

Gregor mcgregor: the original confidence trickster

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The art of scamming is almost as old as the art of story telling itself.

Today we can imagine someone claiming to be a Nigerian prince or the wife of president of some little known country, it is a tried and true story meant to scam you of your money. Now imagine taking this idea to its limit, convincing thousands of people that you are the prince of a unknown country and then actually sending them to the middle of nowhere, it seems impossible right? Well that is until you learn about the story of one very ambitious Scotsman. MacGregor was born in Scotland in 1786 and was able to marry off into high London Society when he met the daughter of the admiral of Gibraltar while fighting against Napoleon in Spain. He left the army after having a disagreement with his superiors and leached off his wife's income. When his wife died in 1811 he decided to travel to Venezuela and fight against the Spanish (the very people whom he liberated during the Napoleonic wars). Here he remarried to a cousin of Simon Bolivar, Dona Josefa Antonia Andrea Aristeguieta y Lovera.

He was given a cavalry battalion and was able to score multiple successes, despite this royalist forces were able to capture the city and Puerto Cabello and in 1812 Macgregor, along with the rest of the independence movement left Venezuela for the Dutch island of Curacao. Being a man of action, he went to New Granada and was offered to lead an army near the Venezuelan border. There he gained the nickname of "Quixote" as he seemed to have no basis in reality when it came to his military planning. By 1815 Macgregor was surrounded in Cartagena and attempted a daring escape with only 10 ships. It was successful and he ended up in Jamaica where he was met as a hero for his efforts.

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His later military adventures took him everywhere from Florida to Panama, but they were failures and many said that he would never be able to gain people's trust again. That was until he returned to Britain as the "Cazique" (Prince) of a nation known as Poyais on the Mosquito Coast. Multiple people who had survived MacGregor's military endeavors had written about him, both positive and negative, but due to his connections with the upper class of London, only the positive was reported on. This gave him the perfect opportunity to begin his scam. MacGregor immediately began work on a 350 page book titled "Sketch of the Mosquito shore including the territory of Poyais" which went into endless detail about the country, he had a cabinet, an entire system of uniforms and badges for the "regiments" of Poyais and offered people positions of government in exchange for money. MacGregor claimed that the capital of St Joseph had a population of 20,000 as well as mansions.

At first some people were skeptical of the existence of a country which they had never heard of or seen. MacGregor was able to dispel most doubters with the help of his book and the printing out of official Poyais bank notes as well as land certificates. Hundreds of people had bought land and positions for this made-up country. What is even more shocking is the fact that the rich and educated were more likely to join than the poor. There were bankers, doctors and artisans willing to cough up endless amounts of cash and move halfway across the world to Poyais. MacGregor had become a multi-billionaire by today's money; despite this he still filled seven ships with colonists ready to go to Poyais.

When the first two ships arrived they were shocked to find that there was nothing, but a shoreline and tropical forests and no sight of St Joseph. Many believed that there was a misunderstanding and that Macgregor could not have been a trickster, they instead blamed the sailors and local guides, such was the effectiveness of his skills. At first the survivors did well, but due to poor planning and coordination between them and disease (It was called the Mosquito Coast for a reason) the death toll began to rise. They were saved by a British vessel which was going to Belize and just happened to spot them. MacGregor knew that his time was up and he escaped to France where he retitled himself as president of a democratic Poyais.

When citizens began asking for visas to a country which didn't exist the French government arrested MacGregor, but he was charged not guilty. He went back to his home of Scotland tried smaller versions of his scheme; it is not known how successful they were. The last mention of nation of Poyais was in 1837 after which MacGregor moved to Venezuela and was given a hero's welcome, he died in 1845. The story of MacGregor is an important lesson to investors and economist's alike. One of the main reasons people invested in him was the fact that until then the British and debt market was a bull's market and so people were more optimistic about the future and didn't worry as much about the quality of their investments.

This let people like MacGregor fool mostly well off British citizens in to his scheme. This raises another question, how could high class people, who have had an education and read newspapers be fooled of the existence of an entire country? One of the reasons is the fact that people like to feel special and join exclusive groups as a result and what can be more exclusive than <https://assignbuster.com/gregor-mcgregor-the-original-confidence-trickster/>

going to an little known Central American country? MacGregor also targeted his fellow Scots more often as he had offices in both Glasgow and Edinburgh. There were two main reasons for this, first being that MacGregor believed that one of his ancestors was part of the failed Darien scheme and so he wanted to give Scotland another chance at becoming a Colonial power and the second was the fact that he thought of Scots as being more hardy and capable than the English. Many scammers both old and new have also targeted their own ethnic, religious and social groups as people trust their peers more than strangers. This does not explain how MacGregor was able to fool French citizens with same trick, a people whom MacGregor had fought while he was in the army back in Spain.

Perhaps it was his personality or tales of his adventures across South America and the Caribbean that convinced dozens of people who spoke a different language and believed in a different religion to place their trust and life savings in McGregor. The story of Macgregor might seem impossible to replicate today , despite this many small scale scams have been tried with mixed results. After the relase of the ' Black Panther' Movie many people began to belive that the fictinoal country of ' Wakanda' Was actually real, so it is plausible that someone could fool people in to buying plane tickets to Wakanda.