosun says

To me this was a life changing book. It is told in first person format about how Tom Neale went to live on an uninhabited island in the Suvorov Atoll. He felt that his whole life was leading to that purpose and then he was finally able to do it in his 50's, in the 1950's. This island was not on a trade route but was an outpost at one point during WWII where a lookout was kept. After the war, all that was really left was a shack and a couple rustic outbuildings. This was Tom Neale's home. The book talks about the preparation, the experiences on the island and all the trials and successes that went along with it. The book made me wish I could have met the man who had such perfect insight into what he should do with his life. Make no mistake, this was not some crazy hermit. He was a New Zealand Navy man who after his time in the military worked in the Pacific Islands. He practiced 'batch' living which essentially meant he depended on no one for what he needed. He knew how to do just about everything and was able to apply that to island living. Reading about his daily life, everything from fishing, to creating a garden to surviving 5 hours in the ocean when his small boat capsized drew me in. It will be one of the books that has a permanent place on my nightstand.

Liralen says

In the fifties, Neale—then middle-aged—set out to realise a longstanding goal: to live alone on an island in the Pacific. He ended up doing two stints on the same island, with a six-year period between (the first period, roughly a year and a half long, ended when he injured his back; the second period lasted three and a half years). Neale was as good a chance as any to do it—he knew boats, he knew survival skills, he knew the Pacific. Too, he wasn't terribly inclined to make things as rustic/'authentic' as possible: he was eager to use things left behind by the soldiers who'd previously lived there and ready to bring comforts in from the industrialised world, insofar as he could.

While in content this is rather akin to *Castaway*, in feel it is more like *Adrift*: Neale has the same sort of confidence that Callahan does, one born of extensive experience. (It was with some degree of amusement that I noted that Neale named the boat he repaired the *Ruptured Duckling*; Callahan named his dinghy *Rubber Ducky III*.) He comes prepared to grow a garden, for example, but when he realises that there aren't enough bees to pollinate his plants, he doesn't give up...he uses *The Origin of Species* to teach himself to hand-pollinate.

In *Castaway*, Irvine describes a number of bureaucratic hoops in the way of spending a year on an island. Neale more or less walked around those hoops, perhaps because his adventure took place earlier (fifties and sixties). He didn't get permission—he just went. (Interestingly, when he was trying to get back to the island for his second stay, the government did throw up some blocks...but their attitude was basically 'we'll try to keep you from getting there, because living alone on an isolated island sounds dangerous and you might die, but if you *do* find a way to get there, well, okay'.)

Neale writes that he'd wondered whether he ought to end the book on his first leaving of the island, but he doesn't—choosing instead to cover most of his second stay as well, if in a more summarised form, as a lot of the basic details are the same. It's just as well, because it does sound like a different experience:

Now that I had had six years to re-live every moment I had spent on the island, and to reflect on the mistakes I had made, I rather ruefully came to the conclusion that I, who loved the leisurely pace of life on the islands, had failed when I reached Suvarov the first time to put into practice the lessons learned during half a lifetime in the South Pacific. I could understand how it had happened. I had been so proud of my island that I wanted to do everything in a rush. And so, in a curiously ironic way, I had unwittingly imposed on the timeless quality of the island the speed and bustle of modern cities from which I had been so anxious to escape. (216)

(view spoiler)

I am curious about two things: first, he says very little about his family, other than a passing mention of his mother's death (in that six-year interval). I'm very curious about how much communication he had with them and whether or not they supported this endeavour. And second: holy moly, for two months near the end of his second stay, he had three castaways (literally, their boat sank within rowing distance of his island) living with him. Says something about both the time period and the isolation of his island that they weren't rescued any sooner, but oh gosh, that could have been a book all its own, and yet it doesn't seem to have made a huge impression on him.

Anyway. I won't be running off to maroon myself on a desert island anytime soon—but I've had this on my to-read list for ages and ages, and I'm thrilled to have finally scrounged a copy. Well worth the read.

The predominant reason [to leave voluntarily] was a very simple one. I realised I was getting on, and the prospect of a lonely death did not particularly appeal to me. I wasn't being sentimental about it, but the time had come to wake up from an exquisite dream before it turned into a nightmare. (255)

Raechelle Thomas says

Just brilliant! I thoroughly enjoyed this book; every page I turned made me stop and think, could John & I do something like that? This guy did it-and did it alone! Pure solitude, and self sufficiency-the truly simple life...well besides the hard work that comes with self sufficiency! And great insight; even though he was very much happy as a loner, even he occasionally would long for some companionship...but only for brief moments..other than that-he was very happy and content for those years that he **CHOSE** to live on an island all by himself. Loved it!
