

## THE DARIEN EXPEDITION

Very few people know about the Darien Expedition nowadays. My interest was sparked during a visit to the National Museum of Scotland where I saw a chest that had been used – more of that later – and I decided to research the story of something that could be said to have led to the Union of the Parliaments.

The late 17th century was a difficult period for Scotland, as it was for much of Europe; the years 1695-1697 saw catastrophic famine in present-day Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Norway and Sweden, plus an estimated two million deaths in France and Northern Italy.

Scotland's economy was relatively small, its range of exports was very limited and it was in a weak position in relation to England, its powerful neighbour (with which it was in personal union, but not yet in political union).

In an era of economic rivalry in Europe, Scotland was incapable of protecting itself from the effects of English competition and legislation. The kingdom had no reciprocal export trade and its once thriving industries such as shipbuilding were in deep decline; goods that were in demand had to be bought from England for sterling. Plus, the Navigation Acts further increased economic dependence on England by limiting Scotland's shipping, and the Royal Scots Navy was relatively small.

A series of domestic conflicts, including the 1639-1651 Wars of the Three Kingdoms and unrest related to religious differences between 1670-1690 exhausted the people and diminished their resources.

*(The Wars of the Three Kingdoms, sometimes known as the British Civil Wars, were an intertwined series of conflicts that took place in the kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland between 1639 and 1651. The English Civil War proper has become the best-known of these conflicts; it included the abolition of the monarchy and the execution of the kingdoms' monarch, Charles I, by the English Parliament in 1649 however Scotland and Ireland rebelled against England's primacy within the Three Kingdoms.*

*The victory of the English parliament (under Oliver Cromwell and the Army) in overcoming the English king, the Scots and the Irish helped establish the future of Great Britain and Ireland as a constitutional monarchy with political power centred on the Parliament in London.*

*These wars included the Bishops' Wars of 1639 and 1640; the Irish Rebellion of 1641; Confederate Ireland, 1642–1649; the Scottish Civil War of 1644–1645; and the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland in 1649 (collectively the Eleven Years War or Irish Confederate Wars); and the First, Second and Third English Civil Wars of 1642–1646, 1648–1649 and 1650–1651.)*

Also, the so-called "seven ill years" of the 1690s saw widespread crop failures and famine, while Scotland's deteriorating economic position led to calls for a political or customs union with England. However, the stronger feeling among Scots was that the country should become a great mercantile and colonial power like England.

In response to these calls, a number of solutions were enacted by the Parliament of Scotland: in 1695 the Bank of Scotland was established; the Act for the Settling of Schools created a parish-based system of public education throughout Scotland; and importantly, the Company of Scotland was established and chartered with capital to be raised by public subscription to trade with "Africa and the Indies".

A Scottish born trader and financier named William Paterson had long promoted a plan for a colony on the Isthmus of Panama to be used as a gateway between the Atlantic and Pacific – the same principle which, much later, would lead to the construction of the Panama Canal. Paterson was instrumental in getting the Company of Scotland off the ground in London.

(Paterson later fell from grace when a subordinate embezzled funds from the company, which then took back Paterson's stock and expelled him from the Court of Directors but he does pop up again later in this story.)

The Scots Parliament passed an act in 1695 that authorised the establishment of a Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies. The Marquis of Tweeddale was the King's Commissioner at the time and knew his master's disapproving mind, but he gave in 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. Men and women seemed moved by a Higher Power toward the '*only means to recover us from our present miserable and despicable condition*'.

Paterson and the Council General of the Company of Scotland first proposed a joint Scots and English venture with additional investors from Dutch and Hamburg, but this was effectively squashed by the London based East India Company, who were keen to maintain their monopoly over English foreign trade. It forced the English investors to withdraw.

Next, the East India Company threatened legal action on the grounds that the Scots had no authority from the king to raise funds outside the English realm, and obliged the promoters to refund subscriptions to the Hamburg and Dutch investors.

