“Con Son: Island of Lost Empires”

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“And the end of the fight is a tombstone white with the name of the late deceased,
And the epitaph drear: “A Fool lies here who tried to hustle the East.”—Rudyard Kipling

The early seventeenth century British trading settlement at Con Son (or Con Don), then known as the Island of Pulo Condore, in the South China Sea, held the potential to anticipate and exceed Singapore and Hong Kong as a colonial entrepot. It was intended to be the fulcrum for English trade between India, Japan, China, the Gulf of Thailand and what today is the Indonesian archipelago. The English settlement of the island began in 1702, with a treaty offered the Nguyen rulers of southern Vietnam only after the settlement and its fort was begun. The transformation of the island was to be effected by slaves and indentured servants who would be offered a role in the settlement’s explicitly utopian future in return for their contribution to its construction. However, before these plans could mature, the entire settlement was burned and most of its European establishment murdered by its own Bugi guards with the connivance of the Vietnamese authorities, who then executed all but one of the English agents still in their hands. These events were repeated when the few survivors of these massacres arrived to help establish a similar settlement at Banjar [Banjarmasin] on the island of Borneo, only to see it also destroyed by the indigenous people. The Nguyen Lords of southern Dai Viet and the Sultan of Banjar were among the first Asians to see the future pattern by which European trade evolved into the assertion of European extra-territoriality, leading in turn to the loss of indigenous sovereignty. That they were able to thwart these efforts serves to illustrate the relative weakness of Europeans in Asia in the eighteenth century even at the margins of Asian civilization.

At the close of the seventeenth century, European commerce with China was in such disarray that the almost one hundred year-old Governor and Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies (1600) and its newly chartered rival, the “New” or English East India Company Trading to the East Indies (1698), were considering the abandonment of their China trade. This crisis was closely tied to the earlier fall of the Ming dynasty. Benefiting from the resulting
relaxation of authority, Chinese merchants at the great trading ports, such as Canton, began exploiting the essentially weak position of European traders. These had to contract well in advance for the delivery of Chinese trade goods that had to arrive on time so that European traders could depart on their return voyage via the Monsoon winds. Unfortunately, this forced departure date gave them little leverage over rapacious Chinese merchants who began waiting until the last minute to deliver substandard goods, or even switch goods, leaving the European traders no choice but to accept them or return home with no Chinese cargo. Alternatively, though contracted to supply the finest silk, these merchants often delivered instead ceramics of such poor quality that the foreign traders simply could not market it at home at a profit. Worse, the newly established Manchu officials, rather than re-establishing order and the sanctity of contracts, were sending members of their families to Canton in search of wealth, either by extorting money in return for contract enforcement or by engaging in the same predatory practices they were ostensibly dispatched to control. The Imperial Court entered directly into such schemes, at one time demanding a license to trade required not only reasonable fees, but an annual embassy to the Court whose charges amounted to £10,000. \(^1\) Against this combination, European ships captains and trading company officials were helpless. Even the union of the London and English companies in 1702 into what became known as the United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies, commonly called the British East India Company, offered no remedy.

The English and United Company’s President in the East, Allan Catchpoole, tried to get British traders to act in concert by withholding their purchases, but the Chinese were not deterred, knowing that the ships’ captains could ill-afford to go home empty-handed. Eventually, the desperate captains turned on Catchpoole, deriding his power to effect any change. One captain, John Roberts, dismissed their own and Catchpoole’s influence over the China trade as so ephemeral as to be “but a flash and we should all vanish away like smoke.”\(^2\)

Catchpoole desperately sought a way out of this dilemma. In 1700, he had tried to establish a more independent position for the English factory at Chusan. This effort had failed when the Chinese

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2 This exchange can be found in a diary of President and Council at Chosun and a Voyage to . . . Batavia 22 October 1701-- 5 November 1701 and 8 January -- April 1703. The British Library, India and Oriental Collections (henceforth BL), G/12/16, p. 271. See also BL, G/12/14 and G/12/195, G/21/7 and G/40/6 *passim*. 
forced him to withdraw from that place with great loss of goods and retreat to Batavia in 1702. It during these trials that Catchpoole he found what he thought would not merely the answer to the China trade problem, but also a new foundation for all European trade in Asia. He visited the Con Son Island group, then called Pulo Condore, situated in the South China Sea about seventy miles southeast of what today is the port of Vung Tau in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Famed English explorer/buccaneer William Dampier had visited Con Son in the 1680s and his report, published in 1691, had spoken well of them, despite the dangers of the coral-strewn sea bottoms of its otherwise hospitable harbors. Upon his own much close examination of the islands, Catchpoole found these coral bottoms did not pose a serious impediment to shipping and that the anchorage offered a lasting haven and source of wealth.

Like the later Stamford Raffles at Singapore and the developers of Hong Kong, Catchpoole saw the advantages of creating a trade entrepot where European traders were masters of their own domain, paying local taxes to none and obedient to no authority other than their own. Chinese merchants would come to Con Son for trade in an open market: a well placed fort would protect the new emporium from any Chinese government or Dutch East India Company effort to wrest control of this trade. Even if begun as an experiment, the settlement would serve to keep Chinese merchants and their government honest, knowing that other merchants might undercut them at Pulo Condore if they did not trade fairly or honestly. It would also provide safe haven for the Company’s merchants fleeing unjust Chinese reprisals or confiscation of trade goods.

However, Catchpoole saw Pulo Condore as much more than a refuge or trade lever. Pulo Condore could be not merely for the China trade, but to compete with the Dutch in the Gulf of Thailand. It could become the hub of a trade empire stretching from Bombay to Japan “if it be not [as] we have here another island lying off from Japan which is independent from it and are very fond of trade and produces most of the commodities Jappan does.” Above all, it could permit Company ships unemployed in India to range farther East and reduce the much hated demorage, or costs of docking and maintaining ships stranded in port either in India or Batavia if they missed Monsoon winds or were otherwise unable to voyage home at the end of the trading season.

