

Colonization and Slavery in Central America

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In the development of the 'Atlantic World' after 1492, Central America was always as peripheral as it remains today. Yet it is precisely the peripheral nature of its relationship to this emerging world that is the key to understanding the particular patterns of colonization and varieties of slavery that existed in the three centuries following the conquest. The relationship between colonization and slavery in Central America from the early sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century was affected by the fact that the region remained, throughout this period, at the periphery of the Spanish and British empires.

The demand for labour in the early Spanish settlements of Hispaniola, Cuba, Panama, and Peru resulted in a large-scale Indian slave trade in Central America in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. Indeed, the first colonial economy of the region was based on slave trading. Supported by the colonial officials themselves, this odious commerce, more accurately conceived as 'looting' than as trade, remained the principal colonial economic activity until the decline in population reduced the supply.

The export of as many as half a million enslaved Indians prior to 1550 contributed to the rapid and severe depopulation of Central America in the sixteenth century. Subsequent demands for labour, particularly by British woodcutters interloping in Spanish territory in the eighteenth century, depended on the import of slaves of African origin, chiefly via West Indian markets. The abolition of slavery in the newly independent Central American republics in 1821 contributed to undermining the institution in the remaining British settlement at Belize, where it was finally abolished in 1838. Thus, the peripheral nature of the colonies and changes in the colonial economies of Spain and Britain were reflected in changing patterns in the institution of slavery in Central America.

THE ENSLAVEMENT OF INDIANS

Slavery existed in the indigenous societies of Central America, as in Mexica society, but it exhibited a new form and scale with the European

conquest of the region.¹ The existence of slavery in the indigenous societies was important to the Spaniards, as it helped them find justifications for continuing the institution, on their own terms. Though the Indians were familiar with the notion, particularly with a pattern of servitude following conquest, the Spaniards found new pretexts for enslaving them. Moreover, the ways in which they obtained slaves, and the scale on which they exported them, had a more devastating effect, especially when combined with the impact of pandemics, than anything experienced during the pre-hispanic period.

Moreover, we should be cautious in interpreting the Spanish sources on indigenous slavery, precisely because the Spaniards were motivated to equate the indigenous forms of servitude with their own. It seems likely that servitude in indigenous societies, though widespread, was more often temporary than under the Spanish, and that the children of slaves were less likely to inherit their mother's status. This is not to suggest that indigenous slavery was somehow 'less oppressive', but simply to warn that the Spaniards had a purpose in translating *tlacotli* and *ppencatob* into 'slavery', in order to try to justify their own cruel and violent actions.

A holocaust devastated Central America in the sixteenth century. When Spaniards undertook the conquest of the region in 1523–4, they found a land teeming with indigenous peoples of many and diverse cultures. In the area between present-day Panama and Mexico (Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) there lived, by conservative estimates, some two and a quarter million people in pre-conquest times. While we will never know exactly how many people there were, we do know that, even taking the more conservative estimates, there was an appalling loss of population within a short period of time of two or three generations. By the early 1570s, only half a century after the Spanish invasion, there were perhaps no more than half a million native people left, most in the highlands of Guatemala.

Many of these people died from diseases, such as pulmonary plague and smallpox, even before the Spanish invasion. Indian traders, messengers, and ambassadors brought infection from Mexico to people who, having no immunity to diseases previously unknown in the region, were devastated. MacLeod says that, 'it is safe, indeed conservative, to say that a third of the Guatemalan highland populations died during this holocaust'.² Pedro de Alvarado, on his first intrusion in 1523, encountered the 'sickly survivors' of this disaster.³ As a result of indigenous long-distance trade and communication throughout the region, similar effects were surely felt elsewhere, such as in Nicaragua even before Pedrarías Dávila and his men arrived from Panama in 1523–4. Cortés found dense Indian populations on the shores of the Gulf of Honduras

during his epic march of 1524, but these were also hit by diseases. Further epidemics of smallpox, plague, typhus and measles followed in 1529–31, 1532–4, and 1545–8, resulting in very high mortality rates. The native population of what is now Nicaragua and Honduras was reduced from more than a million before the conquest to 20,000 or 25,000 by the mid-century, and possibly to less than 10,000 by the end of the century.⁴

