

# ENGLISH IMPERIAL ASPIRATIONS IN THE YUCATAN AND CENTRAL AMERICA, 1584-1800\*

## ASPIRACIONES IMPERIALES INGLESAS EN YUCATÁN Y CENTROAMÉRICA, 1584-1800

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Fecha de recepción: 22 de febrero de 2021 • Fecha de aprobación: 22 de noviembre de 2021.

**Resumen:** Desde las últimas décadas del siglo xvi hasta el final del siglo xviii algunos ingleses —comerciantes, navegantes, aventureros, académicos, cortesanos, militares, oficiales del gobierno y miembros del Parlamento— consideraron que las tierras continentales de Yucatán y Centroamérica tenían una ubicación estratégica para competir con España. Además, consideraban que estaban llenas de riquezas y habitadas por grupos indígenas con hostilidades entre ellos y España, y por lo tanto habitadas por posibles aliados de Inglaterra. Por esto, les parecía que sería posible y fácil ocupar la región y adquirir control de las minas, los recursos y hasta de las ciudades más prósperas de la América española. De esta manera, Inglaterra podría consolidar su imperio estableciendo una base para avanzar en su lucha contra España. En este artículo se discuten los argumentos y los planes militares formulados por ingleses con aspiraciones de dominar Yucatán y Centroamérica, así como sus intentos y esfuerzos para convencer a otros ingleses y al gobierno en Londres de brindarles su apoyo. En este documento también se analizan los obstáculos que enfrentaron y los resultados obtenidos, y se ponderan las circunstancias que permitieron que algunos planes se llevaran a cabo.

**Palabras clave:** imperialismo inglés; planes militares; Yucatán; Centroamérica; rivalidades anglo-españolas.

**Abstract:** From the last quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some Englishmen (such as merchants, sailors, adventurers, scholars, courtiers, military men, government officers and members of parliament) regarded the mainland of Yucatan and

\* This work was supported by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM) under the Project PAPIIT-IA300417.

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Central America as strategically located to compete against Spain. They also considered it to be full of richness and inhabited by indigenous groups who were hostile towards Spain so they could be potential allies of England. Due to this, they considered it was possible, and not difficult, to occupy the region and to control the mines, the resources and wealthy cities of Spanish America. In this way, England could consolidate its empire by establishing a stronghold to advance the fight against Spain. In this paper the arguments and military strategies formulated by Englishmen who aspired to dominate Yucatan and Central America as well as their attempts to persuade some of their countrymen and the government of London to back them are analysed. This article also deals with the obstacles they faced, the outcomes achieved and the circumstances that allowed some of their plans to be implemented.

**Keywords:** English imperialism; military strategies; Yucatan; Central America; Anglo-Spanish rivalries.

**Résumé :** Du dernier quart du xvi<sup>e</sup> siècle à la fin du xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle, certains Anglais — marchands, marins, aventuriers, intellectuels, courtisans, militaires, fonctionnaires et députés — considéraient le Yucatan et l'Amérique centrale continentale stratégiquement situées pour rivaliser avec l'Espagne. Ils la considéraient également comme pleine de richesses et habitée par des groupes indigènes hostiles à l'Espagne qui pouvaient être des alliés potentiels de l'Angleterre. Par conséquent, ils ont déduit qu'il était possible, et pas difficile, d'occuper la région et de contrôler les mines, les ressources et les villes riches de l'Amérique espagnole. De cette façon, l'Angleterre pourrait consolider son empire en tabissant un bastion pour avancer contre l'Espagne. Cet article traite des arguments et des plans militaires formulés par les Anglais ayant des aspirations impériales au Yucatan et en Amérique centrale, ainsi que des tentatives qu'ils ont faites pour persuader leurs compatriotes et le gouvernement de Londres de les soutenir. Il analyse les obstacles auxquels ils ont été confrontés et les résultats obtenus, en réfléchissant aux circonstances qui ont permis la mise en œuvre de certains de leurs plans.