Catchpoole knew that all island entrepots have the same weakness: they lack a hinterland producing its own commodities for trade that could render it a trading destination as well as exchange mart and port of refuge. Condore might only thus serve as an intermediate trading point. For this reason,

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3 See *The Voyages of Captain William Dampier* (London: Grant Richards, 1906).
4 President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, 24 August, 1703 E/3/64, Original Correspondence (hereafter O. C.) 7999.
he preserved as an alternative the Company’s new factory at Banjar [Banjarmasin in Eastern Borneo] which was collapsing due to poor management. Yet, Con Son was much better placed to coordinate the Company’s business and he was confident that Con Son produced sufficient wood, foodstuffs, sandalwood and minerals used to manufacture gunpowder to serve that purpose. He also knew plantations could be created to develop these resources. These he saw easily established by the turning of the slaves commonly employed by the Company into indentured servants whose service would be rewarded with grants of land:

I cannot find any reasons to fear Condore will not answer your honors expectations, but it must have time to grow. And for its thriving nothing is needed than a large number of men . . . who will labor on the ground clearing etc. The few yet come are raw and lazy and grumbled at the little they did, saying they were soldiers and not laborers. So that (with humble submission) it will be necessary that it be expressed in their contracts that they are to serve by sea by land not only as soldiers but also in all other things they have to be . . . in whatever the President and Council shall order. Without a supply of at least a hundred English more it will be very dangerous for your honors . . . and the lives of the Europeans, for when the Chinese and Malays flow hither, which is not to be doubted they will, they are rouges enough to tempt them [to rebel]. Even the Dutch at Batavia (where they are so numerous) and so well fortified have great fears that the Chinese and the Javanese should join and throw them out, which several Dutchmen of good understanding told me in Batavia will certainly one day happen and some of the Dutch inhabitants are so severely oppressed that they wish it. I conceive (with due submission) that it will be necessary for your honors to send out two or three men that nicely understand to make all sorts of gunpowder which will be convenient not only for your island and shipping but quantities may be sent to England if your honors should believe it will be to good account. If your honors should have any of your ships come from Bengal, I humbly conceive it will be necessary to order to Condore forty or fifty slaves, men and women which as we . . . would marry to each other and then giving a peace of ground to them by a convenient value on them and their plantation. When they could work it out, they and their children should be free and the estate [made] good to them and their heirs forever only paying a small acknowledgement. These would never rebel but always be true to the Honorable Company from whom only they held liberty and property and by such a time as a slave could work himself and family free he will be too old to be worth having and unless the slaves have wives they are ever unceasingly endeavoring to run away and ready to rebel especially the Maccasars from whence I would never advise bringing any women, for they are lazy and cruel and their own women do not love them so well as they do the longhaired slaves. [Of] this I was informed from a Dutchman at Batavia who had above fifty of his own and managed them. I most humbly recommend it to your honors better judgment only that I am of opinion slaves for Condore is very necessary. When I was last at Ballesore [in Bengal] they were bought for ten fifteen and twenty rupees each.

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5 President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, 8 July 1703 E/3/66, O. C. 8188.
6 President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, 28 August 1702. BL E/3/70
Catchpoole’s visit to the island in the fall of 1702 ended with him intent upon moving the Company’s affairs there and building a settlement initially comprised of a few company officers, Macassar soldiers—actually Bugis, a sea-faring peoples whose ferocity led to the word boogieman—some long-haired slaves and Topasses, who were people of mixed Portuguese and island Southeast Asian descent. These would began the task of clearing land for the construction of the fort that would dominate the harbor chosen by Catchpoole as suitable for trade and defense. He would later return with a guard ship purchased in Batavia (the Seaford), which he stationed at the mouth of the harbor to discourage any Chinese attempt to attack the settlement. He then asked the Company’s managers to supply him with 100 soldiers and a supply of writers which would convince the Chinese government that the English were not longer subject to its whim and could retaliate against any Chinese port if these were subject to unjust imprisonment or exactions, a point driven home by his report that after beginning the settlement on Con Son and returning to Chusan, he was lied to regarding the arrival of Beijing merchants to purchase of goods for the Emperor’s sons, placed under guard and had to bribe his way out.

Catchpoole was well aware that the islands were inhabited and that there was a Cochin Chinese or Vietnamese military post there. At the time, the Vietnamese State of Dai Viet (Great Viet) was divided between two contending, and related, families, the Nguyen in the South and the Trinh in the North, their spheres of influence divided approximately at Da Nang. Each family claimed to be the true protector of Le Dynasty, which had been founded in 1427. For decades there had been first warfare and ultimately a grudging peace between the two. The Nguyen lands came to be known to Europeans as Cochin China (to distinguish it from Cochin in India), but the latter had little dealings with it. Both the Dutch and British had trading stations in Tonkin, but in 1697 the English abandoned their trade there least partly because of the same reason that had made profitable trade with China impossible. Such were the exactions of the Vietnamese mandarinate that, as one English trader put it, “they would have the carpet from the table.”

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7 Though greatly feared by the British and Dutch as pirates, the Bugis were known for their industry as well as ferocity. A seafaring people today numbering approximately four million people, the Bugis had traveled as far as Madagascar before the coming of the Europeans.

8 Letters from President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, from Chusan and Batavia, 15 June, 28 August, 4 and 27 September, 7 November 1702, 30 January and 10 February, 1703, in Bruce, Annals of the Honorable East-India Company, vol. 3, pp. 528-529.

Fatefully, Catchpoole was so determined to wrest free of indigenous interference that he hoped to avoid contact with Cochin Chinese officials on Con Son. He was polite to the officers of the local garrison, but was overheard to say that he was going to build his settlement whether or not he had permission from the mainland government.\(^{10}\) This prompted a visit from the island’s officials, who offered presents. Catchpoole reciprocated by giving them “knifes, sizzors, looking glasses, etc.” Catchpoole admired the black silk clothing of the headmen of the twenty-five families living on the island that had accompanied these officials to their meeting with him. He may, however, have been more impressed that the government deputies seemed to have no great authority over the island’s inhabitants. It seemed to Catchpoole that the local officials were “cautious” in giving figures about yearly yields of local products, but “they seemed very pleased with our coming and “only pressed that we might remain ashore.” Having his presence officially noted by these officials prompted Catchpoole to “deliver a letter to the their King or Governor where we mentioned our arrival at Pulo Condore and out intention to settle there, and that we would on our return from China send an Embassy to him . . .”\(^{11}\) Catchpoole added that his settlement could serve the country well in the protecting the islands inhabitants from piracy.\(^{12}\) This letter was sent to the Vietnamese authorities via a Chinese merchant traveling to the mainland. The Vietnamese reply, dated 3 August 1702 and addressed “From The King of Cochin-China To the Great General [on the Island of Pulo Condore] and his Council,” was cautious, if diplomatically correct:

