

The Darien Scheme and Global History in the Classroom

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Global history has emerged as a field and an approach over the past two decades, and though it has become prominent in university departments, its impact has not been significantly felt in secondary education. At its heart, global history seeks to redress the dominance of the nation-state as the primary unit of historical analysis. Global historians argue that other political formations, such as empires, city-states or corporations, have been equally or more significant than the nation. Some historical processes cannot be understood by considering the history of a state or the interactions between states. Rather, the modern world has often been shaped by the flows of people and things between different localities. This sudden interest in networks and exchange, of course, is a response to the concerns of our contemporary world. With globalisation rising to prominence as a concept in the 1990s, historians became interested in the origins of this process. In John Darwin's words:

For the moment at least, writing the history of nations and states seems much less important than tracing the origins of our world of movement, with its frenetic exchange of goods and ideas, its hybrid cultures and its fluid identities. A new global history has grown up in response. Its units of study are regions or oceans, long-distance trades, networks of merchants, the tracks of wandering scholars, the traffic of cults and beliefs between cultures and continents.¹

In recent years, in parallel with the contemporary rise of anti-globalisation movements, the field has turned its attention to examining the frictions and resistances to globalisation.² By moving away from a focus on the nation-state (a political formation which has its origins in Europe), global historians have challenged metanarratives of 'the rise of the West', showing that the premodern world was polycentric and that European powers had no clear economic or military superiority over other societies until around 1800.³

Such an approach presents both challenges and opportunities to secondary education. Secondary curricula have traditionally been dominated by the framework of nation-states. When world history is offered it is usually presented as 'inter-national' history, focusing on the interactions between states (with a particular focus on the twentieth century). Within such a context, the in-between spaces — of global trade, migration and diaspora, and the circulation of

¹ John Darwin, *After Tamberlane: The Global History of Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 12.

² Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History*, 13 (2018), pp. 1–21, p. 9.

³ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

knowledge — fall through the cracks. This can be seen in the Scottish curriculum, which is markedly Eurocentric in its content. For National and Higher qualifications, two-thirds of assessment is on Scottish and British history; only two of the twenty National 5 options focus on the interconnections between different parts of the world (Migration and Empire and The Atlantic Slave Trade). Within the Broad General Education, the Curriculum for Excellence’s “experiences and outcomes” for Social Studies does not require that any non-European history be taught.⁴ This is reflected in the classroom, with a recent Historical Association survey showing that only 43% of schools taught about a non-European society on its own terms during the BGE and 36% the British Empire.⁵ These figures are lower than their English equivalents.⁶

More work remains to be done, therefore, in offering a diverse history curriculum. This article will not examine the causes behind the relative lack of global histories compared to England or delve into potential policy solutions. Instead, it will suggest ways in which teachers, as co-creators of the curriculum, can draw on the approaches of global history to develop innovative curricula in the BGE. In particular, it will focus on the ways in which global historians tell big histories through small stories, an approach which has tremendous potential for secondary education. One example of this approach is Timothy Brook’s 2008 work *Vermeer’s Hat*. Brook sets out to tell a momentous historical process — “the dawn of the global world” — through the lens of Johannes Vermeer’s paintings.⁷ He uses the objects in Vermeer’s work — a beaver fur hat, a porcelain dish, a globe, a silver coin — as “passageways leading to discoveries about the seventeenth-century world”.⁸ A dish of fruit, for example, is a passageway to the growing connections between Europe and China. Peter Seixas has argued that Brook’s work can help pupils develop their understanding of historical significance. Pupils are challenged to explain how Brook makes an object such as Vermeer’s hat historically significant even though it did not itself have an impact on history. By elucidating the dawn of globalisation, a process which concerns us today, a normal person, object or event becomes significant.⁹ The rest of this article outlines the Darien Scheme as an event which can do similar work to Vermeer’s hat.

The Darien Scheme was an ambitious Scottish attempt to break into the European colonial world. In the seventeenth century Scotland was effectively locked out of England’s rapidly expanding maritime empire through the Navigation Acts. Responding to this, in 1695 the Scottish parliament created the Company of

⁴ Joseph Smith, Katharine Burn and Richard Harris, ‘Historical Association Survey of History in Secondary Schools in Scotland 2021’ (Historical Association, 2021), p. 10. This can be contrasted with the more prescriptive English national curriculum, which stipulates the study of “a non-European society” in Key Stage 2 and “a significant society or issue in world history” in Key Stage 3; Department for Education, ‘National curriculum in England: history programmes of study’ (2013), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study>.

⁵ Smith, Burn and Harris, ‘Historical Association Survey, Scotland’, pp. 6–10.

