

## ‘Canaanising Madagascar’: Africa in English imperial imagination, 1635–1650

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Africa has often been seen as a barrier between oceanic systems, and a dividing line within English imperial activity – with colonialism a key strategy to the west and trading favoured to the east of the continent. This article will consider English plans for colonisation on the islands of Madagascar and Assada on the east African coast and question how these can help us understand how the English thought about Africa as a geographical and imagined space within England’s developing imperial activities. This, in turn, will support an argument that English activities overseas operated within an environment where information was carefully controlled, created and disseminated to support the aims of the commercial community.

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When Queen Elizabeth I presented the East India Company with a charter on 31 December 1600, Africa seemed to have a clear role in the English conception of the world; it was a barrier, a dividing line, a landmass that separated two distinct oceanic systems. By enabling the East India Company to establish trade with ‘Asia & Africa & America [...] beyond the Cape of Bona Esperansa to the Straights of Magellan,’ the segregation of the two systems that would dominate the global economy over the coming two centuries—the Atlantic on one side, and the Indian and Pacific Oceans on the other—seems to have been inevitable.<sup>1</sup> This division can be noted in the direction of research undertaken by historians, with Atlantic history in particular encouraging a geographically limited region for analysis. Over the past decade, this approach to analysing the interconnected continents bordering the Atlantic has been used by historians across numerous and varied topics. Its prominence has resulted in a stack of edited collections, the most recent being William O’Reilly, D’Maris Coffman and Adrian Leonard’s *The Atlantic World* in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Debates rage throughout such collections about the validity of the Atlantic as a region, with many critics arguing that Atlantic history limits the scope of historical analysis, masking the interconnectivity between other global regions and overstating the similarities across the

Atlantic ‘world.’ Africa, as an important part of the Atlantic world, has often been examined within this framework, with particular attention on the slave trade that formed part of the huge migration of people within the Atlantic. While often producing excellent work, this focus has perhaps stymied analysis of the continent within a broader, global context.

Some recent scholarship has demonstrated how the Atlantic perspective can limit our understanding of this period, with particular attention being given to connections between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Huw Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John Reid’s recent *Britain’s Oceanic Empire* is one such collection, exploring how a global perspective can be of benefit.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, few chapters specifically analyse connections between the regions. In this respect, the work of Alison Games—who, like me, uses Madagascar as a case study—Emma Rothschild and Miles Ogborn has begun to explore these avenues, analysing the global lives of English overseas agents and the shared experiences that connected England’s developing and disparate empire.<sup>4</sup> In these studies, a comparative perspective highlights the global relationships between imperial actors, the intersections between different imperial networks, and their consequences.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the oceanic systems of Asia and the Atlantic were separated through the division of space granted by Queen Elizabeth, the American and Asian continents were also perceived as radically different places for English travellers, merchants and colonists. Colonisation and commodity extraction was a clear aim in America, while trade with established, powerful states was expected in Asia. Africa sat between these extremes. There was little in the way of extensive colonisation during this period but trading factories similar to those in Asia or the Mediterranean were set up to facilitate access to local commodities—including the trade in slaves that fed colonial expansion in America.<sup>6</sup> The slave trade is perhaps the area of interaction between Africa and the Atlantic world most thoroughly explored by historians: a movement of people that tied the continents together. While undeniably of huge importance, contemporaries did not view Africa as a ‘slave continent’ or even a continent with defined boundaries, they interpreted Africa through the relationship between the continent and other regions. For contemporaries Africa was not always a clearly defined geographic area, with the North coast often discussed as part of the Mediterranean or the Islamic world, and other parts of the continent unknown—or almost mythological—in the descriptions available to the English public.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, while America was often presented as an ‘empty’ land by promoters of colonisation, Africa had been home to civilisations that were part of the contemporary admiration for ancient world, particularly in the case of Carthage and Egypt. As John Speed noted in 1631, ‘Africa is of great antiquity,’ and home to ‘her Princes, Pharaoh and his mightie men’ but cautioned that much of the continent had long remained unexplored and ‘held not habitable... by reason of the extreme heat.’<sup>8</sup> He continues to list seven distinct regions within Africa, from Barbary ‘the most noble part of all Africa’ to Numidia where the people are judged to be ‘idolators, idiots, theeves, murderers.’<sup>9</sup> To these regions Speed suggests ‘we adde the Ilands belonging to Africa,’ including Madagascar, which he

describes as 'rich in all Commodities' but with inhabitants 'very barbarous, most of them blacke, some white there are, supposed to have been transplanted out of China.'<sup>10</sup> Clearly, there was some English awareness of the differences between the numerous states they interacted with across Africa, and the lack of attempts to create a single identity for people in the region reflect the complexity of Africa as a continent in the English imagination.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, while the English idea of Africa contained numerous inaccuracies and generalisations, it did not fit so easily into the same image of an empty continent that was presented in reference to America.<sup>12</sup>

This article will assess how English participants in overseas activities—whether trade or colonisation—thought about the island of Madagascar. Attempts at colonisation in the late 1630s and 1640s demonstrate how this region of Africa was conceived as part of Atlantic and Indian Ocean systems rather than a barrier between them, a location connecting the diverse expansion of English trade around the world. Furthermore, promoters of the Madagascan colony were accused of 'Canaanising' the island—that is to say, describing a paradise—and this excessively positive material can shed light on how English imperial promoters imagined Africa. Madagascar can help us to understand how the English perceived Africa within their growing empire, and to recognise that divisions between Atlantic and non-Atlantic endeavours fail to appreciate the entangled qualities of Britain's imperial activities across the globe during the first half of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, we can explore how attempts to create an English empire in Asia, with Madagascar at its centre, were developed in conjunction with 'Canaanising' propaganda, with information (and the lack of it) forming a vital aspect of the ways in which Britain's empire developed during this period.

