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From “the Doors of the Seas” to a Watery Debacle: The Sea, Scottish Colonization, and the Darien Scheme, 1696–1700

Des « portes des océans » à une débâcle maritime : mer, colonisation écossaise et projet du Darien, 1696-1700

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From “the Doors of the Seas” to a Watery Debacle: The Sea, Scottish Colonization, and the Darien Scheme, 1696–1700

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Sept. 10. — This morning wee passed the Tropick of Cancer with a fresh and fair gale, the ships performed the usual ceremony of ducking several of the Ships Crew, who had not passed before; they were hoisted to the main yard arm, and let down 3 several times with a soss into the sea out over head and ears, their legs being tyed somewhat closs, which was pretty good sport. (Rose, “Journal”, p. 192)¹

We weighed and were under the sign of Cancer by the 10th of the month, at which time the usual ceremony of ducking from the Yards arm was performed on those that could not pay their tropick bottle. (“A Journal Kept from Scotland by One of the Company”, 28 September 1698, p. 72)

- 1 The men who wrote these journals were embarking on an exciting venture, leaving from Scotland to found the first-ever Scottish colony in Central America, right under the nose of the Spaniards, in a place they believed the best one for world commerce. This they were doing in spite of the joint opposition of the East India Company, which feared a challenge to its monopoly, the London Parliament, which shared their anxieties, and King William III, who was afraid of a quarrel with Spain and concentrated on European wars. They were sailing in ships which they had had to buy in Europe for want of a suitable shipyard in Scotland itself. They also hoped for the help of the Darien Indians, and especially their non-existent emperor. And they flew the Company of Scotland’s flag: a sun rising over a wide expanse of sea-blue calm water. The tone in their journals was optimistic, even cheerful. Much was expected from the Darien Venture.

- 2 The Darien Scheme appears as Scotland’s greatest attempt at colonial expansion in its own right, as a still relatively independent country and nation. This project, one of several by the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies, raised the highest of patriotic and economic hopes, only to end in cataclysmic failure. At the instigation of its promoter, William Paterson, this venture was intended to link the Atlantic and the Pacific spaces and concentrated on the Isthmus of Darien, seen as the key to these wide oceanic expanses.
- 3 William Paterson’s conception of what the colony of Caledonia should have been will be looked into, and we shall also, mostly but not exclusively, draw upon journals by the first expedition’s eye-witnesses, such as those by Hugh Rose or Captain Pennicook, as well as another, anonymous diarist. Captain Pennicook, sometimes spelt Pennycook or Pennicuik, was captain of the *Saint Andrew* and commodore of the Company’s fleet, and Rose was the secretary of the Council of the Colony. Their journals sometimes replicate each other, being sometimes identical, and may show interpolations, especially in the passages about the Darien Indians—though they are different enough at times to be judged of joint interest—for instance, Pennicook mentions desertions, unlike Rose.
- 4 After a brief outline of the context, we shall try and assess what the Company of Scotland’s project meant, or could have meant, in geostrategic terms of maritime space and world trade. We shall then study the close interrelation of sea and land in the colonial project of Caledonia, in both its positive and negative manifestations, ranging from the choice of a good harbour as a future base and the establishment of the seedling colony on a peninsula, in close proximity to the sea, to the in-between (“*entre-deux*”), whether it be made manifest through mangroves, rainy weather, or even amphibious attacks. The ambivalence of the sea, symbolically linked to both life and death, is a well-known theme, but it seems particularly relevant in the case of the Darien Scheme, and the last part of this paper shall therefore study the conflicting presentations of the sea that appear, often simultaneously or nearly so, in contemporary accounts of the Darien experience.

A study in context: a strong tradition of emigration, and a late start at colonization

- 5 Portugal and Spain had launched themselves into colonial expansion in and then across the Atlantic space towards the Americas by the end of the 15th century, soon followed by France, England and the Low Countries in what Chaunu has termed an un-partitioning of the worlds (“*décloisonnement des mondes*”; translation ours). This led Sir William Alexander to declare, in 1624, in his *Encouragement to Colonies* in relation to the Nova Scotia attempt: “my countrymen would never adventure in such an Enterprise, unlesse it were as there was a New France, a New Spaine, and a New England, that they might likewise have a New Scotland” (1624, p. 32). Scotland was handicapped by several factors: its comparative small size, its poverty, and its minority status in the Union of Crowns (an “anomalous position” analysed by Devine, 2003, p. 3).
- 6 A long tradition of maritime connection and immigration, whether scholarly, mercantile, or soldierly, with Northern Europe especially, had been well-established from the Middle Ages. This included the Hanseatic cities, Poland, Denmark, Scandinavia, and France, not forgetting the Ulster of the 17th century (Devine, 2003, pp. 8–17, and pp. 20–4). Thriving