⁶ In England during Key Stage 3, 73% of schools taught a non-European society and 98% the British Empire; Katharine Burn and Richard Harris, ‘Historical Association Survey of History in Secondary Schools in England 2021’ (Historical Association, 2021).

⁷ Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York: Profile Books, 2008).

⁸ Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat*, p. 9.

⁹ Peter Seixas, ‘Looking for History’, in *Joined-Up History: New Directions in History Education Research*, ed. by Arthur Chapman and Arie Wilschut (Charlotte, NC: IAP, 2015), pp. 255–276, p. 256–258.

Scotland to compete with the English and Dutch East India Companies. William Paterson persuaded the Company to implement his scheme to establish a colony in the Isthmus of Panama. Paterson's idea was to create a new trade route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. A total of 2,400 Scottish settlers went to the Darien region of Panama, where they established the short-lived colony New Caledonia. Very few returned. The colony was devastated by disease and the Scottish underestimated the strength of the local Spanish presence, who forced the few remaining colonists to surrender in April 1700. Since a significant proportion of the country's liquid assets had been invested in the Company, this abject failure had a large impact in Scotland. The economic hardship resulting from the loss of £150,000 invested in the Company was a factor in the Union of 1707: as part of the agreement, the English state bailed out the Company's shareholders and creditors.

This is how the Darien Scheme is usually encountered today: as part of Scotland's national history. Within the SQA National 5 and Higher assessments, the Scheme is taught as part of the 'Treaty of Union' Scottish history unit. Pupils are asked to evaluate the Scheme as one of multiple factors leading to the Union. This reflects how the Darien Scheme has been traditionally remembered. In the public consciousness the Scheme constitutes one of a series of national tragedies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which epitomise Scotland's loss of independence and cultural distinctiveness.¹⁰ Jonathan Hearn has described this as "a trope of elegiacism that articulates a loss of national agency".¹¹

My postdoctoral project aims to remove the Darien Scheme from this national context. I have designed a course for S2-3 pupils (the lesson plans for which will be made available online) in which the Darien Scheme is used as a case study to examine global history and Scotland's place in the world. This is in line with recent scholarship, which has recontextualised the episode by placing it within local, inter-imperial and Atlantic contexts. Historians have become interested in what the Darien colony tells us about the Atlantic world in a key moment of competition between European colonial powers.¹² Ignacio Gallup-Diaz, whose work has been central to my development of a course on the Scheme, has focused on the Tule Indians indigenous to the Darien and their successful resistance to European colonialism across the wider period 1640 to 1750.¹³ Decentring Scotland from the history of the Darien Scheme, therefore, opens up possibilities for telling different stories: about colonialism and cultural encounters in the Atlantic World. Doing so removes the traditional historical significance of the Scheme as a factor in the 1707 Union. Instead, pupils are challenged to construct the Scheme's historical significance as an event which illuminates wider processes of colonialism and globalisation.

¹⁰ John Prebble's work typifies this interpretation of Scottish history. Other examples include the Glencoe Massacre, the Battle of Culloden and the Highland Clearances.

¹¹ Jonathan Hearn, 'Narrative, Agency, and Mood: On the Social Construction of National History in Scotland', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 44:4 (2002), pp. 745–769, p. 759.

¹² Christopher 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; Lista Giovanni, 'No more occasion for Puffendorf nor Hugo Grotius': the Spanish rights of possession in America and the Darien venture (1698–1701)', *History of European Ideas*, 47:4 (2021), pp. 543–560.

¹³ Ignacio Gallup-Diaz, *The Doors of the Seas and the Key to the Universe: Indian Politics and Imperial Rivalry in the Darién, 1640–1750*, e-book (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

Firstly, the course uses the Darien Scheme to explore European colonialism. It recontextualises the Scottish Company as one of many colonial enterprises jostling for advantage in the Caribbean region. Pupils consider the Darien as a colonial contact zone where people from across the Atlantic world interacted. English and French buccaneers sought their fortune; Spanish and French priests evangelised the indigenous population; and Spanish authorities based in Panama City sought to establish imperial control. It was into this competitive, dynamic environment that the Scottish colonists entered, and their unpreparedness for this competition was a key factor in the colony's failure. Through this one example, therefore, pupils gain an understanding of the interconnectedness of the Atlantic world and the colonial models of European exploitation which still shape global inequities today. Pupils also identify colonial discourses. They read Scottish sources which present the Spanish empire as tyrannical, territorial and in decline and their own enterprise as commercial, maritime and driven by ideals of liberty and free trade. They then unpick this discourse. Translated sources show that the Spanish were able to respond effectively to the Darien colony, while Scottish accounts reveal an obsession with finding mineral wealth in the Darien in opposition to their stated goals of establishing a free trade port.

