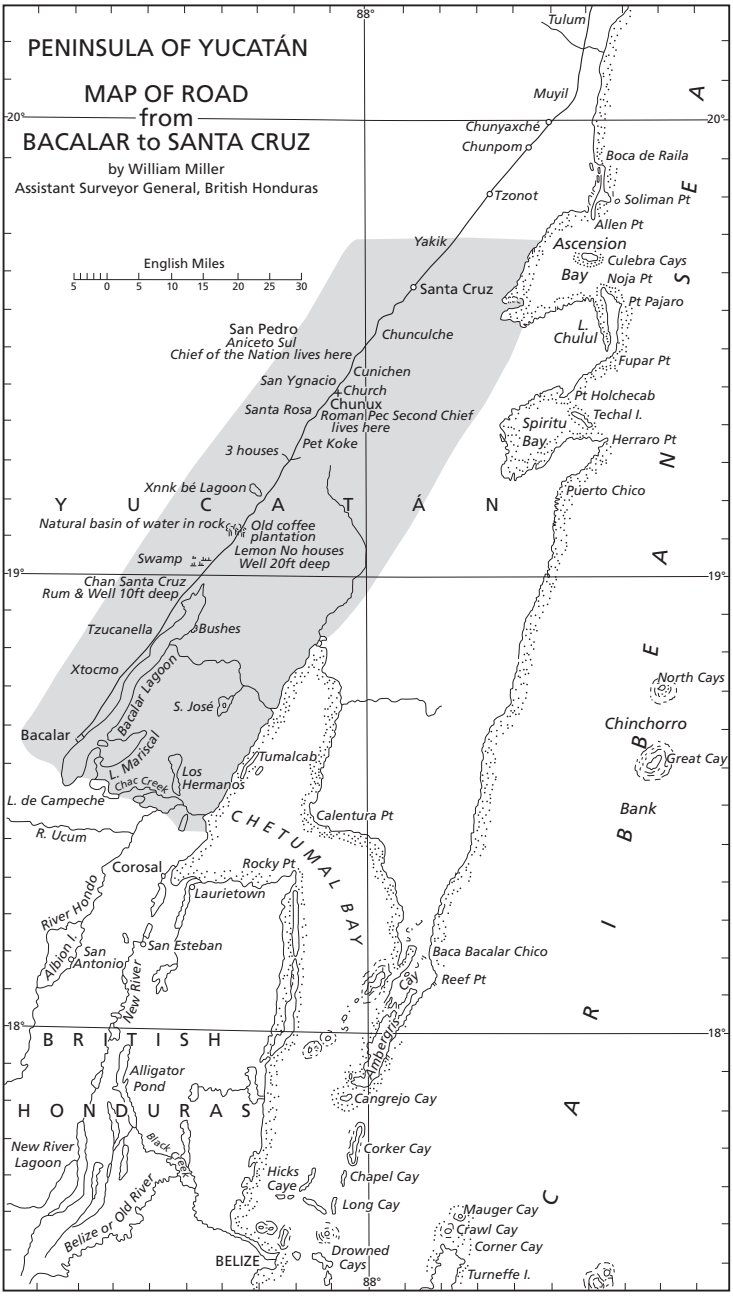
Introduction

In January 1892, Colonial Secretary of State Lord Knutsford – best known for granting the charter for Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company – received a dispatch from the governor of Belize, Alfred Moloney, describing a meeting with a delegation of the Santa Cruz, a Maya group that was the main protagonist in Mexico's Caste War. Buried among the great many piles of correspondence that the Colonial Office received from British colonial possessions, this dispatch would have vied dismally for the attention of the Colonial Secretary.[1] The meeting itself was uneventful and Moloney's description of it lackluster: "I received him [Santa Cruz chief, José Crescencio Puc] and his suite at Government House when the usual ceremonial formalities and professions of mutual good will were interchanged." Enclosed with the dispatch were a map showing the location of the Santa Cruz Maya vis-à-vis the colony (see Map I.1) and a photograph of the main attendees of the meeting (see Figure I.1). Yet, on second inspection, the studied banality of the account – itself a product of colonial bureaucratic practice – gives way to a retelling that underlines colonial attempts to allay the disquiet of that encounter.