The first section of this article will consider how the East India Company monopoly in the Indian Ocean was challenged by experienced Atlantic traders, who argued that Company strategy had failed to utilise the colonial strategies that were becoming increasingly successful in the Atlantic. The second section will assess how Madagascar was imagined in England and how the royal court offered fertile ground for grand imperial visions. The third will explore how Madagascar was presented to potential colonists, and the ways in which the attempted colonies on the island sought to replicate English colonial success in America as part of a larger strategy to exploit the Indian Ocean. This discussion seeks to explore how English observers thought about Africa, how the continent sat within the global trading system developing during this period, and how our analysis of the English empire in the seventeenth century can benefit from understanding the connectivity brought about by Africa's role as a hub within the imperial network rather than as a barrier.

### **William Courteen and the East India Company**

From the turn of the seventeenth century, English exploration, trade, and colonisation around the world had been undertaken and controlled within a framework of royal charters. These allowed what were sometimes very small groups to undertake

trade to particular regions without fear of domestic competition, keeping prices high and limiting access to overseas opportunities. Monopolies were often justified by the expensive trading infrastructure (trading factories, diplomatic missions and armed convoys) or long years of colonial investment required before profitable commodity extraction came to fruition. From the crown's perspective, monopolies delegated sovereignty to private bodies, enabling risky overseas endeavours and colonial expansion without requiring the input of significant resources by the crown itself. However, the relationship between crown and monopolists was not always positive, and negotiation for privileges was an on-going process between these groups for much of the period. Of course, while monopolists and the crown were able to justify this system, non-participants were often very critical, with monopolies coming under attack repeatedly in the first decades of the seventeenth century as one group of monopolists challenged another for control of overseas enterprise.<sup>13</sup> The arguments used against the East India Company monopoly stemmed from the diverse approaches to empire undertaken by different monopoly groups during the first decades of the century, in addition to the perceived failure of the East India Company in utilising the colonial strategies that were beginning to show great promise in the Caribbean and in the Dutch empire in Asia.

Sir William Courteen was the leading voice of a group seeking to break the monopoly of the East India Company. He was the son of religious refugees from Flanders who had established a textile business in London after 1568, drawing on the silk trade between London and the Low Countries. Having apprenticed for his father in Haarlem, William Courteen was part of London's overseas trading community from a young age. His own business was broadly connected with Dutch trading interests in Europe, and it was here that he obtained his first experience of transatlantic enterprise.<sup>14</sup> From these foundations he would invest significantly in numerous colonial enterprises in the Caribbean—with mixed success. These enterprises, together with the experiences of other members of his Association (formed in 1635) were typical of English merchants' activity in the Atlantic world, and it is unsurprising that he saw in them the method for capitalising on opportunities that became apparent in Africa and Asia.

Asia had, until this point, remained a market dominated by the East India Company, and the Company had been careful to control information about trading in the continent. This information was collected and catalogued at the Company headquarters in London, with shipping manifests, reports from factors, minutes from the Company management meetings, maps and guides all collected.<sup>15</sup> These were used internally to assist the running of the trade, and were disseminated through carefully chosen printed literature only when deemed necessary, such as during the debates regarding monopolies or following the Amboina massacre.<sup>16</sup> Of course, other information regarding the area under East India Company purview was available, and as time passed knowledge of the area would have spread (by word of mouth if nothing else) from the sailors, merchants and servants of the Company returning from the east. However, while this information may have become increasingly accessible, it would have been incomplete and—at least in the case of Madagascar—open to abuse.

Disagreement over the control of information was the catalyst that kicked off fifteen years of attempts by English colonists to establish a settlement on Madagascar. In January 1635, after more than three decades of conflict and competition, the Portuguese Viceroy of Goa and the President and Council of the East India Company (the commanders of the Company in Asia) signed an 'Accord' to end the conflict and instead unite 'against the common enemies' in Asia.<sup>17</sup> The Accord would only last until denounced by the Kings of England and Spain (who was also King of Portugal at the time), but for a moment it opened up the possibility of peaceful and cooperative trade in Asia, including the opportunity to enter new markets previously beyond the reach of the East India Company. Meeting at Goa, perhaps the most likely new destination for English trade, President Methwold—the leader of the East India Company in Asia—was joined by other employees of the Company, Captain John Weddell and Nathaniel Mountney. Once the negotiations had been completed, these two enterprising individuals did not follow Methwold back to Surat, but instead returned to England on the *Jonas*, carrying a precious cargo of information with them.<sup>18</sup>

Whether or not it was a plan from the start, or something that became apparent during their return journey to England, the control of this information regarding the new Accord with the Portuguese gave the two men a significant advantage. For once, the East India Company was not able to control information regarding the situation in Asia, and their competitors were quick to seize the advantage. Thus, on their return to London, Weddell and Mountney shared their knowledge with Sir William Courteen, who, alongside other likeminded individuals, developed a plan to take advantage by launching a competing trade body. Through the courtier Endymion Portner they easily obtained access to the court, and by December 1635, the King's support had been granted. Part of Courteen's aim was to shift the focus of English activity in Asia away from the carrying trade developed by the East India Company to instead emphasise settlement and colonisation—and to explore new trades in the Far East.<sup>19</sup> Of course, this strategy was expensive and fraught with risk, and given the strength of indigenous states by no means certain of success, but the plan was to replicate the Dutch colony of Batavia, which acted as a central node for their Asian activities and helped them to dominate the production of spices.<sup>20</sup> The Dutch conquest of Banten was also an essential component in their control of the spice trade, a territorial acquisition that would have similarly been noted by interested parties in England. There is little evidence explaining exactly how Courteen sought to replicate the success of Batavia—and Madagascar was not immediately offered as a location for a colony with a similar role—but his group's insistence on settlement and colonisation suggests that they would have been looking for suitable opportunities.

The East India Company condemned the actions of Weddell and Mountney as treacherous and illegal, while the two men attempted to demonstrate the validity of their action by suggesting the East India Company was not fulfilling its obligation to them as employees. Weddell had clearly been a weak link in the East India Company for a while, having been punished in 1626 and 1631 for attempting to undertake

private trade.<sup>21</sup> He and Mountney would both argue in 1636 that the decision to leave the Company and share key information was to take advantage of ‘a better masters better pay.’<sup>22</sup> In addition to the monetary gains available from Courteen and his partners, the direction taken by the new association was perhaps supported on a personal level by Weddell, who earlier in his career had been part of the East India Company’s assault (alongside Persian allies) on Hormuz in 1622, which they had captured from the Portuguese, perhaps persuading Weddell of the potential successes available through a more aggressive strategy.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the motivation, this episode clearly demonstrates the importance of controlling information in the early modern commercial world, and that the trust placed in Weddell and Mountney by the Company ultimately failed to protect this valuable asset.

