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**L'ÉPREUVE DE  
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# **Eighteenth-Century Dystopian Travel**

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Warm thanks to Daniel Cunningham for his thorough proofreading of this paper.

Set of documents. Compare and contrast the following documents :

## **Document A**

In July 1776 the Italian swindler Guiseppe Balsamo, who had assumed the high sounding name and title of Count Alessandro di Medina Cagliostro, came to London. He was accompanied by his wife and a secretary and brought with him three thousand pounds in gold, besides  
5 money and jewels. He set up in rooms in Whitcomb Street near Pall Mall as a professor of the occult sciences and an infallible guide to lucky numbers in lotteries. He also had a scheme for weaving silk out of hemp, and what made him really famous and sought after, his physical  
10 regeneration. This was a course which would cure all ills or nearly all and indefinitely prolong life. It consisted of a forty days' course of baths, sweating, starvation, medicines, purgatives and a diet of roots. Many people came to him and declared they were cured. Possibly they were; starvation and roots after a long course of over-eating and drinking may well have had an excellent effect. Then Cagliostro did an unwise thing, he  
15 started what may be called a mumbo-jumbo of "*Egyptian Masonry*". This naturally aroused the suspicions of English Masons and people began to whisper that he was an impostor who had swindled many people on the Continent. He contrived, however, to make friends with Lord George Gordon, who, however mad he may have been, was not a knave; other  
20 acquaintances were less reputable, a man and his wife of the name of Fry and an Italian called Vitellini set out to swindle him. They actually contrived to extract from him half his gains, and not content with this had him arrested for a fictitious debt of one hundred and ninety pounds and subsequently on a charge of witch craft. Cagliostro was acquitted on both  
25 these charges; but was imprisoned at the King's Bench at the instance of a

fellow countryman, Badioli, who had become one of his sureties. Lorenza, his wife, now took a hand. She went to mass one Sunday at the chapel of the Bavarian minister, and here by her sighs and tears attracted the attention of a member of the congregation, Sir Edward Hales. He gave her money and afterwards, when her husband was released from prison, employed him to do mural paintings at Hales Place. Cagliostro knew nothing of art and his effort only excited derision. Then he took to lecturing and as popular lecturers must hold their audiences, his lectures took a sensational turn. He stated in one of them that the people of Medina, whose country was infested with wild beasts, were in the habit of fattening their pigs with arsenic. They then turned them out on the countryside to be devoured by ferocious animals. These promptly died of arsenic poisoning; but why the pigs had not died of it Cagliostro did not explain. That anyone should have troubled to refute such nonsense seems odd; but a certain M. de Morande, the editor of a French newspaper, expressed grave doubts about the authenticity of these curious facts. Cagliostro promptly sent a letter to the *Public Advertiser* inviting de Morande to breakfast with him. The principal diet at this meal was to be a sucking pig fattened according to the Medina custom.

"The day after our breakfast" *Cagliostro wrote* "one or more of four things will happen. Either both of us shall die or we neither of us shall die, or you shall die and I survive, or I shall die and you survive. Of these four chances I give you three, and I bet you 5,000 guineas that on the day after our breakfast you shall die and I shall be perfectly well. You must either accept the challenge or acknowledge that you are an ignorant fellow, and that you have foolishly ridiculed a thing which is out of your knowledge."

M. de Morande did not accept the invitation and declared that Cagliostro was "*the greatest impostor of the age*". Finding that his many enemies were working against him and that Londoners were becoming less sympathetic, the count spoke mournfully of going to live with the wild beasts of the jungle where he was sure of finding friends, and departed for Paris.

*Travellers in eighteenth-century England*, Rosamond Bayne-Powell, 1951.

### Document B

From the time of the arrival of the ships to their departure, which is usually about three months, scarce a day passes without some Negroes

being purchased and carried on board; sometimes in small and sometimes  
in large numbers. The whole number taken on board depends on  
5 circumstances. In a voyage I once made, our stock of merchandise was  
exhausted in the purchase of about 380 Negroes, which was expected to  
have procured 500...

The unhappy wretches thus disposed of are bought by the black traders at  
fairs, which are held for that purpose, at the distance of upwards of two  
10 hundred miles from the sea coast; and these fairs are said to be supplied  
from an interior part of the country. Many Negroes, upon being questioned  
relative to the places of their nativity, have asserted that they have travelled  
during the revolution of several moons (their usual method of calculating  
time) before they have reached the places where they were purchased by  
15 the black traders.