Scottish communities existed all over Northern Europe (Devine, 2003, pp. 9–12). Scotsmen also played a part in colonizing Northern America, sometimes in the English colonies established there, despite a strong preference for the more ancient European connections (Landsman, 1999, pp. 463, 465). However, there had also been several attempts at Scottish settlements: Nova Scotia, sacrificed by London on the altar of good diplomatic relationships with France; Cape Breton, attacked by the French; East New Jersey, before its absorption in the royal colony of New Jersey; and Stuart’s Town in Carolina, attacked by the Spaniards in 1686 (Insh, 2004; Devine, 2003, pp. 38–9). The Americas were a place to emigrate for those freely seeking a better life, but also a place to transport political opponents during the Commonwealth (Armitage, 1997, p. 46).

- 7 Traditional European markets were shrinking in the second half of the 17th century, for example France, following Colbert’s protectionist measures, and these deteriorating trading conditions could not counterbalance agricultural problems at home: poor lands and cold, wet climate accounted for poor crops in some decades and made not starvation but dearth loom large (Devine, 2003, p. 15). By the 1680s and 1690s, neither the existing sea connections nor the land seemed to provide satisfactory opportunities; the time had come to try and go further, and embark on transatlantic ventures. It seemed vital to resort once more to the sea, and exploit the country’s peninsular situation, relocating the centres of decision-making, and looking to an Atlantic seaboard. Several English Navigation Acts had repeatedly stood in the way of Scottish maritime development (Devine, 2003, pp. 31–2), and as a direct result, pre-Union Scotland did not enjoy free trade with either England or its colonies, and neither did it enjoy independence at sea. By the 1690s, Scotland had but few ships at its disposal and even fewer maritime opportunities. But it also had this deeply ingrained tradition of emigration, and an Atlantic seaboard. Included within the sovereign powers of the Company of Scotland was, revealingly, the power “to Equipp, Fit, Set out, Fraught and Navigat their own, or hired Ships, in such manner as they shall think fit [...]” in the “Act of Parliament Constituting the Company of Scotland, Trading to Africa and the Indies” of 26 June 1695 (Hart, 1929, p. 185).
- 8 The said ships, on which the hopes of a nation rested, were not Scottish-built, but bought elsewhere, from Amsterdam or Hamburg. In other words, commerce gave rise to the Company’s first fleet, and not the reverse. After loading the cargoes and victualling the ships, they set sail from Leith in a climate of high expectation, exhilaration and enthusiasm.

The Scottish Indies and the “Door of the Seas”: an ambitious rewriting of late 17th century-Geostrategy in Darien

- 9 There were in fact not one but two Darien Schemes. The first, joint-stock project funded by English and Scottish capital planned to follow the model prescribed in “Trading to Africa and the Indies”. It contained no direct mention of the Americas, though the Indies could be understood as the West Indies as well as the East Indies. Its intended scope was as ambitious as that of other commercial companies, and it aimed more specifically towards Africa and the East Indies, and consequently the Indianoceanic space—which triggered the fears and reaction of the East India Company, as “Some Considerations upon

the Late Act of the Parliament of Scotland” or “Some Remedies to Prevent the Mischiefs from the Late Act of Parliament Made in Scotland, in Relation to the East-India Trade” tend to show, as well as the reaction of the English Parliament forbidding the joint-venture. Revealingly, no mention of America is made in these pamphlets, and they are still classified in the Indian and African Studies Section of the British Library of London, category “East India Tracts” (former India Office Library).