Of course, simply knowing that the opportunities for Asian trade were open to exploitation was not enough for Courteen; he required hands-on experience of Asia to increase the likelihood of successfully undertaking the trade himself. Dissatisfaction within the East India Company helped his cause, and it seems likely that personal gain was also the motivation for a number of other experienced East India Company employees who join him. Richard Swanley, John Carter, and Edward Hall were among the fellow seaman who added to Weddell’s own considerable experience of navigating the region. The information held by these men, through their experiences but also likely held in personal guides and maps of the region, was of great value for Courteen. Navigating in Asia was not a common skill in England, and poaching employees from the East India Company was the only means of securing the intelligence necessary to undertake the trade. On the trading side, John Mountney joined Nathaniel in the new project, and was accompanied by Anthony Vernworth, Edward Knipe, Henry Glascock and Peter Mundy in switching allegiance from the East India Company to Courteen’s new group.<sup>24</sup> While these men were all knowledgeable of the East India Company’s activities, enabling Courteen to access the key information required to launch a competing enterprise, they brought no additional experience regarding colonisation to the east of Africa.

Weddell and Mountney gave Courteen a head start against the East India Company in England and he used his knowledge of the Accord with the Portuguese to drive his argument for royal support, which was officially granted to Captain Weddell and Nathaniel Mountney for a voyage to the East Indies on 12 December 1635. The commission was nominally granted because the East India Company had failed to live up to the promises in its own monopoly, namely its failure to ‘establish fortified factories or seats of trade to which the king’s servants could resort in safety’ and its ‘supine neglect of discovery and settling of trade in divers places.’<sup>25</sup> This lack of expansion and settlement in Asia was then directly linked to a decrease in customs revenue for the crown. These arguments, coupled with Courteen and Porter’s close relationships with the court, helped the new trading organisation to gain support for their first voyage, which launched on December 1635 in direct—but royally endorsed—contravention of the East India Company’s charter.<sup>26</sup> Courteen was directed to trade in places where the Company was not already settled, leaving the vast majority of Asia open for his new

organisation and its first voyage—which sailed under the command of Captain John Weddell.<sup>27</sup>

Colonisation in Africa was not immediately the key target for this new organisation, but in Sir William Courteen we see an individual with significant Caribbean experience taking great personal risks to try and break into Asia, and the right to found an African colony was part of his patent from the crown. Although he would die in London soon after the first fleet headed east, his place taken by his son William (who is referred to as Courteen Junior from this point onwards in the article), the elder William's actions opened a previously tightly controlled region of English overseas activity to a huge new group of potential imperial actors. The barrier formed by Africa was breaking down, opening the continent itself to potential settlement—and not simply a trading factory, but a substantial plantation similar to those developing in America. As information spread more freely and among more people in London it is not surprising that strategies were discussed for how to best take advantage of the East India Company's declining control. In particular, the idea of replicating colonial successes of the Atlantic would prove paramount, and using colonies to underpin increased connectivity between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds was also a key component of this design. Over the next fifteen years, the island of Madagascar would become central to this imagined empire in Asia, America and Africa.

### **Madagascar and the English court**

While Courteen sought to outdo the East India Company in establishing a trading empire in the East Indies, another group of Englishmen dreamt of an even more ambitious plan—centred on Madagascar. In the later 1630s, the island became pivotal to a plan for colonisation in the Indian Ocean that would do even more than provide an English equivalent to Dutch Batavia or replicate plantation success. For this group, Madagascar was imagined as the seat of a new English empire in Asia, bringing power, prestige and wealth to the Stuart crown.

As a consequence of increasing familiarity with the region, and the breakdown of the East India Company's monopoly, the idea of creating a colony on the island was not necessarily preposterous. Madagascar had been visited by English travellers for decades, serving as a stopping point on the gruelling long voyage to the East Indies (or the return trip). The island was renowned as a suitable location for resupplying and repairing ships in the region, acting as a welcoming gateway between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans.<sup>28</sup> The East India Company had regularly utilised the southern region, around Augustine Bay, for provisioning, and their reports of the island suggested that it was more than just a good place for a brief stop—one particularly positive report going so far as to claim that a stay on the island had cured the voyage's sick seamen.<sup>29</sup>

The example and success of other European colonisation efforts provided additional impetus for Britain's own colonisation of Madagascar. In addition to viewing the Dutch success at Batavia as a blue-print for empire in Asia, the need to keep up with the Dutch was apparent in Africa too. Just as the English were beginning to



consider colonisation on the east coast of Africa, the Dutch too sought to establish a colony at one of their regular points of call on their voyages east—on the island of Mauritius in 1638. Additionally, increasing French activities in the region, centred on Reunion, would have concerned the would-be English empire builders, who would not want to lose out to these potential competitors. As such, while Courteen's trading activities were aimed primarily at areas further east it is not surprising to see increasing English interest in the east African coast—both as a means of engaging in commercial projects in Asia and Africa, but also to make sure that they did not fall behind their European rivals who were doing the same.

