



On the 320th anniversary of the founding of Scotland's ill-fated colony in Panama, remember the Gunas says Joseph E. Fallon

November 2, 1698, five ships, the Caledonia, Dolphin, Endeavour, Saint Andrew, and Unicorn, anchored off the Caribbean Coast of the eastern end of the Isthmus of Panama in a region named Darien, now called Guna Yala. It was and remains the land of the Guna Indians. The ships' "cargo" was 1,200 Scottish settlers. These Scots, who had endured an arduous passage of sixteen weeks, during which forty perished, went ashore and proudly proclaimed the establishment of Scotland's colony of Caledonia.

"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".

Along "Caledonia" bay, the Scots constructed Fort St. Andrew and armed it with 50 cannons. On a nearby mountain, they erected a fortified watchtower. Under the protecting guns of Fort St. Andrew, they built a settlement, New Edinburgh. It was a daring and daunting undertaking in an unknown land to rescue Scotland from the economic and demographic devastation of the "ill years". Lasting half a century, the "ill years" were marked by a series of crises stretching from the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, (1639-51), to the wars of religions, (1670-90), to seven years of crop failure and famine in the 1690s. For Scotland to recover and prosper, it would have to

imitate England and become a leading mercantile and colonial power. In this hope, Caledonia was "born".

Conceived by wealthy Scot trader, financier, and a founder of the Bank of England, William Patterson, and dubbed the "Darien Scheme", the colony would span the isthmus at its narrowest point and connect the Caribbean Sea with the Pacific Ocean by road. Foreshadowing the Panama Canal by two centuries, it would free commerce from the hazards of sailing around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America by offering a safer, shorter land route for shipping goods.

Patterson wrote: "The time and expense of navigation to China, Japan, the spice Islands, and the far greatest part of the East Indies will be lessened more than half, and the consumption of European commodities will soon be more than doubled. Trade will increase trade, and money will beget money, and the trading world shall need no more to want work for their hands, but rather want hands for their work. Thus, this door of the seas and the key of the universe, with anything of a sort of reasonable management, will of course enable the proprietors to give laws to both oceans and to become arbitrators of the commercial world, without being liable to the fatigues, expenses and dangers or contracting the guilt and blood of Alexander and Caesar."

Of Scotland's colony of Caledonia, Historic-UK.com writes: "Some have said: 'The Darien venture was the most ambitious colonial scheme attempted in the 17th century...The Scots were the first to realise the strategic importance of the area...'"

In 1695, the Parliament of Scotland chartered the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies to raise funds through public subscription to finance the proposed colony. The project initially had the backing of England's Parliament; and English and Dutch investors contributed half the needed capital. This support and financing, however, were withdrawn as a result of opposition from both London's East India Company and King William III. For The East India Company, which threatened legal action against stockholders, it was fear The Company of Scotland would be a rival to its commercial interests. For King William III it was fear England's support for the Scots colony would trigger a war with Spain at a time Spain was England's major ally against France. Scotland would have to finance the venture alone. It did.

"The seed money supposedly equaled a fifth of Scotland's capital, and even commoners cleared out their life savings because they believed wholeheartedly in the purpose of the venture and what it would mean for Scotland should it succeed." Furthermore, every Scot who

sailed to the colony was promised 50 acres of land per man.

According to Professor Mark Horton, Bristol University, "the site was ideal; rivers were navigable and would have allowed the settlers to explore the interior without having to clear swaths of jungle. The waters were also deep enough to provide natural harbours for their ships. And when you're there you realise the distance to the other side of the isthmus was not that great, just 50 or 60 miles. So geographically it was a good choice."

The natural environment appeared ideal for human settlement. In 1998, Stewart Redwood, a geologist from Stirlingshire, living in Panama visited the abandoned Colony of Caledonia to honor the dead on the 300th Anniversary of their landing. The land is as it was then. "It is a beautiful, unspoiled paradise of lush green jungle, mangrove swamps, coral islands and reefs with golden beaches and turquoise sea that basks in the tropical sun and are nourished by the rain."