At these fairs, which are held at uncertain periods, but generally every six  
weeks, several thousands are frequently exposed to sale Who had been  
collected from all parts of the country for a very considerable distance  
around....During one of my voyages, the black traders brought down, in  
20 different canoes, from twelve to fifteen hundred Negroes Who had been  
purchased at one fair. They consisted chiefly of men and boys, the women  
seldom exceeding a third of the whole number. From forty to two hundred  
Negroes are generally purchased at a time by the black traders, according  
to the opulence of the buyer, and consist of all ages, from a month to sixty  
25 years and upwards. Scarcely any age or situation is deemed an exception,  
the price being proportionable. Women sometimes form a part of them,  
Who happen to be so far advanced in their pregnancy as to be delivered  
during their journey from the fairs to the coast; and I have frequently seen  
instances of deliveries on board ship....

30 When the Negroes, whom the black traders have to dispose of, are shown  
to the European purchasers, they first examine them relative to their age.  
They then minutely inspect their persons and inquire into the state of their  
health; if they are afflicted With any disease or are deformed or have bad  
eyes or teeth; if they are lame or weak in the joints or distorted in the back  
35 or of a slender make or narrow in the chest; in short, if they have been ill  
or are afflicted in any manner so as to render them incapable of much labor.  
If any of the foregoing defects are discovered in them they are rejected.  
But if approved of, they are generally taken on board the ship the same  
evening. The purchaser has liberty to return on the following morning, but  
40 not afterwards, such as upon re- examination are found exceptionable....

Alexander Flaconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast  
of Africa*, 1788.

## Document C



*Captain Cook's First Landing at Botany Bay, NSW, Australia, 1770.*  
Illustration by George Soper (1870-1942).

## Introduction

One characteristic of the long eighteenth century in Britain, is travel. Indeed, this period, often equated with the age of Enlightenment, was also that of the First Industrial Revolution, and its subsequent transport modernisation. Britain, then, quickly became a major political and economic player both in Europe and in the world. It took the lead in terms of territory conquest, with, for instance, the discovery of Australia by James Cook in April 1770. But the British eighteenth century was also that of Britain's enhanced involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, with the end in 1713 (Treaty of Utrecht, end of the War of Spanish Succession) of the Spanish monopoly upon this commerce. At that point, Britain

became one of the main slave providers for the American continent, contributing to the forcible migration of millions of African people. Improved transport also enabled people to travel the world in the age of Enlightenment. This fostered intellectual exchanges between enlightened members of the 'Republic of Letters, but this was also an opportunity for confidence tricksters to move from one European capital to the other and to pass themselves off as respectable people, swindling innocent minds.

The set of documents under study rests upon the notion of travel and migration. It also raises the issue of dystopia, with two documents depicting travellers seeking new places to explore or to exploit, while the third one describes people who were forcibly transported to places where they would be exploited to death. The first document indeed describes the career of a rogue, Count Cagliostro, who travelled from Sicily to London, pretending to be a medical doctor and a free mason, and who, once confronted by the people he had taken advantage of, decided to move to Paris where he could deceive new victims.

The second document is an account by Dr Alexander Falconbridge of the conditions of capture and transport of slaves, first within Africa and then from Africa to America.

The third document is a painting by George Soper representing the moment when James Cook set foot in Australia for the first time and encountered a group of native people. The result of James Cook's expedition was the discovery of a new territory and among the consequences of it was the colonisation of this new continent, starting in 1778 and leading to the destruction of the natives' habitat and culture.

All three documents revolving around the notions of travel as well as that of dystopia, as each document is linked to some evil project, this analysis will address the question of dystopian travel. First, this study will insist that any form of travel generally leads to discoveries and encounters, it will then oppose wilful travelling to forced migration. I will finally examine the dystopian ethics and deeds of travellers and confidence tricksters in exotic contexts. I wish to specify that if I chose to use titles for my three parts, it is for didactic reasons, but candidates should remember that they are not allowed to do so and should rely on explicit transitions only.

## 1. Travelling, discovering, encountering

This set of documents is characterised by the notion of travel and therefore by that of discoveries and encounters. All three documents indeed depict situations in which travelling leads to discovering new facts, new countries and new people.