The Spanish invasion, often preceded by such epidemics, resulted in further disruption and death. Entire communities, and perhaps cultures, disappeared in this period. Native sources in Yucatán describe these incomprehensible epidemics as the time of sickness when the dead lie about everywhere untended. The consequent disruption of normal life promoted famine, which in turn made people weaker and more vulnerable to disease and conquest. In MacLeod's words, 'The conquest of the Mesoamerican part of Central America was itself an unusually destructive and protracted process, especially when compared to that of Mexico.'⁵

In the course of this demographic disaster, and contributing to it, the Spaniards began hunting, enslaving and exporting Indians. The Greater Antillean islands suffered drastic population losses in the early sixteenth century, so Spaniards from Cuba and elsewhere began slave-raiding expeditions to the Yucatán coast and the Bay Islands in the Gulf of Honduras in 1515 to replenish their labour force.⁶ Some of the Bay Islands Indians seized a ship in Cuba and returned to their homeland, but the raids continued, undoubtedly because they were lucrative.⁷ By 1525 the Bay Islands had been depopulated by raids from Cuba, Hispaniola and Jamaica.⁸

The transport of Indians from Central America to the Caribbean was soon exceeded by their export via the Pacific coast to Panama and Mexico. The Spanish conquest of the rich Inca empire in 1533, in particular, created labour needs not only in Peru itself but also in Panama. As the original inhabitants of Panama were rapidly reduced, the Spaniards faced the problem of replacing them to provide labour for the Spanish settlements and to staff transportation across the isthmus. African slaves were brought in, but there were not enough of them and they were expensive. Instead, as the Spaniards did not at that time perceive of Central America as an attractive area to colonize, they saw the Indians of the region as a large, available and expendable reservoir of labour for their wider colonial designs. Nicaragua became the chief centre of this trade soon after the conquest, and by the 1530s, 'slaving was the basic industry of Nicaragua'.⁹ Over two-thirds of the foreign Indian slaves in Peru between 1531 and 1543 were from Nicaragua, the remainder coming equally from Mexico and Guatemala.¹⁰

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Spanish attitudes towards and treatment of the Indians were full of contradictions. As early as 1512, a dozen years before the conquest of Central America, the Laws of Burgos required Indians to be well treated and converted to Christianity. Though they could be required to work for Spaniards for nine months, they were to be allowed to work for themselves or for wages during the remaining three months, and they were not to be struck or abused. Between 1526 and 1542, several royal edicts proclaimed that Indians were free and not subject to servitude unless they engaged in pagan practices, such as cannibalism, or rebelled. Indians who refused to submit to Spanish authority were called *esclavos de guerra*, while those who were legally purchased from their native owners were known as *esclavos de rescate*.¹¹ Indians who rose in rebellion against their conquest and ill-treatment thus provided the excuse for their enslavement.

Despite these formal regulations, the enslavement of Indians in Central America that followed the conquest occurred almost without constraint. To some extent, this may be blamed on the 'strong men', Pedro de Alvarado and Pedrarías Dávila, the quintessential *caudillos* who maintained control over most of the region until their deaths, in 1541 and 1531, respectively, and Pedrarías' son-in-law, Rodrigo de Contreras, who ran Nicaragua between 1534 and 1544. Offenders against the law generally went unpunished because the highest colonial officials were themselves in collusion with the slave trade. These peoples' power depended to an extent on their allowing their followers unrestricted access to Indians, with the result that this was 'a period of violence and unrestrained oppression of the native population'.¹²

When the New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians was proclaimed in 1542-3, a new court, the Audiencia de los Confines, was established. From 1544 to 1548, according to Sherman, there was 'better administration and some measure of justice', but 'the plight of the Indians remained much as before'. In 1548, however, a new *audiencia*, formed under Alonso López de Cerrato, substantially enforced the laws to improve the Indians' lot. Nevertheless, 'life for the Indians remained that of servitude to their white masters throughout the sixteenth century and beyond'.¹³ The slave trade was reduced to a trickle after 1550, but this was less the result of humane Spanish laws and dedicated judges than that 'there were simply no Indians left to send'.¹⁴ Central America, in the first quarter century after the Spanish invasion, was a 'conquest society', in which 'the *conquistador-encomendero* had little opposition, living off the labor of the conquered people'.¹⁵

By 1550 the Indian slave trade, in combination with the series of

epidemics and famine, had resulted in the severe depopulation, and subsequently the persistent underdevelopment, of the region. Some of the Spanish settlements themselves declined, while others disappeared, in part because of greater attractions in Peru and elsewhere, but also because the continuing decline of the Indian population reduced the supply of labour on which the Spanish settlers depended.¹⁶ Yet another pandemic, probably of pulmonary plague, swept through Central America between 1576 and 1581, again with high mortality rates. Numerous pandemics and local epidemics continued to take a dreadful toll of Indian lives throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, shattering the fabric of many Indian societies.