Despite presenting the visit as peaceful and economically motivated by Puc's desire to collect rents and settle accounts with "those of the Colony with whom they had regular commercial transactions," Moloney does not

[1] Referring to the massive correspondence received by the Colonial Office as the British Empire expanded after the 1840s, Martin Wiener writes: "The sheer volume of paper coming in grew alarmingly, and the Office became more and more a reactive body, simply trying to respond to this mountain of paper" (Martin Wiener, *An Empire on Trial: Race, Murder, and Justice under British Rule, 1870–1935*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 16).



MAP 1.1 Map of the location of the Santa Cruz Maya enclosed with Governor Moloney's dispatch.
Source. Based on original in Alfred Moloney to Baron Knutsford, January 20, 1892, CO 123/198.

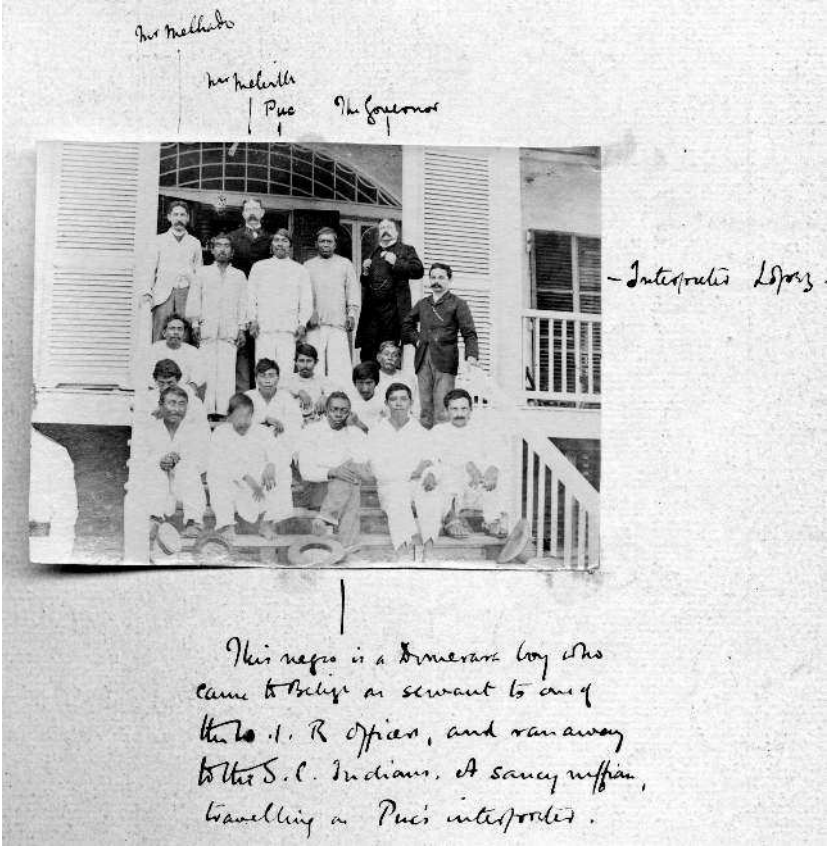


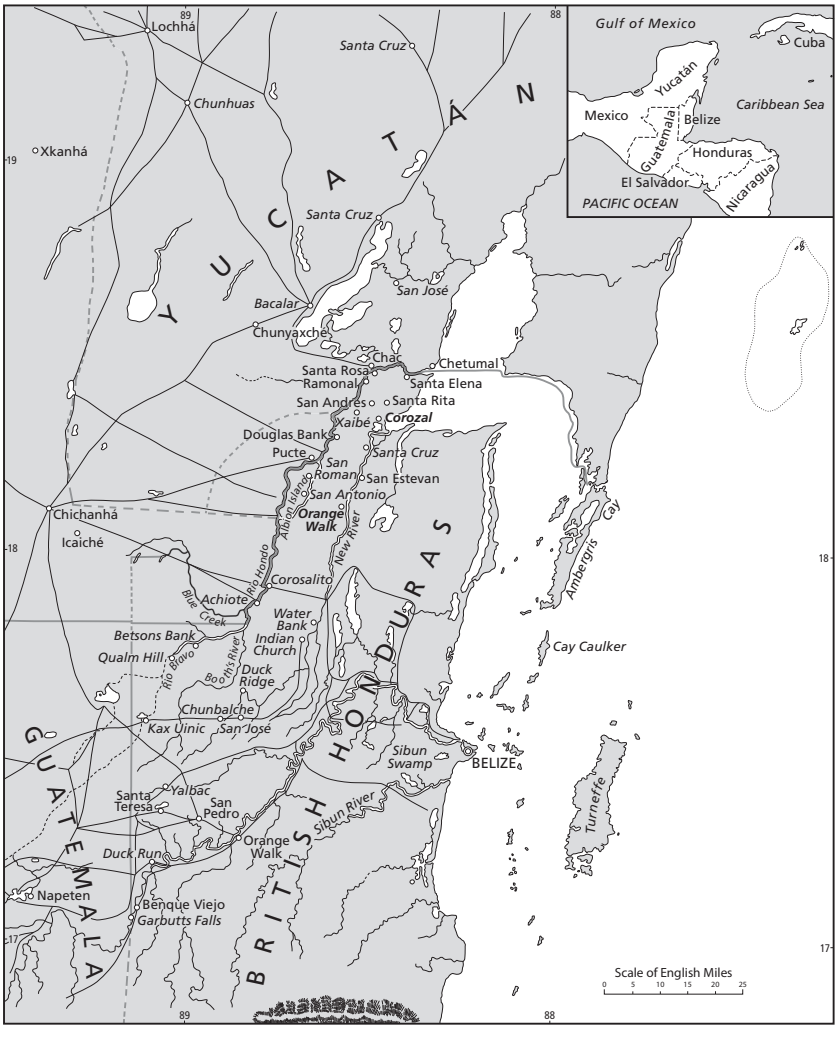
FIGURE 1.1 Annotated photograph of the meeting between Santa Cruz leaders and Governor Moloney, January 8, 1892, included in Moloney's dispatch. *Source*. Alfred Moloney to Baron Knutsford, January 20, 1892, CO 123/198. Courtesy of the National Archives, Kew.

fail to note the military nature of the entourage: "Puc . . . was accompanied by . . . about forty attendants who although not in the least presenting any such appearance either in bearing, dress or equipment were notwithstanding styled soldiers." Moloney's detailed description of the route followed by the Maya contingent to arrive in Belize and his inclusion of a map showing the Santa Cruz positions along the northern border of Belize were surely not meant as simply informative – after all, what difference would it make for the Colonial Office to know how many miles Puc had traveled or the direction in which he had crossed a lagoon? Neither

does Moloney's description of Puc, with his sandal tied together by rope and soiled white trousers, appear to serve any purpose. On the margin of the photograph of the attendees, Moloney points to himself, Carlos Melhado of Cramer and Co., Colonial Secretary Mr. Melville, an interpreter Lopez and a black "demerara boy" who we are told "came to Belize as a servant to one of the W. I. R. [West India Regiment] officers and ran away to the S. C. [Santa Cruz] Indians. A