Scotland then attempted to enlist the support of the Hanseatic towns in Estonia, Latvia and the Netherlands but this was also stopped by the English.

One reason for English opposition to the scheme was the then prevalent economic theory of Mercantilism, a concept as widespread and accepted then as capitalism is today. Modern economics generally assumes a constantly growing market but mercantilism viewed it as static; that meant you could only increase your market share by taking it from someone else. This meant the Darien Scheme was not simply competition but an active threat to English merchants.

Another reason for English opposition was that England was at war with France and hence did not want to offend Spain, which claimed the Darien territory as part of New Granada.

All of this left no source of finance but Scotland itself so the decision was taken to go ahead alone.

In an atmosphere of feverish enthusiasm, Scots men and women, burghs, corporations and associations subscribed four hundred thousand pounds (equivalent to roughly £51 million today) toward the Company, believed to be ***half the available capital of the nation.***

The first to sign up was the Duchess of Hamilton, she subscribed £3000 and committed one of the most aristocratic families in Scotland to the great project. Not every subscriber had a title – Robert Douglas, a soap boiler from Leith – gave £100; Thomas Gemill, a hammer man from the Gorbals also gave £100 and Thomas Baxter, a Glaswegian tailor gave a hefty £400.

Towns and institutions also contributed – Paterson was pleased to see his home town of Dumfries send £500. Interestingly old east/west rivalries can be seen – the town of Glasgow contributed £3000 but was not accorded the same title as Edinburgh which also gave £3000 but was inscribed as the Good Town of Edinburgh.

The Company had based itself at the Trongate in Edinburgh so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at this.

The money raised and the Company papers were held in the chest that I mentioned earlier.

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 a port to which goods would be brought for import and export, and for collection and distribution on the coast of Darien, the most inhospitable and unhealthy part of the Isthmus of Panama.

Staggeringly, 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 surgeon, Lionel Wafer, who had gone to Jamaica to join his brother and fell into a bit of piracy on the side. It was on one of these trips that he was injured and forced to remain with the Indians of Darien for some months. He later wrote about his adventures and published "A New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America."

Paterson found what he wanted to read in this exotic account of a jungle paradise and Wafer's 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. In a serious error of judgement hundreds of English bibles, thousands of wigs, every imaginable type of cloth and thousands of white clay pipes were stockpiled. The bibles were included because the Kirk was a strong backer of the venture and insisted that a Presbytery be set up to save Spanish souls.

*'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.

## THE FIRST EXPEDITION

In July 1698, first expedition of five ships and 1200 people left Leith upon a great wave of emotion. They were captained by Robert Drummond, Robert Pinkerton, Thomas Fullarton, John Malloch and Captain Robert Pennecuik who was the commodore of the expedition fleet. The ships were named Saint Andrew, Caledonia, Unicorn, Dolphin, and Endeavour

They only went 12 miles before they stopped at Kirkcaldy to pick up Paterson and his wife. (Remember I said he been fired because his assistant had been an embezzler? He wasn't about to miss the great adventure and managed to get a place as a volunteer without rank.) The ships sailed north and then down the Atlantic, calling in at Madeira and the West Indies before they made a landfall off the coast of Darien in November, and claimed it as the Colony of Caledonia.

Paterson's wife died within a few days of the landing, and he went slowly out of his mind with despair.

Many of the colonists were already dead from dysentery and fever, and their leaders were inefficient and quarrelsome. Nevertheless the settlers christened their new home "Caledonia" declaring "we do here settle and in the name of God establish ourselves; and in honour and for the memory of that most ancient and renowned name of our Mother Country, we do, and will from henceforward call this country by the name of Caledonia; and ourselves, successors, and associates, by the name of Caledonians".

With Drummond in charge, they dug a ditch through the neck of land that divided one side of the harbour in Caledonia Bay from the ocean, and constructed Fort St Andrew, which was equipped with 50 cannons but no source of fresh water. A watch house on a mountain completed the fortifications. Although the bay appeared to be a fantastic natural harbour, it later proved to have tides that could easily wreck a vessel trying to leave.