The numbers of Indians enslaved and exported are hard to estimate, as is the number who died in the course of the slaving expeditions. Between 1536 and 1540, more than twenty ships sailed regularly from the Pacific coast of Nicaragua, as often as six times a year to Panama and once or twice a year to Peru. The number of Indians in their cargoes varied but was frequently as high as 400 per ship, and most of the crews were Indian slaves. On this basis, MacLeod estimates, 'ten thousand slaves per year for the decade between 1532 and 1542 would certainly seem to be a low figure, and a total of two hundred thousand Indians for the whole Nicaraguan slaving period appears to be conservative'.¹⁷ Radell estimates that 450,000 to 500,000 Indians were removed by the slave trade from Nicaragua between 1527 and 1548, and another 400,000 to 600,000 died of disease and war, or fled from Spanish domination,¹⁸ while Sherman believes that no more than 150,000 Indians were made chattel slaves between 1524 and 1549 and that fewer than a third of these were exported.¹⁹ Newson estimates that in the decline of the Nicaraguan population, 'the Indian slave trade and disease were of equal importance, perhaps accounting for one third each of the total decline', the remainder dying from overwork, ill-treatment, and the disruption of their communities.²⁰

Many other Indians were transported from further north, along the coasts of San Salvador (now El Salvador) and Guatemala. Honduras, too, suffered huge losses to the slave trade. In 1526 the governor of Honduras, López de Salcedo, argued that it was only the traffic in slaves that allowed the Spanish settlement to exist, as the Indians were traded for food from the Caribbean islands. Twenty-five pounds of salted meat or a bushel and a half of maize could be obtained in return for two slaves, worth a couple of pesos each.²¹

The slaving expeditions were hugely wasteful, resulting in many more deaths than live slaves. In 1527 Salcedo led an expedition south into Nicaragua, taking with him hundreds of Indian slaves as bearers. *En*

route, he punished by execution and mutilation two hundred Indians who had rebelled. He enslaved a further two thousand Indians, but most died on the way, only a hundred arriving in León. Those enslaved were placed in neck chains, and if they weakened on the journey they were decapitated. The Bishop of Honduras reported that a major expedition from Guatemala, involving three thousand Indian auxiliaries, had resulted in six thousand Indians being killed or enslaved, three thousand of them being taken to Guatemala or sold to the Caribbean islands.²² While it is difficult to estimate how many were killed as distinct from those who were enslaved, Newson suggests that between 100,000 and 150,000 Indians were enslaved and exported from Honduras, while some 30,000 to 50,000 were killed in the conquest and the raids.²³

The dramatic decline in the native population concerned those local Spanish officials and *encomenderos* who resented the export of what they saw as their labour supply, a supply that it was hard and expensive for them to replace. By 1545 most labour in the extraction of gold in the Guayape River valley in Honduras was by African slaves, who numbered about 1,500, but most local enterprises could not afford such labour.²⁴

López de Cerrato, who arrived after the Nicaraguan and Honduran slave trade had dried up for lack of supplies, was largely successful in using the New Laws to stop the Indian slave trade in Guatemala. At least as important, however, was the fact that the demand for slave exports declined as local Indians in Peru became increasingly subjected to coerced labour after 1548, while mules and horses largely replaced Indian bearers in Panama. By the early 1550s the export of enslaved Indians, the first major staple of the colonial economy of Central America, had virtually disappeared.²⁵ But attempts to have surviving Indians returned to their homelands from Panama and Peru were unsuccessful. When the Indian slaves were freed in Panama in 1550, only 185 of the 821 brought forward were survivors from the Central American holocaust.²⁶