Secondly, pupils are challenged to uncover indigenous responses to colonialism. The goal here is to move away from simple models of first contact between European and Native American societies, instead recognising that the indigenous people of the Darien had interacted with European intruders for two centuries (something which the Scottish themselves did not fully recognise). Tule society had been changed by colonialism, but the Tule were not passive victims in this process. Pupils should identify indigenous agency, recognising that the Tule sought advantage in their encounters with various European powers. In the process they learn a key historical skill: to read sources against the grain to uncover the actions and perspectives of those who did not write them. Pupils are familiar with recognising the 'bias' of a source and its resulting limitations, but they should also be challenged to uncover the source's unintentional revelations. For example, pupils are presented with two sources which recount the respective English and Scottish interactions with a Tule leader called Diego. The English captain Richard Long walked away believing that Diego had pledged his territories to the King of England and promised to reject Scottish advances.¹⁴ Three months later Diego entered into a "Treaty of Friendship, Union, and Perpetual Confederation" with the Scottish colony.¹⁵ Pupils have to reconcile and explain these encounters. We explore whether the Tule had the same understandings of treaties and alliances as Europeans. We then attempt to interpret Diego's actions, trying to uncover indigenous agency from these European sources. Pupils move from an initial impression of an indigenous leader unknowingly handing over his land to predatory Europeans to an understanding that Diego was skilfully navigating imperial politics, forming relationships which gave him power within Tule society. It was the Europeans who were unknowing: their racial conceptions of

¹⁴ Richard Long, letter to the Lord High Admiral of England, 17 June 1700 (Public Record Office, Admiralty Letters 1/2003).

¹⁵ Treaty between the Council of Caledonia and the Chief Diego of Darien, 24 Feb 1699, in *The Disaster of Darien*, ed. by F. R. Hart (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1929), p. 224.

Native Americans led them to believe that they could easily establish unequal power relations, and this miscalculation helps explain the Scottish colony's failure.

Through this one event which did not have major consequences for the Atlantic world, pupils gain an understanding of early modern colonialism. Colonial enterprises offered wealth and opportunity. This was predicated on the exploitation and enslavement of other peoples and justified by racial and cultural discourses. The Darien Scheme also reveals that such enterprises were fragile: the colony's projected success proved to be fanciful, partly because the indigenous people were not the desperate victims of Spanish tyranny that the Scottish expected. Instead, the Tule actively shaped their interactions with Europeans. Through primary sources, pupils encounter colonialism as a complex process of exploitation and growing interconnectedness which was not solely shaped by Europeans. The approaches of global history therefore present an opportunity to reform a Eurocentric curriculum. Rather than combating Eurocentrism through the study of a more diverse range of societies, global history focuses on the *interactions between* different cultures and societies. In doing so, it addresses the concerns of our modern world of interconnectedness and transnationalism.

The Darien Scheme is just one example of taking a Scottish story and reorienting it in a manner which tells global histories. Rather than introducing entirely new topics, we can ask: are there untold global stories in the histories we already teach? There are many opportunities for telling global histories through specific people, things and events. For example, the National Trust for Scotland's 'Facing Our Past' project is uncovering stories which explore the legacies of slavery and empire. Stories such as how two duels — one in 1763 in Aberdeen and the other in 1795 in the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent — are linked through Scottish emigration and colonisation can teach powerful lessons about empire and globalisation.¹⁶ They also help us meet one of the CfE's central capabilities: to "develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it". This cannot solely be achieved by foregrounding Scotland. Rather, histories in which Scotland plays a small role in much larger processes helps students understand Scotland's place in the world. This necessarily involves confronting Scotland's colonial past. For example, the Darien Scheme could serve as a starting point (or a false start) for a wider curriculum that explores Scotland's role in colonialism. The Scheme shows that Scottish colonists, merchants and investors were keen to participate in this emerging colonial world, but an independent Scottish empire was curtailed by the opposition of better-established powers. The Union provided a new avenue for this participation, and Scottish people went on to play a central role in the British Empire. This historical and educational work is crucial if we are to address the pressing issues of racial prejudice and global inequities which have come to the fore following the Black Lives Matter protests. Such work does not have to start with a comprehensive new curriculum on Scotland and empire. It could begin with Vermeer's hat, or a duel in Aberdeen, or a fleet departing Leith to establish a doomed colony. By providing opportunities for pupils to encounter global history in the BGE, we are introducing them to the big questions and concerns of our present society.

¹⁶ Désha A. Osborne, 'Facing Our Past: Leith Hall's Tale of Two Duels' (Blog post, National Trust for Scotland, 2021), <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/facing-our-past-leith-halls-tale-of-two-duels>.

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