saucy ruffian, travelling as Puc's interpreter." What purpose did this annotated photograph serve? In fact, it was precisely through the acts of capturing, categorizing and fixing subjects in time and place – expressed in maps, photographs and, even, notes on the margin – that colonial officials attempted to cognize, contain and control the northern frontier of Belize. At the same time, Moloney's gift to Puc at the end of the meeting – a musical box, a cornet, two clarinets and a violin – underlines both imperial arrogance and the failure of the British administrator to truly comprehend his Maya counterpart.[2]

How – asks this book – does Empire operate in frontiers and borderlands during times of conflict? It examines how British officials during the second half of the nineteenth century attempted to understand and impose order on northern Belize, an area that was both a frontier of colonial power and the locus of a disputed border with Mexico (see Map I.2). Their efforts were complicated by the local ramifications of the Caste War (1847–1901), a long-lasting, violent struggle between segments of the indigenous Maya in southeast Mexico and the Mexican state. During the first decade of the war, thousands of refugees – both Maya and Spanish-descended (or Hispanic) – moved into the northern part of the colony, increasing its population tenfold; and, at various points in the conflict, war-related rivalries between *pacífico* Icaiche Maya and the rebel Santa Cruz Maya over land in the border zone, access to arms and ammunition from colonial merchants, and support from the British government fanned social frictions throughout the area. By 1853, the center of rebel activity in Yucatán shifted to the area of Chan Santa Cruz where a cult of the Speaking Cross, which spoke to the Maya and promised vengeance against the Mexican government, galvanized rebels into action. The Maya to the south and west of Santa Cruz formed an alliance with the Mexican authorities against the rebel Santa Cruz. One of these *pacífico* groups known as the Chichanhá became a target of hostile Santa Cruz Maya and retreated deeper and deeper south toward the British territory

[2] Alfred Moloney to Baron Knutsford, January 20, 1892, Colonial Office records at the National Archives, Kew (hereafter, CO) 123/198.