**Mots-clés :** impérialisme anglais ; Yucatan ; Amérique centrale ; rivalités anglo-espagnoles ; plans militaires.

England's longing for becoming an empire and the plans to achieve it arose in the last quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century due to the growing power and wealth that Spain obtained from its colonies in the Americas. As this aspiration spread further and further, exploration ventures, colonial discourses, various publications, policies and actions took place that in due course emerged the idea of England as an overseas empire that could challenge and supplant Spain in this region.<sup>1</sup> Some English people sailed westward looking for a north-western passage, lands, treasures, merchandises and new markets while others invested their efforts in sacking Spanish ports and ships (Andrews 1984, 56, 66-67; De Ita 2000, 16-17; Hanna 2015, 39). Some of them went further, promoting the settlement of colonies in places not yet possessed by the Spaniards and even proposing plans and actions to attack and take control of lands that were considered by Spain to be part of its American Empire.

It was difficult for Spain to keep control of the Caribbean region; colonial occupation was scattered, large sections of the coast were uninhabited, the white population was concentrated in a few towns that were quite isolated from the main cities of Mexico and Peru, a big part of the indigenous population had fled to the forest, military defences were feeble and there were neither efficient nor defensive administrative policies (Reichert 2016, 114; 2017, 20-21). Therefore, the efforts of the English explorers and promoters of American ventures progressively consolidated English presence in the continent and the Caribbean was one of the fronts where Spain and England struggled against each other (Bosch 2009, 33-37).

Although some scholars have considered the whole region of Yucatan and Central America as part of what is called geographically the circum-Caribbean (Bosch 2009; Von Grafenstein, Muñoz Mata & Nelken 2006), general historiography, both Anglophone and Ibero-American, has tended to equate the Caribbean with the islands or to focus its attention on shores and ports (Higman 2011; Palmié & Scarano 2011). Most studies dealing with the rise of the British Empire or the threats that the Spanish Empire faced, which address the Caribbean region, have regarded continental shores as the targets of buccaneers, illegal traders and small groups of settlers that attempted to extract natural resources (Beckles 2011; Childs 2012; De Ita 2000; Gibson 2014; Hanna 2015; Mancall 2007; McFarlane 1994). However, little attention has been given to the ambitions of some Englishmen who invested imagination and energy in getting control of inland territories.

Aiming to contribute to a better understanding of Anglo-Spanish interactions in the Caribbean, the history of the region and the rise of the British Empire, in this article it is developed the thesis that, from the last quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some Englishmen (merchants, sailors, adventurers, scholars, courtiers, military men, government officers and members of parliament) considered the region of Yucatan and Central America as extremely valuable. They coveted its richness and precious resources and wanted to use wisely its strategic location and what they perceived as bitter hostility between the indigenous inhabitants and the Spanish settlers. They deemed that by taking control of Yucatan and Central America, England could supersede Spain's power by England's power. However, to be able to launch their plans these Englishmen needed to convince the government in London to sponsor an invasion of the region. Their efforts, the strategies, plans and the several activities made by them to achieve that goal are studied in this paper.

### First Efforts to Convince the Crown

Although Queen Elizabeth issued letters patent and supported English individuals who sought to establish settlements in America or plundered Spanish ships and coastal towns, she was unwilling to invest public treasure on invading the Caribbean and fighting against Spain. Nevertheless, English promoters of colonisation did not spare efforts to increase royal involvement in their plans to expand English presence in the new continent.

In 1584, Richard Hakluyt, geographer and avid collector of travel accounts, presented the queen the text *Discourse on Western Planting*, written at the request of the adventurer and courtier Walter Raleigh. Hakluyt's *Discourse* portrayed the Spanish monarch as the main enemy of England and Protestantism (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 13, 47, 71). Hakluyt was very clear in claiming that the revenues extracted from the New World were the main sustenance of Spanish power and a constant threat to England (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 50). In 1577, the navigator Humphrey Gilbert, Raleigh's half-brother and Hakluyt's friend, had advised Queen Elizabeth about the best way to vex Spain in «A Discourse How Her Majesty May Annoy the King of Spain» (Gilbert [1940] 2010). According to his work there was no better way to assault Spain than to settle in the West Indies and to launch attacks against Spanish fleets (Gilbert [1940] 2010). Hakluyt's *Discourse* presented a wider perspective and claimed that English colonies in the Americas

would benefit England in many ways: this fact will help to spread the «gospel of Christ,» to create jobs for the unemployed, to raise English minds to high enterprises, to yield important commodities and to help to subvert Spanish rule throughout the New World (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 7, 19, 36, 42, 55, 59, 71, 87).