Soon after Courteen established his new trading organisation, Madagascar became the focus of colonial promoters even more closely connected to the crown than his partner Endymion Porter (although Porter was also a key proponent of this scheme too).<sup>30</sup> For this group, Madagascar would provide a seat for English rule in the Indian Ocean and Asia, modelled on the success of Batavia but with a greater focus on military and political rule. Important supporters included Prince Rupert and Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and by 1636 they were openly discussing the exciting potential that the island offered. Interest from Rupert, the nephew of King Charles, gave the group a huge boost with support from the crown guaranteed, but it perhaps also led to illusions of grandeur. Arundel, identified as a leading voice behind the colonisation in Powle Waldegrave's damning later account of the Madagascar enterprises, had long been active with other investors in England in both Atlantic and Indian Ocean trading and colonisation.<sup>31</sup> Following a childhood admiration of English colonist and adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh, Arundel's interest in overseas activity began when he became a founding investor in the Virginia Company in 1609; he later supported the Irish Company, the New Merchant Adventurers, the Northwest Passage exploratory voyages, and the Hudson ventures.<sup>32</sup> It is also likely that he invested in privateering in some form.<sup>33</sup> Arundel clearly offered more than just a willing ear to Prince Rupert and his plans for overseas adventure. He also brought his own knowledge and experience of the challenges, and potential rewards, that a scheme like the colonisation of Madagascar could offer. That said, his previous ventures were all in arenas where colonisation was the most common strategy undertaken by the English. In Virginia and Ireland he witnessed the difficulties posed by hostile local populations (violence was endemic in both), but in both places colonisation was supported through the idea of taking 'unused' lands, or civilising 'uncivil' ones.<sup>34</sup> In Madagascar, it seems he found a location that fit similar conceptual parameters, where he believed the North American experience of colonisation could be replicated.

While Prince Rupert's championing of the scheme seems to have dismayed his mother, who sought the aid of Sir Thomas Roe (he had been English ambassador to the Mughal and Ottoman empires, and was an active and trusted member of the court) to persuade her son that the plan was fanciful, support within the court was enthusiastic. What is most interesting, however, is not necessarily that such a bold colonisation scheme piqued the interest of this group, but how the idea of a



Madagascan colony was presented. The changing place of the island in the English imagination was keenly expressed in a poem by William Davenant.<sup>35</sup> Although not published until 1638, it is likely that the poem was written during the height of excitement generated by Arundel and Rupert. It was dedicated to Davenant's patron, Endymion Porter, showing again his role as a public figure who supported English endeavours in the Indian Ocean.<sup>36</sup> Twenty-one pages long, *Madagascar* reflected the imperial imagination of the English court during this period. While clearly hyperbolic, the supposed ease of conquest and colonisation to which it alludes was replicated in the promotional literature that supported colonisation over the following decade.

The poem takes the form of a prophetic dream of Davenant's, where he witnessed the voyage and colonisation of the island by Prince Rupert. The publication began with a series of letters from friends, expressing their admiration for Davenant. The first acknowledged the scope of a poet to 'discover, conquer, what, and where they please' without recourse to the assistance of a 'flegmatick Sea-Captaine,' and the author of this introductory letter, I. Sucking, cheekily asked Davenant to bring gold back with him on his next voyage.<sup>37</sup> Its inclusion is perhaps intended to signal awareness by those involved in the publication that the invasion described is nothing more than an entertaining fantasy. The next letter, by Thomas Carew, also acknowledged the poem as a fiction, and questioned whether similar epic poems, such as the tale of Troy, were 'blended with more faithfull history.'<sup>38</sup> However, in spite of these commentaries on the poem's fiction, each letter also contained an element of enthusiasm for the dreamed-of conquest alongside these warnings. William Habington expresses this most clearly, lamenting that while Madagascar 'doth lie a trophie now of thy Wits Victorie,' a 'King may find proud ambition humbled by the Sea.'<sup>39</sup> Davenant's poem was therefore not a guide, or even a call, to colonisation, but these preliminary admissions do not detract from the strength of the idea or the imagery employed. Davenant's imagined Madagascar perhaps had more influence in creating tropes that would be repeated in more serious printed literature in the following years than it did in directly inspiring a colony. The fantastical quality of Davenant's poem formed a basis for dangerously unsubstantiated writing in the future.

Considering the poem in more detail, we can see how Davenant created the image of an island that was not only suitable for colonisation, but also one that was particularly suited to the English. In the poem, Davenant dreams that he witnessed the fleet of Rupert reaching shores with inhabitants whose 'quivers hung empty, their arrowes were unplum'd, their Bowes unstrung.'<sup>40</sup> This representation of indigenous peoples as acquiescent to the English is repeated in later literature and images—and mirrored much of the artwork created to represent the region.<sup>41</sup> Following a peaceful conquest, Rupert leads his men against other Europeans in the region, displacing these rivals to secure political dominance in Asia and becoming 'the first true Monarch of the Golden Isle: an Isle, so seated for predominance, where Navall strength, its power can so advance, That it may tribute take, of what the East shall ever send traffique to the West.'<sup>42</sup> This mirrors the later aim—discussed below—of

using the island as a base from which to oust Dutch or Portuguese power and to control trade. With the conquest complete, the riches of the island, such as gold, ruby and diamond, but also other more exotic goods like ‘Ambar-Greece,’ were made available to the English. Davenant was so overcome by the wealth of the island that he concluded ‘I wish’d my Soule had brought my body here, not as a Poet, but a Pioneer.’<sup>43</sup> Here, Davenant set his aim most clearly, that his dream would have the potential to take pioneers to Madagascar. As mentioned already, the poem was not a serious guide to colonisation, so we should interpret this interest in Madagascar as part of a formative process of imperial imagining that would inspire and influence the attempted colonisation of the island over the following years. Davenant used a number of images, such as that of the welcoming, unthreatening ‘native,’ that could equally have been applied to English images of other parts of the world—particularly in America—and these themes were replicated in subsequent publications. This process of replication has often been discussed in connection to the artistic representations of non-Englishmen—both visual and literary.<sup>44</sup> Madagascar is presented in Davenant’s dream as peaceful and ripe for conquest. It offered a means of challenging the major European powers in Asia for dominance of Asian trade, and the island itself was home to riches and had the capacity to sustain a colony. Although clearly a fictional account, it needs to be remembered that, in travel writing from the period, the boundary between fact and fiction could be permeable—the power of stylised tropes should not be underestimated.<sup>45</sup> Through Davenant and the group around Arundel and Rupert, Madagascar became a location that seemed perfect for bridging the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean worlds, where Arundel’s experience of colonisation in Ireland and Virginia could be replicated as a means of accessing the riches of Asia just as they had America.

