‘Tom Island’ — that was the name I was given once by a girl I met on an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Of course, she broke my heart in due course. Turned out to be a lesbian, or so she claimed. But I liked the nickname, and as I think about it now, my life seems to be defined by islands of one sort or another (even putting aside England, which isn’t one).

I live, at least part of the time, on the Greek island of Corfu. (It’s *de rigueur*, these days, for writers to ‘divide their time’ rather than be so dull as to live in just one place. I divide my time between Corfu and Chiswick.) In the past two months I’ve visited an embarrassment of islands, including Albania’s Sazan, whose landscape is scattered with Soviet-era gas masks; Montenegro’s Gospa od Škrpjela (Our Lady of the Rocks) which is said to be built out of shipwrecks; and Croatia’s Mljet, where Odysseus was held prisoner for seven years by the witch Calypso, and where (rather suitably, I thought) I proposed to my girlfriend.

And I’m currently editing the memoirs of HRH Prince Michael of Sealand, who spent his formative years living alone on a tiny artificial island off the coast of Essex — in reality, a metal platform on concrete stilts, where, in February, I spent five excruciatingly cold days, so I have some idea of what he went through. My sojourn was short, but I was made a lord for my pains: Lord Thomas of Sealand, another island-related alter ego.

So it’s hardly surprising if, like J. Edward Chamberlin, I should make extravagant claims for the importance of islands in human history and culture. Chamberlin, incidentally, is an old hand at this kind of thing. *Island: How Islands Transform the World* is a sequel to his 2006 book, the similarly entitled *Horse: How the Horse Has Shaped Civilisations*. Which leaves me speculating madly as to what his next might be. Maybe *Fish: How Fish Have... No. More likely Bicycle: How the Bicycle Continues to... Hang on. How about Fish and Bicycles: How This Incongruous Pair Will One Day...?*

But before I get carried away, I should say that Chamberlin’s *Island* is an extremely pleasant read. Elegant though unillustrated — the most beautiful islands, arguably, are islands of the mind — it consists of five chapters that deal discursively with the pre-history of islands via a focus on Jamaica; sailing, with reference to the islands of the South Pacific; the geological formation of islands, especially Iceland; the uniqueness of islands in general and the Galapagos in particular; and finally a discussion of islands in literature, which opens, for some reason, with a history of fishing off Newfoundland.

As you’d hope with a book of this kind, there are serendipitous delights, including, for instance, an account of the origin of the word serendipitous. It was coined by Horace Walpole in his tale of three princes of Serendip (the
Arabic name for Sri Lanka), who had a knack for making fortuitous discoveries. I also particularly enjoyed the passage on the colonisation by Indonesians of the South Sea islands. How did they find their way across a sequence of horizons, to unmarked dots on non-existent maps? Did they even know they were there? And if not, what were they thinking? To learn the answers to these questions, read this book, but I can reveal that they involve the trajectory of turtles, and a green tinge given to the bellies of clouds by light reflected from underwater atolls.

Chamberlin’s anthropological expertise is not in doubt, and the currents of his prose are lively. Yet if I have to make a criticism (and I sort of feel I do), his concluding chapter on islands in literature struck me as a bit timid — unexpectedly, perhaps, from a professor of comparative literature at Toronto University. Try this instead. Islands provide settings for the second great work of western literature (some would say the second greatest), the *Odyssey*; for the last great work by the greatest dramatist of all time, *The Tempest*; and for perhaps the first, or first great, novel ever written, *Robinson Crusoe*. There’s a few too many greats in that last sentence, but you see where I’m heading with this.

The question is, why?