This beauty masked a danger. The land, then and now, is lethal. "Darien has billions of mosquitoes, many carrying deadly diseases."

In addition to disease, Caledonia was beset by poor planning, feuds, limited rations, but most importantly by the failure to grow crops. The colonist cleared the land for farming and planted yams and maize. But Scottish farming methods could not be successfully applied to tropical lands. "The Scottish climate is cool, wet, and changeable. In Darien, it is swelteringly hot all year round, with some places getting well over 100 inches of rain a year."

The Scots were soon dying from disease and starvation. One colonist, Roger Oswald, wrote of that first Spring, "They lived on less than a pound of mouldy flour a week: 'When boiled with a little water, without anything else, big maggots and worms must be skimmed off the top...". The death rate was 10 a day. Then came the first Summer and the situation worsened. The Summer heat brought "malaria, yellow fever and ... turned most of the food stock into a bacteria colony."

By June 1699, eight months after their arrival most of the colonists were dead; of the original 1,200 only 300 were still alive. The survivors abandoned the colony and sailed to Jamaica and New York. Unaware of the fate of New Edinburgh, two resupply ships, the Olive Branch and Hopeful Beginning, carrying 300 colonists anchored in Caledonia Bay in July 1699 expecting to

find a bustling settlement only to discover desolation. Failing to rebuild the settlement, the Scots sailed to Jamaica where most died of fever.

Before word of disaster reached Scotland, a second expedition set sail for Caledonia. A fleet of four ships, The Rising Sun, The Duke of Hamilton, the Hope of Bo'ness, and the Hope, with 1,300 colonists and supplies on board reached the deserted colony on St. Andrew's Day, November 30, 1699. They found "a vast howling wilderness" but most elected to stay and reestablish the settlement. They initially held their own against Spanish attacks, but overwhelmed by disease and the superior fire power and resources of the Spanish, the Scots were defeated and expelled from the isthmus of Panama.

Scotland's colony of Caledonia ended in death and disaster. Of 11 ships that sailed to Caledonia, only one, ironically the Caledonia, ever made it back to Scotland. Of 2,800 colonists, only a few hundred survived "scattered across the Caribbean either in English service or Spanish captivity. Those that returned to Scotland were fewer still."

The "Darien Scheme" had become the "Darien Disaster"; the financial repercussions of which would lead to the loss of Scotland's independence.

Assaulted by nature, attacked by the Spanish, abandoned by the English, the Scots had only one ally – the Guna Indians.

"The Indians came out of the jungle to meet them almost as soon as they arrived. These were the Kuna Indians and they were happy to see what they thought were Englishmen pulling into the bay. They hated the Spanish and hoped that the Scots would help them in their fight against the Spanish. The Spanish were hated not only for their cruelty, but also because they demanded that the Indians work in the gold mines of Panama."

Later, the Guna would bring fish and fruit to the starving Scots and fight alongside the Scots against the Spanish at the battle of Toubacanti.

In a 2014 interview with Allan Little of BBC, a Guna elder reflected: 'In the time of our

forefathers, white people came here – Scottish and Spanish people. We liked the Scottish more than the Spanish, for the Spanish attacked us and drove us inland away from the coast and the Scots did not. But there were battles and many ships were sunk'.

We know the fate of Scotland's colony of Caledonia, but what was the fate of the trusted ally of the Scots, the Guna Indians?

Spelled Kuna prior to the 2010 orthographic reform, the Guna Indians, who number 50,000, are the only people to have successfully settled the inhospitable land, which was the site of Scotland's ill-fated colony of Caledonia. The hostile environment enabled them to remain largely independent of the Spanish Empire, then Colombia, and after 1903, Panama.

For Gunas live in or adjacent to the Darien Gap, a natural barrier of swamps, jungles, and mountains so impenetrable the Pan-American Highway, which extends from Alaska to Argentina, could not pierce it. There is no a road from Panama to Colombia. The Darien Gap stretches "from the north to the south coast of Panama - from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It's between 100km and 160km (60-100 miles) long, and there is no way round, except by sea."