Close to the fort, the settlers began erecting the huts of the main settlement, New Edinburgh, and clearing land to plant yams and maize. Letters sent home by the expedition created a misleading impression that everything was going according to plan. This seems to have been by agreement, as certain optimistic phrases kept recurring. However, it meant the Scottish public would be completely unprepared for the coming disaster.

Agriculture proved difficult and the local Indians, though hostile to Spain, were unwilling to trade for the combs, wigs and other trinkets offered by the colonists. Most serious was the almost total failure to sell any goods to the few passing traders who put into the bay.

With the onset of summer the following year, malaria and fever led to many deaths. Eventually, the mortality rate rose to ten settlers a day.

Local Indians brought gifts of fruit and plantains, but these were appropriated by the leaders and sailors, who mostly remained on board ships. The only luck the settlers had was in giant turtle hunting, but fewer and fewer men were fit enough for such strenuous work. The situation was exacerbated by the lack of food, mainly due to a high rate of spoilage caused by improper stowing.

At the same time, King William instructed the Dutch and English colonies in America not to supply the Scots' settlement, so as not to incur the wrath of the Spanish Empire. The only reward the leaders had to give the colonists was alcohol, and drunkenness became

common, even though it sped the deaths of men already weakened by dysentery, fever and the rotting, worm-infested food.

After just eight months, the colony was abandoned in July 1699, except for six men who were too weak to move. The deaths continued on the ships, and only 300 of the 1200 settlers survived. A desperate ship from the colony had called in at the Jamaican city of Port Royal, but it was refused assistance on the orders of the English government, who feared antagonising the Spanish.

Those on the single ship that returned home found themselves regarded as a disgrace to their country, and were even disowned by their families. The *Caledonia*, with 250 survivors, including William Paterson and the Drummond brothers, made a desperate passage to New York, then just a small town of 5000, landing on 10 August. Four days later, *Unicorn* (commanded by Captain John Anderson) limped into New York harbour. In a letter to Hugh Montgomerie, a Glasgow merchant, Drummond reported that sickness and mortality continued to afflict the remnant of the colonists. When the Scots were told that two ships, the *Olive Branch* and *Hopeful Beginning*, had already sailed to re-supply the now deserted colony, Drummond commissioned two sloops to aid their efforts in Darien.

In August 1699, the *Olive Branch* and *Hopeful Beginning* with 300 settlers arrived in Darien to find ruined huts and 400 overgrown graves. Expecting a bustling town, the ship's captains debated their next move. When the *Olive Branch* was destroyed by an accidental fire, the survivors fled to Jamaica in the *Hopeful Beginning*, and landed in Port Royal harbour. The Scots were not allowed ashore, and illness struck the crowded ship.

On 20 September, Drummond set sail from New York in the sloop *Ann of Caledonia*, (formerly the *Anne*), picking up another fully supplied vessel (the *Society*) on the way. They arrived in Darien to find the burnt timbers of the *Olive Branch* rotting on the shore.

## THE SECOND EXPEDITION

Word of the first expedition did not reach Scotland in time to prevent a second voyage of more than 1000 people.

Tragically, some of these colonists were the wives of men who had died on the first expedition – they didn't know that they were already widows when they set sail.

A new company flagship, *The Rising Sun*, boasting 38 cannon, led the way, supported by *The Duke of Hamilton*, the *Hope of Bo'ness*, and a smaller vessel, the *Hope*. They sailed from the Clyde, on the west of Scotland, cutting out the perilous round-Scotland route taken by the previous ships.

The expedition had the blessing of the Church of Scotland who had appointed Alexander Shields as the senior of 4 ministers.

The second expedition arrived in Caledonia Bay on 30 November 1699 and found Thomas Drummond's New York sloops already there.

They also found what they described as 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*'.