However, despite Davenant’s imagined successes, the poem did little to help Arundel and Rupert launch a colonisation attempt. Rupert withdrew from the project and Arundel was unable to sustain support on his own. Yet Madagascar remained on the minds of many proponents of the colony, re-emerging as a planned venture in 1639, once again with Arundel as the key figure. Arundel proactively brought together a fleet of ships, gathered supporters, and encouraged support by promising to lead the venture himself—an unheard-of move for someone of Arundel’s ‘quality or stature.’<sup>46</sup> Van Dyck’s portrait of Arundel reveals the scope of Arundel’s vision. Carefully composed, the portrait brought together the wealth and prestige of Arundel alongside his passion for the Madagascan enterprise, which is made clear by a prominently positioned globe. Like Davenant’s poem, this portrait demonstrates how the colony of Madagascar was promoted across multiple platforms, and Games has suggested that the portrait itself could have been distributed to encourage interest in the colony.<sup>47</sup> In addition to these efforts, Arundel also wrote a treatise encouraging support for a Madagascan colony. His *Declaration Concerning Madagascar* was much more balanced than Davenant’s poem, but still identified similar reasons for undertaking the venture.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps understanding that previous attempts had lacked reliable information, Arundel was careful to highlight ‘being

Certainly informed by the relation of all that have been there in the riches and plenty of those places' and that it is more than a 'vayne and ayrye undertaking.' He asked that gentlemen who would like to participate in the venture do so by 20<sup>th</sup> December 1639, promising that he was 'resolved to goe my selfe in p[er]son' and that 'His Majestie upon due consideracon of the fruitfull Consequence [...] is graciously pleased to give mee leave to retyre from my imediate attendance, and to assist mee with one of his best shippes.'<sup>49</sup> By carefully demonstrating that he had the support of the crown, reliable information, and was willing to risk his own fortune and person, Arundel's declaration presented Madagascar not as a fanciful project, but as a carefully considered and well-financed colonial venture.

Nevertheless, Arundel's attempts to ignite interest in Madagascar in the late 1630s were again unsuccessful. The *Declaration* was the last attempt made from within the court in this period to encourage colonisation of the island. While Courteen's actions may well have opened up the potential for greater English settlement east of Africa, there was little motivation among the commercial groups of early modern London to support the ventures proposed by members of the court. Instead, the 1630s witnessed the development of a particular, positive literature and imagery regarding the island, and the placement of Madagascar at the heart of an imperial idea that moved this east African island to the centre of a combined colonial and trading endeavour designed to connect England's burgeoning global empire.

### **Planning and executing a colony on Madagascar**

While the ambitious plans of Prince Rupert and Arundel came to nothing, the idea of an English colony in Madagascar was firmly planted in the imagination of those seeking to capitalise on the East India Company's diminished monopoly of trade in the Indian Ocean. After 1640, the advocates of a colonial scheme shifted from the court to the City, with merchant interests increasingly looking towards Madagascar—particularly given the riches promised by Davenant and Arundel—as a potential colony. Already by 1640 the East India Company was petitioning the King to cease granting licences and patents for plantations at Madagascar and Mauritius, which while unsuccessful in the short term, suggest that there was continuing interest in London to establish colonies in these regions.<sup>50</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that printed encouragements for such schemes also appeared in the 1640s. The first was the pamphlet by William Monson, an admiral who had travelled across the full scope of English overseas activities. In this text, Monson drew American parallels for the first time, highlighting his experiences in that region as a guide for Madagascan colonisation. Although his American investments were probably an experience that had been drawn upon by Arundel, the explicit comparisons brought forward by Monson highlighted a changing perspective in English thinking about the island. Set out specifically as a guide to colonisation, Monson's *Advice how to plant the Island of St. Lawrence* detailed the specific benefits of a colony on the island. Not only had Monson travelled widely, but his experience of participating in colonial ventures lent his account more weight.

By identifying the island as a ‘port of Africk,’ Monson pulled Madagascar closer into the global trading system developing during this period.<sup>51</sup> This question of distance was very important to Monson, and the location of the island was presented as suitable for a colonial enterprise. He identified three considerations for a new colony: distance from home, how to supply it, and how the transportation of men and supplies can be achieved. For each, Monson considered Madagascar not only suitable but preferable to the Caribbean colonies that were proving so successful in this period thanks to favourable winds.<sup>52</sup> Although very short, Monson’s tract suggests a growing awareness of opportunities among promoters, demonstrating not only Madagascar’s potential, but also how it fitted into the global development of England’s developing empire.

Monson presented his tract in the context of colonial experience, but it was followed by two promotional texts that did little to balance expectation with reality—although both highlighted the expertise and accuracy of the authors. This construction of knowledge was not uncommon, and the reasons contemporaries placed exotic information alongside ‘accurate’ information has been studied by numerous historians.<sup>53</sup> One pamphlet, by Walter Hamond, also from 1640, was based on a three-month stay on the island in the 1630s. In *A Paradox*, Hamond sought to prove that ‘the inhabitants of the Isle called Madagascar or St Lawrence, (In Temporall things) are the happiest People in the World.’<sup>54</sup> Printed shortly before Courteen Junior’s expedition, this text is dedicated to John Bond, who is, according to Hamond, Governor of the island, having been granted authorisation both by King and Parliament.<sup>55</sup> Hamond, unlike Davenant or Monson, had been to Madagascar while in the service of the East India Company, even living on the island for a short period after travelling on a ship commanded by Captain Waddell.<sup>56</sup> Proclaiming Madagascar as ‘the greatest known Island in the World’ he took the time to describe its geographical location, lying to the east of Africa, south of Comero, west of Mauritius and north of ‘the maine Ocean.’<sup>57</sup> For Hamond, Madagascar was positioned as part of the east African coast, with the ocean to the south as a route to Asia; it was not so close to the Asian mainland as to integrate Madagascar into this continent. This was an important difference to previous attempts at encouraging colonising the island, where Madagascar was as a location was identified as being more closely connected to the East Indian trade like Batavia rather than part of Africa as a continent. Of course, these earlier Asian connections were not the only way Madagascar was positioned in the English geographic imagination. In his 1631 book, *A Prospect of the Most Famous Parts of the World*, John Speed included maps of each continent, and the east African coast and Madagascar are excluded from ‘Asia’ while displayed in reasonable detail in the map of ‘Africa.’<sup>58</sup> This second map also includes a portrait of a Madagascan, who is presented as healthier and more civilly clothed than other Africans displayed in the print.<sup>59</sup> While Madagascar was still seen as a means to bridge the Atlantic and India Ocean worlds, Hamond suggested that East Africa offered benefits itself—and that connecting Africa into the Asian and American trading circuits could be beneficial to both. Hamond then