> It is written in one of the [Confucian] Classic Books [that] Heaven has created all people and without doubt it is careful and concerned about them. It is therefore agreeable to reason that Kings acting on the part of Heaven in the first place worship Heaven itself, and next love and embrace the people who are committed to their charge in as would be their own children. They should also look upon the affairs of foreigners in the same manner and embrace and cherish Strangers. They are obliged likewise to look upon the Kingdoms of others and the Vietnamese people, altho' at a great distance from one another, as of one House and Family [and treat them as] as their Brothers and Companions. As for Our part, we are truly obedient on the one hand to the Commands of Heaven, and on the other [hand] We perpetuate the Government of Our Ancestors. We largely make use of [traditional] Royal Rules to govern Our subjects; We study the methods of governing practiced by former Kings, and We show leniency and meekness toward strangers. When laws and treaties are decreed after mature deliberation, the

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\(^{10}\) See documents cited below at note 32.

\(^{11}\) President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, October 21, 1702, BL, E/3/64, Original Correspondence (hereafter O. C.) no. 7999 and 6538.

\(^{12}\) See President Catchpoole and Council to Governor of Dingmoy, dated Condore, 5 April 1702 and 19 July 1703, and also “Copy of Letter delivered to the King of Cochinchina, received via Chambers frigate, 13 November 1705,” BL, E/3/95 O. C. no. 9002, 9541.
execution thereof takes place and the Government is easily continued. Where Piety is not, there is only desolation. When Royal Bounties are meagerly or partially given, the meeker sort [evil doers] daily increase and grow rich.

Some time ago We heard that you gentlemen did sail to arrive at and settled upon the Island [Pulo] Condore, which land indeed belongs to our Kingdom and Jurisdiction; for thither prows [ships] go and return, and there our affairs increase with our People that dwell there. You came all of a sudden, truly beyond our expectations; you have allotted large stations coming from your Native Country without bringing any evidence of your honesty; you have entered another’s Territories and showed no civility by making of Presents. But We out of regards to Piety and Love, embracing the whole World, bury all these in oblivion. After confirming reports of your arrival, Our Governor in these territories ordered you to communicate with Us and in obedience to his commands you sent Ambassadors hither to testify your fidelity.

Our complaint is against your uncivil and illegal behavior. We do not complain because you did not [immediately send presents to our court, because what good are presents if they are not offered civilly [i.e. before you occupied our territory]? But seeing you have now settled yourselves there it only remains that the end answer the beginning, and that you don’t betray your honesty and fidelity; for although the Customs in the Southern and Northern Countries [Ho & Viet] are different yet there is one reason [standards of reasonable behavior] common to all the World. Consider this and fear Heaven with all your heart and all your strength, and you will presently become as if we were surrounded by one Wall.

Your Letter also makes mention that there are a great many Pirates in these places. It is convenient therefore ye guard that Country, by which means it will come to pass, that Merchants may be without fear and both strangers and our people may get gains together and rejoice together.

Now if you have a desire to trade with us [though you] be outwardly furnished with Arms to oppose Robbers, so long as you are clothed in civility there is no reason why we should hinder you; but we reserve the right of examining of Ships, an unalterable custom of Our Kingdom. At this time, the Ships of all Kingdoms are as many in number as the stars, and all sorts of Merchandise abound as a running water. Follow therefore the old custom and conform your business thereto and why should we permit any base thing to be done to you? [However, if we showed any favoritism towards you] We shall make the trust of other Kingdoms reposed in us of no effect, and without doubt be suspected. Our Commands [must be as evenly] regulated as the four seasons of the year, and Our method of Government is altogether convenient and universal [treats all openly and fairly]

You are pleased to say in your Letter, that upon another occasion when a Ship comes to you, you will send richer Presents. How can such sorts of things be precious to us? Do you know what it is we highly esteem? Upon goodness and piety we put a great value. Friendship and love We reckon of great moment. With what regard can We have for Pearls and rich Silks, if honesty and respect be wanting? But seeing you are very expert
in Sea and Military Affairs, We are confident ye’ll exert your teeth and hoofs against Our Enemies; and on this account you will do a considerable piece of service and [be] worthy of [trust]. So long as you stay and trade in that Island, We freely forgive you the Customs of the Goods and the Tribute of the Land, although the old inhabitants pay both, for, providing you observe Our Laws, We will not value the usual ways of measuring out the grounds [taxation], so that We may assist your Shipping such as may increase your Merchandise and Riches.

Get every thing in good order that you may come to Court yearly, whereby it will come to pass that We shall mutually as in the winter season [during which extended Vietnamese families reunite] cherish one another, and also increase our fidelity and friendship, which two blessings are so great that they can never be exhausted.  

The King of Cochin China [probably Phuc Chu I, 1691-1725] was right to be suspicious of the new settlement and Catchpoole’s behavior. The building of European forts on Asian territory, while initially intended to protect European traders from each other, was a harbinger of empire. First at Surat, Bombay and Madras in the late 1680s, English agents, with the complete approval of their superiors in London, sought to convert these fortresses into vehicles for the projection, not merely the protection, of their own economic and political authority. This is not to say that, initially, the Honorable Company had sought “territorial conquest which the Dutch have aimed at;” it had, for its first 80 years, largely sought profits in quiet trade and began first began erecting fortifications only to ensure the safety its “great stocks.” However, in the 1690s, the Company reappointed Sir Josiah Child as Director and supported both Sir John Child’s settlement of the former Portuguese colony at Bombay and also his war against the Mughal over trade, not security, issues at Surat. These acts confirmed an emerging pattern of converting trade into empire. Though trade was still the optimum means of extracting profits for Asia, the Company’s directors believed that, following the Dutch model, it would in the future not shy away from using force and conquest to achieve that end if it would lead to an increase in revenue. In 1670, Gerald Aungier, the true founder of the settlement of Bombay, boasted of the English “city” that would arise there. In 1683, the Court of Directors ordered its settlement in Madras to look to its revenues by establishing “such a Politie of civil and military power, and create and secure such a large Revenue as may bee the foundation of a large, well-grounded, sure English Dominion in India for all time to

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13 Letter from the King of Cochin-China, 2 August 1703, BL. The exact location is being withheld prior to publication and until it can be ascertained if there is an original copy extant at this location.. Only an English translation is currently available.

come.” In 1687, the Company would anticipate Catchpoole’s reasoning for building a fort and settlement on Con Son in a letter to their servants in Bombay. They declared that:

The increase in revenue must always be the subject of our care, as it must always be yours, as much as our trade . . . ‘Tis that must maintain our force . . . ‘Tis that must make us a nation in India. Without that, we are as a great number of interlopers, united by His Majesty’s Royal charter, fit only to trade where no body of power think it their best interests to prevent. And it is on this account that the wise Dutch as we have seen write ten paragraphs their government, their civil and military policy and warfare and their increase of revenue for one paragraph they write on trade.”