MAP 1.2 Map of the Belize-Yucatán border and surrounding area in the nineteenth century.
Source. Based partly on "British Honduras (now Belize); Guatemala; Mexico. Map of the area between 16°50′ and 19°25′N and between 87°20′ and 89°30′ W, showing areas in the Yucatán occupied by different native American nations. Scale: 1 inch to about 13 miles. Compiled, on the basis of an earlier map, by G[ordon] Allen, Surveyor General, 30 November [18]86. Originally enclosure number 3 in Governor R. T. Goldsworthy's despatch, 29 November 1886." MFQ 1/196/3, The National Archives, Kew.

of Belize. A branch of the Chichanhá under the leadership of Luciano Dzuc settled at Icaiche near the Belize border. Belize remained caught in the crossfire between the Icaiche and the Santa Cruz Maya. More generally, the convoluted movements of people and goods, the intensification of race and ethnic mixing, and persistent disputes about the boundary with Mexico gave the frontier a fluidity and nebulousness that constantly challenged easy comprehension and effective control.

Following independence from Spain, Mexico oscillated between liberals and conservatives – later represented by federalist and centralist political parties, respectively. In Yucatán, a further rift between the cities of Mérida and Campeche meant that the postindependence political scene was one of constant turmoil. According to Lean Sweeney, following the separation of Campeche a new kind of politics toward the frontier emerged that was predicated on strong links between state politics and banditry.[3] Indeed, the fortunes of Campeche and the *pacífico* Icaiche were often interlinked.[4] A federalist revolt in 1840 led by a military officer named Santiago Iman proved to be one of the primary triggers of the Caste War. Iman galvanized poor Mayas, arming them and promising them the abolition of the hated *obvenciones* or church taxes. Iman's revolt created what Rugeley terms a "welter of expectations" among the Maya and contributed to the spiraling of local politics into the outbreak of the Caste War in 1847.[5] The feud between Campeche and Mérida, as well as the continuing conflict between centralists and federalists, meant that a united front against eastern Maya rebels was often impossible. Conversely, anxiety over the Caste War often justified aggression between the two factious cities.

An added complication was the dynamics of broader Anglo-Mexican relations in this period. In October 1861, Britain, along with France and Spain, signed the Convention of London with the aim of blockading Mexico to pressure the Juárez government to repay its international debt, which the Mexican president had suspended in July 1861. The British and the Spanish were also incensed over the maltreatment of their citizens in Mexico. Within Mexico, the raging civil war between 1858 and 1861 also prompted conservatives to support the installation of a monarch in Mexico as a means of providing stability. Yet France's aim in

[3] Lean Sweeney, *La supervivencia de los bandidos: Los mayas icaichés y la política fronteriza del sureste de la peninsula de Yucatán, 1847–1904* (Mérida: UNAM, 2006), 84, 91.
[4] Ibid., 93.
[5] Terry Rugeley, *Maya Wars: Ethnographic Accounts from Nineteenth-Century Yucatán* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 10.

blockading Mexico went beyond simply the question of debt repayment. Rather, as Edward Shawcross writes, "the ambitions of the French emperor, Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, extended far beyond mere debt collection. He planned regime change … in order to establish a state closely tied to French interests, but not ruled from Paris."[6] Britain and Spain, realizing the extent of France's ambitions in Mexico, withdrew from the expedition in 1862. While popular sentiment in Britain supported the new monarchy in Mexico, the new government's policies to end the Caste War ultimately created tensions with the British government. The imperial commissar Salazar Ilarregui, in his aggressive bid to end British merchants' supply of arms and ammunitions to the rebel Maya, issued a decree claiming British Honduras as part of Mexican territory. The British minister in Mexico, P. Campbell Scarlett, attempted to negotiate a treaty with Mexico to settle the boundary dispute; and, in October 1866, both countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce that held out the promise of considering the problem of British Honduras.[7] However, with the withdrawal of Scarlett from Mexico following the collapse of the Second Empire, the Treaty – which had never been ratified – died a quick death. The death of Maximilian and the restoration of a republic in Mexico created a new spate of Anglo-Mexican tensions. President Benito Juárez canceled all treaties and conventions between Mexico and those countries that had participated in the first stages of intervention in 1861 (i.e. Britain, France and Spain). Although the British Foreign Office was willing to renew relations with Mexico, it stipulated that Mexico should take the initiative.[8] Yet, as Alfred Tischendorf points out, "when Porfirio Díaz became President of Mexico in April, 1877, British Mexican relations stood exactly where they had at the beginning of the decade."[9] The Mexican economy under the Díaz regime became more and more dependent on foreign investment and it was in this backdrop that diplomatic relations between the two countries began to thaw. By 1884, diplomacy between Britain and Mexico was restored – a development that certainly presaged the end of British involvement in the peninsula's Caste War.