Although Hakluyt alleged that England's main goal should be the establishment of a colony in the area of Virginia, he also proposed to make some efforts to settle on the rest of the continent «in diverse fit places» (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 95) including the Caribbean. He argued that the English could take the principal Spanish cities of the region, which, according to him, were not as strong and protected as «the popish clergy and other authors» claimed (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 60, 69). The *Discourse* included a section about «[...] rich towns [...] on the north side from the equinoctial of the mainland of America under the King of Spain» (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 64).

Hakluyt indicated that the Gulf of Honduras was full of gold and provisions, very well located and unprotected by the Spanish. He added that «within a mile there are plenty of Indians, at war with the Spaniards who most likely will be willing to help the English» (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 66). Hakluyt did not mention Yucatan in that section, but used an extract from Francisco Lopez de Gómara to claim that the English should avoid at any cost acting as Juan de Grijalva did; instead of conquering and colonising «the rich and good country of Iucaton [*sic*],» went back to Cuba and allowed Hernán Cortés to be the one who reaped the glory. He blatantly argued that if England missed its opportunities to establish in the West Indies, «other nations, might secretly fortify and settle themselves before us» (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 97). That would not only ruin England's imperial aspirations, but also it would mean that the English would never be able to have full knowledge of the language, manners and customs of the people of those regions and that they would never «be able thoroughly to know the riches and commodities [...] with many other secretes whereof as yet we have but a small taste [*sic*]» (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 96-97). He suggested that once the English settled in the Americas, both in the north of the continent and in the Caribbean, they could start a general revolt to end Spanish dominion (Hakluyt [1584] 1877, 72).

Hakluyt's *Discourse* did not help to get the support of the queen as he and Raleigh expected, and he did not convince her that his plan could be successful. She had enough on her plate already, and although her animosity towards Spain guided many of her decisions, plundering and piracy seemed more than enough for her, even after 1585, when the Anglo-Spanish War started. The *Discourse* was

intended to be a secret document and was never published (Mancall 2007, 264, 306). Still, it circulated among those close to Hakluyt and the idea of Yucatan and Central America as key entrance points to Spanish America reverberated in other documents.

## Socialising the Idea and Convincing the Wider Public

Richard Hakluyt and Walter Raleigh did not give up about their idea that it was advantageous to take control of towns in the continental area of the Caribbean. Both, Raleigh and Hakluyt published books: Raleigh about his own travels and Hakluyt about travels made by others. In the third volume of his *Principal Navigations*, published in 1598-1600, Hakluyt proudly claimed to be publishing the secrets previously held by Spain about the West Indies. He asserted that such information was useful «as may anyway avail us or annoy them.» Although he did not call openly for an invasion of the territories possessed by the Spanish Empire, he portrayed those Englishmen that had travelled through New Spain and had gathered key information peacefully as well as those that had taken ships and sacked Spanish towns and cities as heroic and patriotic figures (Hakluyt 1598-1600, 447-95).

Hakluyt's point of view was conveyed through the argument that the Spaniards were voracious and greedy and had committed unspeakable cruelties against the natives, and therefore their right to the Americas, if it had ever existed, could be ignored (Hakluyt 1598-1600, 447, 468). According to this, the English had *carte blanche* to act in the Americas.

Raleigh, in his *Discovery of Guiana*, published in 1596, was bolder regarding the strategies of England to attack Spain in the Americas. He criticised English attacks on vessels and coastal towns as inadequate, claiming that taking two or three ports did not hurt the king of Spain as much as the English supposed, and that the richness of Peru or New Spain were not lying on the beach waiting to be picked up. England should attempt to «invade the best part» of the West Indies instead of wasting energy on adventures that were of no real benefit and that until then had hardly damaged the true source of Spanish power and greatness (Raleigh 1596, v, vi). For him, it was clear that the English should penetrate into the mainland because it was within the country that Spanish colonies were rich.