Though relatively large populations survived in the highlands, the Spaniards in Central America could no longer count on what they had falsely assumed to be limitless supplies of Indian labour. While Spanish freeholders still fought against the abolition of Indian slavery, the *encomienda* became 'the most important method of organizing and coercing Indian labor' in the second half of the sixteenth century. So, when López de Cerrato enforced the abolition of Indian slavery in the years after 1548, he 'was not attacking the powerful in Central America, nor was he improving the lot of the majority of Indians who were by this time nearly all in Crown hands or private *encomiendas*'.²⁷

Given the serious labour shortage and the Indians' unwillingness to be ill-treated and exploited voluntarily, it seems inevitable that a variety of

forms of forced labour, though not precisely slavery, would continue.²⁸ The use of *tamemes*, Indian bearers who transported loads on their backs supported by tumplines, contract labour in which the terms sometimes extended for several years, *repartimiento* labour, and other forms of personal service, more or less unfree, persisted. Moreover, some Spaniards continued to hold and act on the idea that Indians who resisted could be enslaved, so 'the issue of Indian slavery was not completely closed in Central America' after the mid-sixteenth century.²⁹

So long as surface gold or Indian labour could be grabbed and sold they offered quick fortunes, but once these resources were exhausted those Spaniards who had not moved on had to search for alternatives. Thus, the typical monoculture economy, with its associated cycles of booms and depressions, was established at the beginning of Central American colonization, stimulating 'a constant search for a single key to wealth'.³⁰

The problems of the cacao economy illustrate the consequences of the catastrophic decline in the native population. The Spaniards in Guatemala, San Salvador and Nicaragua turned to cacao production in the 1560s. Soconusco, along the Pacific coast, from where cacao had been sent to the Aztecs before the conquest, was the greatest cacao province of all. Its population declined from 30,000 tributaries at the time of the invasion to 1,600 in the 1560s and 1570s. 'Desperate efforts to recruit fresh labor were made, but the new laborers died as rapidly or more rapidly than the original inhabitants'.³¹

Though the cacao economy depended on the skill as well as the hard labour of Indian workers, bad conditions and overwork continued to reduce the labour supply. Indeed, as MacLeod points out,

overwork in the cacaotales, or cacao plantations, did not begin in a severe form *until* the Indian population had declined so drastically that the labor situation had changed from one of overabundance to one of scarcity. Then indeed the Spaniards forced the remaining Indians to work harder in a desperate attempt to prevent the plantations from becoming overgrown, aged, and gradually unproductive, as they were doing increasingly by the early seventeenth century.³²

Moreover, as the remaining Indians were forced to work on the plantations, they neglected production of such staples as maize and beans; by 1570 famine was widespread. Facing this shortage of manpower, the Spaniards began coercing large numbers of Indians out of the highlands, where there were still numerous survivors of the holocaust. Though highland Indians poured into Soconusco every year, the population of the area remained around two thousand. 'The long journey, the drastic

change in climate, and the exposure to the murderous diseases of the coast quickly killed many of these new arrivals' and among the survivors who returned home were some who carried infections.³³ Soconusco was a depressed area by the end of the sixteenth century, and the high mortality rates promoted by its short-lived 'development' continued well into the seventeenth century.

Forced labour was still widespread when Thomas Gage lived in Central America between 1627 and 1637, and he refers to the extreme violence used against Indians. Nevertheless, as Sherman concludes, while 'unjust exploitation continued in familiar vein until at least a century following the conquest, the vicious atrocities and chattel slavery of the early decades after the conquest were far less in evidence'.³⁴

THE ENSLAVEMENT OF AFRICANS

As high mortality rates reduced the Indian slave gangs in Honduras and Guatemala, the Spaniards began to import African slaves. By the 1540s they were arriving in quite large numbers, though not in comparison to the number of Indian slaves being traded. Of the 62,500 African slaves imported into the whole of Spanish America between 1551 and 1600, only about three thousand ended up in Central America. As Burkholder and Johnson have noted, 'African slavery prospered only where a diminished Indian population could no longer sustain alternative forms of labor,'³⁵ but in Central America, despite the demographic catastrophe, Indian labour was still cheaper than enslaved Africans.