- 10 In contrast, the second Darien Scheme was an exclusively Scottish project, solely funded by Scottish capital. Investors thronged at Mrs Purdie’s coffee-house to enter their names in the subscription book, wishing as much to defend national pride as to invest in a promisingly prosperous venture. William Paterson, a Scottish merchant who had lived in the Caribbean and London—he was one of the founders of the Bank of England—played a crucial part in reorienting the new Darien Scheme towards Central America. He well knew from personal experience of the opportunities the West Indies had to offer; not only in relation to the Atlantic space, but also the “South Sea”, the Pacific. Yet Paterson had never set foot on the isthmus itself, which may account, at least partly, for his genuinely undaunted but purely theoretical enthusiasm about it. The scope of this second, independent project was, in itself, enormous, since it aimed at no less than bringing together the Atlantic and Pacific together, clearly breaking the Spanish monopoly in the matter and challenging their long-established rights to the area, by taking possession for Scotland of “these doors of what the Spaniards used to proudly call their king’s summer chambers, or, more properly speaking, the keys of the Indies and doors of the world” (Paterson, 1701, p.147). It was more ambitious and novel than other chartered companies’ projects, as it meant substitute itself, peacefully or otherwise, for the main and most ancient colonial power in this part of the world.
- 11 The isthmus was, for Spain, the crucial point of the *Carrera de Indias*, not an easy pathway due to climate, vegetation and terrain, but the narrowest connecting “neck of land” as it is often described, between South and North Sea. It was the shortest route, though always difficult and even perilous to cross. Yet, the alternative was enough to frighten even the most hardened sailors: the passage round Cape Horn, or through the risky Straits of Magellan. Across this trans-isthmian trail, from Panama towards the Atlantic seaboard, trains of mules would carry overland the riches from Philippines and the Far East, together with silver mined from the Potosi, in today’s Bolivia. Here, they would assemble at Portobello—Nombre de Dios having been twice attacked by Drake, and then abandoned by the Spaniards—and sail from there or Cartagena, in modern-day Colombia (Tavernier, 1970, p. 102; Ward, 1993, pp. 29–66, 188–9). Paterson thought very highly of Darien and took in, in one wide rhetorical sweep, the part played by sea routes and the world interconnectedness which Scotland could now play its part in: “[T]hese doors of the seas and the keys of the universe would of course be capable of enabling their possessors to give laws to both oceans, and to become the arbitrators of the commercial world.” (Paterson, 1701, p. 159)
- 12 His objective was commerce, as, for him, “the isthmus of America [was] not only the natural centre of the west, but easily to be put in a state of being that of at least two-thirds of the trade and treasure of both Indies” (*ibid.*, p. 127). Accordingly, he wished to create a world entrepot, in keeping with a venture focused upon trade rather than military conquest with its concomitant atrocities, which he did not condone and wished to avoid: in his own words, “without being liable to the fatigues, expenses, and dangers, or of contracting such guilt and blood, as Alexander and Cæsar” (*ibid.*, p. 159). The

merchant or tradesman was the new hero of the age, far from the bloodthirsty conquerors of the past, far from conquistadores themselves, implicitly. This outpost of future trade, a “Scottish Amsterdam of the Indies” (Callagher, 2015: “*Amsterdam écossaise des Indes*”; translation ours), was to welcome strangers and foreigners provided they intended to settle, thus making the settlement stronger and richer, and religious toleration was to be its hallmark (“a general naturalization, liberty of conscience, and a permission trade”, Paterson, 1701, p. 154). It was an enterprise set apart from the *leyenda negra*, therefore, with its massacres of Indians and the cruel Inquisition, not to mention the territorial monopoly jealously enforced by Spain, which regarded trespassers into their Darien and South Sea provinces, especially Protestant, English-speaking ones, as downright pirates (Botella-Ordinas, 2010, p. 146; Schurz, 1922, p. 185).

- 13 However, it would seem a stumbling-block was already present in Paterson’s noble, somewhat idealistic ambitions. To settle a colony in the teeth of colonial Spain, especially in a place of such geostrategic significance, meant that it needed the capacity to resist attack. Here appears the sharpest of contrasts between theory, “an international emporium without the costs of territorial empire” (Devine, 2003, p. 46), and practice. In order to endure long enough to trade, the colony of Caledonia would have to defend itself, and the recruitment of colonists accordingly took on a strong military imperative, although the official language resorted to double meaning, and demurely mentioned “Overseers” and “Planters” when “officers” and “soldiers” were actually meant (Prebble, 1968, p. 99). Of course, it may be argued, Ancient Rome itself had its peasant soldiers, but the conquered remembered the soldiers in them rather than the peasants, and the viceroys of the Spanish New World did not underestimate the threat. The terms “overseers” and “planters” apparently indicate landsmen rather than seamen, which means that the Councillors had survival in mind. However, the primary objective, once the settlement was effective, remained trade, and therefore sea ventures.

