

# AN ISLAND NEGLECTED

STORY AND PICTURES BY ROB GREENAWAY

**N**ew Zealanders, it seems, love living on islands. Our two most obvious and successful settlements are on the North and South Islands. Then there's Stewart, Great Barrier, D'Urville, Waiheke, Motiti, Mayor, Slipper, Mercury and so on. We just can't help ourselves. Why then isn't there a settlement on Raoul Island? This verdant volcanic crater lies halfway between Auckland and Tonga, has a perfect climate (in my mind), and has virtually all the attractive characteristics of a tropical paradise, and none of the diseases. It grows wonderful fruit and vegetables, is surrounded by abundant sealife. It's certainly big enough at almost 3000 hectares, and it's not like there hasn't been any encouragement for New Zealanders to set up shop on what is this country's warmest piece of real estate.



Consider the impression that Raoul Island made on Mr A.M. Venables, a visitor to the island in 1936. At the time Raoul was generally referred to as Sunday Island. "Sunday Island must be settled," he wrote. "It must be made use of. Sunday Island could support a thousand people, under ideal living conditions. These people, in their turn, would be able to supply the tropical fruit and out-of-season vegetables that are so needed for the health of the people of this country. It is New Zealand owned, and it is up to New Zealand to see that it is used by them to its fullest extent."

Venables was fully aware that many settlers had attempted what he suggested. One after another, their settlements had failed. But Venables reckoned he had worked out why, and published his findings in a 1937 publication called *The Unvarnished Truth about Sunday Island*.

"This is the secret of the failure of all the settlements on Sunday Island," he wrote. "It has a most peculiar influence on the white man; the most energetic person under ordinary conditions becomes listless and lethargic after two or three weeks' residence on the Island. Every person enjoys the best of health on the Island, and it has been noticed that women folk resident there are exceptionally healthy and energetic, so that the climatic conditions do not seem to affect them adversely."



Looking across a verdant island of pohutukawa and nikau to the blue and green lakes of the Raoul Island's volcanic crater.



If that was the case, you could imagine how keen Club Med would be to throw up a few condominiums. Imagine a resort where it was medically proven that one half of the visiting population would relax – whether they liked it or not – and the other half would become exceptionally healthy. Of course exclusive condos are not on the menu for Raoul, and for a few good reasons. For all the tropical waters, luxuriant vegetation and glorious isolation, there's something about the island that ensures any settlement is a short term investment. If human beings weren't biodegradable, the island would have a litter problem.

Raoul is definitely off the tourist route. You're not going to get there unless you sail independently or with an official navy party, or are part of the small team posted to the island each year to maintain its conservation values and a meteorological station. Temporary staff, employed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) – usually a mechanic, a technician, a meteorologist and a dedicated conservation worker – are replaced each year.

I was fortunate enough to be part of a small team of volunteers travelling to the island to assist the semi-permanent crew of four. A little maintenance was required on the collection of buildings which support DOC's ef-

forts at preserving the island's unique flora and fauna. Installing kitchen cupboards and pulling out weeds was my contribution.

I'm happy to help anywhere where the daytime temperature is regularly around 25°C, the waters clear and full of life, and the bush dense and fascinating. It was easy to see what attracted previous settlers.

A *New Zealand Geographic* article recounts the story of the barque *Rosa Y Carmen*. Since the 1830s Raoul had been home to a series of hopeful settlers, all wishing to make a living supplying whaling ships with fresh produce. A difficult task considering the droughts, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, cyclones and blights of the Polynesian rat (kiore) which regularly decimated crops. Families came and went. It seems that for every settler that gave up, another was waiting in the wings.

In 1863, en-route from Polynesia to Peru with a load of slaves, *Rosa Y Carmen* visited the island to off-load its human cargo suffering from dysentery. One-hundred-and-fifty Cook, Easter and Tokelau Islanders died on Raoul Island's Denham Bay. Nine settlers also contracted the disease, with fatal results. Denham Bay was littered with bodies.

At the time I was there it was littered with a Japanese fishing trawler – the *Kinei Maru* –

that struck the beach in 1986. Big enough to be fascinating, but not old enough to be considered an historic relic. Three of us had walked the two hour route to Denham Bay from the DOC 'hostel', partly in the company of the Raoul's resident dog, the only permanent settler at the time.

This reasonably ugly but slightly lovable Jack Russell terrier had been delivered to the island by a trading ship moving between Fiji and New Zealand. The story goes that the dog stowed himself aboard in Fiji but could not be landed in New Zealand due to quarantine restrictions. Fiji wouldn't have him back since the dog had been to New Zealand. To solve this Catch 22 he was dropped off on Raoul and lived there for almost 15 years, dying in 1993.

