

A remote life, a remote island

Van Cleef's albatross

A search for meaning on a remote island

Nov 18th 2004

AFTER finding out that he could not have children, Alfred Van Cleef needed to escape the broody couples of Amsterdam. The women he loved had left him, and the sight of cooing mothers and playful dads became unbearable. In an effort to make sense of his own existence, Mr Van Cleef replaced an emotional black hole with a geographical one. Real physical isolation, perhaps, might overcome the social one.

The author's search for solitude led him to an island lost in the immensity of the Southern Ocean, a place so far-flung that "remote" scarcely does it justice. As it happens, it is called Amsterdam Island, though it is French territory, one of those vestigial oddities which attach to former colonial powers. The population is a mix of fur seals and albatrosses and weird scientists.

For the privilege of spending a month in this godforsaken place, Mr Van Cleef waged an eight-year war against immovable French public servants. The first part of the book describes the fight. There is wit and humour, yet it is impossible to ignore that this is Mr Van Cleef's quest for salvation, with the eerie sense that insanity is probably not far away.

Mr Van Cleef's stay on Amsterdam is an insight into human solitude. A community of 30-odd men live it out, contact with the outside world restricted to a battered radio for passing ships and a thrice-yearly visit of the *Marion Dufresne*. Everyday life is spiced with daily scientific discoveries (a new shade of bird vomit, a record gust of wind) and arguments over the management of stocks of chocolate spread. Hard-core porn films feature on special occasions.

The island mirrors an emotional desert. It is a world of untamed wilderness and sheer exposure to the elements, one where—ironically for Mr Van Cleef—life at its most precarious is reduced to its most basic function: reproduction.

"The Lost Island" is a moving story, funny and endearing at times, immensely sad and disturbing at others. One cannot help but feel for Mr Van Cleef and the profound distress that dogs him. The book also provides a wealth of information about the geography and history of the island, but it distinguishes itself above all as a touching piece on the meaning of human existence. The reader's only regret is that it takes a little while to get there.