Places in-between sea and land

- 14 The meeting of land and sea might in fortunate circumstances provide the colonists with natural harbours, though it could just as easily present them with salt shallows and hazards such as mangroves. While the former are, clearly enough, in favour of human activities, the latter can be seen as obstacles to them.
- 15 In Modern, 16th to 18th-century Europe, a trading or colonizing venture started from one land, and sought to reach another one, thanks to the sea as connector, and bond: the supremacy of the maritime element in exotic ventures cannot be in doubt. In most cases, traders or colonists from Europe aimed for another continent, whether America, Africa or Asia, where they would establish themselves close to the sea, either as permanent settlers (Plymouth) or occupants in trading-posts (the Moluccas), on or near the coast, or up a river (the Hooghly), in the hinterland. Unsurprisingly, the first areas to have been colonized by Europeans in the Americas were the Caribbean Isles, the first commodious landfalls they had met on their way.²
- 16 A harbour, whether already existing or to be created, as Caledonia was, brings into contact both sea and land and allows commerce and interaction between colonizing nation, colonists, and colonized, hence its central importance. Consequently, the search for the best possible harbour was the Scottish settlers’ starting point, bearing in mind not only the necessary connection to be kept and developed with the outside world—the

whole point of their enterprise, after all—but also the defensive matters, too. It had to be spacious enough to accommodate a flourishing traffic of boats and ships, quite safe and sheltered from both natural elements and enemies, easy to access and easy to defend. They needed solid ground rather than marshland, unsilted waterways with fresh water in the vicinity, and not brackish water. In other terms, one had to be assured of land before venturing at sea.

- 17 The site of the future, but short-lived, Caledonia Harbour, seemed to win general approval. It was judged “most excellent” by the anonymous writer of “A Journal” (4 November 1698, p. 74), which is echoed by Rose: “[wee went] in our boats to sound a bay about 4 miles to the eastward of Golden Island, and found it a most excellent harbour”, and, perhaps counting his chickens before they were hatched, he calculated it would easily shelter “1000 of the best ships” (3 November 1698, pp. 197–8). The natural protection it afforded was good, Pennicook thought: “here you ly Landlockt every way, that noe wind can possibly hurt you” (Pennicook, 3 November 1698, p. 82, echoed in Rose, 3 November 1698, p. 198). And the anonymous diarist saw in all this the hand of God, writing in a dutifully thankful tone: “We are certainly much bound to Providence in this affair; for as we were searching for the place we were directed to, we found this”, and he carries on, “and though the Privateers had been so often at Golden Island, and though English, Dutch, and French had been all over this Coast, from Portobelo to Cartagena, yet never one of them made the discovery; even the Spaniards themselves never knew of this place” (“A Journal”, 4 November 1698, p. 76). Apart from sounding over-optimistic, this is tantamount to denying Balboa knowledge of the area of the very town he founded, Acla.
- 18 Another example of place where this “entre-deux” is manifest and offers shelter to humans would be Captain Ambrosio’s dwelling, protected as it is from a surprise attack: “It stands upon the banks of this river with about 10 or a dozen lesser houses about it. Their houses are on the sea hand inaccessible in a manner, being so advantageously situate that no stranger can come at them that way by reason of the numerous unseen shoalds, small rocks, and banks.” (Rose, 21 November 1698, p. 207) This seems not unlike modern-day Kuna dwellings, as a majority of Kuna communities—the descendants of the Indians Wafer and the Scottish settlers met in Darien—now live on small coralline islands away from fevers while going every day on the mainland to till their fields (Severin, 2002, pp. 216–7; McKendrick, 2016, p. 99).
- 19 At first, a kind of balance appeared between the sea (dynamic) and the land (static), and the would-be colonists laboured at both: “The people ashoare are imployed in making of huts, clearing way, & c. and those on board in ordering their holds, overhauling their rigging, blocksails, & c.” (Rose, 11 November 1698, p. 205) The settlement had to be made first, but could only hope to endure thanks to communications with the outside world, through the coming of news, supplies, and at a later stage the development of commerce. However, a fundamental imbalance was soon to be observed, with the liquid element gradually taking over, preventing human activities or at least slowing them down considerably, and making men and women sick from mosquito-induced fevers.
- 20 Mangroves, where sea and land meet in a tangled vegetation of entwined aerial roots, were hostile to European activities, and the time had not yet come when they would be considered as shrines of biodiversity to be protected. Marshlands were justly feared, as they brought fevers, although the part played by mosquitoes as vectors was not yet known. Mr Rose described an unsuitable place in the following terms: “On the main and

all the bay round full of mangrow and swampy ground, which is very unwholesome.” (Rose, 1 Nov. 1698, p. 196)

