

Alexander Selkirk (1679-1721) — The Real Robinson Crusoe

Alexander Selkirk was a second mate on board a British navy ship who was marooned by its captain on a desert island in the South Pacific. When he was eventually rescued by a passing British ship—having survived there against the odds between 1704 and 1709—his story became a notable source for contemporary writers, giving rise to a famous poem by William Cowper (1731-1800) and a much more famous novel by Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*, 1719).

According to the known facts Selkirk was an unruly young man who got into trouble with the members of his Scottish ‘kirk’ (church) in Largo, a maritime town in Scotland, and ran away to sea to avoid punishment at home. Once in the navy he continued to show an independence of spirit that did not suit his superiors. When sailing under Captain Stradling in the *Cinque Ports*, he suspected that the navy ship was unseaworthy as it left the island of Juan Fernandez off Chile after watering there. Rather than travel onwards he stated that he preferred to remain on the island, whereupon the captain left him there with basic provisions—a musket, a hatchet, a knife, a cooking pot, a Bible, bedding and some clothes.

Faced with this dire plight, he pleaded to be allowed back on board but was refused by the captain. Sailing on, however, the *Cinque Ports* did indeed founder and sink. Only the captain and some others survived the disaster and these were captured by the Spanish and subjected to harsh treatment as prisoners in Lima. Meanwhile Selkirk was rescued by a Woodes Rogers who was conducting his own buccaneering raids on Spanish ships in those waters. Back in England in 1712, Captain Rogers wrote an account of his adventures which included Selkirk’s desert-island sojourn but also told of the cruelties which they later inflicted together on Spanish settlements in South America including the theft of personal property from some ladies who fled up-river before the arriving marauders. Selkirk failed to get the share of Rogers’ booty which he reckoned on and went back to sea as a privateer preying on Spanish merchantmen. Eventually he succumbed to yellow fever on a British Navy expedition against pirates off West Coast Africa in December 1721.

The chief resemblance between Selkirk and Defoe’s character is in the use made of goat-skins and in the general organisation of his campaign to survive under inhospitable conditions. His rebellious childhood might also be cited as an inspiration for the ‘repentance’ theme of Defoe’s novel. However, the island that Selkirk actually occupied was far removed geographically from the coordinates given by Defoe which places his island in the tropical waters of the Caribbean and the date of Crusoe’s shipwreck—30th Dec. 1659—is half-a-century earlier though the novel was written but seven years after Selkirk’s return to England. So strong was the belief among contemporary and later readers that Selkirk was the original that the first and later editions show him wearing a goat-skin dress and hat in illustrations—garments that would have been both unnecessary and intolerable in the latitude where the novel was set. In fact, Defoe had a wide variety of tales of desert-island survivors to choose from.

The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk (1782)

I am monarch of all I survey;
My right there is none to dispute;
From the centre all round to the sea
I am lord of the fowl and the brute.
O Solitude! where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?
Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
Than reign in this horrible place.

I am out of humanity’s reach,
I must finish my journey alone,
Never hear the sweet music of speech;
I start at the sound of my own.
The beasts that roam over the plain
My form with indifference see;
They are so unacquainted with man,
Their tameness is shocking to me.

Society, Friendship, and Love
Divinely bestow’d upon man,
O, had I the wings of a dove
How soon would I taste you again!
My sorrows I then might assuage
In the ways of religion and truth;
Might learn from the wisdom of age,
And be cheer’d by the sallies of youth.

The winds that have made me your sport,
Convey to this desolate shore

Some cordial endearing report
Of a land I shall visit no more:
My friends, do they now and then send
A wish or a thought after me?
O tell me I yet have a friend,
Though a friend I am never to see.

How fleet is a glance of the mind!
Compared with the speed of its flight,
The tempest itself lags behind,
And the swift-wingèd arrows of light.
When I think of my own native land,
In a moment I seem to be there;
But, alas! recollection at hand
Soon hurries me back to despair.

But the sea-fowl is gone to her nest,
The beast is laid down in his lair;
Even here is a season of rest,
And I to my cabin repair.
There’s mercy in every place,
And mercy, encouraging thought!
Gives even affliction a grace,
And reconciles man to his lot.

Note: The first line of the poem seems to bear witness to the fact that it was composed *after* reading of Defoe’s novel of which the 11th chapter begins: ‘IT would have made a Stoic smile to have seen me and my little family sit down to dinner. There was my majesty the prince and lord of the whole island; I had the lives of all my subjects at my absolute command; I could hang, draw, give liberty, and take it away, and no rebels among all my subjects.’