The limited network of tracks on Raoul had previously been kept clear of vegetation by a large population of goats, released last century to provide meat for sailors. After their removal from the island in the 1980s, the tracks became overgrown and the view of Denham Bay now suddenly erupts from the dense bush, some 300 metres below a vertical rock face. The Bay, with its deserted shipwreck, fringe of volcanic cliffs and pohutukawa, and thundering surf is everything an island-lover would dream of.





Frederica Bell at the doorway of the family's hut at Denham Bay from the book "Crusoes of Sunday Island".



Mrs Bell with her daughter Freda and two sons, Roy and King Bell, in the vegetable patch.

A vast number of plants have been introduced to the island over the past few centuries, mostly to provide food and materials for prospective settlers – both Polynesian and European – and a full range of unexpected species litter the high side of the beach.

The Bell's are the islands best known set-

tlers. Bess Bell was brought to the island – along with her mother and elder sister Hettie and two younger brothers – by her parents Thomas and Frederica in 1878. In later years Bessie recounted the story of her 15 years on the island to author Elsie Morton, and the result was published in 1957 in *The Crusoes*



Thomas Bell in 1908 after thirty years on Sunday Island.

of Sunday Island. Bessie's father was driven by a dream to develop a personal kingdom on Raoul.

Their settlement was launched with bad luck. Tom had purchased a load of tinned food from the skipper of the vessel which brought them to Raoul, enough he thought to see them through until their own crops were harvested and their accommodation built. He also asked that the *Norval*, their delivery ship, return in three months time to replenish their stores.

The Bells had been sold a pup. All the tinned food was way past its best by date, rotten and inedible. The *Norval* never returned, the skipper probably fully aware that it was safer to leave the Bells as castaways than to face the wrath of Tom.

He didn't even let any other skipper know

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**Landing stores at Denham Bay where most often the surf was heavy and dangerous.**

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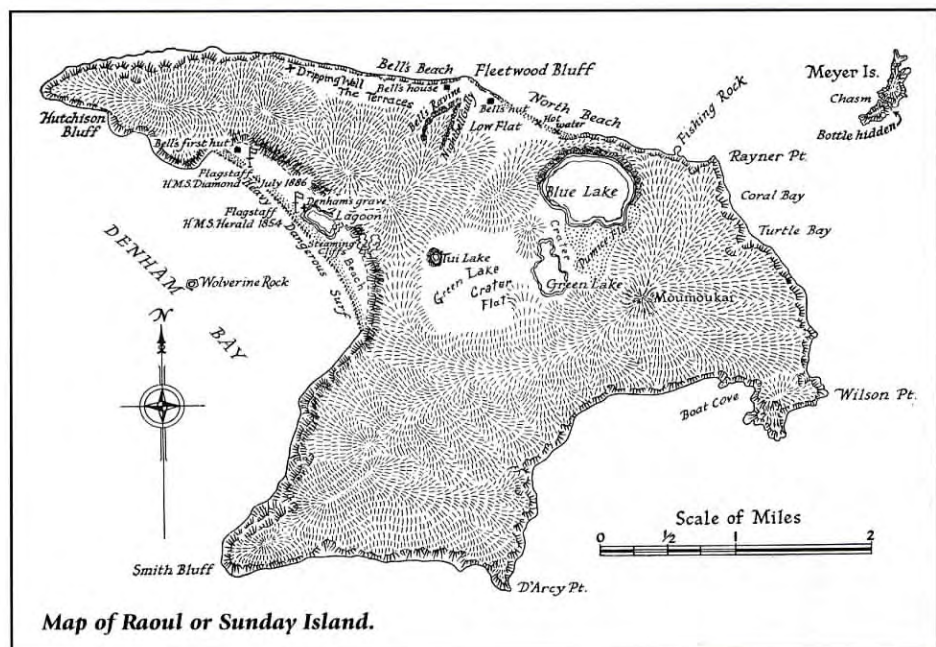
Things did get better for the family, between rat infestations and cyclones. They planted a huge range of vegetables and exotic trees, including coffee, mango, sugar cane and tobacco. The island almost delivered the dream of a tropical kingdom, but with the annexation of the island by the New Zealand Government in 1887 the family lost their assumed rights of ownership. Instead, Raoul was subdivided into nine separate leases.

Approximately 40 settlers arrived, but it was all tears before bedtime. The subdivisions bore no relation to practicality, covering volcanic craters, steep hillsides and very little flat, arable land.

The Bells gained a lease, and continued to farm until 1911. A cyclone contributed the final blow and after more than 30 years, the longest staying settlers gave up. The family had grown to 12 in the meantime, although several sons and daughters had left in previous years.

Mr Venables suggests the Bell's successes were due to the number of women involved.

Of course, more prospective excursionists were in the wings. The island's tropical cli-







From left: Tropic bird and chick; petrel; and red crowned parakeet.