- 21 Wafer, trudging across Darien with an open wound in his knee, found the conditions truly appalling in the rainy season, and left an apocalyptic account of his experience in which water and earth seem no longer to exist as distinct entities: “But not long after Sun-set, it fell a Raining, as if Heaven and Earth would meet; which Storm was accompanied with horrid Claps of Thunder, and such flashes of Lightning, of a Sulpherous smell, that we were almost stifled in the open Air.” (Wafer, 1704, p. 13; emphasis ours) The New Edinburgh colonists did not arrive in the rainiest months, unlike Wafer, yet references to rain and poor weather conditions are recurrent in the testimonies of Caledonia’s early days (Rose, 12–15 November 1698, pp. 205–6; 19 November, p. 206; 1 and 2 December, p. 210): “24. Much wind and rain. 25. Wind and rain as above. 27. Very much rain and wind. 28. These 24 heures ther has fallen a prodigious quantity of rain. 29. Much rain with fresh gales.” (24–29 November, p. 208) Rain, thunder, and downpours again, in an endless litany: in what Kricher terms the “neo-tropical” climate (1997), rivers overflow their banks, swamps encroach, and, as in Wafer’s narrative, earth and water appear to merge. This other “in-between” was of course prejudicial to human activities, both in preventing regular work (“which hinders the work much”, Rose, 2 December 1698, p. 209) and in augmenting the number of the sick. Those still lodging onboard the ships suffered less from the fevers. It seems William Paterson and the Company’s Directors had overlooked this part of Wafer’s experience. After all, the Spaniards themselves had never actually settled the area around New Edinburgh, at least not for long.
- 22 Another potentially lethal admixture of sea and land is to be noticed in the Isthmus’s long-favoured military strategy, that of amphibious operations. Given the absence of roads or even permanent paths wide and clear enough for Europeans to circulate unhampered, and the difficulty of travelling overland combined with the necessity of attacking settlements on land, troops had to be shipped to a landing-point and disembarked close to the place they wanted to attack. This was exactly what privateers and pirates had done against the Spanish cities of the Isthmus: Henry Morgan organized a whole fleet before attacking Panama (Exquemelin, 1684, Part III, p. 3). Ironically, this was also the strategy the Spaniards resorted to in order to drive the Scots from Caledonia: their land forces—Campmaster Luis Carrisoli’s men, or the garrison at Toubacanti—were insufficient, and expeditionary reinforcements, from Colonial America and from Spain itself, under the command of Don Juan Diaz de Pimienta and Don Pedro Fernandez de Navarrete respectively, were shipped to the nearby Golden Island, then disembarked, to drive the Darien colonists away. When the Spanish troops arrived in the Spring of 1699, the settlement was already abandoned; but, on the second occasion, in April 1700, New Edinburgh capitulated, and so ended the “Scottish dream of empire” (Prebble, 2000; Storrs, 1999).

The ambivalences of the sea: life and death, dearth and plenty

Eaux en mouvement, la mer symbolise un état transitoire entre les possibles encore informels et les réalités formelles, une situation d’ambivalence, qui est celle de l’incertitude, du doute, de l’indécision et qui peut se conclure bien ou mal. De là vient que la mer est à la fois l’image de la vie et celle de la mort. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 623)