Eventually, the Company would develop a rationale for empire based on collecting revenues from “natives.” These would, as in the Dutch territories, be charged with repaying the full charge and expenses of English fortifications because the natives “do live easier under our government than under any government in Asia.” In the end, no rationale was necessary other than avarice. As one of those who believed the Company should seize Bengal from its ruler, and its “treasure of 30 million” and its revenues of “two million sterling” sooner rather than later, Colonel Mill at Fort William wrote: the policy of the Mughals is bad; their army is worse . . . the country might be conquered and laid under contribution as easily as the Spaniards overwhelmed the naked Indians of America.” Apologists for European empire in Asia traditionally dismiss these statements as untypical of Company policy. They identify either the Company’s self-serving “men on the spot” or the alleged chaos that accompanied the decline of Asian empires as the primary factors that dragged an unwilling Court of Directors into empire.

Catchpoole’s unannounced arrival on Pulo Condore was, however, reason enough for at least one indigenous ruler of Asia to have good reason to fear a European agenda that interpreted the term “free trade” to mean free of their influence, their taxes and at cost of their sovereignty if that served to increase European profits. However, though the Phuc Chu’s reply left no doubt that the Vietnamese authorities were not pleased with Catchpoole’s behavior, the ever-confident Catchpoole believed he had

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15 Letter from the Court of Directors to Fort St. George dated, 12 December 1687, cited in Hunter, History of British India, pp. 273-4
16 Letter from the Court of Directors to Bombay, 11 September 1689, cited in Ibid.
secured the King’s acquiescence and could move forward with his operations. He had little choice. He had attempted one more voyage to Chosun, arriving there on 9 August 1703, to see what could be recovered of the Company’s trade and Factory. He found that the agent left there had been able to accomplish little and that when he himself came on shore and attempted to arrange some purchases, “he had been confined to the Factory, and compelled to make a contract with the Chinese merchants on their own terms” and also had to leave behind 10,000 Tales of the Company’s treasure. This left Catchpoole in no doubt of the necessity to open a trade with China through Pulo Condore, from whence he could make reprisals on Chinese junks until the treasure was recovered; the same tactic used by the Company’s Sir John Child in Western India against local Mughal exactions and confiscations in 1689.\(^\text{20}\)

The Honorable Company fully agreed to this course. It affirmed the propriety of all of Catchpoole’s plans and dispatched a vessel laden with supplies Catchpoole’s settlement required. It promised to send “what soldiers and artificers we can get and military stores” he requested.\(^\text{21}\) They also appointed a military engineer, Captain Thomas Rashall [Russell], to help construct the Fort. Rashall proved to be an excellent site manager and visitors to Pulo Condore praised his work and the settlement’s prospects.

These supplies, together with Rashall, arrived early 1703, but little followed thereafter. In fact, few Company transoceanic ships visited Con Son that year or in 1704 and none in early 1705. The little communication Catchpoole did receive made little sense to him. While leaving the future of the Con Son settlement entirely to his judgment, the Court of Directors called Catchpoole’s attention to what they perceived as the weaknesses of a settlement on these islands and suggested that, if his observations confirmed their concerns, he should relocate to the nearly abandoned settlement of Banjar, which they, like Catchpoole, planned to develop in any event. Since Catchpoole found the Company’s reservations groundless, and Con Son far superior to Banjar, his only course was to write extensive reports dismissing them and requesting the material support he had been promised. He also included Rashall’s and the visiting ship Captain John Roberts’ own glowing evaluations of the settlement’s prospects along with his own reports.\(^\text{22}\) When Catchpoole failed to receive replies to this correspondence in 1704, he tried to send copies of his reports home via local shipping to India and Batavia in the hope they might reach a ship bound for London.\(^\text{23}\) He also sent increasingly desperate calls to Company officials in India.


\(^{21}\) Court to President Catchpoole and Council, 26 February 1702, BL, E/3/64.

\(^{22}\) President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, 21 October 1702, BL, E/3/64 O. C.6538.

for the “one hundred lusty slaves, most men” he needed to complete his all-important fortifications. Thomas Pitt received this request and ordered the officials at Fort St. David to “provide what slaves they can” to Pulo Condore, only to find that they were “fearful there was none to be had.” None of his reports and requests reached London in time to prevent disaster, and those that did produced little result for reasons more personal and political than physical.

Unknown to Catchpoole, soon after its warm endorsement of his Con Son project, the Company reversed their position. Catchpoole’s enterprise had been the darling of his then employers, the English East India Company. After that company had merged with the Honorable London Company, the latter’s directors increasingly took control of the merged company’s operations. These directors harbored no love for Catchpoole. The latter had, along with his close friend Thomas Pitt, once been one of the London Company’s best agents, but had been driven from their service in 1697. Pitt and Catchpoole had then joined the “interlopers,” as the New or English Company had been called, and Catchpoole become the English Company’s President in the East. This act carried some stigma in the London Company’s eyes, but this did not alone account for their hostility to Catchpoole. His friend Pitt had joined Catchpoole among the ranks of “interlopers,” but with the union of the two companies, Pitt had been made Governor of Madras and enjoyed the United Company’s full support. What damned Catchpoole was his falling out with the London Company’s savior in India, Job Charnock. Charnock was the founder of Calcutta who had rescued the London Company’s fortunes after its war with the Mughal Empire over what the former left were unreasonable trade duties at Surat in 1689. Only vestigial evidence of Catchpoole’s quarrel with Charnock remains, but Charnock’s disapprobation was damning enough for the Company to sanction the driving of Catchpoole not only out of the Company, but out of Bengal. However, there may have been some among the United Company’s directors who still supported Catchpoole; there certainly was no candidate skilled enough to replace him and, given the tenuous situation regarding the China trade, even the managers ill-disposed to him could not afford to alienate Catchpoole or replace him until matters were more settled. This ambivalence may have been the source of the mixed signals that characterized their communications with Catchpoole. Mistrusting