The protection a hostile environment historically provided the Gunas would disappear in the 20th Century. After its 1903 secession from Colombia, the government of Panama sought to exert control over all the lands the new state claimed including that of the Gunas. For Panama, "control" was the instrument by which to create a nation-state where none existed. It required abolishing the identity, religion, and land rights of Gunas. Police and Catholic missionaries arrived to "Hispanicize" the people. While officially approved business concessions began "developing" their land, government tolerated squatters started colonizing it. This repressive regime provoked a revolution. In 1925, the Guna expelled Panamanian officials from their territory and declared their independence as the Tule Republic. If Panama could secede from Colombia, Gunas could secede from Panama. Independence lasted a few days. The United States negotiated a settlement by which the Gunas remained part of Panama, in return the government of Panama officially recognized Guna autonomy.

Most Gunas live in northeast Panama in three, contiguous, autonomous "comarcas" or reservations: two in the interior, Guna de Madugandí and Guna de Wargandí, and one along the coast, Guna Yala. Guna Yala, known as "Land of the Guna", is home to the majority of Guna in Panama, and is the site of Scotland's ill-fated colony of Caledonia. The Scots are remembered by the Guna who still call the bay where Caledonia was located, despite a

Panamanian name change - Puerto Escoces (Scottish Harbor).

Most Guna in Guna Yala live on 49 islands in the San Blas Island chain, an archipelago 12 miles off the coast of Panama consisting of 378 coral islands stretching 170 miles parallel to the coast, extending from the border of Colombia to the Panama Canal. A smaller population of Guna live on the coast north of the San Blas Mountains. The most common method of travel to Guna Yala and the San Blas Islands is either by small aircraft or boat.

Their political structure combines elements that are "democratic", "federal", and "hierarchical". There are 49 separate political communities in Guna Yala. Each led by its own "saila", who functions in the role of political, as well as spiritual leader. Decisions affecting the community are reached at public meetings in the Congress House. The Congress House also serves to preserve Guna history and traditions, administer local laws, and oversee the day-to-day activities of the community. Guna Yala as a whole is governed by a General Congress, which is presided over by three "great Sailas", called Saila Dummagan.

"The San Blas Kuna of Panama are among the best known and most successful indigenous peoples of Latin America. Prosperous, well fed, educated, and secure – at least in comparison with their counterparts elsewhere – they participate actively in national affairs while at the same time holding to a semi-autonomous territorial reserve, one they secured through a rebellion against the national government three-quarters of a century ago. ... These notable successes, however, mask both serious ongoing threats and the structural weaknesses of the institutions through which the Kuna struggle to meet them."

Some of the same incidents that provoked the 1925 Tule Revolution are reoccurring – invasion of Guna lands by both business concessions, such as logging, mining, and commercial fishing, and Latino squatters from Panama and Colombia. "Perhaps the greatest threats presented to the comarcas have come from a series of large-scale commercial, military, and development projects, all of them backed or initiated by the national government."

If allowed to continue, Gunas may find themselves outnumbered by Latino colonists in their own comarcas and the natural wealth of their lands and waters expropriated by outside concessions. The Gunas are a numerically small people living in a hostile "national" environment. "The prevailing culture of Panama is fundamentally Spanish, which disparages indigenous cultures. All aspects of Kuna culture are considered by the Latino majority as valueless, strange, and antique, although the exotic Kunas are seen as good for the tourist market."

Even at this distance in time and space, action by old allies is possible. Just as the English should aid their loyal ally, the endangered Miskito Indians of Nicaragua, so too should the Scots aid their loyal ally, the endangered Guna Indians of Panama. Diplomatic measures could include assisting the Miskito and Guna through mediation on their behalf with governments of Nicaragua and Panama, and failing that bringing the plight of Miskito and Guna to the UN Committee on Human Rights and to the Special UN Committee on Decolonization.

Financial assistance, perhaps from the foreign aid budget, could be given to Miskito and Guna to strengthen their respective political structures and to provide education in their indigenous languages. The immediate need is to remove Latino squatters from their lands.

If not the English and the Scots, then who? And if not now, then when?