Raleigh suggested that once the English had the control of continental lands in Yucatan and Central America, they could advance to other Spanish territories

on the continent. In the preface of his book, he made reference to a document he had previously written specifically regarding the West Indies; in that paper he allegedly included a detailed description of the region. He claimed to have examined in that document «Nicaragua, Iucata [*sic*], Nueva Espanna [*sic*] and the islands, as those of the inland, and by what means they may be best invaded.» That text was never published and unfortunately the manuscript cannot be found. It is possible that in that missing treatise Raleigh used the same tone as in his *Discouery of Guiana*, prompting his countrymen to pursue «a better Indies for Her Majesty than the King of Spain had any» (Raleigh 1596, vii).

Raleigh never gave up his quest nor abandoned his plans, not even when the new king of England, James I, negotiated a peace treaty with Spain in 1603. That year, as the new king promised to restrain English efforts to settle in the West Indies, an anonymous text, probably by Raleigh or someone close to his circle of influence, circulated in London: «A Discourse against the Peace with Spain». It urged the English king to renovate the country's efforts to attack Spain and «overthrow the King of Spain and take his Indies from him» (Anonymous 1603).

In spite of this kind of publications, King James maintained his friendly policy towards Spain and did not support any incursion into lands possessed by Spain. However, English private invasion efforts prevailed and various English settlements in the Americas materialised during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the Caribbean, the English settled in several islands: St. Christopher (1624), Barbados (1627), Nevis (1628), Montserrat (1632), Antigua (1632) and Providence (1630), which was the closest territory to Spanish properties in the continent (Andrews 1984, 302). Also, during this time, some Englishmen started to sporadically visit the coasts of the Yucatan Peninsula in order to cut logwood, which was a dying wood highly appreciated in Europe. Official records show that during these years in England there were intentions of «fitting out a fleet to attack the Spanish settlements» and to penetrate the continent (Coke 1860). Indeed, the document «Instructions for Captain Ross» states that the English nation could make good use of any Spanish pilot taken prisoner, if he were «well acquainted with Nicaragua, Honduras, Tierra Firme or other parts of main» (The Company of Providence Island 1860, 225). Supporters of English colonisation from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean feared that English colonies in the Americas were doomed to perish without a much more aggressive policy against Spain. But neither King James I nor his son King Charles I were eager to support schemes that could affect Anglo-Spanish relations.

## Providence Island Company and the Involvement of the English Parliament

Joint-stock companies proved effective in collecting and administering resources to support overseas ventures. In 1620, a group of Protestants, who shared the idea that England should establish a stronghold in the West Indies in order to expand to the mainland in Central America, united to form their own company. In 1629, the Providence Island Company was established. Its purpose was to colonise an uninhabited island in the Western Caribbean off the Nicaraguan coast, previously called Santa Catalina, and renamed «Providence» by the English. That same year, King Charles I chose to rule without Parliament and, for the next eleven years, the members of the Company became a strong opposition force to the crown. When the Parliament reconvened in 1640, they formed a very important group within the House (Kupperman 1993, 7). In one of his speeches to the Parliament in 1640, John Pym, one of the founding members, pointed out the weakness of the Spanish Empire in the West Indies and the advantages, such as treasure and countering Spanish wars and Catholic religion, which England could obtain by taking hold and settling in those «fruitful countries:»

There are now in those parts [...] able persons of this Nation, many of them well armed, and their bodies seasoned to that Climate, which with a very small charge might be set down in some advantageous parts of these pleasant, rich and fruitful countries and easily make his Majesty Master of all that treasure, which not only foments the War, but is the great support of Popery («A speech delivered in Parliament», Pym quoted by Kupperman 1993, 321).

The Providence Island Company urged their fellowmen, in England and New England, to move to the island of Providence, especially as the threats of attacks by the Spaniards became plausible. Having a big and well-populated settlement was a detriment to Spain and gave greater chances of victory in case of an attack. Plans could not be abandoned if they wanted to achieve what Captain John Humphrey (selected governor of the island in 1641) called the «second phase of their colonisation: that of the Central American mainland» (Kupperman 1993, 322-23).

