Section I: Dissertation on Alexander Selkirk, and on the real author of Robinson Crusoe

Before we enter on the more solemn and awful subjects of this little Volume, it appeared to me not irrelevant to pay some attention to a character, which, whether known under the real name of Alexander Selkirk, or the fictitious one of Robinson Crusoe, has always been considered, if I may so express myself, as the venerable recorder of the shipwrecked Narrative. When I recollect the avidity with which the page of Crusoe has been perused from its first appearance in 1719, the wide circulation it obtained on the Continent, and the peculiar delight it afforded me when a schoolboy; it seems astonishing, rather that a work of this kind should not have been previously undertaken, than that it should now be offered to the attention of the public. Robinson Crusoe does not yield even to Gil Blas in the universal suffrage it has experienced; and yet the supposed authors of each seem to be equally surreptitious and doubtful. Though they are both read, and admired; a specious Frenchman, who never composed a single original work of merit, enjoys the reputation of the one, whilst Alexander Selkirk and Defoe, with more reason, divide the credit of the other.

That Alexander Selkirk’s Story afforded hints for the outline of The Life and strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Mariner, admits not of a doubt: but then it does not follow, nor can it be proved, that Defoe made an improper or unfair use of the papers of Selkirk; though Dr Beattie in his Moral and Critical Dissertations seems to imply as much. Selkirk’s Story was printed in 1712, by Captain Woodes Rogers, and had therefore been made public about seven years before the appearance of Crusoe. Besides, as the writer of Defoe’s Life in the Biographia Britannica observes, “When Robinson Crusoe was first published, the Author was so far from being accused with having taken his book from any manuscripts of Alexander Selkirk’s personal conversations with him, that the great charge against him was, That the Story was feigned; that it was all a Romance; that there never was any such man, or place, or circumstances in any man’s life; that it was all formed and embellished by invention to impose upon the world.” This objection to his book, Defoe found it very difficult to answer: However, at length, in order to remove all such objections, and to prevent any farther doubt, or possibility of doubt, upon the subject; he published a declaration, in a Preface to the Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe, signed by Robinson Crusoe himself; and part of which is as follows: “I Robinson Crusoe, being at this time in perfect and sound memory (thanks be to God therefore), do hereby declare, their objection is an invention, scandalous in design, and false in fact; and do affirm, that the Story, though allegorical, is also historical; and that it is, the beautiful representation of a life of unexampled misfortunes; and of a variety not to be met with in the world: sincerely adapted to, and intended for the common good of mankind; and designed at first, as it is now farther applied, to the most serious uses possible.”

The Story of Selkirk, as given by Captain Woodes Rogers, who visited the island of Juan Fernandez in February 1709 without doubt formed the materials which the glowing imagination of the author of Crusoe afterwards so admirably arranged. It is as follows:
“Our Pinnace returned from the shore (of the island of Juan Fernandez) and brought abundance of craw fish, with a Man cloathed in goat skins, who looked wilder than the first owners of them. He had been on the Island four years and four months, being left there by Captain Stradling in the Cinque Ports; his name was Alexander Selkirk, a Scotchman, who had been master of the Cinque Ports, a ship that came here last with Captain Dampier, who told me that this was the best man in her; so I immediately agreed with him to be a mate on our ship. 'Twas he that made the fire last night when he saw our ships, which he judged to be English. During his stay here he saw several ships pass by, but only two came to anchor. As he went to view them, he found them to be Spaniards, and retired from them; upon which they shot at him. Had they been French he would have submitted; but chose to risque his dying alone on the Island, rather than fall into the hands of the Spaniards in these parts; because he apprehended they would murder him, or make a slave of him in the mines: for he feared they would spare no stranger that might be capable of discovering the South Sea. The Spaniards had landed before he knew what they were, and they came so near him that he had much ado to escape; they not only shot at him, but pursued him in the woods, where he climbed to the top of a tree, at the foot of which they killed several goats just by; but went off again without discovering him. He told us that he was born at Largo, in the county of Fife in Scotland, and was bred a Sailor from his youth. The reason of his being left here was a difference betwixt him and his Captain; which, together with the ship’s being leaky, made him willing rather to stay here, than go along with him at first; and when he was at last willing, the Captain would not receive him. He had been in the Island before to wood and water; when two of the ship’s company were left upon it for six months till the ship returned, being chased then by two French South Sea ships.