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him and despairing of the China trade, they were slow to answer his request for troops and peppered him with complaints designed to chivy him into moving on his own accord to the settlement at Banjar. This did not mean that they had no legitimate reservations about the settlement on Con Son: they, like Catchpoole, were concerned that without a hinterland producing valuable products like pepper (which could be found in Borneo) the settlement might not best serve their interests. But they also distorted or, in today’s parlance, spun, their arguments to suit their anti-Catchpoole agenda. For example, they told Catchpoole that William Dampier’s journals and the reports of recently returned ships’ captains with knowledge of Pulo Condore spoke against the islands as an anchorage, but the reservations they expressed referred to anchorage sites Catchpoole had no intention of using or for which Catchpoole had an answer. He had his own copy of Dampier’s book with him that called attention to its “very commodious harbor” and was able to easily expose Company’s other misapprehensions. But what far worse for Catchpoole and his new settlement was that his ambivalent managers couched their reservations in a form of circumlocution that avoided a decided opinion on any of them and made no order to withdraw to Banjar, though that was their aim. A typical and crucial example of this writing was a dispatch of 11 March 1704, in which the managers wrote “If it shall so happen that after all these things have been duly considered by you and you shall not think it in our interest to go on with that settlement [Con Son], we then would have you to bring the people and all materials to Banjar,” which the Company admitted was then in ruin due to poor management. The same dispatch then closed with yet another repetition of their disclaimer: “We offer these thoughts, but you will best be able [to know] what may be best to our advantage and would refer it to your judgment to determine as you shall resolve to leave Pulo Condore and settle in Banjar.” The Company would inform its servants in Asia by reference to this same 11 March letter they had “ordered” Catchpoole to move to Banjar. It is no wonder Catchpoole missed the intent of the managers’ letters and responded with careful refutations of their concerns and repeated calls for the men and materials he required.

Unfortunately, none of Catchpoole’s responses reached London before it was too late to save the settlement, partly because the Company chose not to order any transoceanic ships to go to China and thus easily touch at Pulo Condore in 1704. Only on 16 December 1704 and 12 January 1705 did the

27 Court to President Catchpoole and Council, 26 February 1704, and 11 March 1704, BL, E/1112.
28 President Catchpoole and Council to the Court of Directors, 8 July 1703, BL E/3/66, O. C. 8188. See also John Masefield (ed), The Voyages of Captain William Dampier, vol. 2, pp. 388-392.
29 Ibid.
30 Court to Council in Borneo, 16 December 1704, BL, E/3/94.
dithering Company managers finally write dispatches indicating that they had finally resolved that Catchpoole move to Banjar, which was to be turned into a Presidency, like Madras, with Catchpoole at its head if he chose to take the new post.\textsuperscript{31} These were orders Catchpoole never received, as they did not arrive in Batavia until five months after matters had been settled on Pulo Condore by the Bugis and the Vietnamese.

Whether Catchpoole would have accepted these orders or demanded that they be stayed until the managers received his reports will never be known. Like Melville’s \textit{Pequod}, the ships the managers finally sent to the South China Sea found only orphans. Its few survivors were then scattered across Southeast Asia. As this is a conference paper, rather than a published article, it might prove illuminating to provide here a two-part eyewitness account of the settlement’s demise, written partially in the second person, by John Cunningham. Note passages marked in bold.

\textit{March 3, 1705} at One in the Morning, the \textit{Maccassar} Soldiers in the Company’s Service, set Fire to the Houses within the Fort, and murder’d the English as they came out of their Beds to extinguish it. \textit{Thomas Fuller}, Ensign, and \textit{Joseph Ridges}, were shot as they enter’d the Fort; Captain \textit{Raswell}, fleeing the Tragedy thus begin, had only time to bid the English stand to their Arms, and them himself was kill’d. Messieurs \textit{Pound, Greenhill, Wilkins, Chitty, Dennet,} and \textit{Covingham} were by this time got together, and retired to Mr. \textit{Pound’s}, at some Distance from the Fort; but not thinking themselves safe there, they got into a \textit{Cochinchina} Boat, and put on Board the Company’s Sloop in the Harbour, all but Mr. \textit{Coningham}, who betook himself to the \textit{Cochinchinese} for their Protection, as his Letter here after mentions; but one \textit{James Ray} came on Board in his stead, and gave them a just Account of the Havock that was made in the Fort. He said the Governour [Catchpoole] was the first that was shot, but he died not immediately. For want of Wind, they warp’d out of Gunshot of the Fort, and then flood about the S.E. Point to Anchor; contrary to the Opinion of Doctor Pound, who was for lying longer in the Harbour, to see the Event, and afford the best Assistance they were able, to their miserable Friends on Shore, of whom it was very probable some few had escaped the Fury of the \textit{Assassins}. They got Rice and Water from Flag-staff Island, and took \textit{John Peterson} on Board, who made his Escape from the Fort with \textit{William Omans}, but \textit{Omans} died of his Wounds by the way. At Sun-rising they flood into the S.W. Harbour, where they stay’d till Sun-set, and them made Sail for Malacca; which was agreed to by Majority of Voices. There were 45 \textit{Europeans} on the Island when this happen’d, of whom the following were suppose’d to be kill’d in the first Massacre:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Allen, Catchpole, Gov. & Thomas Herring, \\
John Ridges, & John Watts, \\
Thomas Rashwell, & John Walton, \\
Thomas Fuller, & Henry Ormond, \\
Arthur Aust, & Peter Hill, \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{31} Court to President Catchpoole and Council, 16 December 1704, and 12 January 1705, BL, E/1112.
Robert Emmet, Peter Bensley,
John Marefield, Alexander Lindzy,
John Boul, Williams Omans
George Stratford, Richard Bradford.

