



# The Man Who Was Robinson Crusoe

*Rick Wilson*

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2009 marked the 300th anniversary of the rescue of Alexander Selkirk, the Fife mariner who became the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe". The story is told not only by the author but also through the words of those who knew Selkirk with three colourful contemporary accounts of Selkirk's island experiences on Juan Fernandez - two by the sailors who rescued him from the island, 300 miles off the coast of Chile (Capt Edward Cooke and Capt Woodes Rogers) and one by Sir Richard Steele, who talked with Selkirk after his homecoming. Selkirk had spent four and a half years on the island. Wilson also delves into Defoe's construction of Crusoe from Selkirk's experiences and his youth in Fife. He also covers the dramatic circumstances of his abandonment on the island when he asked to be stranded rather than risk drowning in the unseaworthy Cinque Ports. Selkirk was right, the ship sank and the crew perished. Having been adopted as master of the ship that rescued him, Selkirk got his privateering career immediately back on track and, thanks to the success of this expedition, became a rich man. When he returned as such to Lower Largo - entering the church in all his new finery - his family and the common people almost fell at his feet. But this triumphant moment did not last. He became bored and nostalgic for his island (often sitting at a point overlooking the Forth to try to conjure it up) and, after starting a relationship with a local girl, he - and she - went back down to London. The story does not have a particularly happy ending. While his Fife lass felt uncomfortable in London society, Selkirk abandoned her in two ways - he took another woman as a wife and went off to sea again, as lieutenant aboard HMS Weymouth. While the ship was sailing off the west coast of Africa in 1723, it was struck by yellow fever and Alexander Selkirk was among the many crew members who died. He was aged 47 and the 'new' woman finally won the long and ugly tussle over his remaining fortune.

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