

# This Month in the not so distant past

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Looking back at historical moments that happened in February,  
**John Davis** highlights **Alexander Selkirk**.

**T**olstoy's *War and Peace*, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Wuthering Heights* from Emily Bronte and even Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* are among the books that most readers have heard of, without ever owning a copy let alone having read them.

'Everyman's' list might also include *Robinson Crusoe* written by Daniel Defoe and published under the title *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* in 1719.

Defoe is believed to have based his story partly on the real-life escapades of a Scottish sailor named Alexander Selkirk but it was probably just one of many survival narratives that existed at the time.

A closer examination reveals that Selkirk's situation and that of the eponymous hero of Defoe's novel do differ considerably, Selkirk, for instance, was castaway on the Juan Fernandez archipelago in the South Pacific while the Crusoe story is based on an island in the Caribbean, possibly Tobago. Selkirk actually spent about four years living as an island recluse while Crusoe's abandonment is seven times greater. Robinson Crusoe is able to salvage useful materials from wrecked ships but has to contend with cannibals, hostile Spaniards and mutineers. Conversely, Alexander Selkirk was provided with only basic utensils to work with when abandoned and, apart from hiding away from a group of Spanish seamen who came ashore briefly, had no human contact.

Selkirk was born near Fife in Scotland in 1676. By all accounts he was an unruly youth who crossed swords with the law several times and it was no surprise when he ran away to sea as a teenager.

In 1703 he enlisted with the English privateer and explorer William Dampier on an expedition to the South Pacific. The authorised mission was to attack and loot foreign shipping. Selkirk sailed on a vessel named Cinque Ports under Captain Thomas Stradling where his considerable maritime skills led to him being appointed sailing master.

In 1704 after a skirmish with a French vessel, St. Joseph, they captured a merchant ship and attempted a raid on a Panamanian goldmining town. Lucky to escape being captured or killed, Stradling soon lost

patience with Dampier and decided to strike out on his own.

So, in the autumn of the same year, Stradling brought Cinque Ports to the Juan Fernandez archipelago off the coast of Chile to re-stock fresh water and other supplies. It was here that Selkirk raised grave concerns about the seaworthiness of the vessel and insisted on necessary repairs being carried out before they continued.

He told Stradling that he would rather stay on the island than put back to sea in a leaky ship. Surprisingly, Stradling took him at his word and, despite Selkirk's protestations, he was marooned on the island. All he was left with was a musket and some shot, a hatchet, a knife, a cooking pot, the Bible, some bedding and several changes of clothes.

Later Selkirk's prophecy proved to be accurate when Cinque Ports foundered off the coast of Colombia. Stradling and several of his men survived but were captured and imprisoned by the Spanish and did not return home until after four years of incarceration.

Initially, Selkirk spent his time living along the island's shoreline eating fish and spiny lobster until hordes of raucous sea lions forced him to move inland. The relocation was fortuitous as there was a more varied diet of food available here. Feral goats, introduced by earlier sailors, provided meat, milk and skins while he also found edible berries, vegetables and leaves. Here he was able to build several shelters, one for cooking in and the other for sleeping. From his Bible he sang psalms and derived comfort reading familiar passages.

Selkirk's long-awaited deliverance came on February 2nd, 1709 when a ship piloted by Dampier, The Duke, visited the island. After four years and four months without human company Selkirk was incoherent with joy and provided fresh meat for the crew, some of whom had developed scurvy.

The skipper of The Duke, Woodes Rogers was impressed not only by Selkirk's vigour but also by the peace of mind he had managed to attain. He observed, 'One may see that solitude and retirement from the world is not such an insufferable state of life as most men imagine, especially when people are fairly



called or thrown into it unavoidably, as this man was.'

Selkirk became second mate on *The Duke* and later was put in charge of a captured vessel named *Increase*. From then on, he returned to privateering with a vengeance capturing treasure galleons along the coast of Mexico. Before returning home in October 1711, he had, in effect, completed an around-the-world voyage. He had been away for eight years.

His privateering had made him a wealthy man although legal disputes made the payment of some amounts difficult. He married several times but could not settle to shore life and by 1720 was serving as an officer on *HMS Weymouth* on anti-piracy patrol off the west coast of Africa. In December 1721 he became ill with a tropical disease, probably yellow fever, and along with a number of his shipmates he died and was buried at sea. He was forty-five years old.

#### Footnotes:

(1) Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, was a prolific novelist, journalist, pamphleteer, poet and part-time spy. He produced more than three hundred works. Some of his political treatises got him

into trouble with the authorities and he spent several periods in prison. He also dabbled in espionage during his time in Scotland in the years leading up to the Acts of Union when England and Scotland merged. He chronicled events of the time in writings like *The Storm* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* and his other novels include *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*.

(2) Robinsonade is now the name given to a literary genre in which a leading character or characters are suddenly separated from normal civilisation usually by being shipwrecked or marooned. These include plays, films, animations, pantomimes, novels, short stories, poems etc. Some examples might include *Lord of the Flies*, *The Coral Island*, *Life of Pi* and the recent films *Cast Away* and *Ad Astra*.

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