In the Sloop were saved,

James Pound, Minister Ambrose Chitty
Moses Wilkins, (my In- Thomas Dennet,
former) Henry Greenhill,
John Peterson, Thomas Emmerton,
Henry Peterson, John Hall,
Adrian Peterson, James Ray

Baldwin, and George Wingate, were sent by those that were left to Cambogia, thence to make the best of their way to Batavia with the News.

The Persons reserved for the Close of this bloody Scene were,

Solomon Loyd, John Lynch,
Henry Pottinger, John Allen,
George Townsend, Henry Slade,
Henry Savage, Cornelius, the Smith
Michael St. Paul, Joseph Ridges,
John Hudson,
Henry Dorothy, and Mr. James
John Pennyman, Coningham,

who alone was saved to give his Masters an Account of the miserable End of their Condore Settlement, as I have in this Letter to the Company’s Supracargos, and Captains in China:

Gentlemen,

Before this comes to your Hands, you may have heard of the Overthrow of the Settlement at Condore, whereof I shall here give you a further Account, and what relates thereto, that you may impart the same to our honourable Masters. Our Maccassar Soldiers has been threaten’d for letting two of our Slaves escape their custody, whereupon it seems they did mediate a cruel Revenge; for on the Second of March, at Midnight, they set Fire to the Fort, and at the same time kill’d the Governour, Mr. Lloyd, Captain Raswell, Mr. Fuller, and others, to the Number of Nineteen. Doctor Pound, Mr. Chitty, and Captain Dennet, with 8 or 9 more, made their Escape in a Sloop to Malacca, I suppose and from thence to Batavia. Those that remain’d were so dispersed, that there were scarce two together. I took to the Cochinchinese for their Assistance; but their Fear was so great, that they only went about to Barricado themselves. The Maccassars having perpetrated this Villany, got into a Cochinchinese Prow, to put to Sea, but were assaulted by the People of a Cambodia
Vessel, which was then at Hand, with the Assistance of our Armourer, who kill’d one of
them, and mortally wounded two more, which made them put a Shore again, and made
their Escape into the Woods. In the Morning betimes, the Cochinchinese took Possession
of the Fort; fearing I suppose, we should have join’d with the Cambogioans, to carry
away what the Fire has not destroy’d for being got together, we were sixteen English,
four of which were dangerously wounded, 6 Topazes, and about 20 Slaves, too small a
Number to cope with them, who were above 200. The Chinese being like so many
[Others?], and the Madrass Sloop in Cochinchina, obliged us to desire their friendly
Assistance. Whereupon the Money was all put into Chests, and the most part weigh’d
and carry’d into their Custody. During which time, the Maccassars thought to have
seiz’d another Prow to escape in, but were frightened away by the Cochinchinese, who
promised in a few Days to bring them all dead or alive. Most of us were dubious of their
Friendship, but did not now how to answer it to our honourable Masters, to leave so much
Money, while they pretended to be our Friends, and we had not deserved otherwise at
their Hands; for we could have got away in the Cambogian Vessel, which sail’d the
Seventh following, being unwilling to stay any longer, on which went Mr. Baldwin, and
Mr. Wingate to Cambogia, to make the rest of their way to Batavia. The next Day after
they went away, the Cochinchinese caught one of the Maccassars, and that very
Night cut off his Head, whereby we thought their Friendship had been secure to us;
yet on the 10th, without any Provocation, but to make sure of their Prey, they
barbarously murder’d all the English, of which were Mr. Pottinger, Mr. Townsend,
Mr. Joseph Ridges, and Mr. St. Paul, with four Topazes, and six Slaves only me they
saved alive, after they had given me two Wounds, one flight in the Arm, and the
other more dangerous in my left Side, whereof I am now well, God be thanked, with
two Topazes, and fifteen Slaves. On the 18th, arrived there from Borea [Baria, near
Cape Saint Jacques], 4 Cochinchinese Galleys, with Prows, which amounted to in all 65,
and in them about 300 Soldiers, the other Cochinchinese making above 300 more.
Wherewith they imarked every thing worth carrying away. During their Stay there, they
went 3 or 4 times in Search of the Maccassars, and lighting on them at last, kill’d four.
On the 7th of April, I was order’d on Board one of their Galleys, not having leave to go
any where, without a Soldier along with me. I saw and understood that all the People
belonging to the Madras Sloop were under Confinement, and [in] separate Houses, and
also in Congas [Chinese chains], except Captain Ridley. I offer’d several times to wait
upon the Governour; but could not, he was so taken up in over-halling the Goods that
came from Pulo Condore, and weighing the Money, which was found to amount to 21300
Tales. At last upon the 28th I was obliged to appear as a Criminal in Congas, before
the Governour and his Grand Council, attended with all the Slaves in Congas, as
also there I was charged with three Crimes. The first, that the English, when they
arrived at Pulo Condore, said they would stay there, whether the King of
Cochinchina would or not. The second, That there were no English sent along with
the Prefect to Court last Year. The third, that we sent a Ship to Cambogia, and did
not acquaint the Governour of Borea therewith. To the first I reply’d, That we had
never heard any such thing; for at our Arrival there, we did not know any Body
lived upon the Island, and that as soon as our Governour had dispatched the Ships
to China, he presently sent an Embassy to Cochinchina, whereby he had his Grant
to stay there. To the second, That all the English were so sickly, that we had not one
of any Port to send, and therefore spoke to a Chinese Captain then present, who agreed to go, but that the Caifou [translator] did take it upon himself to carry the Present, and excuse us to the King; whereto they reply’d, that the sending a Chinese, was all one as sending the Caifou, and that an English-man would have done better; I answer’d that was the Caifou’s [translator’s] Fault, who should have inform’d us better: Then further, why we did not get some out of the Ships to Send, where there were so many: To which, reply’d, That ‘twas not in our Powers to demand them out of their Ships. To the third, That never any Body told us we were to acquaint the Governour of Borea, before we sent any Ships to Cambogia. Then insisted they, there did not any English come about the Ship to him at the Mouth of Cambogia River, when he sent thither by one to speak with them: To which reply’d, That the Ship had not return’d to Pulo Condore, and therefore could not positively tell the Reason for so doing. Thus I was dismissed, and return’d home, where I had the Congas taken off again. The next Day I was at the Governour’s Son’s House, by which the Governour passing accidentally saw me, whereupon he sent for me to his House: He asked me nothing on Moment, but why I sent two English-men to Cambodia, and how much I had given them: having answer’d this, I deferred to know what he had resolved to do with us; he answered, that we must stay here till he has a Return from Court, which will take up two Months. And being ask’d for Captain Ridley, who was sick at Dang-Nar, about 20 Leagues from hence, and to take his People out of the Congas, he only reply’d, he would see to it shortly. And thus Matters stand at present, and what will the Result thereof be, God knows. I know not what our honourable Masters will be willing to do, and therefore cannot tell how to advise them herein.

