

10 years of paradise

As the Castaway series – in which prominent people with an Oxfordshire connection are interviewed and asked what they would take with them to the mythical island of Oxtopia – nears its 10th anniversary, **Sylvia Vetta** takes a look back to see how some of them have been getting on. We learn what they have been doing in real life and what some would like to have done if they really had been marooned. **This month: authors, artists and poets**

HELEN PEACOCKE was castaway in April 2013 on her 70th birthday. Her work of art was *The Butcher's Shop* by Annibale Carracci.

Author, journalist and food writer Helen is best known for her books of walks to dog friendly pubs and since being a castaway has written *Paws in the Cotswolds*. She has also written two cookbooks – *The Eynsham Cookbook* for the village where she was born, brought up and lives, and *Green Power The Spirulina Cookbook* written for fellow castaway Nancy Hunt's charity the Nasio Trust.

Somehow Helen smuggled her border collie Barnaby onto Oxtopia and he has sent this report: "Helen and I now live miles away from Eynsham on a sunlit tropical island where banana trees and pineapples grow

in abundance and strange furry creatures covered in stripes and spots prowl the forest floor. Some purr – some growl.

"On arriving, Helen declared she would look for a pub (she rather likes pubs, particularly if they brew their own beer and serve good home-cooked food – but she didn't find one).

"Helen built a hut with a little kennel attached to the main door and began to prepare banana wine and pineapple beer. Unfortunately the beer and wine tasted rather salty as she had used sea water to brew it – not the best, but when you are a Border collie and destined to live on Oxtopia with a rather batty mistress who insists this is where you are going to stay even though there is not a single sheep in sight, how can you complain?"



MICHAEL SMITH (August 2010): his castaway choice was a copy of TE Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

The journalist and author Michael Smith who lives near Wallingford, worked in military intelligence. That experience had rich rewards as background for his many successful books. They include *Station X and Six – A History of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service: Murder and Mayhem 1909-1939*. Since being castaway he has written *The Debs of Bletchley Park* which celebrated the work of the female codebreakers during the Second World War. He helped one of them, Mavis Batey, to write the biography of Dilly Knox – another famous codebreaker. Michael also wrote *Foley: The Spy Who Saved 10,000 Jews*, republished with extra material by Dialogue this year.

It tells the story of MI6 officer Frank Foley who worked as passport control officer in Berlin and helped thousands of Jews to escape from Germany. At the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann he was described as a Scarlet Pimpernel, risking his own life to save Jews threatened with death by the Nazis. As a result of Michael's research, Foley is now recognised as Righteous Among Nations, an honour for gentiles who helped Jews, at Yad Vashem, the official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. On April 20, at the launch of this book, Chancellor George Osborne agreed to fund a statue of Foley. Michael is writing a fictional thriller called *No Man Dies Twice* and is a visiting fellow at Kellogg College.



JENNY LEWIS (July 2011): the poet's castaway choice was the complete works of Wilfred Owen.

Singer, songwriter, teacher, playwright and poet: Jenny Lewis's first published poetry book, in 1996, *When I Became an Amazon* for Iron Press came to the notice of Woman's Hour.

Since 2011, the First World War has been the focus of Jenny's attention – not the Western Front but the often battlefields in what today is called Iraq.

Taking Mesopotamia is the name of Jenny's anthology inspired by her father's experience of The Siege of Kut Al Amara. Her research led to meeting with Iraqi poet Adnan al-Sayegh.

Jenny said: "I've been working with Adnan for the last four years. We are collaborating with the Foreign Office, the British Council and the Poetry Society on a Poetry for Peace Competition for Oxford schools, based at the Ashmolean Museum. There will be a performance and presentation of prizes on November 6 in the atrium of the museum. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will publish an anthology of the winning poems in English and Arabic which will be launched March 21, 2017, World Poetry Day."

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BRIAN ALDISS (February 2011): his castaway object was a portrait of St Anna which inspired *The Cretan Teat*.

Headington resident and science fiction writer Brian has published more than 100 books. His influential works include the short story *Super-Toys Last All Summer Long*, the basis for the Stanley Kubrick-developed Steven Spielberg film *AI Artificial Intelligence*. In 1943, Brian joined the Royal Signals. He said: "I had my 19th birthday on the harbour frontier in Bombay. I fought in what became known as the Forgotten Army in Burma."

On his way back to England via Calcutta, he saw a giant banyan tree in the botanical gardens which inspired *Hot House*, one of his books that has been reprinted.

Since 2011, his archive has been deposited in the Bodleian Library. To celebrate he wrote and the Bodleian published *An Exile On Planet Earth* which brings together twelve essays by the master of science fiction.