- 23 The sea is a traditional mythological and literary theme, and, as a metaphor of human experience, the whole drama of human experience from beginning to end, it seems to sum up and illustrate the contradictions of the Darien project. Apart from the divide and difference between seamen and landsmen in the Council of the Colony (Prebble, 1968, p. 129, for example), the two Darien expeditions seem to have been characterised by high levels of hope—the first accounts sent home were almost lyrical in their praise—while the failure brought despair to not only the colonists but to the nation itself.
- 24 The sea was not only what made the colonization possible: it also meant the arrival of potential Indian allies, supplies, news, and reinforcements from the mother-country. As such, it concentrated the hopes in the seedling establishment’s survival. The former’s repeated visits occurred soon enough—Rose and Pennicook report them in similar terms. The latter, in contrast, had to be long awaited: even to send Edinburgh news of the safe arrival meant finding a ship bound for the Caribbean or, even better, Europe. In this respect, the shipwreck of the French vessel which had agreed to carry dispatches, just before Christmas 1698, was a sore blow.
- 25 Kuna chiefs appear to have been well-pleased with their new neighbours, and Captains Ambrosio, Pedro and Diego took turns to visit the settlers. The colonists saw them as potential allies, inspired in this by Wafer’s account and the Kunas’ own declarations of friendship for privateering and pirate captains (Rose, 2 November 1698, p. 197). However, as Gallup-Diaz has emphasised, the diplomacy at stake here was not one-sided, whatever the settlers might have thought; the chiefs had for long been negotiating alliances, with or against each other, and with or more frequently against the Spaniards, or with buccaneers and freebooters whom they sometimes helped to cross the isthmus. Kunas, Pocosas, Urabaes, Spanish-supporting Chocos, all had agendas of their own, whereas the new arrivals failed to understand the advanced state and complex nature of “rainforest diplomacy” (Gallup-Diaz, 2005, chapter 4).
- 26 Supplies were greatly needed, but few arrived. Soon after leaving Leith, Paterson was appalled at the lack of some and the poor quality of others (“Report by William Paterson”, 19 December 1699, Burton, 1849, p. 179); in Madeira, the Darien fleet bought wine, but their autonomy in the matter of food was from the start less good than it should have been (Prebble, 1968, pp. 118, 144). Far from trading in spices or silk, sugar or tobacco, the settlers needed basic provisions. On 23 December 1698, a delighted Mr Rose noted that a sloop brought “flower, beefe, & c. from Jamaica”, but it was rather small, he noted (23 December 1698, p. 215), and, the readers may observe, quite alone.
- 27 Rather engagingly, echoing Wafer’s remark about a land of plenty, the secretary of the Council reported good catches, in keeping with the motif of the nurturing sea: “Sometimes most excellent fish taken here, as also Tortoises (but very few yet, not having time nor nets fit for them,) some of them above 2, others above 300 weight: they are the best of meat. One of them will serve 100 men of reasonable appetites.” (Rose, p. 210, 9 December 1698) *A Short Account from, and Description of the Isthmus of Darien, Where the Scots Collony are Settled* described the many resources of the place, drawing heavily from Wafer’s account: vegetation, both useful and exotic, land animals, with a strong emphasis on edible ones, birds, unknown, beautiful, and delicious, and fish, of course, such as “Paracoods” (barracudas), the “Sea-Cow” (the manatee) and the best way to catch it, for it, too, was exquisite, and turtles (1699, pp. 5–9). Yet, reading Rose’s journal, the last impression is not quite so favourable, as the catching of fish and turtles already seems in

jeopardy due to lack of time. This may be understood as a reference to the harsh and slow process of land clearing and building, and, implicitly perhaps, to the high number of sick men too, making the progress harder and slower. The lack of adequate fishing tools (Rose, 9 December 1698, p. 210) added to the difficulties of their adaptation to their new environment, which might have been remedied had they had time enough to observe Indian ways and knowledge. As for the expected reinforcements, the first Darien settlers never saw them: when they arrived, they found a deserted colony, and what should have been a strengthening of the settlement proved to be, in fact, a second attempt and a second expedition.

- 28 Knowing that not only allies and friends, but also spies, rivals, or enemies could come from the sea, Rose explains their defensive effort: "The Council have ordered their ships in a line of battle in the mouth of the harbour." (14 December 1698, p. 213) The need to have a clear view and anticipate an attack is evident when he adds: "There is a look out made from which ships or vessels within 10 leagues can be descried." (*Ibid.*) Point Look-Out was indicated on contemporary maps of Darien.
- 29 Spies and rivals were feared, and the arrival of the English Captain Richard Long on board his *Rupert Prize*, officially commissioned to sail the area in search of sunken treasures from wrecked ships, was interpreted as a potential threat from London, the English capital interfering in Scottish affairs. Long was invited to dine several times and reciprocated the invitation (Rose, 13–23 November 1698, pp. 205–8; Pennicook, 13–26 November 1698, pp. 88–90) and the atmosphere remained courteous throughout his visit, but as soon as he had surreptitiously left, the alarm was sounded: "The Counsell mett, where Captn Long's sudden departure being consider'd, it was resolv'd the *Pink* should be sent home to Scotland with all possible speed" (Pennicook, 26 November 1698, p. 90), and the anonymous diarist tartly writes that
- Capt. Long came in eight days after, and I believe we were a great eyesore to him, tho he said nothing. [...] Hearing by the Natives that we were here, he came in with his Long-boat, as he said to see us, but I believe it was only to know the certainty of what he feared was too true. ("A Journal", 4 November 1698, p. 77)
- 30 As they well knew, Captain Long was not there as a free-lance treasure-seeker, but had been sent on some official mission: "He commanded the *Rupert Prize*, a small English Man of War, fitted out by the King, upon what Design we know not, but he pretends it was to search for a Silver Wrack [...]." (*Ibid.*)
- 31 Other rivals at this time took the modest shape of a group of French privateers at the San Blas Islands, who also benefitted from good relationships with local Indians and their chief, Captain Corbet ("Captain Long's Letter", 1699, Burton, 1849, p. 81). They were not necessarily hostile, but uncomfortably close. And, centuries after the Auld Alliance, France was known to mistrust the Scottish endeavour, fearing at first that they would aim for their own colonial possessions instead of Darien, thus verging from centuries of mutual support, friendliness and goodwill, following perhaps the well-acknowledged principle "no peace beyond the line". Furthermore, Scotland was now included in the Union of Crowns, which made it part and parcel of William III's kingdom, Louis XIV's Protestant enemy.
- 32 The enemies the New Edinburgh settlers feared were, of course, the Spaniards, and they waited for sometimes contradictory news about their movements from the visiting Indian chiefs. The Spaniards could not admit of the Scottish intrusion in the geographical centre of their empire—"the fulcrum of [their] imperial economy" (Watt, 2007, p. 5)—, which

