

The Real Robinson Crusoe

He was a pirate, a hothead and a lout, but castaway Alexander Selkirk the author's ancestor inspired one of the greatest yarns in literature

By Bruce Selcraig
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Three centuries ago an impetuous Scottish sailor known as Alexander Selkirk—though this wasn't his real name—was languishing off the coast of Chile in a battlescarred, worm-eaten British ship called the *Cinque Ports* when he began to argue with the captain that the leaky, disease-ridden vessel was a deathtrap.

Selkirk, a skilled navigator, and the ship's sickened crew were privateers—in effect, legalized pirates for the British Crown—who had spent a year at sea off South America robbing Spanish ships and coastal villages. Selkirk had already been on a similar voyage. He knew all the risks. But by October 1704, as the *Cinque Ports* anchored off a deserted archipelago 418 miles west of Valparaiso, Chile, he had made a lifechanging decision.

Selkirk demanded that his 21-year-old captain, Lt. Thomas Stradling, whom he regarded as arrogant, leave him on the largest island, a wish that Stradling was only too happy to oblige. By all accounts the 28-year-old Selkirk was a hothead. Back home in Scotland he had beaten up his father and two brothers over a harmless prank and would later leave both the women who claimed to be his wife.

In any case, Selkirk was left ashore, but when he realized that none of the crew was joining him in the mutiny, he frantically waded back into the ocean and begged forgiveness from Stradling, a tyrant who delighted in saying no.

Fortunately, for Selkirk's sake and world literature's, he accepted his fate, survived, and upon his return to England, inspired one of the world's great tales of self-reliance and courage, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Yet the cliché holds true—truth is stranger than fiction. The real life of Alexander Selkirk surpassed Crusoe's in almost every aspect. But then I may be biased. You see, poor Alex—pirate, lout and hero—was not in fact born with the name Selkirk, but with an even less common Scottish name, one to which I've grown attached: Selcraig. Yes, Alex is family. I am, according to Scottish genealogist Tony Reid, directly descended from Alex's oldest brother, John. Alex apparently never had children.

The first I remember hearing of the Selcraig-Crusoe connection was from my *National Geographic*-hoarding dad, now 91, who would wait until he had a captive audience at dinner to tell us kids about our Scottish ancestors. We mostly nodded and asked to be excused from the table, but as I grew older, I learned that Selkirk was hardly just a castaway and accidental hero.

When Alexander Selcraig was born in Lower Largo, Scotland, in 1676, it was a fishing village in Fife with fewer than a thousand souls, across the Firth of Forth (an estuary of the North Sea) from bustling Edinburgh, then a metropolis of close to 30,000. Today it's a quiet weekend destination for harried urbanites where BMWs crawl along a 15-foot-wide Main Street past centuries-old sandstone row houses with orange pantiled roofs and crow-stepped gables.

These days, the wide sandy beach beneath the inviting Crusoe Hotel is still perfect for dogs and long walks, but the herring boats that once choked the harbor are long departed, as are the fishermen, their net factories and the flaxen mills. There's a tiny corner market, a railway pub and someone who offers "Reiki Indian head massage," but a more powerful draw for many visitors is that Lower Largo is 15 minutes from Scotland's cradle of golf, St. Andrews.

Were this the United States, you wouldn't be able to see the ocean for all the billboards touting Crusoe Land Thrill Rides and Man Friday Burgers, but the Scots are a bit more restrained. Or perhaps it's because, as a local drama critic put it to me over tea and scones: "Selkirk was a bit of a bastard, more respected in his absence than in his presence."

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