He is still writing. He said: "One hears that old folk often die of boredom. I believe I may die of something this year; I can only say that I shall be perfectly furious if it happens when I'm in the middle of a novel."



KORKY PAUL (May 2008): Korky's desert island choice was the 19th century children's book *Struwwelpeter*.

He is most famous for illustrating OUP's *Winnie the Witch* series which is now in its 25th year. Winnie and her cat Wilbur are about to take to the small screen, (Channel 5, *Milk Shake*). He has sent a detailed account of the Life and Times of an Oxtopian Castaway: "After the first few days of trekking around I discovered a picturesque sandy bay against a rocky peninsular covered with large shady trees – the ideal location to open my Ouzeria serving iced ouzo with mezedes (appetizers) such as octopus,

sardines, calamari, clams and fresh salads. All abundant in the Oxtopian Ocean. The ouzo is made from distilled coconut juice and wild aniseed is added to insure an authentic ouzo taste.

"To add to the authenticity I have grown a Cretan moustache – admired by the ladies. I do sometimes incur rude comments from visiting friends asking 'Where have you parked the taxi...'

"Patrons are encouraged to write or draw while enjoying the ouzo, mezedes and the sparkling company."

He is pictured above with fellow castaway Helen Peacocke and a Winnie the Witch cake she made for him.



JOANNA HARRISON (December 2013) and **MICHAEL ROSEN** (December 2012): Joanna's castaway object was work by her children and a Cornish painting by Nicolas Hely Hutchinson and Michael's was a replica miner's lamp attached to a poem by Raymond Carver.

Animator, illustrator and art director Joanna and prolific poet, broadcaster and former children's laureate Michael are currently working together. They are creating an animated film of *Going on a Bear Hunt* which readers can watch this Christmas on Channel 4.

WEIMIN HE (April 2011): his island choice was a folio collection of prints by artists from Rembrandt to Ren Bonian Wu.

The Manchurian born artist Weimin He was joint curator of the China Prints exhibition at the Ashmolean in 2007. Weimin persuaded many celebrated artists to donate work to the museum. When Weimin was castaway he had just ended a period as artist in residence at the Ashmolean. His *Building the New Ashmolean* was the first exhibition in the museum when it was opened by the Queen. Since then Weimin has worked as artist in residence at the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter and at the Bodleian.

A selection of his paintings and woodblock prints were printed on giant hoardings which can be seen if you walk from Walton Street behind the Mathematics Institute. Weimin had a display of work on show when the School of Government was opened by Prince William in May.

He has recently bought a house in West Oxford and although he wants to do some work in China, he hopes to have the freedom to develop his art here. He also plans to teach now that his period as artist in resident has come to an end.



JOHN BUCKLEY (August 2012): Castaway choice Brancussi's Endless Column transported in a red Lamborghini.

Artist and sculptor John Buckley is best known in Oxfordshire for the sculptures he made for fellow castaway Bill Heine (March 2008). The John Buckley shark in Bill's Headington roof is still a tourist attraction.

Artists in residence don't usually head for the most dangerous places on Earth. Before the war in Cambodia came to an end he went there for the Cambodia Trust. He returned deeply disturbed with a cargo of prosthetic limbs and turned them into moving artworks. As a trustee of MAG (Mines Advisory Group) he shared in the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.

He has continued his pattern of working in his studio near Wallingford followed by periods of travel and has been working on three giant sculptures. He has completed one inspired by a trip to Sudan. He walked with some women making the daily seven-hour trip to fetch water. It was filmed and put on a giant screen on the plinth in Trafalgar Square.



SIMONETTA AGNELLO HORNBY (March 2009): Castaway object: A pagoda of dreams – a Japanese miniature cabinet with drawers containing tiny boxes: Simonetta has encouraged her sons to write their wishes and thoughts on pieces of paper to put inside.

Novelist and lawyer Simonetta Agnello Hornby was born into an aristocratic Sicilian family and brought up in Palermo. She might have continued to live a life of cosmopolitan comfort indefinitely had she not been sent to England to study the language where she met her future husband, Martin Hornby (who was studying astrophysics). As a young mum living in Kennington, she worked on a law degree, studies which eventually led to the establishment of a law firm in London, specialising in childcare and domestic

violence cases. Her first novel *La Mennulara* (*The Almond Picker*) published in 2002, saw her life take a new direction. The book, which she wrote in Italian, is set in her native Sicily. Since she was castaway she has written six best-selling novels and been involved in two cookery books and is now a television celebrity in Italy. This year she featured in the Chain series of interviews on *Woman's Hour*.

You can read the original stories of the first 90 castaways in two books by Sylvia Vetta. For the rest of the year *Castaways 1* and *Castaways 2* will be available to OLE readers for £5 each from oxfordfolio.co.uk.