At first glance, it is possible to believe that, at least initially, the outbreak of violence was attributable to the Bugis alone. After all, their contracts upon renewal may have been re-written or re-interpreted to mean they were common laborers; they had not been paid and, though their contracts had expired, Catchpoole not only would not let them leave, but had castigated the Bugis as soldiers for letting two slaves escape. However, their act may not have been mere lashing out in anger or revenge: the Fort was burnt, the Company’s store of silver was untouched despite the fact that they may not have been paid or underpaid, and a Vietnamese vessel twice offered them means of escape. Had they been acting alone, why would the Bugis burn the Fort, but not loot the treasury? Was it is possible that the Vietnamese, in executing many of the English survivors of this revolt, were merely opportunistically exploiting a spontaneous Bugi mutiny to put an end to the settlement? Perhaps so, for what is not clear from Cunningham’s account, but is in that of another survivor, is that the Vietnamese garrison was not surprised at the revolt and did not barricade themselves inside their own stockade in fear. When Ambrose Baldwyn, the English settlement’s chaplain, ran to the Vietnamese headquarters to solicit their

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32 Cunningham to the Court of Directors, 11 May 1705, BL, E/3/68, O. C. no. 8368.
aid, he found them “all in armes.” Their commander then not only refused his request for help, but put Baldwyn himself under guard. Baldwyn feared that this was proof that the Vietnamese intended to plunder what ever was left of the settlement in the morning. However, having discovered many English had survived the Bugi attack by fleeing to boats off-shore, they released Baldwyn to join them. This had what may have been the desired effect. As Cunningham notes, in the aftermath of the Bugis violence, the Vietnamese “to make sure of their Prey” had acted as trustworthy protectors. Both he and Baldwyn were reassured by the manner in which the Vietnamese helped tally the company’s treasure and place it under guard, hence Cunningham’s sense shock and betrayal when the Vietnamese then turned on the English survivors [Baldwyn had been sent to Cambodia prior to that event].

Reading Baldwyn and Cunningham’s account together, it is possible to conclude that the Vietnamese may have known of the revolt in advance, may have been its instigators, and at the very least hoped to use the angry Bugis as a means of disposing all the English without provoking a war with their superiors. This consistent with the view put forward in a Vietnamese account of these events. The *Liet Truyen Tien Bien*, a biographical account of the Nguyen Dynasty, claims that Nguyen General Truong Phuc Phan had actually recruited 15 Bugis (therein called Malays) to serve the settlement until the opportunity offered itself to kill all the English there. It also claims they were well rewarded for their part in the uprising. There are inconsistencies in this account. Were the Bugis who were slaughtered not part of the scheme? Perhaps the plan went somewhat awry. Too many Englishmen had survived the Bugis assault and many of the latter had not been able to make a clean escape. Moreover, the Company’s treasure was known to have fallen into Vietnamese hands by the Englishmen who had left the island. Angry at this state of affairs, the local commander, perhaps Truong Phuc Phan himself, chose to kill the (innocent?) Bugis and all but one of the English survivors healthy enough to give an account of themselves. Cunningham had clearly been spared to explain the true reasons for the coming of the English and their seeming attempts to expand their activities into neighboring Cambodia with whom the Vietnamese were on poor terms. Whether this captive and his surviving slaves were also to be killed was left to the decision of the provincial governor and his council, who arrived shortly thereafter with a fleet carrying 300 soldiers from the mainland shortly thereafter, a possible coincidence that

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33 Ambrose Baldwyn to the Court of Directors, 26 February 1706, BL, E/3/68, O. C. no. 8439.
passed unobserved by Cunningham. After the Governor had finished his interrogation of Cunningham, who had been brought before him in chains, it may have been thought wiser to let the survivor carry back word of the anger of the Vietnamese government at the English for having occupied their territory without prior permission. The price for this violation of Vietnamese sovereignty was the execution of some of the survivors of a clash that the Vietnamese could claim, and might have actually been, the Company’s own internal affair. That the Vietnamese authorities notified these survivors that their treasure was to be formally held by the government pending further inquiry was proof that they, at least, were abiding by “universal” law and were acting according to its principles. It was the English who had disobeyed these laws and were, accordingly, punished for that transgression.

Due to the remoteness of these events, this attempt a diplomatic gamesmanship took months to make itself known to the English and they had by then their own reasons for brushing the entire incident under the carpet. In the interim, the Honorable Company repeated at Banjar the political errors that had been made at Pulo Condore with identical results. While the Company had been engaged in their fruitless desultory correspondence exchanges with Catchpoole, they had gone ahead with their plans to build a fort at Banjar. Making the same mistake as Catchpoole—and thus destroying the long standing conceit among British scholars that only avaricious “men on the spot” and not the Company’s directors sought dominion in Asia—they explicitly cut orders that “every civility should be shown to the inhabitants, and the project of fortifying Banjar-Massin concealed, til the place could be put in a state to repell attacks.”

As at Condore, “native’ anger at the unheralded arrival of the English had developed quickly and word of the massacre at Pulo Condore led the agents on Boreno to make repeated appeals for troops. Yet, when John Cunningham had won his release from Vietnamese custody and took command of this new settlement, he was shocked at how aggressively the Company’s servants had attempted to lord it over the indigenous inhabitants and defy the local authorities. He also noted that having a hinterland—the ostensible reason for shifting the President and Council to Banjar—was easily negated for the very reasons identified by Catchpoole: The Sultan of Banjar, who, like his Vietnamese counterpart, had objected to the sudden appearance of the English, and quickly made common cause

with the Chinese to isolate the British from any trade. This included halting of shipments of pepper from the interior to the British settlement.  

