



A life of islands and adventure

by Gerard Hutching

Remote, bird-haunted islands have always attracted Ronald Lockley; as a child he was profoundly influenced by such books as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Coral Island* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Skokholm Island, of the south-west coast of his native Wales, may not have been a Pacific paradise but it held sufficient romantic adventure for him to pioneer there for 12 years until the Second World War broke out.

These days the 81-year-old Lockley is content to gaze out from his Auckland "House Above the Sea" to nearby Rangitoto, Waiheke, Motutapu, Motuihe, Motukorea and more distant Great Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf. At an age when most people's horizons have closed in, he continues to have a boyhood longing: "I still dream of retiring to live on a remote, unspoilt island, but know that at my age I probably won't," he says with regret.

Despite that, at 75 he took a pack on his back and lived with Eskimoes in the Canadian Arctic. Since then he has visited Antarctica twice (stopping off at Scott Base, the Auckland, Campbell, Macquarie and Snares Islands) and in 1982 landed on islands in the pack ice north of Spitzbergen where he encountered polar bears, walruses and Arctic sea birds. A year later he cruised to Tierra del Fuego, the Falklands, South Georgia and the islands of the Weddell Sea.

It is the naturalist's abiding fascination with nature that has inspired these journeys to remote parts — coupled with a love of adventure and inability to live a humdrum existence that is the lot of most.

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As a young man he wrote: "Most men spend their whole lives earning their daily bread in the bowels of darkness — for it does not matter whether it is a city office, a cowhouse or coalmine, they are all dark enough."

The patterns of his life were set early; well before he had heard of Henry David Thoreau he had discovered the truth of the statement: "I have never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude," although with four sisters and a brother he was never short of human contact.

From a young age, inspired by his literary heroes, he decided to pursue the career of a lone naturalist. He was "mentally stunned" upon reading Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, a book which became his bible, expressing all his youthful ideas and wishes in exquisite prose.

Longing to live like Crusoe

However, it would be some time before Lockley could live in quiet contemplation on an uninhabited island. A determined mother with thoughts of security persuaded him, on leaving school, to start a small holding in Monmouthshire.

"I was forever longing to get away, like most young men, and live a Crusoe life on a remote island, especially one which might be full of birds." In 1927 he discovered and settled on Skokholm — its little farm was derelict, occupied by thousands of seabirds (10,000 pairs of muttonbirds or shearwaters, 500 of storm petrels, 20,000 puffins and many others).

"Here I established the first coastal observatory and ringing station in Britain in 1933. After the war it was reopened and you can still stay there. I was able to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 1983 by visiting the island."

Lockley was also responsible for establishing bird observatories elsewhere on British coasts, including the Channel Islands. On coming to live in New Zealand he became co-founder of this country's first, on the Firth of Thames, managed by the Miranda Naturalists Trust.

Among the studies he carried out on Skokholm were long distance homing experiments with sea birds, sending shear-