He had with him his Clothes and Bedding, with a Firelock, some Powder, Bullets, and Tobacco, an Hatchet, a Knife, a Kettle, a Bible, some practical pieces, and his mathematical Instruments and Books. He diverted and provided for himself as well as he could; but for the first eight months had much ado to bear up against Melancholy, and the terror of being left alone in such a desolate place. He built two Huts with piemento trees, covered them with long grass, and lined them with the skins of goats, which he killed with his gun as he wanted, so long as his Powder lasted, which was but a pound; and that being near spent, he got a Fire by rubbing two sticks of piemento wood together upon his knee. In the lesser Hut, at some distance from the other, he dressed his victuals, and in the larger he slept; and employed himself in reading, singing psalms, and praying: so that he said he was a better Christian while in this Solitude than ever he was before; or than, he was afraid, he should ever be again. At first he never ate any thing until hunger constrained him: partly from grief, and partly for want of bread and salt – nor did he go to bed until he could watch no longer; the piemento wood, which burnt very clear, served him both for firing and Candle, and refreshed him with its fragrant smell.

He might have had Fish enough, but could not eat them for want of salt, because they occasioned a looseness; except craw-fish, which are there as large as lobsters, and very good: these he sometimes boiled, and at other times broiled; as he did his goats’ flesh; of which he made very good broth, for they are not so rank as ours. He kept an account of five hundred that he killed while there, and caught as many more, which he marked on the ear and let go. When his Powder failed, he took
them by speed of foot; for his way of living, and continual exercise of walking and running, cleared him of all gross humours; so that he ran with wonderful swiftness through the woods and up the rocks and hills — as we perceived when we employed him to catch goats for us: we had a bull dog which we sent with several of our nimblest runners, to help him in catching goats; but he distanced and tired both the dog and the men; catched the goats, and brought them to us on his back. He told us that his agility in pursuing a goat had once like to have cost him his life: he pursued it with so much eagerness, that he catched hold of it on the brink of a Precipice, of which he was not aware, the bushes having hid it from him; so that he fell with the goat down the Precipice a great height, and was so stunned and bruised with the fall, that he narrowly escaped with his life; and, when he came to his senses, found the goat dead under him. He lay there about twenty-four hours, and was scarcely able to crawl to his Hut, which was about a mile distant, or to stir abroad again in ten days.

He came in at last to relish his Meat well enough without Salt or Bread; and in the season had plenty of good turnips, which had been sowed there by Captain Dampier's men, and have now overspread some acres of ground. He had enough of good cabbage from the cabbage-trees, and seasoned his meat with the fruit of the pimento trees, which is the same as the Jamaica pepper, and smells deliciously. He found there also a black pepper, called *Malagita.*

He soon wore out all his Shoes and Clothes by running through the woods; and at last being forced to shift without them, his feet became so hard, that he ran every where without annoyances: and it was some time before he could wear Shoes after we found him; for not being used to any so long, his feet swelled when he came first to wear them again.

After he had conquered his melancholy, he diverted himself sometimes by cutting his name on the trees, and the time of his being left, and continuance there. He was at first much pestered with Cats and Rats, that had bred in great numbers from some of each species which had got ashore from ships that put in there to wood and water. The Rats gnawed his feet and clothes while asleep, which obliged him to cherish the Cats with his goats’ flesh; by which many of them became so tame, that they would lie about him in hundreds, and soon delivered him from the Rats. He likewise tamed some Kids; and to divert himself, would now and then sing and dance with them and his Cats: so that by the care of Providence and vigor of his youth, being now about thirty years old, he came at last to conquer all the inconveniences of his solitude, and to be very easy. When his clothes wore out, he made himself a coat and cap of goat-skins, which he stitched together with little thongs of the same, that he cut with his knife. He had no other needle but a nail; and when his knife was wore to the back, he made others as well as he could of some iron hoops that were left ashore; which he beat thin and ground upon stones. Having some linen cloth by him, he sewed himself Shirts with a nail, and stitched them with the worsted of his old stockings; which he pulled out on purpose. He had his last shirt on when we found him on the Island.

At his first coming on board us, he had so much forgot his language for want of use, that we could scarcely understand him, for he seemed to speak his words by halves. We offered him a dram, but he would not touch it, having drunk nothing but water since his being there, and it was some time before he could relish our Victuals.
He could give us an account of no other product of the Island than what we have mentioned; except small black plums, which are very good, but hard to come at; the trees which bear them growing on mountains and rocks. Piemento trees are plenty here, and we saw some of sixty feet high, and about two yards thick; and cotton trees higher, and near four fathom round in the stock. The Climate is so good, that the Trees and Grass are verdant all the year. The Winter lasts no longer than June and July, and is not then severe; there being only a small frost, and a little hail, but sometimes great rains. The heat of the Summer is equally moderate; and there is not much thunder or tempestuous weather of any sort. He saw no venomous or savage creature on the Island, nor any other sort of beast but goats, &c. as above mentioned; the first of which had been put ashore here on purpose for a breed by Juan Fernando, a Spaniard; who settled there with some families for a time, until the continent of Chili began to submit to the Spaniards, which being more profitable, tempted them to quit this Island; which is capable of maintaining a good number of people, and of being made so strong that they could not be easily dislodged.”