The Sultan would have been satisfied with thus driving the British out of business, but an attack by frustrated Company servants first on the anal passages of local workers and then on a barge carrying a “Lady of Quality” [one of the Sultan’s household] precipitated an assault on the new, half-finished fort on 27 June 1707. In this case, the English had not been taken by surprise, but in the ensuing fight, in which 1500 islanders perished along with the chief English agent and military engineer, Captain Barre. The half-finished fort and some vessels were burnt and the English were forced to flee to Bencoolen in southern Sumatra, leaving a treasure of 50,000 dollars behind. Cunningham, who had just survived one “native” massacre, again saw a greater political hand behind the attack on Banjar. He blamed the Chinese for instigating the revolt. Alexander Hamilton, who lost a ship in this encounter, had other ideas. In his New Account of the East Indies, originally published in 1727, saw the war as between the English and an indigenous state seeking to secure its sovereignty:

The King [of Banjar] thought his Revenge had gone far enough in driving them [the English] from their Settlement, and finding the Loss of English Trade affected his revenues, he let all English who traded to Johore and other circumjacent Countries, know, that he would still continue a free Trade with the English on the old Footing, but would never suffer them, nor any other Nation to build Forts in his country. Several English have been there since, and loaded Pepper, and have been civilly treated... But these good relations did not last. The English persisted in attempting to build settlements, In 1763 they raised a British flag over Balikpapan and acquired the rights to territory in northern Borneo and Palawan, but between then and 1804 these and other stations were destroyed or robbed so that in 1804 “there being no profit to be made there,” all English stations were withdrawn.

After the loss of Pulo Condore and Banjar, the Company was forced for sometime to concede the lion’s share of Southeast Asian trade to the Dutch and Chinese. It would be decades before the

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37 “Captain Barre writes us that the Trade of Banjar has been shut up 4 months before his arrival.” See Court of Directors to Council at Banjar, 24 June 1707, BL, E/1112,
39 Letters from Mr. Cunningham to the Court of Directors of the English Company, 29th April and 26 July 1707 and Letters from the late Council at Banjar-Massin to the Court of Directors, 24 July 1707 cited in Bruce, Annals of the Honorable East-India Company, vol. 3, 664.
Company’s Far Eastern trade flourished once again and when that occurred it would follow the lines suggested by Catchpoole at Singapore and the Treaty Ports. This result was anticipated by Thomas Pitt, who wrote on 3 February 1705 to the Directors (one month before the disaster on Pulo Condore):

I am sorry to hear that you have ordered the raising Pulo Condore, which I take to best design, if well manag’d, that the ENGLIS H have undertaken in these parts for many years, for certainly ‘tis incomparably well suited for an Emporyum of trade in those parts, and I am sure in a little time I could have brought the MANILLA trade in good part hither, for there was an Armenian that would have agreed with me for a thousand bales of goods to be delivered there where he would have paid me for ‘em in pieces of eight, the properest commodity for China.42

The loss of the Pulo Condore settlement was a considerable embarrassment to the Company. Had they responded reasonably to Catchpoole’s concerns about a slave revolt and had not brushed off his request for troops, there might have been no slave revolt and Catchpoole might have been able to put up a fight against the Vietnamese forces on the island, if it came to that. That the Company had also diverted to Banjar the fort-building materials he requested further compromised Pulo Condore’s security. Worse, if the managers had been confident enough in their own intentions and given Catchpoole an early, direct order to move to Banjar, he and his party would have at least lived a little longer. Having so mismanaged its affairs, the Company allowed the blame for the tragedy to fall onto whatever remained of Catchpoole’s shoulders. Subsequent accounts suggested that the loss of the China trade had made Pulo Condore obsolete: a claim that required dismissing Catchpoole’s reports to the contrary. The Company made no mention of the role of the Vietnamese in the deaths of the English and their retainers, even though this meant abandoning an attempt to recover the Company’s silver then in Phuc Chu’s hands. The same tack was taken in regard to the “melancholy” news of the loss of the settlement on at Banjar, which the Company, like Cunningham, laid at the feet of the Chinese, not the indigenous people. The buggery and rape at Banjar were glossed over or blamed on recalcitrant servants who had been ordered to be sensitive to the local inhabitants while at the same time, of course, carrying out the company’s orders to secretly build a Fort upon their land, over which they were not in any way to be disturbed though it was built without permission and would infringe of the local Sultan’s control of the pepper trade there! Generations of Western historians have nonetheless been content to repeat the Company’s account that the loss of these

42 Hedges, Diary of William Hedges, p. cxil.
settlements was not due to indigenous resistance, but to Bugi savagery or Chinese agents provocateurs, respectively. John Bruce, whose summary of the annals of the Company records in 1810 was drawn from the kind of documents cited here, speculated that after the first massacre, “to this treachery the Malays were supposed to have been instigated by the Cochin-Chinese, that they might get possession of the remainder of the Company’s treasure.” As for Banjar, Bruce offered no comparisons other than that both had been promising projects that ended in disaster.  

It was thus that Catchpoole’s enterprise and the parallel loses on Borneo lost all significance as a marker of the desire of British merchants for extra-territoriality and the limits of European power in the seventeenth century Asia. Battered by China, slaughtered by Bugis, bested by the Vietnamese and the Sultan of Banjar, and living in fear of indigenous revolts even in Dutch occupied Java, Europeans in Asia had yet to alter the balance of global politics and trade even on the margins of Island Southeast Asia. Those who seek to read the impact of European power in Asia in the early nineteenth century backward into the early eighteenth century may thus profit by reading the marker on Pulo Condore memorializing the loss of life there in 1705. If they fail to do so, they will be in good company. The island of Con Son would later be the first French colonial possession in Indochina, but its use as a prison colony—a Devil’s Island for Vietnamese political prisoners backfired. It would serve as the premier “school” for leaders of the Vietnamese nationalist movement that brought French colonialism there to an end. The revelation that the later Republic of Vietnam used the island much as had the French, despite American assertions to the contrary is considered by some historians to be the final nail in the coffin of American involvement in Indochina. Thus, Con Son Island is not merely the graveyard for Catchpoole’s British colony, but of two later efforts in which Westerners, pace Kipling, had tried to hustle the East.

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