



Ringling a chaffinch

INTRODUCTION

Amy Liptrot

MY RESEARCH into R.M. Lockley and the Welsh island of Skokholm involved a phone call to Gough Island in the South Atlantic, near Tristan da Cunha, one of the world's remotest islands. Over a satellite link shared with a ship and two Antarctic bases, I spoke to Chris, a former colleague from my time working for the RSPB in the Orkney islands where I grew up. Chris was working on a project that required him to camp on tiny, uninhabited Orkney islands for days at a time, catching seabirds and fitting them with tracking devices. Before all this, before Gough Island and Orkney, he had been the warden on Skokholm and Skomer, working for the wildlife trust that now owns the islands. Chris, like me, is both an island and a wildlife lover, and we have made our lives and work in the fields. 'The types of wildlife you get in these places is unique, and there's a different pace of life,' Chris says. In this way, we are the inheritors of R.M. Lockley's legacy.

Dream Island (1930) and his sequel *Island Days* (1934), combined here as a single book, is the account of how Cardiff-born Ronald Lockley moved onto the tiny island of Skokholm, four miles off the tip of Pembrokeshire, where he lived with his wife Doris and daughter Ann for twelve years. Just one mile long, the island had been uninhabited, apart from lighthouse-keepers, since at least the beginning of the twentieth century.

Living as the only inhabitant on your own island is a fantasy for many. It had been a dream of Lockley since boyhood, inspired by Robinson Crusoe and Henry David Thoreau. But, unlike most, he went ahead and

did it. Bringing back (human) life back to an abandoned island is hugely romantic. But as well as romance and idealism, Lockley's account reveals the practical challenges and how adventure soon becomes an endeavour.

His restrained, matter-of-fact style is of his time and echoes the books he loved to read as a boy. There are many more technical descriptions of sailing – the state of the boat and the sea, tide and wind – than of his feelings, conversations or philosophy. I admire this practical focus. Lockley wears his considerable accomplishments lightly and is understated about his achievements. In his early twenties, he visits Skokholm and decides 'here at last was my dream island!'. He convinces local fishermen to take him over to the island, speaks to the farmer who rented the island and negotiates the rental of the land for himself – and passes these things off quickly and lightly.

At first, Lockley plans to live on the island alone, but then Doris appears. He charmingly, and briefly, describes their courtship: 'Even now I sometimes wonder if it was because I had an island to offer that she – well, it will suffice to say that very suddenly my lofty plan to be another Crusoe (with a Thoreauvian austereness of life) was completely annihilated. Henceforth I renounced celibacy.'

He travels to Skokholm first to get it ready for Doris to move over. Huge effort is required – he employs local help and takes over the things they need to start a life and begin building. This is a real life adventure including, notably, a shipwreck. The tale of salvaging the contents and material of the wrecked ship the *Alice Williams*, in which they adopt the language of seafarers or pirates ('Ye'd best make the most of her, sir' said John. 'Tis plunder then, John,' I said), is one that will inspire and enthuse readers as much as it did the local men who came out to Skokholm to assist the operation. Timber from the schooner was used in rebuilding the old house and its cargo of coal kept the Lockleys warm for years.

I am also charmed by the bold Doris, respectfully and lightly written by her husband. They are an adventurous and capable couple who choose to honeymoon on Grassholm – an island even smaller and more remote than Skokholm. A few years later, they are joined by their daughter Ann (born

on the mainland, brought over to Skokholm at three weeks old).

This island reinhabiting – and, just as importantly, Lockley’s writing about it – was an inspiration and model for ideals of island life and self-sufficiency that were to become popular in the second half of the twentieth century. These ideas influenced people like my parents, who bought a farm in the Orkney islands in the 1970s, where I was born. I realise that part of what attracts me to the Lockleys is that they remind me a little of my own family: brave parents and an idyllic but also elemental childhood – playing with lambs, battling with gales.

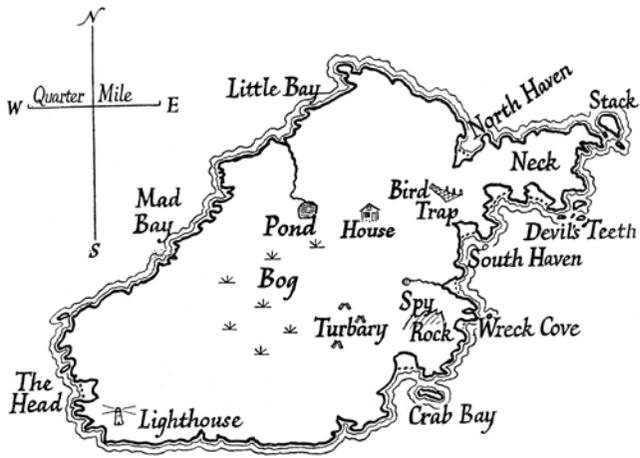
Additionally, Lockley’s ornithological work was an early pioneer of the work now done by contemporary enthusiasts. In 1933, he established the first bird observatory in the UK on Skokholm. He carried out methodical studies of Skokholm’s birds, observing their behaviour over years, notably, as described in this book, of the many thousands of manx shearwaters and puffins that breed there. And there is poetry in his science in, for example, how he describes ‘the most unearthly coughings and cooings’ of the shearwaters and how ‘the birds do not like the moon’. In a way, the whole island was his laboratory, and he performed experiments: rabbit-breeding, crop-growing, encouraging bird-nesting, and what we now know as ‘habitat management’. This built up into a detailed study of a ‘local patch’, with decades worth of studies and statistics. Now there are huge ornithological and environmental organisations, RSPB and others, and national networks, encouraging public concern and government policy on conservation – and employment opportunities for people like Chris and me.

Skokholm, and its larger neighbour Skomer, is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest, owned and managed by the The Wildlife Trust of West and South Wales. The public can take a boat over and stay. During Chris’s time as warden, the buildings on Skokholm were renovated to turn them back into a bird observatory, with daily rounds, checks for migrants, ringer training and other activities. A warden lives there for nine months of the year. The character of the island is still influenced by Lockley’s spirit, Chris says, with visitors coming, inspired by his ideal of island life. Each evening, the current islanders meet for the daily bird log, a long-running tradition.

The concept of ‘following your dream’ seems like a very modern concoction, but here we have an example of it in the first half of the twentieth century, until it was ended by the outbreak of the Second World War, when the Lockleys were served an evacuation notice. The reader supports Lockley’s aims – so clearly defined and hard-won. And, for a few brief years between the wars, his dream blossomed:

In walking every day around the island upon this work I am able to satisfy my desire to know how my little kingdom progresses, what new arrivals are here, what birds gone: whether the tadpoles are hatched under the starwort in the main pond, whether the lesser black-backs have yet occupied the bog, whether the ravens have brought their young off, whether any black redstarts have come, whether the vernal squills, the campion or the cowslips are flowering, and a hundred other events of early spring.

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Orkney, 2016



The Island