[6] Edward Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820–1867: Equilibrium in the New World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.
[7] Narda Dobson, *A History of Belize* (London: Longman Caribbean, 1973), 220.
[8] Alfred Tischendorf, *Britain and Mexico in the Age of Porfirio Díaz* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 8.
[9] Ibid.

Focusing on the Caste War period, *Empire on Edge* explores how British colonial officials, keenly attentive to the material interests at stake, attempted, in the context of war, to impose coherence at the frontiers of the empire by deploying a wide variety of tools – from legal prescriptions, policing measures and military interventions to specific ways of using language, categorization, mapping, censuses, surveys and even stamps. It also illuminates how people subjected to these efforts, especially the Hispanics and the various Maya groups, sought to thwart them by building alliances across seemingly firm lines of racial and ethnic division. In the process, this book engages several different bodies of literature: frontiers and borderlands; Belizean and Latin American Studies; and the Caste War historiography.[10]

[10] At a fundamental level, this book contributes to the scholarship on Belize, a markedly understudied region in Central America. While most of the notable works in Belizean history have been surveys of Belizean history over long chronological periods – such as O. Nigel Bolland's *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize from Conquest to Crown Colony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Narda Dobson's *A History of Belize* and Victor and Barbara Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Belize: From the 17th Century to Post-Independence* (Benque Viejo del Carmen: Cubola, 2012) – the only extant work that directly examines the effect of the Caste War on Belize is Angel Cal's unpublished master's thesis ("Anglo-Maya Contact in Northern Belize: A Study of British Policy Toward the Maya During the Caste War of Yucatán, 1847–1872," University of Calgary, 1983). However, even there Cal examines only the period between 1847 and 1872, and his account does not explore the impact of the Hispanic refugees in Belize. While certain works such as Wayne Clegern's *British Honduras: Colonial Dead End, 1859–1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967) and R. A. Humphreys's *The Diplomatic History of British Honduras, 1638–1901* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981) help us understand the diplomatic and geopolitical relations of Belize and its neighboring areas, there is a need to examine the actions of colonial governments in the localities. One work that comes close to doing this is P. D. Ashdown's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, which examines colonial policies and particularly the internal dissonances in colonial rule in Belize in the period after the Caste War ("Race, Class and the Unofficial Majority in British Honduras, 1890–1949," University of Sussex, 1979). *Empire on Edge* also contributes to Caste War historiography by showing how the Caste War spilled out of Mexico and into Belize. Several excellent works have been published in the last few decades that examine the Caste War as it played out in Mexico, including Nelson Reed's classic account, *The Caste War of Yucatán* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, rev. ed.); Terry Rugeley's *Yucatán's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) and *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatán, 1800–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Don Dumond's *The Machete and the Cross: Campesino Rebellion in Yucatan* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) and Marie Lapointe's *Los Mayas rebeldes de Yucatán* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1983) have shed critical light on the involvement of Belize in the Caste War. Lean Sweeney's *La supervivencia de los bandidos* explores the effect of the complex regional politics within Yucatán on competing Maya groups and sheds some light on their consequences for Belize. *Empire on Edge* adds to this conversation by examining the colonial attempt to impose order on northern Belize during

At the end of the nineteenth century, Belize, with a population of just 30,000, represented less than 0.01 percent of the British Empire; and yet the dispatches and correspondences of colonial administrators in Belize reveal a compelling story of Empire on edge – both spatially and metaphorically, as an expression of imperial anxieties accompanying the project of colonialism in the margins. Along the way, the book raises important questions about the dissonance between colonial and imperial projects, the nature of frontiers and borderlands and the local effects of disputes between bordering countries.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF GOVERNANCE IN BELIZE

