

L'ÉCOSSE ET SES DOUBLES
Ancien monde – nouveau monde

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Old World – New World
SCOTLAND AND ITS DOUBLES

L'Harmattan

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PRESENTS OF EMPIRE:
SCOTLAND, CALEDONIA AND THE EMPORIUM OF
THE INDIES

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In the late 1690s, the European commercial and political worlds were keenly interested in the news of the emergence of a Scottish empire at the heart of Spanish America. The Company of Scotland trading to Africa and the Indies, by planting a colony at Darien on the Isthmus of Panama, attempted to connect the great oceans of the Atlantic and Pacific and thereby situate Scotland at the heart of global trade. In the words of the scheme's chief promoter, William Paterson, the Company of Scotland seized the "key to the universe", and aimed at nothing less than enabling Scots "to give Laws to both Oceans and to become Arbitrators of the Commercial world".¹

Despite this grand scheme for global domination, the Darien venture which created the colony of Caledonia is widely regarded as a catastrophic failure. Although some scholars have begun to reassess it, the "disaster" of Darien is still routinely described as ill-conceived, badly planned and executed with almost criminal incompetence, and it stands as surrogate for all that is bad about Scottish independent imperial activity.² While this essay does not seek to position the venture as

¹ William Paterson, quoted in David Armitage, "The Scottish vision of empire: intellectual origins of the Darien venture", *A union for empire: political thought and the union of 1707*, Ed. J. Robertson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 104.

² See, for example, Francis Russell Hart, *The Disaster of Darien*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1929; George Pratt Insh, *The Company of Scotland trading to Africa and the Indies*, London and New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; John Prebble, *The Darien Disaster*, London, Pimlico, 2002 edition. For newer work, see David Armitage, "Scottish vision of empire"; C. Storrs, 'Disaster at Darien (1698-1700)? The persistence of Spanish imperial power on the eve of the demise of the Spanish Habsburgs', *European History Quarterly*, 29, 1 (1999), pp. 5-38; W. D. Jones, "The bold adventurers': a quantitative analysis of the Darien subscription list (1696)", *Scottish Economic and Social History*, 21, 1 (2001), pp. 22-42; Douglas Watt, *The price of Scotland: Darien, Union and the Wealth of Nations*, Edinburgh, Luath, 2007.

DREAMS OF EMPIRE: SCOTLAND, CALEDONIA AND THE EMPORIUM OF THE INDIES

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In the late 1690s, the European commercial and political worlds were keenly interested in the news of the emergence of a Scottish empire at the heart of Spanish America. The Company of Scotland trading to Africa and the Indies, by planting a colony at Darien on the Isthmus of Panama, attempted to connect the great oceans of the Atlantic and Pacific and thereby situate Scotland at the heart of global trade. In the words of the scheme's chief promoter, William Paterson, the Company of Scotland seized the "key to the universe", and aimed at nothing less than enabling Scots "to give Laws to both Oceans and to become Arbitrators of the Commercial world".¹

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crowning glory in Scottish imperial history, it will suggest that it was a rational undertaking in the context of the mid-1690s. Although the settlement is well known to historians, the type of colony the Scots planned to settle has tended to be obscured by its failure. This paper aims to revisit the intentions of Scots in establishing a key territorial settlement at the heart of what appeared to be a grand commercial and particularly maritime empire.³

When the first fleet weighed anchor in Leith in July 1698, some 1200 people left with it. At the outset, its planned white population of 1200 in late 1698 can be compared to that of just over 7000 in Jamaica in 1700, an island which had been settled by England since 1655. This and other comparable colonies of settlement took time, even generations, to become established and secure. The first arrivals at Caledonia, for example, outnumbered the first settlement at Virginia in 1607 by some ten to one, which provides a useful indication of the seriousness with which the Scots took the creation of a colony.⁴ For all the emphasis on the commercial aspects of the scheme, then, it is clear from the initial and proposed investment in human capital that this was a serious attempt to build a new society.⁵ With those people went a series of ideas about how to run a colony and, in particular, how to structure and manage life in Caledonia. This essay explores the extent to which the Scots who went to Central America envisaged the creation of a new Scotland, of a 'double' that reflected much of what they had left behind. It suggests that as well as mirroring some elements of life in Scotland (or seeking to find improvements on a Scottish model) this venture ought to be viewed as more than simply a bilateral connection between Scotland and Caledonia. By positing a wider Atlantic context for the construction of Caledonia this essay argues that the new colony was informed by the flow and circulation of ideas, peoples and commodities across and around the Atlantic basin. It focuses, in particular, on four aspects of the planned

³ David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 146.

⁴ For Virginia, see Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: the settlement of North America to 1800*, London, Allen Lane, 2002, p. 130; for Jamaica, see Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and slaves: the rise of the planter class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*, London and New York, W. W. Norton, 1973, p. 312.

⁵ Michael Fry, "A commercial empire: Scotland and British expansion", Eds. T.M. Devine and J.R. Young, *Eighteenth-century Scotland: new perspectives*, East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 1999, pp. 53-69, makes the argument that Scotland adopted a commercial rather than colonial approach to empire.

colony — state building, naturalisation, religious toleration, relationships with the indigenous population, and slavery — to explore the influences on the settlers. Caledonia was not the first place that independent Scotland tried to establish an Atlantic empire, however, and to understand why this scheme emerged when and as it did in the 1690s, the essay begins with some of these earlier ventures.

