Juan Fernandez is an island in the great South Sea, about fifteen miles long, and six broad. The springs of water, which it contains, are excellent; and it abounds with a variety of esculent and antiscorbutic vegetables. Formerly wild goats subsisted in great numbers, on its mountains; but the breed is now nearly destroyed. Commodore Anson’s squadron, in 1741, remained here three months; during which time the dying crews, who on their arrival could scarcely heave the anchor, with one united effort, were cured of the scurvy, and restored to perfect health. The Commodore sowed, in the island, many garden seeds; and set the stones of plums, apricots, and peaches, which, it is said, have since come to maturity.

About the year 1705, Alexander Selkirk, a Scotch mariner, was left by some accident on this desert island; where he continued till 1710, when he was taken up by an English ship, and brought back to Europe. The house, which he built, as a shelter from the inclemencies of the weather, and as a defence from danger, subsisted in the time of Lord Anson; and is described to have been so small, that a man could not, without difficulty, creep into it, and stretch himself at length. When Selkirk returned to his native country, he related his very interesting adventures to Daniel Defoe; who founded upon them the History of Robinson Crusoe, the best and most entertaining moral romance now extant. It displays, in a striking manner, the advantage of being inured to manual exertions; the value of skill in the mechanic arts; the numberless benefits we derive from the division of labour; and above all, it enables us to perceive, in their full extent, the intellectual, moral, and religious aids we derive from society.

Some of these improving lessons are admirably enforced in the following little poem, by Mr Cowper; which the reader must suppose to have been the soliloquy of Selkirk, on the island of Juan Fernandez.

[Reprints in full Cowper’s 1782 poem]