The disastrous decline of the cacao economy by the end of the sixteenth century confirmed a serious and prolonged depression in Central America. The search for new industries and trades resulted in expanding indigo plantations, but shortages of labour remained a persistent problem. The indigo growers, if they had the capital and opportunity, bought African slaves, but purchase prices were high and Central America was not such a good market for slavers as New Spain or Tierra Firme. Moreover, the colonial authorities were anxious about slave revolts and saw the largely unpopulated interior as a dangerously inviting refuge for maroons. The authorities even feared that slaves might join with Indians, free blacks, mulattoes and mestizos in revolt.³⁶ In any case, few Spanish entrepreneurs could afford African slaves, few were imported after 1635, and the African slave population of the Spanish Central American colonies remained small. Instead, despite legal constraints, fresh expeditions were mounted to enslave previously unconquered Indians. Any sign of rebelliousness became the pretext of slave raids; in 1620 governor Alonso de Guzmán of Costa Rica invented a rebellion among the

Ayoaque Indians in order to attack and enslave them.³⁷ Though such raids, called *entrada y saca*, increased in the first two decades of the eighteenth century, they did not resolve the Spaniards' labour problem and the shortages continued.

Meanwhile, the peripheral, underpopulated and depressed nature of the Spanish Central American colonies provided an opportunity for their British rivals to intercede, establishing a series of minor settlements along the Mosquito Coast and at Belize, as well as on the Bay Islands in the Gulf of Honduras and on Providence Island off the coast of Nicaragua. Though these settlements were also peripheral to the British empire, they became increasingly important after Britain seized Jamaica from Spain in 1655, as Jamaica became the centre for British trade and piracy in the western Caribbean and Central America. One consequence that was typical of such colonial rivalries was that the British sought allies among the local Indians and maroons who were hostile to Spain.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, small groups of British adventurers, with some African slaves, settled on these Caribbean coasts to engage in small-scale planting and trade with the Indians. By the 1680s, some of these Africans, sent to trade with or raid Indian communities inland from the Mosquito Coast, had mixed with local people. The result was a new people, the Miskito Indians or Zambos Mosquitos, who became feared by the Spaniards and other, less aggressive or less well-armed Indians. These people, who remained largely dependent on the British into the middle of the nineteenth century, inhabited the Caribbean coast between the eastern tip of Honduras and northern Costa Rica. Their principal settlement was at Sandy Bay, near Cap Gracias a Dios.³⁸ Nineteenth-century chroniclers attested to the persistent power of the Miskito Indians over the 'pure Indians' of the interior, from whom they continued to obtain tribute and even slaves.³⁹ These Miskito Indians and their persistent slaving activities resulted from the particular patterns of colonization of this region.

For the most part, however, the British settlers along the Caribbean coast depended on imported African slaves, chiefly obtained in West Indian markets such as Jamaica, from the early seventeenth century until the end of the slave trade in 1808. Though they were an expensive source of labour – the compensation money given for freed slaves in 1838 being higher in Belize than in any other colony – the British had better supplies than the Spaniards. Moreover, the British developed a lucrative wood-cutting trade, first in logwood and then mahogany, that made the import of such slaves worthwhile. Consequently, before the middle of the eighteenth century, these slaves became the majority of the population in the British settlements. When the Spaniards captured the settlement at

Belize in 1779 there were about three thousand slaves, who were about 86 per cent of the population. After the resettlement following the peace of 1783, about 75 per cent of the population was slaves, 14 per cent was free blacks and 'coloured', and about 10 per cent was white. After 1787, when 2,214 people, over three-quarters of whom were slaves, were evacuated from the Mosquito Coast to Belize, the British hold on those parts of Honduras and Nicaragua became weaker,⁴⁰ while the settlement at Belize became a colony in all but name.⁴¹

The initial *raison d'être* of British settlement at Belize, sometime in the 1630s, was the exportation of logwood, a tree from which a dye valuable in the woollen industry was extracted. In 1763, the Treaty of Paris conceded the right of the British to cut logwood on what was still defined as Spanish territory, but by then logwood production was only marginally profitable. By 1770, when the depression in the logwood trade was acute, the settlers were exporting mahogany, an enterprise which was legalized by the Convention of London in 1786. Used in the making of luxury furniture and shipbuilding, and later in the construction of railway carriages, mahogany remained the chief export of Belize until the mid-twentieth century.