The second document of this *dossier* is extracted from Alexander Falconbridge's testimony on the slave trade. Falconbridge was a surgeon. He accepted to work on board slave ships from 1780 to 1787. Witnessing the horrible sufferings of the slaves on board slave ships, he became an abolitionist activist and decided to publish *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, from which is extracted the excerpt under study, in 1788. In the case of Dr Falconbridge, travelling was an opportunity to discover the reality of the slave trade and to meet people who, like him, were horrified by the existence of this aberrant type of commerce. Falconbridge's account insists more particularly on the horrible conditions in which the slaves travelled. Not only did they have to cross the Atlantic for months on board packed slaveships, but prior to that, they were captured in Africa, sometimes "two hundred miles from the sea coast" (line 9-10). They had to travel "during the revolution of several moons" to reach the places "where they were purchased by the black traders" (lines 13-15).

Travelling on board slave ships as a surgeon therefore enabled Falconbridge to realise that in the unthinkable reality of the slave trade, human beings were treated like objects and actually exchanged for merchandise : "our stock of merchandise was exhausted in the purchase of about 380 Negroes" (lines 5-6). Falconbridge's testimony also indicates that purchasers examined slaves closely, exactly as they would have done with cattle : "They then minutely inspect their persons and inquire into the state of their health" (line 32-33).

The first document of the *dossier* is a brief biography of a famous eighteenth-century adventurer and rogue. This document also revolves around the notions of travel, discoveries and encounters. Indeed, when he arrived in London in 1776, Giuseppe Balsano also known as Count Cagliostro, had already travelled extensively and discovered lots of things, such as, for instance, how to deceive people and how to take advantage of them in all possible ways. When he settled in London, he sought to establish himself as a sort of magician : "a professor of the occult sciences and an infallible guide to lucky numbers in lotteries. He also had a scheme



for weaving silk out of hemp, and what made him really famous and sought after, his physical regeneration" (lines 6-9). His trick worked quite well, until he made a mistake, as insists the first document of this *dossier*. At one point, indeed, he tried and practiced Free masonry. He more specifically practiced 'Egyptian Masonry', calling himself 'The Grand Copht' and organising flamboyant ceremonies. As Cagliostro took advantage of many people using this ruse, this attracted the attention of the London masons who soon exposed the traveller as an impostor. Yet his London mishaps did not discourage "the quack of quacks", as Thomas Carlyle would call him. Indeed, Cagliostro went on travelling, exploring and encountering new people, whom he took advantage of: "he departed for Paris" (line 56-57).

It is also travel, thirst for adventure, discoveries and encounters which took James Cook to Australia. In this particular case, the travel was an expedition commissioned by King George III and organised by the Royal Navy and the Royal Society with the objective of discovering the "unknown southern land" (*Terra Australis Incognita*). In April 1770, James Cook and his crew became the first Europeans to reach Australia and to encounter Aborigines. The third document is George Soper's painting *Captain Cook's First Landing at Botany Bay, NS Wales, 1770*. It vividly depicts the very moment when the European explorers met the Australian native population. The painting shows the faces of the group of invaders but not those of the Aborigines; the body language of the latter, however, clearly reflects their misgivings on encountering this group of European explorers, as if the artist had tried to depict this invasion from the natives' point of view and as if he had wanted the spectator to experience the way the Aboriginal population perceived the arrival of Europeans on their land.

The contrast between the two groups of men is striking in the painting. On the left-hand side of the masterpiece is the group of Europeans arriving on board a wooden dinghy, with, in the distance, the huge ship which took them around the world. On the right-hand side are three Aborigines holding their weapons and shields as a protection against those invaders. The peaceful and self-confident demeanour of the Westerners as opposed to the amazement and fright displayed by the Aborigines highlights the exceptional but also deeply unegalitarian character of this encounter: the travellers, nice though they may look, were extremely powerful as they were backed and funded by a whole ambitious country willing to 'rule the waves', namely eighteenth-century Britain. In

contrast, those three native threatening-looking warriors, had nothing but their spears to defend their country, their culture and their future.

## 2. Travelling versus forced migration

A very striking contrast in this *dossier* consists in the opposition between, on the one hand, Cagliostro's biography and Soper's painting, which both depict travel as a choice, and, on the other hand, Falconbridge's testimony, which denounces forced slave displacement.

Indeed, George Soper's painting depicts explorers setting foot on an unknown shore under the eyes of three Aboriginal warriors. The group of elegantly clad European warriors wilfully joined the very well-prepared expedition to the Southern hemisphere as show their equipment (His Majesty's Ship *Endeavour* in the background), their number (5 men actually landing, but a crew of over 70 sailors), their attitude (friendly but self-confident) and their expressions.

