



CHAPTER ONE

It had been nine weeks since the sailors had set foot on land. Nine weeks of hard sailing, all down the coast of South America and then round the Horn with the storms pushing them south into the ice-bound waters of the Antarctic. They had met waves as high as houses and winds that would freeze a man's hands to the rigging and chill his heart to the core. The sailors had spat and cursed, they had greased their hands with whale blubber, tied sacking to their legs, tapped the weevils from their ships' biscuits and prayed for more rum.

Then finally they had come north into warmer waters. Two battered frigates, their rigging tattered, 50 men down with scurvy and three already dead. Now, after so many days, the rugged peaks of Juan

Fernandez loomed before them. Here, even though the mountains looked so forbidding, they knew they'd find clean water, fresh meat, and at last have a chance to rest.

Ten well-armed men rowed a small boat into the bay. The sailors were wary. There had been a fire up on the mountainside last night as they set anchor. Perhaps their French or Spanish enemies were hiding somewhere nearby. They cocked their muskets and scanned the island. But they had not rowed far before they heard the cries and shouting – a strange half-human, half-animal noise.

There on the beach, below the huge mountains and the forest, stood a tiny figure waving its arms frantically. The figure had the shape and proportions of a man, but it was entirely covered in fur, like a Barbary ape. The sailors crossed themselves. What was this thing? A new kind of animal? A monster?

They watched as the thing jumped up and down, waving its furry arms and pointing and hollering. Then it began to run. Yet it ran not like an ape, lolloping along with its arms trailing the ground, but like a man – only faster. When it stopped, it seemed to be pointing to a sandy landing spot. And as the sailors

rowed into shore, they realised that the creature was in fact a human being, a wild-looking individual with a long woolly beard, and covered from head to foot in animal skins – and he was growing frantic with excitement.

The wild thing welcomed the sailors as long-lost friends, embracing each man in his big furry arms. He smelt very powerfully of goat. And as he hugged them all, he made strange sounds – not the grunts or snorts of an animal, but blurred bits of words, as if his tongue were stiff and his mouth unused to human speech.

The sailors strained their ears – the wild thing was not only speaking, but also doing so in a Scottish accent. For the wild thing was a sailor like them. He was in fact Alexander Selkirk, Scottish mariner and privateer, hale of heart and mind, and delighted to be rescued after spending four years and four months alone on a Pacific island. This book is about how Selkirk came to be stranded on the island and how he survived. It is the tale of what happened to the real Robinson Crusoe.