The necessary protagonists of this book's story are colonial officials and representatives of the British Crown in Belize. Their power and dominance, however, were not absolute but rather contested at various points in the nineteenth century. One of the foundation myths of Belize is that the British settlement in the Bay of Honduras began with a motley group of pirates and buccaneers who preyed on Spanish galleon ships and vessels transporting logwood to Europe. As logwood, which was used for making dyes that were in high demand in textile industries, became a lucrative

the Caste War period. At the same time, by engaging with questions of migration, trade and identity, *Empire on Edge* seeks to enlarge the scope of Caste War studies beyond the prevalent narrative, which gives primacy to war and violence. Apart from Caste War Studies, the book also engages with the lively historiographical and theoretical debates on the question of frontiers and borderlands (see Chapter 1 for discussion of this historiographical issue). Finally, this book argues for a deeper and more sustained examination of the intersection between British imperial history and Latin American history. For the nineteenth century, Robert Aguirre's *Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) is one of the few serious treatments of this historiographical issue but mostly concerns material culture. There is a historiographical tendency in Latin American Studies to exclude Belize from treatments of Latin America. This can be noted in many important survey works on Latin American history, including Victor Bulmer-Thomas's *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes's *Independence to the Present: Volume 2: A History of Latin America* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013); Thomas Holloway's *A Companion to Latin American History* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); and even George Reid Andrews's otherwise admirable work *Afro-Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). O. Nigel Bolland can be credited as the first historian of Belize who attempted to address this omission in his 1986 work *Belize: A New Nation in Central America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986). By emphasizing the transnational nature of the Caste War that connected Mexico and Belize in the nineteenth century, *Empire on Edge* attempts to fill this lacuna in Latin American Studies.

commodity and the Treaty of Madrid of 1667 suppressed piracy, this motley crew decided to settle in the Bay of Honduras in what is now the region of Belize.[11] The first settlers or "Baymen" felled and hauled the trees themselves and, indeed, it is not until 1724 that slavery became clearly intertwined with logwood extraction.[12] From the very beginning, the region remained a source of tension between Spain and Britain, with the Spanish asserting their sovereignty over the Bay of Honduras and only conceding the right of the English to cut logwood in 1763 by which time the logwood trade had already declined in profitability.[13] By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the growth of the English luxury furniture industry proved propitious and mahogany became an important export commodity for the settlement. Indeed, by 1789 more than six million feet of mahogany was being exported from the Bay of Honduras.[14] The extraction of mahogany operated in ways that required more manpower than logwood; and we therefore see a concurrent increase in the number of slaves in the settlement, mostly imported from other British Caribbean colonies such as Jamaica. In 1786, the London Convention extended the area of British timber extraction from the Hondo River in the north to the Sibun in the south. In return, the British were to evacuate from its other settlements in the area such as the Mosquito Coast. This led to a social transformation of the Bay of Honduras settlement, with 537 white and free "coloured" along with 1677 slaves entering the colony.[15] All but a few of these newcomers became assimilated into the settlement at the lowest rungs and, by the late 1700s, the British settlement had a social structure that was dominated by a small wealthy white elite ruling over

[11] The early history of Belize is not without controversies. According to Bulmer-Thomas, there was no permanent settlement in the Bay of Honduras before 1642. After 1642, there was limited scope for privateering since Jamaica was a more attractive location for such activities. Bulmer-Thomas argues that, as privateers turned to piracy after 1670, Belize may have been more tempting but this phase too lasted a short period that ended with the turn toward logwood extraction (Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Belize*, 37–38). According to Matthew Restall, "Before the eighteenth century, the place later called Belize did not yet exist. That is, I argue, buccaneers or pirates did not found a permanent settlement there in the seventeenth century; Peter Wallace is pure invention" (Restall, "Creating 'Belize': The Mapping and Naming History of a Liminal Locale." *Terra Incognitae* 51, no. 1, 2019: 5–35). Restall also addresses the origin myths of Belize in his upcoming monograph on early Belize.

[12] Bolland, *The Formation*, 49.

[13] O. Nigel Bolland, *Colonialism and Resistance in Belize: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Benque Viejo del Carmen: Cubola, 2009), 21.

[14] Ibid. [15] Ibid., 31.