Morale was low and little progress was made. Drummond insisted there could be no discussion, and the fort must be rebuilt as a Spanish attack would surely come soon. He was right about that as the colony had very quickly been seen as a potential threat to the Spanish Empire by being located near routes used for silver shipments.

Drummond clashed with the merchant James Byres, who maintained that the leaders of the first expedition had now lost that status and had Drummond arrested. Initially bellicose, Byres began to send away all those he suspected of being offensively minded – or of being allegiant to Drummond.

He outraged a kirk minister by claiming it would be unlawful to resist the Spanish by force of arms, as all war was unchristian. Byres then deserted the colony one of the sloops.

The colonists sank into apathy until the arrival of Alexander Campbell of Fonab, sent by the company to organise a defence. He provided the resolute leadership which had been lacking and took the initiative by driving the Spanish from their stockade at nearby Toubacanti in January 1700. However, Fonab was wounded in the daring frontal attack and then became incapacitated with a fever.

Once again the Spaniards attacked, and were once again thrown back in the green wet mist of the jungle. They blockaded the colony by sea and land, and advanced their guns and trenches to the rotting ramparts of the fort. The Scots resisted bravely for a month and then surrendered.

After negotiations, the Scots were allowed to leave with their guns, and the colony was abandoned for the last time. Only a handful of those from the second expedition returned to Scotland. Of the total 2500 settlers that set off, just a few hundred survived.

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.

*Interestingly, one of the 4 ministers remained in Jamacia although this was unintentional. The Reverend Archibald Stobo came from Peebleshire. When the colony was surrendered to the Spanish the Rev. Stobo boarded the "Rising Sun" to return to Europe. They were caught in a storm and the ship put into the mouth of the Ashley River to make repairs on Sep 3 1700.*

*A party from shore asked if there was a minister aboard who could perform a marriage ceremony, and the Rev. Stobo and his wife disembarked in order to do so. That night the storm drove the vessel from her anchorage and she never returned. The Stobo family took up residence in Charleston, never to see Europe again.*

*He helped establish the first Presbytery, founded the church at Pon Pon, South Carolina, and served as the minister to the Circular Church and the Willton Church. The Rev. Stobo also became a considerable owner of land.*

*Among his numerous descendants are President Theodore Roosevelt.*

## THE AFTERMATH

The failure of the colonisation project provoked tremendous discontent throughout Scotland, where almost every family had been affected. Some held the English responsible, and others believed that they could and should assist in yet another effort at making the scheme work. The company petitioned the king to affirm their right to the colony. However, he declined, saying that although he was sorry the company had incurred such huge losses, reclaiming Darien would mean war with Spain. The continuing futile debate on the issue served to further increase bitter feelings.

Hoping to recoup some of its capital by a more conventional venture, the company sent two ships from the Clyde, the *Speedy Return* and the *Continent*, to the Guinea coast laden with trade goods. Sea captain Robert Drummond was the master of the *Speedy Return*; his brother Thomas was also on board the vessel. However, instead of trying to sell for gold as the company's directors intended, the Drummond brothers had exchanged the goods for slaves, whom they sold in Madagascar. Carousing with the buccaneers for whom the island was a refuge, the Drummonds fell in with pirate John Bowen, who offered them loot if they would lend him their ships for a raid on homeward bound Indiamen.

The Drummonds backed out of the agreement, only to have Bowen appropriate the ships while they were ashore. Bowen burnt the *Continent* on the Malabar coast when he decided she was of no use to him, and he later scuttled the *Speedy Return* after transferring her crew to a merchant ship that he had taken. The Drummonds apparently decided against returning to Scotland, where they would have had to explain the loss of the ships they had been entrusted with, and no more was ever heard of them.

The company sent out another ship, but she was lost at sea. Unable to afford the cost of fitting out yet another vessel, the *Annandale* was hired in London to trade in the Spice Islands. However, the East India Company had the ship seized on the grounds that it was in contravention of their charter. That provoked an uproar in Scotland, greatly aided by the inflammatory rhetoric of the company's secretary, Roderick MacKenzie, a relentless enemy of the English. Fury at the country's impotence led to the scapegoating and hanging of three innocent English sailors.