would have split the viceroalties of New Spain and Peru into two separate entities, and created a regrettable precedent, possibly paving the way for other Protestant settlers—“*Luteranos*” and heretics in the eyes of Carlos II’s subjects. Protestants or subjects of William III meant only one thing to colonial Spain, as it had endured repeated attacks from Sir Francis Drake to Sir Henry Morgan to Captain Bartholomew Sharp: pirates—although some of them had actually been privateers—, that is, arch-enemies to be eradicated as soon as possible. The Council of Caledonia took every step to reassure them on this point (“Letter by the Council of Caledonia”, Burton, 1849, p. 91),³ but fair words were not judged sufficient. The possibility of Spanish reaction had been underestimated, as was their enduring strength (Storrs, 1999, pp. 6–7, 27), by those who saw colonial Spain as an empire on the wane, inhabited by slothful, cowardly, and degenerate individuals, and Spain itself as the very image of Carlos II, its perpetually ailing monarch whose death was expected any minute and whose succession agitated Europe. But the counterattack had to be reckoned with, as Caledonians themselves judged when they tried to take protective measures such as the digging of a ditch and the construction of Fort Saint Andrew, overlooking the sea. “[I]f Darien was, ultimately, a disaster for Scotland—a minor, peripheral European power—it was a triumph for a Spanish Monarchy which remained a Great Power and was by no means the desperate figure of legend on the eve of the advent of the Bourbons and the War of the Spanish Succession.” (Storrs, 1999, p. 27)

- 33 The Company’s Directors judged, somewhat harshly, that their fellow countrymen had under-utilised their ships in the first expedition, and thus not taken enough advantage of the sea element:

And whereas we understand that the ships sent upon the first expedition for settling of the said Colony were after their arrival there all along kept wholly idle and useless, and not employed as they ought to have been in making reprisals upon the persons and goods of the Spaniards after that they broke out in acts of hostility against the said Colony; you are therefore hereby ordered to take care not to fall in the like error and neglect [...]. (“Instructions to Mr Daniel Mackay, Captain William Vetch, Captain Alexander Campbell of Fonab, and Mr Alexander Hamilton”, 1699, Insh, 1924, p. 189)

- 34 But, of course, it was easier said than done, and the second expedition did not, in the end, fare any better than the first. Paterson saw ships as a lifeline, an indispensable link with the outside world, and found that the Darien ships were far from meeting such requirements: “When we arrived first, we were, as it was, in a Prison for want of sloops, briganteens, or other good, stiff, windwardly vessels.” (“Report by William Paterson”, 19 December 1699, Burton, 1849, p. 181)
- 35 Of these ships, the *Saint Andrew* managed with extreme difficulty to make its way to Port-Royal, Jamaica, after narrowly escaping wreckage off the coast of Cartagena, the *Dolphin* was taken by the Spaniards, the *Endeavour* sank, and the *Unicorn* had to be abandoned after reaching the Hudson River estuary; the *Caledonia* made it back to Scotland, after staying in New York, but only just made it there from Darien (Insh, 2004, p. 119; Prebble, 1968, pp. 305, 178, 202, and 215). As for the second expedition, the *Rising Sun* and the *Hope of Bo’ness* were wrecked, the *Duke of Hamilton*, sunk by a storm, and the *Olive Branch*, a supply ship which went with the *Hopeful Binning*, burnt accidentally. Despite the liquid element, wooden ships’ greatest enemy was fire (Prebble, 1968, pp. 306, 307, and 237). The aptly-named *Speedy Return* reached Scotland, but was to disappear on another, Eastern expedition with her consort the *Content* (Prebble, 1968, p. 312). To describe this as a hecatomb does not seem far-fetched, and this is also meant in human terms: “In our