Selkirk returned with Captain Woodes Rogers who remained about a fortnight at Juan Fernandez; and arrived in England by way of the East Indies on the first of October, 1711, having been absent eight years. He seems to have been born about the year 1676, and to have left England in the Cinque Ports galley during 1763. His being abandoned on the Island eventually proved a blessing; for the Cinque Ports ran ashore a few months after they had forsook him: the Captain and crew were taken prisoner by the Spaniards, and suffered great hardships. Sir Richard Steele often saw Selkirk after his arrival; and in a periodical work styled the Englishman, notices his singular history: “When I first saw him,” adds Sir Richard, “I thought if I had not been let into his Character and Story, I could have discerned that he had been much separated from company, from his aspect and gesture. There was a strong but cheerful seriousness in his look, and a certain disregard to the ordinary things about him, as if he had been sunk in thought. When the ship which brought him off the Island came in, he received them with the greatest indifference with relation to the prospect of going off with them; but with great satisfaction in an opportunity to refresh and help them. The man frequently bewailed his return to the World, which could not, he said, with all its enjoyments, restore him to the tranquillity of his Solitude. Though I had frequently conversed with him; after a few months’ absence he met me in the street, and though he spoke to me I could not recollect that I had seen him: familiar converse in this town had taken off the loneliness of his aspect, and quite altered his face.

This plain Man’s Story is a memorable Example, that he is the happiest who confines his wants to natural necessities; and he that goes farther in his desires, increases his wants in proportion to his acquisitions; or, to use his own expression, ‘I am now worth eight hundred pounds; but shall never be so happy as when I was not worth a farthing.’”

The great comfort which all shipwrecked Mariners must have derived from the perusal of Robinson Crusoe, has induced me to dwell thus long upon every thing that concerns a Work of so beneficial an import. It says more for Solitude, and the advantages which may be obtained from a proper use of it, than all the treatises that ever were published on that subject. The Reader lives, thinks, and acts with Crusoe: he assists him to sow his Corn, and to ornament his Cave: his mind, with him,
acknowledges the manifold blessings of Christianity; and amidst the gloom and awful silence of a desert Island, by a perusal of the sacred Scriptures, holds converse with his God. I never could understand what Dr Beattie meant, when he asserted that this Romance “fixes in the mind a lively idea of the Horrors of Solitude”, though I perfectly agree with him when he added “it shows how, by labouring with one’s own hands, one may secure independence, and open for one’s self many sources of health and amusement.”

But before I conclude this Section, I wish to make the admirers of this Nautical Romance mindful of a report, which prevailed many years ago; that Defoe, after all, was not the real author of Robinson Crusoe. This assertion is noticed in an article in the seventh volume of the Edinburgh Magazine. Dr Towers in his Life of Defoe in the Biographia, is inclined to pay no attention to it; but was that writer aware of the following letter, which also appeared in the Gentleman’s Magazine for 1788? At least no notice is taken of it in his Life of Defoe:

Dublin, February 25.

“Mr Urban,

In the course of a late conversation with a Nobleman of the first consequence and information in this kingdom, he assured me, that Mr Benjamin Holloway, of Middleton Stony, assured him, some time ago; that he knew for fact, that the celebrated Romance of Robinson Crusoe was really written by the Earl of Oxford, when confined in the Tower of London; that his Lordship gave the manuscript to Daniel Defoe, who frequently visited him during his confinement; and that Defoe, having afterwards added the second volume, published the whole as his own production. This Anecdote I would not venture to send to your valuable magazine, if I did not think my information good, and imagine it might be acceptable to your numerous readers; notwithstanding the Work has heretofore been generally attributed to the latter.”

W.W.11

It is impossible for me to enter on a discussion of this literary subject; though I thought the circumstance ought to be more generally known. And yet I must observe, that I always discerned a very striking falling off between the composition of the first and second volume of this Romance – they seem to bear evident marks of having been the work of different writers.

1 Mr Chalmers, in his Life of Defoe, informs us, that the first reception of Robinson Crusoe was immediate, and universal; and that Taylor, who purchased the manuscript after every bookseller had refused it, is said to have gained a thousand pounds. It has passed through more than twenty editions, besides those that have been printed on the Continent. During a short tour which I made in 1792, I found this Romance in the original by the bed side of the Arch Duke of Austria.

2 I may probably at some future period enter more largely on this subject; in which I am proud to acknowledge the support of one of the first Spanish scholars in this country, my friend Robert Bewicke, Esq.

3 Pages 565, 566, Quarto Edition 1783.


5 Page 34.

6 See also Histoire Generale des Voyages (tome XI, p68).
The Portuguese Pilot, as mentioned in his Voyage given by *Ramusio*, and translated in the *Progress of Maritime Discovery*, page 302, describes a species of Pepper called *melegete*, which he found on the coast of Africa.

Woodes Rogers’ *Cruising Voyage round the World*, (pages 125-131, Second edition.)

Number 26, published December 3, 1713.

*The Englishman*, page 124.