The shift from logwood to mahogany reinforced the tendency for a few of the wealthier settlers to dominate the economy and control the settlement, as the extraction of mahogany was a much larger-scale operation, requiring more land, labour, and capital. Consequently, while logwood was first cut by British settlers with one or two slaves, the concentration of slave ownership by a handful of 'Principal Inhabitants' who also claimed possession of four-fifths of the land, became marked.⁴² By 1816 some 3 per cent of the free heads of families owned 37 per cent of the slaves, and in 1820, the five biggest owners possessed 669 slaves, or over a quarter of the total.⁴³ Since land tenure remained insecure in the eighteenth century because of Spanish claims to sovereignty, most of the Belizean settlers' capital was invested in slaves.

There was an unusually marked division of labour by gender among the slaves in Belize: in 1834, 795 of the men, over 80 per cent of those over ten years of age, were woodcutters, whereas virtually all the women were involved in domestic work of some kind. Residence patterns, too, were unusual in that men spent the long logging season in more or less temporary camps in the forest, while the women and children were clustered in Belize Town. In this way, the social organization of labour shaped the social and cultural life of the slave population, with the period around Christmas, when all the slaves came together in the town at the end of the logging season, being the climax of the year.⁴⁴

The slave population in Belize, like most in the Americas, did not

reproduce itself. There was a marked imbalance of the sexes (generally two or three men to each woman), and high mortality rates resulted from such factors as disease, malnutrition, overwork, and ill-treatment. Some slaves killed themselves and abortion was said to be 'extremely common', having 'its avowed professors' among the slave women.⁴⁵ The slave population became increasingly older, as those who were forty years old or more increased from about one-fifth in 1820 to about a third in 1834. From a peak of around three thousand at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the slave population declined after the abolition of the slave trade, and their proportion to the rest of the population declined dramatically. In 1834, the 1,923 slaves constituted less than half the total population of the settlement, not counting the Maya Indians in the interior or the Garifuna in the south. By that time, men outnumbered women by only seven to six under the age of forty, compared to ten to three at age forty years or more. These figures suggest that the slave population had attained greater demographic stability by the time of emancipation in 1838.⁴⁶

Two further factors contributed to the decline in the slave population of Belize in the early nineteenth century. One was the rate of manumission, which was unusually high for a British colony. Almost three hundred slaves were manumitted between 1808 and 1820, and 210 between 1821 and 1830, a total of about one-fifth of the slave population in 1834. Less than a quarter of the manumitted slaves were adult males, despite the fact that they constituted the majority of slaves, and the most common forms of manumission, by gift or bequest of the owner, suggest that many of those being freed were the slave mistresses and children of their owners. However, a surprising number of slaves purchased their own freedom, often at considerable expense; one slave paid £450 for his freedom in 1829.⁴⁷

The other cause of the decline of the slave population was simply that many slaves escaped. The British settlers repeatedly complained that the neighbouring Spaniards gave asylum to runaway slaves, and the organization of timber extraction, with many small gangs scattered throughout the forest, facilitated flight. Most of the slaves who escaped in the eighteenth century went north across the Rio Hondo into Yucatán, where the commandant at Bacalar offered them freedom and protection. When the mahogany cutting expanded to the west and south in the early nineteenth century, pushing the Maya further back into the forests, the slaves tended to escape through the bush into the Petén in northern Guatemala or by boat down the coast to Omoa and Trujillo in Honduras. Most of the slave revolts that occurred, in 1765, 1768, 1773 and 1820, ended with slaves escaping, either over the border into Spanish territory or to maroon

communities in the interior of Belize. In 1817 the Magistrates expressed the fear that runaway slaves would join with Indians, overpower the British and destroy the settlement, but there is no evidence that this was ever attempted. The most serious instance of Maya resistance did not develop until a decade after slavery was abolished.