Wilful travelling and exploring also seem to be the characteristics of Cagliostro's numerous adventures. This Sicilian rogue, depicted in the first document, decided to travel the world to gain fame and make a fortune at the expense of his countless victims : "In July 1776 the Italian swindler Giuseppe Balsamo, [...] came to London. He was accompanied by his wife and a secretary [...]. He set up rooms in Whitcomb Street near Pall Mall as a professor of the occult sciences" (lines 1-6).

Born in Palermo, this man understood very young that travelling could help him take advantage of a wide range of people and get away with it. Cagliostro therefore crisscrossed Europe and the Middle East, spending some time in Greece, in Egypt, in Persia and in Rome before picking London and, later on, Paris to go on conning his fellow human beings : "Finding that his many enemies were working against him and that Londoners were becoming less sympathetic, the count [...] departed for Paris" (lines 53-57).

Cagliostro on the one hand, and the group of Britons landing on the Australian coast on the other, were there all people travelling of their own volition as opposed to the slaves described by Alexander Falconbridge in his testimony. In the case of the slaves captured and deported to America, travelling was not only forcible, but it was also horribly painful and often lethal ("unhappy wretches", line 8).

As Falconbridge's text makes it clear, the slaves had to travel from the

place where they were captured to the place where the ships were moored : "Many Negroes, upon being questioned relative to the places of their nativity, have asserted that they have travelled during the revolution of several moons (their usual method of calculating time)" (line 11-14). They were also bought and sold "at [...] fairs, which are held at uncertain periods [in which] several thousands [of them] are [...] exposed to sale" (line 16-17). The forcible displacement also included pregnant women who, because they were forcibly displaced, gave birth in extremely precarious conditions : "Women sometimes form a part of them, who happen to be so far advanced in their pregnancy as to be delivered during their journey from the fairs to the coast ; and I have frequently seen instances of deliveries on board ships..." (lines 27-29).

### 3. Dystopian travels

Travel, however, is not the only notion characterising this set of three documents. Dystopia, that is to say "a [...] world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanised fearful lives" (Merriem-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dystopia>), is another important concept to take into account in order to interpret this *dossier*, as lies, manipulation, misleading appearances, criminal behaviours, destruction and exotic perversion all seem to be at the very heart of each of these three documents.

Cagliostro was an absolute liar since not only was he a fake nobleman ("high sounding name and title of Count Alessandro di Medina Cagliostro", line 2-3) but he also pretended to be a soothsayer ("professor of the occult sciences and an infallible guide to lucky numbers in lotteries", line 6-7) and to be able to cure people ("could cure all ills or nearly all and indefinitely prolong life", lines 9-10) through a specific "forty days' course of baths, sweating, starvation, medicines, purgatives and a diet of roots" (lines 10-11). All of Cagliostro's ethical principles were then distorted and only travel could enable him to misbehave with impunity.

In like manner, deception, lies and manipulation seem to characterise the atmosphere of George Soper's painting. These elegant invaders, facing a group of suspicious people whom they regarded as savages, hid under a misleadingly friendly attitude the very covetous intentions of the nation which had sent them.

Lies and manipulation were also at the heart of the slave trade practice, with poor quality merchandise, often fake jewellery and weapons,

used as a medium of exchange to purchase human beings. As Falconbridge testified: "our stock of merchandise was exhausted in the purchase of about 380 Negroes" (line 5-6).

Dystopian destruction seems yet another common point between the three documents under study. Indeed, Captain Cook's travel to Australia did not only lead to the discovery of a new continent. It also led to a process of colonisation which entailed the gradual destruction of the native population's habitat, culture and identity, reducing its members to a community of less than a million people nowadays. In 1788, when the colonisation of Australia officially began with Captain Arthur Phillip's landing near what would later become the city of Sydney, it was officially declared that this land did not belong to the aboriginal population. The ensuing policy of exploitation and deprivation even consisted at one point in removing aboriginal or mixed-race children from their families. This accelerated even more the process of destruction of the natives' cultural legacy. Looking at Soper's painting, it can definitely be said that the natives' defensive attitude was actually a very good anticipation of what the group of apparently harmless invaders landing on their shore had in store for them...