described an island paradise with an ideal environment for growing crops, rearing animals and building settlement. Such is the bounty of the land that Hamond believed the natives a 'sluggish and slothfull people' as a consequence.<sup>60</sup> This idea bares close resemblance to tracts encouraging colonisation in north America and was probably intended to support the activities of Courteen and others who had experience in this region and were only now seeking to replicate them in Africa and the Indian Ocean. However, while the description of Madagascar's bounty reflected the image presented by previous writers, Hamond's pamphlet may have carried more weight among contemporaries thanks to his eyewitness validity. Hamond's image of Madagascar, along with Richard Boothby's later text, would drive the shape of colonisation on the island.

The publication of Boothby's *A Briefe Discovery or Description of the Most Famous Island of Madagascar* was delayed until 1646 (after the colony had already failed) but it had been planned beforehand (and had been at least available in manuscript). The manuscript was likely seen prior to the voyage and in turn influenced the direction taken by the colony. At the very least, a survivor of the colony, Powle Waldegrave, damned Boothby for the misinformation it contained.<sup>61</sup> The delay in publication was a consequence of ill health and 'the hinderance of a captious licencer, blameing the rudenesse of the stile and my placeing Madagascar in Asia, which he would needs have been in Africa.'<sup>62</sup> This admission is interesting. While it lies much closer to the east African coast than any other, Madagascar had long been spoken about in England as a means of encroaching on Asian trade—or as a stopping point on the route to Asia. Similar disagreements about how to geographically define the region were apparent in a printed pamphlet describing King Charles' acceptance of the peace with Portugal brokered by the East India Company, where the coasts of Africa and Guinea are listed as separate regions.<sup>63</sup> This disagreement could suggest that the island was difficult to identify as part of one of the traditional continents, and perhaps explains why the many accounts about the island position it in a number of different geographical contexts. Although it had a greater depth to it than other publications, much of the text replicated work of previous authors, with Madagascar identified as a bountiful land ripe for colonisation. Nevertheless, Boothby and Hamond's texts do much to reveal the attempts of Courteen Junior and his fellow merchants to obtain greater support for their colony, and that sharing information through these publications was considered a suitable means of doing so.

Within this environment of enthusiasm and support for a potential Madagascan colony, and attempting to find a stable foundation for the trading association he had inherited from his father, William Courteen took the leap and launched a Madagascan colony for the first time in 1644. This was not the only attempt to launch such a venture in the intervening years and Captain Bond planned to transport 250 settlers to the island, but it seems that pressure from the Company, and its willingness to oppose him, halted his plans—in spite of Hamond's declaration of his role of Governor.<sup>64</sup> The commission for trading in lands not settled by the East India Company which Courteen's father had received included a patent for settling the island.

Thus, in August 1644, 140 settlers left England to settle at St. Augustine's Bay on the southwest coast. They left on three ships of Courteen's outgoing fleet—the *Hester*, the *Sun*, and the *James*—and arrived in March 1645, settling in the bay as planned.<sup>65</sup> Considering that English travellers had traded and stayed in the same area in the past, with a positive experience of local conditions, it was hoped that they would be welcomed. However, rather than the dream of Davenant, the colonists experienced something more akin to a nightmare. Scurvy, malaria and other diseases ravaged the settlers, and their crops failed. The indigenous people, rather than welcoming the settlers, did little to assist them. By December only 63 settlers remained, leading the Governor, John Smart to seek an alternative location—although in this too he was unsuccessful. The surviving account of this settlement comes from a pamphlet written by one settler, Waldegrave, upon his return to London, and his scathing description clearly expressed the frustration of the colonists.<sup>66</sup> The Madagascar that permeated English imperial imagination did not exist, and the lack of sustained support for the colony from Courteen or others left it exposed to difficulties that might have been overcome if more accurate information and pragmatic plans had been circulated beforehand.

As a lone project, the 1644 settlement at Augustus Bay lacked the support necessary to sustain an early colony, but like many colonial failures in the seventeenth century, its failure did not put off its proponents. Once again, though, we see a shift in the English approach to the island stemming from a change in the architect of English empire in the region. As Courteen's project failed, both colonially in Madagascar and in his trading pursuits, his interloping consortium was taken over by Maurice Thomson. Like Courteen, Thomson had ambitious aims for English activities in Asia, but, unlike his predecessor, he had a longer and much more successful resume of colonial activities in America under his belt. Robert Brenner suggests that Thomson envisaged not just an alternative trading association for Asia, but a systematic strategy for creating an empire in Asia that mirrored the English colonies in the Atlantic and Caribbean.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Courteen, he was a member of the East India Company, working from within the organisation to encourage colonial activities in Asia. Derek Massarella has gone further than Brenner, suggesting that Thomson sought to undertake an Eastern Design alongside the Western Design of Cromwell.<sup>68</sup>

