Darien Company

Darien, the former name for the Panama isthmus

As the 17th century drew to a close, Scotland was in desperate straits due to the famine brought on by seven successive years of crop-failure.

In June 1695, the Scots Parliament passed an act authorizing the establishment of a Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies. The Marquis of Tweeddale was the King’s Commissioner, and knew his master’s disapproving mind, but he bent his ageing and rheumatic back to the pressure of the Estates, touched the Act with the sceptre, and thus gave it the royal assent without first giving William the opportunity to read it. The dream of a Scots merchant colony was not new, and although previous attempts to fulfil it in Nova Scotia, New England and Carolina had been miserable calamities, the spirit and challenge of this ‘noble undertaking’ inflamed the imagination of the country.

In its original form, the scheme for the Company had been drawn by a group of Scots merchants in London and principally by William Paterson, a Dumfries wanderer whose creative intellect was in advance of his time. He and his companions proposed a joint Scots and English venture, but the English trading companies and the impeachment of its founders before the Commons effectively squashed this. A following attempt to enlist the support of the Hanseatic towns was also stopped by the English, and Scotland went bravely ahead alone.

In an atmosphere of feverish enthusiasm, Scots men and women, burghs, corporations and associations subscribed four hundred thousand pounds toward the Company, believed to be half the available capital of the nation. Patriotism was married to profit, and the issue was assured. ‘Trade will increase trade,’ Paterson had said, ‘and money will beget money.’ The Council-General of the Company abandoned its earlier thoughts of Africa and decided to establish a colony and an entrepôt on the coast of Darien, the most inhospitable and unhealthy part of the Isthmus of Panama.

No one, not even Paterson who had suggested this site from the beginning, had ever been there. What information there was about it came from the journals and papers of a young buccaneer-surgeon, Lionel Wafer, and his warning that it was the wettest place in the torrid zone was blithely ignored. Ships were bought, built or chartered in Holland and Hamburg, and the Company’s warehouses at Leith and Glasgow were slowly filled with a bizarre collection of goods, which, it was confidently believed, could be exchanged for the spices, silks and gold of the Orient.

‘Darien’, said Paterson, would be the ‘door of the seas, the key of the universe’, reducing by half the time and expense of navigation to China and Japan, and bringing peace to both oceans without the guilt of war. This wondrous scheme was premature, not impossible, and two centuries later men would realize part of it by cutting the cord of the Isthmus with a canal.

In July 1698, five ships left Leith upon a great wave of emotion. They sailed north about and down the Atlantic, made a landfall off the coast of Darien in November, and claimed it as the Colony of Caledonia. Many of the colonists were already dead from flux and fever, and their leaders were inefficient and quarrelsome. The splendid harbour chosen was a trap for vessels that could not sail to windward. Ambition, pride and envy, aggravated by ignorant stupidity, destroyed the spirit of those who survived the killing fevers. Paterson’s wife died within a few days of the landing, and he went slowly out of his mind with despair. The town of New Edinburgh was never more than a few palmetto huts, and the ramparts of Fort St Andrew were washed away by the pitiless rain.
William and the English government had acknowledged the Spaniards’ claim to Darien, but their attempt to retake it was repulsed by the Scots in a little jungle skirmish. When the English colonies of America and the Caribbean were ordered to give no help to Caledonia, the survivors lost their courage and abandoned the huts, the fort and the bay. Relief ships from the Forth were welcomed by four hundred lonely graves. Despite the bitterness of famine, and the shortage of money and supplies, Scotland had assembled another expedition of four ships, and it was already at sea before the failure of the first was known. It reached Caledonia in November 1699, and found only a ‘vast, howling wilderness’, but the huts were rebuilt and the fort reoccupied. From the beginning there was jealousy and disunity, fever, desertion and mutiny, and the ministers sent by the General Assembly violently abused the sick and dying for their ‘atheistical cursing and swearing, brutish drunkenness and detestable mockery’.

Once again the Spaniards attacked, and were once again thrown back in the green wet mist of the jungle. When they blockaded the colony by sea and land, advanced their guns and trenches to the rotting ramparts of the fort, the Scots resisted bravely for a month and then surrendered. On April 12, 1700, Caledonia was finally abandoned to the Spanish. In the first week of May, three ships sighted the hills of Jamaica. Two hundred and fifty souls had died on this voyage to Jamaica. In the following two months, with little relief and no credit, another hundred died

The Darien venture was perhaps the worst disaster in Scotland’s history, greater than the bloody defeats of Flodden and Dunbar and Worcester. There had been no glory, no valour, and few nations can withstand the terrible loss of pride and money. Its exchequer and storehouses were empty, and its challenge to the mercantile power of England was now a mockery. Nine ships, which the Company had bought or chartered, were sunk, burnt or abandoned. A call had been made upon three-quarters of the subscribed capital, and it was all lost. Only three hundred of the colonists, soldiers and seamen returned to Scotland.

Two thousand men, women and children had been sacrificed to a national hubris, drowned at sea, buried in the fetid earth of Darien, abandoned in Spanish prisons, or lost for ever as indentured servants in English colonies. The anger of the people was intense, and was not reduced when the King said that their colony had been a threat to peace. Nor was his promise to promote their trade, to repair their losses if possible, more than bitter comfort. Few men blamed the failure of the colony upon the stupidity of its location, the contentious inefficiency of its leaders, or the blind ignorance of its promoters. English treachery was responsible. Great men who knew this to be false, or at least an exaggeration, publicly agreed rather than challenge the outraged emotions of the nation.

**Principal Character**


**MAY 1. 1707 The Treaty of Union of the two Kingdoms of Scotland and England takes effect. By Article XV, the Company of Scotland is dissolved.**

The Treaty of Union in 1707 united the parliaments of Scotland and England. Possibly the most significant event in the history of Scotland since the era of Robert the Bruce, the 1707 Treaty was the result of political and economic factors becoming irresistible. The Darien disaster of 1698-1700, when supposedly half of Scotland’s available capital was raised by public subscription (and subsequently lost), ruined Scotland’s economy, and its sense of economic confidence. Opponents
of the Union found it increasingly difficult to counter the financial benefits union with England would bring.

As part of the ‘Equivalent’ – the £398,000 to offset Scotland’s losses – money was made available to compensate those who had lost heavily through Darien, and for salary arrears (allowing James Balfour to purchase Pilrig House). In some quarters, this was seen as forming inducements, or bribes, leading to figures such as Robert Burns expressing his view: “We’re bought and sold for English gold, Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!” His reaction reflects much of the passionate feeling about the Union, which still exists today.