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.

As the Company of Scotland was backed by approximately 50% of all the money circulating in Scotland, its failure left the entire country and especially the Lowlands in substantial financial ruin.

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 foetid 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.

The failure of the Darien colonisation project has been cited as one of the motivations for the 1707 Acts of Union. According to this argument, the Scottish establishment (landed aristocracy and mercantile elites) considered that their best chance of being part of a major power would be to share the benefits of England's international trade and the growth of the English overseas possessions - and so its future would have to lie in unity with England. Furthermore, Scotland's nobles were almost bankrupted by the Darien fiasco.

So, some of the Scottish nobility petitioned Westminster to wipe out the Scottish national debt and stabilise the currency. Although the first request was not met, the second was, and the Scottish shilling was given the fixed value of an English penny. Personal Scottish financial interests were also involved. Scottish commissioners had invested heavily in the Darien project and believed that they would receive compensation for their losses. The 1707 Acts of Union, Article 15, granted £398,085 10s sterling to Scotland to offset future liability towards the English national debt.

Left with seemingly no choice, Scotland signed the "Treaty of Union of the two Kingdoms of Scotland and England." This was a momentous event in history that effectively destroyed most autonomies that Scotland had previously enjoyed.

## **FACTORS FOR THOUGHT**

There were many factors that led to the outcome of the Darien scheme. Many people feel there was more than merely a withdrawal of support for the Scots at the time. Did the "powers that be" deliberately undermine Scotland's chance for economic independence? Had it not been for the denial of support, perhaps the lack of proper provisions, such as food and tradable goods, could have been remedied with the assistance of nearby colonies. Maybe with proper military backing for the colonists, the Spanish, already dealing with their own plagues, would have decided Darien wasn't worth the trouble.

In the years following the Darien affair, the Spanish made many attempts to settle the region. However, constant opposition by the Darien Indians made it ultimately impossible. The land where the Darien colony was built, in the modern province of Guna Yala, is virtually uninhabited today.

In the end, the bold ideas that fuelled the Darien scheme eventually led to the building of the Panama Canal. The passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans would open up a whole new world for international maritime commerce. Today, somewhere around a million vessels have safely passed through the canal.



## **AND FINALLY**

You may have heard the phrase “such a parcel of rogues” in a Scottish folk song written by poet Robert Burns in 1791. It actually references the Darien scheme and parliament.

And in that bloom there is a brier,  
 Shall pierce the heart of tyrannye,  
 Or there is neither faith, nor truth,  
 Nor honour left in our countrie.

## SONG XXXVI.

## Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation.



Fareweel to a' our Scottish fame, Fareweel our ancient



glo-ry, Fare-weel ev'n to the Scot-tish name, Sae



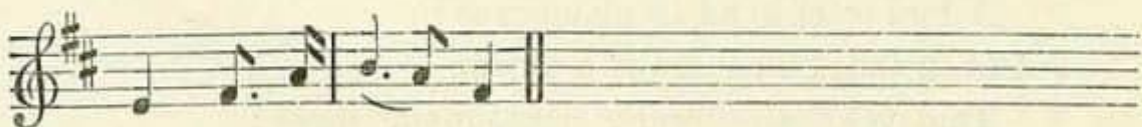
fam'd in mar-tial sto-ry. Now Sark rins o'er the