Originally, Raoul hosted massive populations of red tailed tropic birds, mutton birds, noddies, ternlets and Kermadec parakeets. Now, tuis, kingfishers, sooty terns and introduced blackbirds, starlings and thrushes are pretty much all that populate Raoul.



mate, rich volcanic soils and potential to deliver out-of-season fruit and vegetables to New Zealand attracted many a prospective money-maker. The most optimistic perhaps was New Zealand's original sailor, Johnny Wray.

In the early 1930s Wray, a redundant accountant, built a 35-foot sloop in his parents' backyard at the grand cost of 8 pounds, 10 shillings. The Ngataki was held together with fencing wire and caulked with pyjamas, but was – and still is – a very solid vessel. In 1935 Wray realised that while oranges were three for a shilling in Auckland, they were free on Raoul (270 oranges represented the construction cost of the Ngataki). Dozens of trees grew wild on the island, courtesy of Thomas Bell and the settlers before him.

By coincidence Wray ran into a chap called Alf Bacon who had lived on Raoul previously and harboured a desire to return and, again, attempt a permanent settlement. The deal was struck that Wray would deliver Alf and two friends to Raoul, and in return they would help load their yacht with fruit to be sold back in New Zealand. They succeeded in delivering the settlers (although one decided to return immediately) and in collecting their load.

They weren't so good at returning their precious cargo, however. Raoul oranges are irresistibly sweet and juicy. As the Ngataki sailed into Auckland Harbour, the sailors consumed the last one. In Wray's words, in his book *South Sea Vagabonds*: "With a cheerful disregard of economics, the crew had eaten all the profits!"

**Tramping to Denham Bay through thick regrowth of nikau palms.**





**Launching an inflatable boat by flying fox. The sea is too treacherous to store the craft on the shoreline.**

Alf Bacon, the island's last long-term settler left in 1938 when the New Zealand Government first established the radio and meteorological station.

The current settlement consists of a collection of white weatherboard houses and utility sheds facing the Pacific Ocean. Occasionally the spout of a whale can be spotted on the horizon. A generator hums in the background, powering the accommodation and most importantly the large, walk-in fridge.

As wonderful a place Raoul seems, it's not really the most welcoming of islands. There is no safe anchorage, nowhere for boats to go in a storm but out to sea. The volcano ticks away quietly and every now and then it bursts forth – most recently in 1994 when earthquakes of up to 6 on the Richter scale forced that year's staff to be temporarily evacuated. The island's previously green and blue volcanic lakes remain muddied from a significant eruption in 1964.

Still, it's a marvellous place to visit. Dangerously captivating even. Without knowledge of the skeletons lying under the sand we took every opportunity to don masks and fins and cruise the shallows of the island's coast. So excited at one stage to have the opportunity to swim with what we thought were harmless reef sharks that I leapt in with only one fin. Can't get far like that, but far enough

to discover that it's not necessarily the big things that bite, and that reef sharks don't really like company. They disappeared quickly, but more sneaky carnivores lurked nearby.

Below the warm surface of the calm sea near Raoul, there's a cooler layer. Looking from the surface, the meeting of these layers is marked by a cloudy mixing. The rocky bottom appears as if through a pall of heat, which suddenly disappears as you dive through it. The temperature drops a few degrees, and then you're dinner. A tiny orange fish – the 'mimic blenny' – makes its living nipping bits of flesh from the fins and skin of various fish, or mammals if they happen past. We made perfect little meals. Or at least, very little bits of us did.

Kingfish the size of labradors hurtled past, pausing momentarily to look us over. Schools of kahawai and drummer fish cruised in the background and the blank faces of giant spotted grouper peeked from dark caverns. Raoul is a meeting place of warm and cold currents and the seas seethe

with life. All this has been part of one of the world's largest marine reserve since 1990 and is protected from exploitation. The island is a nature reserve.

Hopefully, the rats and cats which currently infest the island can be removed in future years, and the air will again be as thick with life as the nearby ocean. Originally, Raoul hosted massive populations of red tailed tropic birds, mutton birds, noddies, ternlets and Kermadec parakeets.

Now, tuis, kingfishers, sooty terns and introduced blackbirds, starlings and thrushes are pretty much all that populate Raoul. Most of the surviving remnants of the original populations are confined to the neighbouring and much smaller Meyer, Macauley and Curtis Islands.

Human settlement of Raoul is clearly out of the question – beyond a handful of caretakers. But, according to Mr A.M. Venables, even some of them should take heed, for: "There is a far, far greater degree of irresponsibility and lassitude in the atmosphere of Sunday Island. There is always a 'tomorrow.' Women seem to do better there; they enjoy perfect health, and are able in the joy of living to do a certain amount of work. Sunday Island will suit mature men and women or people of tropical experience, but young and irresponsible men – no!" ☹