Thomson had developed a personal fortune through trading in Virginia, the Caribbean, and Guinea, as well as taking a stake in the East India Company. He was, then, a merchant with a truly global focus, and sought to use Madagascar as the centre of an imperial design that united these diverse interests. While many merchants invested in both America and other ventures, be it Asia, the Mediterranean or elsewhere, Thompson followed Courteen as one of the minority who sought to replicate the America experience elsewhere. Global interests were not uncommon, but plantation colonies and territorial conquest had been restricted to the Atlantic. Madagascar was seen as an opportunity of expanding this form of empire, and the 'Canaanising' of the island was persuasive in encouraging participants that the Atlantic experience could be replicated elsewhere. After the debacle of the St Augustine Bay settlement it is perhaps



surprising that Thomson launched a new syndicate, the Assada Merchants, and launched a new colony on the island of Assada (just off the coast of Madagascar) in 1649. Although theoretically acting within the parameters of the Courteen commission, when his plans were discovered by the East India Company they were met with greater anger than the previous colonial attempts on this island. From at least 1645 the Company had been aware that Thomson was using Madagascar a stopping off point for his voyages, but his desire to establish a plantation was clearly a step too far.<sup>69</sup> However, the weakened state of the East India Company by this point, and support for Thomson within the organisation, enabled him to propose a merger between the two groups, which led to an agreement of mutual support.<sup>70</sup> An important element of the merger was the Company's agreement to the colonisation of Assada—or at the very least a 'promise not to discourage any planters who wish to go or to send to Assada.'<sup>71</sup> This colony was one part of an expansive strategy for building an empire that connected Africa and the Indian Ocean, with a second colony planned in Pulo Run.<sup>72</sup>

The proponents of this colony approached the challenge with significant experience of colonies in the Atlantic—they were aware of the agricultural goods that could be used to create a sustainable colony and modelled the new colony on Barbados, the Caribbean island where sugar plantations were creating a new type of colony for the burgeoning English empire.<sup>73</sup> While the general idea of settling Madagascar, and places in Asia, was apparent in earlier plans for colonisation, plantations were a different matter. They were high-yield, sophisticated operations, requiring great effort and investment from owners and demanding significant migration—forced or voluntary—to power the labour intensive process. However, trade with India was still considered a further strength for the island, and its position between the two imperial arenas made it particularly attractive—with the benefits of access to the resources required in America made clear.<sup>74</sup> Although it was never printed, planning for the Assada colony was accompanied by a manifesto, but unlike previous ventures regarding this island, the Assada manifesto was more specific as to the requirements of the colony. The first settlements were a clear step, but £5000 a year was specified as necessary to support the colony, with the merchant organisation preparing to build infrastructure on the island independent of the settlers who migrated there. However, in spite of this agreement between Thomson and the Company, the East India Company did limit the Assada colony, which, although permitted to establish a plantation, was restricted from acting as a trading centre to take Asian goods to England, with only African goods allowed.<sup>75</sup> English merchants were certainly not united in this vision of English empire, and the East India Company still sought to re-establish Africa as a barrier to keep their monopoly intact. Finally, the manifesto highlighted the island's future role as a headquarters connecting Guinea, east Africa, India and the Far East—an ambitious strategy positioning Africa at the centre of an imperial endeavour spanning the oceans and continents that made up English overseas expansion.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, other proponents of a Madagascan colony were also producing promotional material for the venture. The short pamphlet of Robert Hunt, *The Island*



of *Assada*, printed in 1650, was one such work. Although he had never travelled to Madagascar, Hunt had been governor of Providence Island in the 1630s and was well positioned to share his thoughts on the potential benefits of a colony on Madagascar—or at least reinforce the belief that the Atlantic experience could be replicated with ease. His pamphlet, only a handful of pages long, offered little new in terms of information, but it did reveal this colonial expert's perspective on how a successful Madagascan colony could be achieved—and his motivations for joining the attempt.<sup>77</sup> A comparison to the Caribbean is explicit in Hunt's pamphlet, with geographical context for the island presented through its proximity (according to latitude) to Barbados, and he claims that Assada is 'about that bignesse and goodnesse' with the same potential for plantation.<sup>78</sup> Estimated at about 16 miles square, Hunt asserts that Assada will have room for around 200 sugar works, in addition to other commodities including indigo, ginger, cotton, tobacco, rice and pepper—a haul of goods greater than anywhere known to the English.<sup>79</sup> He also compares the cost of comparable plantations on Barbados and Assada, with Assada cheaper by a considerable margin. The savings are particularly clear in Hunt's judgement of costs for 'Negroes,' with 100 worth £2,700 on Barbados available for only £100 on Assada.<sup>80</sup> This would suggest an expectation that Assada was more closely integrated and accessible for the African slave trade—with significant commercial benefits for the colonists. East Africa, including Madagascar, Mauritius, and Reunion, formed one part of the slave trade conducted by the Dutch in Asia, and they conducted a trade for Malagasy slaves from 1641–1647, although in the seventeenth century African slaves were less important for the Dutch than those from Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>81</sup> In addition to the island's potential as a plantation colony, Hunt repeated the standard expectation that the island would provide a suitable position to dominate the trade with Asia. Hunt's pamphlet, then, reveals the final turn in the screw for the English plans for Madagascar before the attempt to settle Assada. The image is one of plenty, easy success, great wealth, and little in the way of difficulties to overcome for settlers. The East India Company did not share his enthusiasm, describing Assada simply as a small island near 'the great Island of Madagascar, which hath bin so fatall.'<sup>82</sup> While the Assada merchants had put more planning into their attempt, the same image of Madagascar that had initially been promulgated by Davenant remained strong.

Once again, though, the imagination of its proponents outshone the reality of the settlement. While starvation and disease had brought about the destruction of the St. Augustine's Bay colony, the Assada plantation suffered from the violent attentions of the island's indigenous inhabitants. Soon after landing, an attack killed ten settlers, including Hunt, the governor of the colony.<sup>83</sup> When new settlers arrived in 1650 they found that the original colonists had already moved on in the face on continuing attacks, and by 1651 the island was abandoned.<sup>84</sup>

The failure of this second colony on Madagascar was the last attempt to establish a colony in Africa to dominate the trade of Asia, but still the evidence seemed unpalatable for the English. One merchant who found Assada abandoned still

thought it necessary to highlight the great fertility of the island, suggesting that it could be secured by 600 men.<sup>85</sup> In spite of the dramatic failure of two colonisation attempts, some of the allure of Madagascar lived on.