Dystopian destruction is also what characterised the slave trade. As Falconbridge's detailed description makes it absolutely clear, the Black population captured as part of the slave trade were not only forcibly transported by Black and White traders who travelled through Africa to abduct them, but were also bartered or sold like cattle ("from twelve to fifteen hundred Negroes who had been purchased at one fair", lines 20-21) and minutely examined as such by their potential purchasers ("If they are inflicted with any disease or are deformed or have bad eyes or teeth [...] if any of the foregoing defects are discovered in them they are rejected. But if approved of, they are generally taken on board the ship the same evening" lines 34-39). The whole process – the Middle Passage and the subsequent exploitation to death of the Black slaves – led to the destruction of millions of African lives.

Count Cagliostro's practices, lifestyle and intentions were also obviously destructive. From his fake nobility title to his self-styled talents as a doctor, professor of occult sciences or mason, everything in this travelling swindler was morally vile and extremely harmful to the naive people whom he managed to deceive. This worked more or less thanks to Cagliostro's constant travelling which enabled him to practice his dystopian talents on all sorts of victims... until the day when he was

himself the victim of other travelling confidence trickers : "an Italian called Vitellini set out to swindle him [...] and not content with this had him arrested for a fictitious debt" (lines 21-23). Dystopian principles can backfire... and destroy confidence tricksters themselves.

However, and this is a striking difference between Cagliostro's biography on the one hand, and Falconbridge's testimony and Soper's painting on the other, Cagliostro paid a high price for his vile actions unlike the conquerers of Australia and the slave traders, who all got away with it. Cagliostro was indeed imprisoned, then released from jail thanks to the generosity of Sir Edward Hales. He did not really learn his lesson, though, as he went on deceiving people ("M. de Morande [...] declared that Cagliostro was 'the greatest impostor of the age', line 51-52) and eventually left London to continue deceiving other victims in France.

Dystopian exoticism is one last common characteristic of the three documents composing this *dossier*. Lying, manipulating, destroying seem indeed to have been easier in foreign and remote contexts in the eighteenth century, far from Europe and far from potentially disagreeing witnesses. Capturing human beings, bartering them for low quality merchandise, selling them at "fairs [...] at the distance of upwards of two hundred miles from the sea coast" (line 9-10), with a large part of them coming from everywhere in the African continent ("several thousands [...] exposed to sale who had been collected from all parts of the country for a very considerable distance around", line 17-19) was part of the slave trade's dystopian exoticism, that is to say the possibility of committing atrocities in remote countries and escaping punishment for that very reason.

In like manner, colonisation took place in remote, newly discovered parts of the world as George Soper's painting reminds us, and the exoticism of the native populations became a pretext to treat them with scorn, as suggests the fake friendly air of the White invaders.

Cagliostro's background and references, coming from Sicily and having extensively travelled the Middle-East, also partook in this dystopian exoticism. Indeed, as he travelled Europe and the Middle East, the Sicilian rogue changed his identity several times in order to hide his activities. He travelled to Greece, Egypt, Persia and Arabia before settling in Europe. His stays in the Middle East enabled him to acquire some medical skills which helped him pass himself off as a scientist when in London. His so-called masonic activities were also related to exotic references as the rite he used was supposed to be 'Egyptian Masonry' (line 15) while he called himself the Grand Copht, an obviously Egyptian title.

Again, exotic references and travel to remote places enabled Cagliostro to commit despicable acts and, temporarily at least, get away with it.

### **Conclusion**

Dystopian travel, that is to say travel to remote exotic places with evil intentions and/or evil consequences, is at the heart of this set of three documents. This *dossier* can be considered as a reminder that travelling in the eighteenth century, more particularly for the proud nation embodied by the trident-holding Britannia, but also for the whole then called 'Republic of Letters' did not necessarily equate with the most ethical of pursuits.

Cagliostro, a Sicilian-born well-travelled adventurer, took advantage of the interest of the Enlightenment era for science, free masonry and esoteric spirituality to con dozens of people. The discovery of America led the Europeans to develop a dystopian form of commerce – the slave trade – which lasted for about four hundred years and involved the active participation of industrialising and self-proclaimed enlightened countries. The discovery of Australia spawned yet another type of dystopian system, namely colonisation, which entailed the take-over of the whole territory and, in the case of Australia, the subsequent subjection and destruction of the Aborigines. Slavery and the triangular trade, exploration voyages and travelling rogues, such are some of the not so palatable aspects of what travel was in the age of Enlightenment.