Complaints of escaping slaves increased after the neighbouring Spanish territories became independent and abolished slavery. In a little more than two months in 1823, for example, 39 slaves 'absconded' to the Petén, where they knew there was 'a Town of black People' who had fled from Belize in former years. In 1825, the settlers were desperate, 'having just learnt that 19 slaves have left their employments up the river in a body, and taken the road to the Town of Petén at the head of the River, and 12 to Omoa . . . instant ruin stares us in the face'.⁴⁸ The facility with which slaves could escape also inhibited ill-treatment. George Hyde, a leading free coloured merchant and slave-owner, complained in 1825 that 'as for punishment or ill-usage, you are aware (if ever so deserved) we dare not inflict it, so easy is their retreat to the Spaniards'.⁴⁹ James Stephen, in the Colonial Office, commented in 1830 that, '[British] Honduras is now in the centre of countries which have declared Slavery illegal, and if we persist in maintaining it we must look for a rapid depopulation of the settlement by slaves passing the border line, and returning no more.'⁵⁰

There is no doubt that many slaves took advantage of the opportunities available and, by voting with their feet, contributed to undermining slavery in Belize. The Abolition Act, passed in June 1833, was applied to Belize as if it were a colony (though this was not officially declared until 1862), instituting the 'apprenticeship' system in 1834 and ending it in 1838, just as in the British West Indies.

Varieties of coerced labour persisted in Belize, as elsewhere in Central America, long after slavery had been made illegal. The extreme concentration of land ownership ensured a dependent population,⁵¹ and forms of debt servitude, backed by an expanding police system to enforce the labour laws, disciplined the workers of Belize effectively for more than a century after 1838.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The fact that Spanish conquistadores demanded labour outside Central America more than they required it within resulted in the huge export trade in Indian slaves in the 1530s and 1540s, which in turn contributed to depopulation, persistent labour shortages, and the subsequent underdevelopment of the region. The holocaust, in which some three-quarters

of the indigenous population of Central America was lost in the fifty years after the conquest, condemned the region to persistent underdevelopment and confirmed its peripheral status within the Spanish empire. The effect was most severe in Nicaragua and Honduras, where the combination of disease, warfare, enslavement, and social disruption reduced the native population by over ninety per cent in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The Spaniards' motives in the region were to accumulate wealth as quickly as possible, and few thought of long-term settlement or economic development. MacLeod has aptly characterized the conquest of Central America and the two following decades as 'a large raid', rather than an occupation.⁵³

Meanwhile, the relative lack of Spanish interest in settling the Caribbean coast enabled the British to establish small settlements from the mid-seventeenth century, expanding them with the importation of slaves of African and West Indian origin. After Spanish power waned in the eighteenth century, the British colony of Belize developed on the basis of African slave labour, while the Spanish colonies of Central America continued to stagnate. Finally, the independence of the Spanish territories and their abolition of slavery helped undermine the institution of slavery in Belize by facilitating the escape of slaves.

After the legal end to slavery in Belize in 1838, varieties of coerced labour persisted in much of Central America. Even today, over 150 years after the abolition of slavery, many people, whether of African, Indian, or mixed descent, continue to struggle against the persistent legacies of colonization and slavery in the region.⁵⁴

NOTES

1. Murdo J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History, 1520-1720* (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 27-8, 32; Sylvanus G. Morley, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, 1956), pp. 159-61; William L. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (Lincoln, 1979), pp. 15-19; Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 142-4.
2. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 41.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
4. David R. Radell, 'The Indian Slave Trade and Population of Nicaragua During the Sixteenth Century', in W.M. Denevan (ed.), *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, 1976), p. 76.
5. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 41.
6. Ruth Kerns Barber, *Indian Labor in the Spanish Colonies* (Albuquerque, 1932), p. 110.
7. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 50.
8. Linda Newson, *The Cost of Conquest: Indian Decline in Honduras Under Spanish Rule* (Boulder, 1986), p. 108.
9. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 51.
10. James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532-1560: A Colonial Society* (Madison, 1968), p. 200.

11. Newson, *The Cost of Conquest*, p. 108.
12. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor*, p. 10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 54.
15. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor*, p. 9.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
17. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 52.
18. Radell, 'The Indian Slave Trade', p. 75.
19. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor*, p. 82.
20. Linda Newson, *Indian Survival in Colonial Nicaragua* (Norman, 1987), pp. 123-4.
21. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor*, p. 68.
22. Newson, *The Cost of Conquest*, pp. 109-10.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8.
24. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, pp. 60-61.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
26. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor*, p. 81.
27. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, pp. 111-12.
28. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor*, p. 208.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
30. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, p. 47.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
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