First forays

Scots had long recognised the value of empire, which they saw as operating alongside their long-standing European commercial connections. Attempts were made to found permanent settlements at Nova Scotia as early as the 1620s, and then, in 1634, Charles I granted a charter to a Scottish Guinea Company to exploit African trade.⁶ This enterprise was wound up after five years, and it was not until the 1670s, after the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, that concerted Scottish imperial initiatives recommenced. By this time, a number of Scots were operating in the English and Dutch colonies in America and demand grew for Scotland to be given colonies of its own. In 1671, Charles I offered it the Caribbean island of Dominica, while proposals for the settlement of St Vincent in 1678 were still-born.⁷ In North America, other colonies were established and while the Carolina settlement between 1684 and 1686 was short-lived, the East New Jersey settlement, founded in 1683, survived independently until swallowed up by the royal colony of New Jersey in 1702 and the community lasted there until well into the eighteenth century.⁸ In addition to these schemes and to the thousands of Scots who inveigled themselves into foreign empires over the century, new opportunities opened up amidst the political tumult of the 1690s which kindled wider ambitions.

Under the reign of the Stuarts, English imperial expansion in the seventeenth century was often driven by a series of companies incorporated under a Royal charter. From Massachusetts Bay via the

⁶ N.E.S. Griffiths and J.G. Reid, "New evidence on New Scotland, 1629", William and Mary Quarterly, 49, 3 (1992), pp. 492-508; Robin Law, "The first Scottish Guinea Company, 1634-1639", *Scottish Historical Review*, 76, 2 (1997), pp. 185-202.

⁷ Douglas Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic world, 1750-1820*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005, pp. 2-3.

⁸ Ned C. Landsman, *Scotland and its first American colony, 1683-1765*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985.

Levant Company to the East India Company, companies managed both commercial and territorial empires. Their power and status derived from their royal association but, with the overthrow of the Stuarts following the 'Glorious Revolution' in 1688, suddenly these enormous undertakings were left without political legitimacy. Some, like the Hudson's Bay Company were almost immediately successful in securing new parliamentary charters in the 1690s. Others, like the Royal African Company, founded in 1672, had always been especially close to the Restoration and were left particularly vulnerable to challenges from independent merchants and potential new rival companies.⁹

At the same time, French naval and privateering actions during the War of the League of Augsburg in the 1690s seriously hampered overseas trade and the companies plying it. In an attempt to secure their colonial and overseas revenues, European states became increasingly protectionist, which meant that Scotland was effectively further excluded from legitimate trade with English and Dutch colonies. There was a perceived and growing need for Scotland to find its own commercial outlets.

While these twin assaults of war and political upheaval weakened the English companies, it was also clear that great opportunities existed in the Atlantic in the 1690s. The sugar revolution had taken hold in the Caribbean and this highly labour-intensive crop spurred a rapidly-growing demand for enslaved Africans which meant that African trade was now potentially very lucrative despite wartime restrictions on English trade. Around 67,500 Africans were loaded on to English ships in the 1660s, but by the 1680s that number had risen to over 112,000. Despite the war, the growth continued (albeit more slowly) in the 1690s (to around 116,500) and thereafter the slave trade grew exponentially to the point where more than 250,000 people were exported in every decade from the 1750s until the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ The Royal

⁹ K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company*, London, Longman, Green & Co, 1957, pp. 11-12; Percival Griffiths, *A licence to trade: the history of the English chartered trading companies*, London and Tonbridge, Ernest Benn, 1974.

¹⁰ Transatlantic slave trade database :

<http://www.slavevoyages.org/last/assessment/estimates.faces>, accessed 11.03.09; Eltis, *The rise of African slavery in the Americas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp 152, 166; David Blackburn, *The making of new world slavery: from the baroque to the modern, 1492-1800*, London, Verso, 1997, part 1; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and slaves: the rise of the planter class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*, New York, Norton, 1973, pp. 224-262.

African Company held a nominal monopoly of English trade to and from the African coast, where it was in competition with French, Dutch and Portuguese companies. None of these companies was entirely secure – either in their support at home, or in their capacity to dictate terms to powerful rulers in Africa. As a result, the African coast was one region where smaller states, notably Denmark and Brandenburg, might carve out opportunities.¹¹

The Company of Scotland

In these circumstances, enthusiasm for empire grew in Scotland and in June 1693 an Act for Encouraging of Forraign Trade was passed. A group of 48 Edinburgh merchants actively promoted the idea of a Scottish Africa company, partly to provide an outlet for Scottish manufacturing but also as a joint stock vehicle to muscle in on the Royal African Company which was then under attack by a series of independent English merchants.¹²

At the same time, a group of London merchants wanted to break the monopoly of another great English concern, the East India Company. They saw an opportunity in using another company, established with the authority of the new British king, but based in Scotland rather than London, to break into the riches of Asian trade. This southern impulse also dovetailed with an existing Scottish eastern trade, which previously had been routed through other European countries, using naturalised Scots partners as a way into the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC).¹³ These twin, but not necessarily complementary, interests in different geographical locations, added to a long term desire by Scots for empire, resulted in the emergence of the Company of Scotland, trading to Africa and the Indies.

The Company was established by an Act of the Scottish Parliament in June 1695. It offered the prospect not only of trade and settlement in Africa or India, but America too, though at this point no mention was made of a settlement in Panama. Indeed, it is important to note that although the Company has become synonymous with Darien,

¹¹ Davies, *Royal African Company*, p. 12; for Danish slave trade estimates see <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>, accessed 11.03.09.

¹² Insh, *Company of Scotland*, pp. 26-35.

¹³ Andrew Mackillop, ‘Accessing empire: Scotland, Europe, Britain and the Asia trade, 1695 - c. 1750’, *Itinerario*, 29, 3 (2005), p. 9.