voyage from the Collony to New York we lost neare 150 of about 250 persons putt on boord, most of them for want of looking after and meanes to recover them”—amounting to 60%, therefore (“Report by William Paterson”, 19 December 1699, Burton, 1849, p. 196). Given the bedraggled survivors’ sorry condition, and despite the royal proclamation forbidding help to the Darien colonists, the numerous New Yorkers of Scottish descent, as well as John Nanfan, then acting as Deputy Governor for Lord Bellomont, tried to help them, at least to some extent (Insh, 2004, pp. 119–20). Some, however, never took to the sea again and chose to stay and prosper in the English colonies of America instead of returning to Scotland. For them, the sea experience was definitely over, and they had escaped a watery grave.⁴

- 36 Whilst the means to defend Darien had been chronically insufficient before the Scottish attempt (Schurz, 1922, p. 185; Elliot, 2007, p. 59), they were increased after 1700 (Storrs, 1999). Paterson appears to have stuck to his views of Darien when he wrote his “Proposal” in 1701, and in his 1704 edition of *A New Description*, Wafer still urged an English colonization of the area: the geostrategic charms of the place still had not faded, and were thought enticing enough to justify these publications.
- 37 The Company of Scotland had lost much, and so had the Scottish nation; but it courageously returned to its first, Eastern interests and managed to man a few more ships. It did not prosper there, either. Prosperity took much longer to achieve, and happened only after the Union (see McGilvary, 2011), which enabled Scotland to gain access to English colonies on equal terms, although this was far from being immediate (Clive & Bailyn, 1954, p. 201).

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NOTES

1. The late 17th-century spelling has been left unaltered, random capitalization included.
2. One notable exception to this supremacy of the sea element would seem to be Russia, then an essentially continental, Eurasian power in the making, where colonies came into direct geographical contact with the colonial power, quite unlike the overseas territories claimed by Western European nations. Yet, even then, the sea was not absent from the ambitions of Peter the Great, who founded the national navy, or of Catherine II, during whose reign the search for an ice-free coastline in winter accounted for the Russian territorial extension towards the Crimea.
3. “Wee doe therefore, by these, signifie to you that wee are the subjects of the King of Great Brittain, by virtue of whose power and authority granted to us, with advice and consent of his Parliament of Scotland, wee have settled here, for the encouraging, advancing, and carying of trade and commerce.” At this point, in Spring 1699, the Council was trying to have the men of the *Dolphin* freed from Spanish gaols, where they were detained under an accusation of piracy.
4. Among those who chose to stay was Reverend Alexander Stobo, an ancestor of President Theodore Roosevelt.

ABSTRACTS

The Darien Scheme (1696–1700) appears as Scotland’s greatest attempt at colonial expansion in its own right, before the 1707 Union of Parliaments. Due to its peninsular situation and overall poverty, the nation had a long tradition of emigration, and by the end of the 17th century, it also wished to take part in the trans-Atlantic venture. Far from being perceived as an obstacle, the sea

had a crucial part to play, both as a means of reaching the Americas and as a way of furthering overseas trade. But enemies too could come from the sea, and for many of the survivors of Spanish retaliation and tropical fevers, the Caribbean and the Atlantic were not only a way of escape, but also a watery grave, in an ambivalent reversal of what had first appeared as a dazzling opportunity.

Le projet du Darien (1696-1700) apparaît comme la tentative coloniale majeure de l'Écosse en tant que nation indépendante, avant l'Union des Parlements de 1707. Du fait de sa situation géographique et économique, elle avait une longue tradition d'émigration, et souhaita également, à la fin du XVII^e siècle, participer à l'aventure transatlantique. Loin d'être perçue comme un obstacle, la mer avait donc au contraire un rôle crucial à jouer, permettant à la fois le passage vers les Amériques et la promotion du commerce extérieur. Mais de la mer pouvait aussi venir l'ennemi, et pour nombre de survivants de la riposte espagnole et des fièvres tropicales, la mer ne fut pas seulement une échappatoire, mais aussi un tombeau liquide, en un renversement non dénué d'ambivalence.

INDEX

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