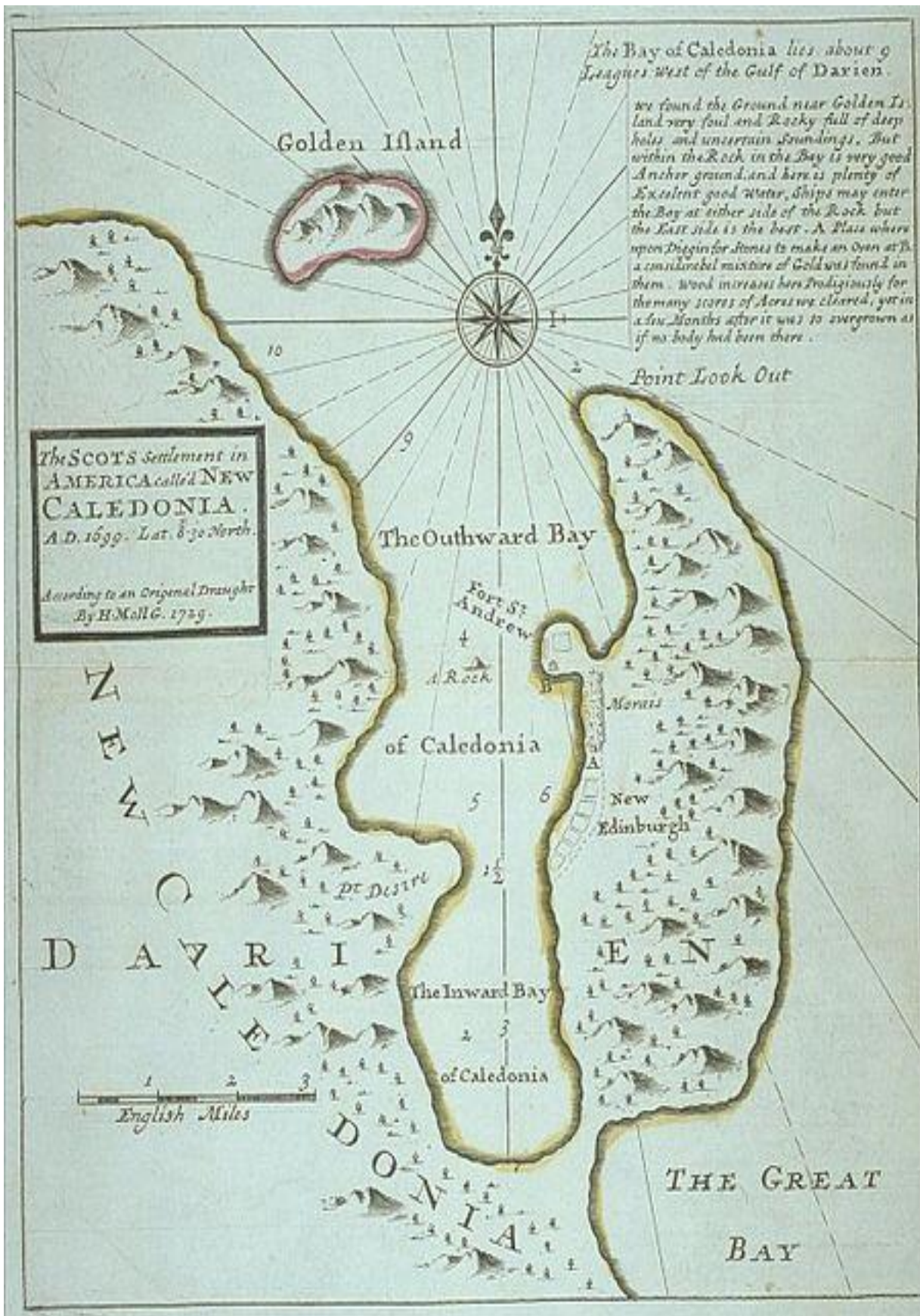
Sol-way sands, And Tweed rins to the o-cean, To



mark where England's province stands: Such a par-cel of



rogues in a na-tion!



The Bay of Caledonia, west of the Gulf of Darien. New Edinburgh is on the isthmus on the right.



## New Edinburgh



"A New Map of the Isthmus of Darien in America, The Bay of Panama, The Gulph of Vallona or St. Michael, with its Islands and Countries Adjacent". In A letter giving a description of the Isthmus of Darien, Edinburgh: 1699.

William Paterson

I



T