

**'The very Navel of the Trading World':
Darien in British Commercial Fantasy, ca. 1685-1710
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The plan to establish a British trading colony on the Isthmus of Panama always looked good on paper. This favorite project of William Paterson's—conceived from the exploits of the buccaneers, attempted by the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies, proposed again to King William after the failure of New Caledonia, and (with modifications) promoted avidly by Daniel Defoe—dazzled the imagination with its rich prospects. Whoever possessed Darien, Paterson assured King William, would hold “[the] doors of the seas and the keys of the universe” and would be in a position “to give laws to both oceans, and to become the arbitrators of the commercial world.”

With historical hindsight, the failure of the Darien venture seems a political and commercial inevitability. It was opposed by the English East India Company (to say nothing of Spain), compromised by English political interference, and ultimately denied King William's protection, caught as he was between the claims of his English and Scottish subjects. It is, today, a comparatively little-remembered episode: the South Sea Bubble looms larger as an example of early eighteenth-century commercial catastrophe, and discussions of early colonialism have other, more successful ventures to mine.

In its own time and for some years after, however, the Darien project was the object of considerable discussion and debate, and the pamphlet literature surrounding it has much to tell us about the ways that late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britons imagined their place in the world of commerce. The speculations of enthusiasts over the rewards that were projected to flow from a colony in South America reveal a rich seam of commercial fantasy: *if only* such a commerce could be established, they insisted, the entire order of the trading world would be altered, with all the benefits accruing to Britain.

Also in view in these pamphlets, however, are profound questions of national destiny. The question of whether, where, and how to establish a British presence in South America turned on anxieties about Britain's position relative to other trading powers like Spain and Holland, but also on still more pointed worries about French ambitions in the region after the death of Charles II of Spain raised the prospect of Bourbon rule over all the Spanish territories. Likewise, frictions between Scotland and England over the Scottish Company's attempt raised sharp questions about whether there could even be said to be common *British* commercial interests at all; such questions lingered after the failure of New Caledonia and colored debates over the Union of 1707. In the literature of the Darien scheme, we can see ideas about British commerce taking shape before there was a politically united Britain.