### Conclusion

After the calamitous attempts to colonise Madagascar in the 1640s, the image of the island in England began to move away from the beatific dream world of Davenport and the paradise of Boothby. The suppositions of these authors had been shown to be unfounded and the misinformation in their texts held to account by survivors of the attempted colony. Upon his return to England, one colonist, Powle Waldegrave, damned Boothby for his description of Madagascar and for '*Canaanising* and paradisising the glories of it,' persuading fellow Englishman to attempt a colonisation that led to only death and ruin.<sup>86</sup> His pamphlet is dedicated to the East India Company, who saved him from the calamitous colonisation, and is in some respects a defence of the Company—who had been dismissed by Courteen for their very lack of attempted colonisation. He was, following the publication of the pamphlet, rewarded five pounds by the Company.<sup>87</sup> In this pamphlet he traces the information about the island from Arundel and Endymion Porter's early interest through to Courteen and Boothby. Waldegrave makes it clear that Boothby, and other proponents of a settlement of the island, were to blame for the failure of the colony and the suffering of the colonists. Their '*Canaanising*' led to a situation where poor-quality information was the root cause of failure. Waldegrave's condemnation was blunt. In one example, he responds to Boothby's lauding of the island's bounty by suggesting 'For the Countreys pleasantness and fertility, comparable with Canaan, I cannot but wonder at his [Boothby's] arrogance and impudence,' before highlighting the inaccuracies of Boothby. That Boothby never travelled to the island was a sticking point for Waldegrave. In countering Boothby's claims he stated, 'Fertile grounds there are none Southward 150 miles' adding, pointedly, 'I can justify it, for mine eyes have seen it.'<sup>88</sup> He was not willing to accept that these were mistakes, and by judging that 'His imaginary mines of Gold and silver were wholly fabulous,' Waldegrave was clearly unappreciative of knowledge that had only recently become popular through Davenant's dream world. Just as Weddell's actions in the 1630s made clear, information was a vital commodity in the developing English empire, and poor information was just as damaging as good information could be profitable.

Over the course of the period discussed in this article, Madagascar in particular, and Africa more broadly, was situated in a mutable place in the English imperial imagination. In 1635 the island was little more than a stopping-off point for other imperial activities, with trade between the West African coast and the developing American colonies clearly the dominant activity undertaken on the continent by English traders. In spite of its location along the shipping route to Asia, Africa was not an important part of the East India Company's strategy. Instead, it was predominantly a geographical division splitting the Atlantic and Indian Ocean

trading worlds. Of course, many merchants had interests on both sides of the divide, and the experiences of eastern trading and western planting were not as divisive within this community as some historians have believed, but Africa did divide the two in terms of approach. As these proponents of settlement in Madagascar demonstrated, Africa was not an impassable barrier for non-East India Company traders, and from Weddell's earliest plans to draw Atlantic traders into the Indian Ocean world through to Thomson's design of using Assada as a capital for a transcontinental empire, we see the barrier breaking down. In 1654, even after these failures, Thomson was still a proponent of colonisation as a means of controlling intercontinental trade, possibly even at Madagascar, stating that the Dutch and Portuguese owed their 'extraordinary wealth, potency, and strength' to their ability to 'build forts, plant garrisons, and settle factories, colonies and jurisdictions of their own independently of the said princes and in the midst of their dominions.'<sup>89</sup> This shift in the idea of empire in Asia would live on, and Africa would continue to be seen as a bridging point, although it would be the Dutch at the Cape, rather than the English on Madagascar, who would make such a colony a success.<sup>90</sup>

Information was a key component in the breakdown of the African barrier within the English empire, and the creation and dissemination of information in support of the Madagascan colonies reveals how the English conceived of their developing empire. For Davenant, Madagascar was a mythical dream world, open to conquest and ready to help set England on the path toward empire in Asia. The image of Madagascar as a paradise ripe for the taking was presented by Davenant as a dream but was taken up by later authors with increasing recourse to demonstrations of truth. Arundel, Boothby, and Hamond are all careful to state that eyewitnesses have corroborated their tales, and Hunt holds up his Providence Island experience as proof of his expertise. In spite of these attempts to persuade their audiences, it is Waldegrave's cutting account that reveals the poor quality information contained in these other publications. By Canaanising Madagascar, proponents of English colonisation in Africa obtained the support necessary to launch their settlements, but as a consequence of misinformation regarding Madagascar, settlers were unprepared and unable to make the colony a success.

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## Notes

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- 1 British Library, IOR/A/2 'Copy of the Charter'
  - 2 Coffman, Leonard and O'Reilly, *The Atlantic World*. For other collected editions see Armitage and Braddick, *British Atlantic World*; Canny and Morgan, *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World*. For some of the criticism see Coclanis, 'Atlantic World or Atlantic/World'; Games, 'Beyond the Atlantic'; Greene and Morgan, *Atlantic History*.
  - 3 Bowen, Mancke, and Reid, *Britain's Oceanic Empire*
  - 4 Games. *Web of Empire*. Rothschild, *Inner Lives*. Ogborn, *Global Lives*. A further study of the colonies on Madagascar can be found in Foster, 'English Settlement in Madagascar'
  - 5 A global perspective has had numerous proponents, perhaps most influentially Braudel's *Civilisation and Capitalism*. Specifically, the East India Company has been identified as a key player in Britain's early modern experience by a number of scholars both within and outside historical studies: Adams, *The Familial State*; Mentz, *The English Gentleman at Work*; Go, *Patterns of Empire*; Stern, *The Company-State*; Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*; Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire*.
  - 6 Hair and Law, 'The English in Western Africa.'
  - 7 One excellent example of these difficulties is Purchas' collection of travel accounts where the continents often provide only secondary classifications alongside other regional markers. Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimes*. For secondary literature on this issue, Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*.
  - 8 Speed. *A Prospect*. 5.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 5–6.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, 6.
  - 11 Hair, 'Attitudes to Africans'; Hatfield, 'A 'Very Wary People'.'
  - 12 Smith, 'De-personifying Collaert's Four Continents.'
  - 13 The issue of trading monopolies is explored in detail in Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*.
  - 14 Appleby, 'Courteen, Sir William (c.1568–1636).'
  - 15 Ogborn, *Indian Ink*. 22–6.
  - 16 Mun, *Discourse of Trade*. Digges, *Defence of Trade*.
  - 17 Foster, *English Factories*, vol. 5, 88.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, p. vii.
  - 19 Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*.
  - 20 Games, *Web of Empire*. 184–5.
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