In 1641, Spaniards started to rule the island and the settlers had to migrate. It was a complicated time in London and many members of the Providence Company were engaged in the dispute about the king's religious and fiscal policies; John Pym, Sir Thomas Barrington, Henry Darley, Sir Benjamin Rudyerd and Oliver St John were members of the Company and formed part of the Parliament that put an end to King Charles I's personal rule (Kupperman 2007). The

political environment in England demanded that interests in the West Indies had to be set down temporarily, but they were not neglected completely. In «the petition of the House of Commons, which accompanied the Remonstrance, of the State of the Kingdom» presented in 1641, one of the commoners' complaints was the king's decision to divert «the wars from the West Indies, which was the most facile and hopeful way for this kingdom to prevail against the Spaniard [sic]» (Rushworth 1721, 437).

Certainly, the fact that Providence Island was taken from English hands by Spain ignited the patriotic and religious spirit among some Englishmen. In 1641, the minister William Castell published *A Petition of W.C. Exhibited to the High Court of Parliament now Assembled, for the Propagating of the Gospel in America, and the West Indies and for the Settling of our Plantations There* «to the most high and honourable court of Parliament now assembled.» Castell, known for his anti-Spanish mind-set, collected the signatures of seventy English clergymen of varied persuasions as well as six Scottish pastors (Ransome 2004). The petition stressed the importance of supporting all colonies in the Americas and proposed an English invasion to Spanish inland territory. The petition stressed the importance of supporting all English colonies in the Americas and proposed an English invasion to Spanish inland territory. The legality of this action was based on the injustice of the papal bull that served Spain to claim the New World and on the mistreatment the Indians suffered at the hands of the Spaniards. Castell was convinced that the English could count on having God's blessing and the support of the indigenous people in America (Castell 1641, 8, 10-11, 13-14).

In 1642, the first English Civil War broke out between Parliamentarians and Royalists. Two years later, still in the midst of the conflict, the petition of Castell to the Parliament was reissued as the introduction to a book by the same William Castell entitled *A Short Discoverie of the Coasts and Continent of America from the Equinoctiall Northward and the Adjacent Isles*, which included two documents intimately linked to the Parliament and to the Providence Island Company and connected to the cause of England in the West Indies. The first was «An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons Assembled in Parliament» issued in 1642, in which Robert Earl of Warwick, founding member of the Providence Island Company, is appointed as «governor in chief and Lord Admiral of all those islands and other plantations, inhabited, planted, or belonging to any of his majesty the King of England's subjects, within the bounds, and upon the coasts of America» (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 9). The second paper was a speech by Sir Benjamin Rudyerd, English politician, Puritan, member of

the Parliament on various occasions and founding member of the Providence Company.

Rudyard's discourse had been presented to the House of Commons in 1626, but the editor and the promoters of the book found it relevant at the moment. Without mentioning the original date, they printed it as new material. Rudyard, together with other Puritans and parliamentarians, had a strong feeling of hostility towards Spain. In his speech, he proposed to form an «Association for the West Indies», whose main purpose would be «to cut him (the Spanish King) up at root, and seek to impeach, or to supplant him in the West Indies» (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 6-7). Rudyard claimed that the Spanish king was weaker than ever and that without the silver he obtained from the New World he could not maintain his empire, threaten his neighbours nor be «so troublesome to all Christendom» (Castell & Rudyers, 1644, 1: 7). He alleged that there was no other option for England but to expel the Spanish from their colonies in the Americas. Rudyard did not explain the strategy to follow, but he implied that the West Indies Association was to play a key role defending the English West Indies and attacking the Spanish in the Caribbean.

In the main part of his work, which consisted of two books, William Castell presented information about the different regions of the Americas, including Yucatan and Central America. He stated that Panama was almost abandoned and that the Gulf of Honduras was easily accessible, it did not have any fortress, it was convenient to dock, it was safe from storms and strong winds and it could be easily taken and then protected from the Spanish attempts to recover it (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 31, 36-38). Moreover, he added, Honduras was wealthy and had enough fertile land, grass, and seeds to maintain men and cattle and to produce a great variety of grains and excellent fruit (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 38).

In contrast, Castell's views of Yucatan were not as optimistic. For him, it was a long and wide peninsula, with an extreme and unhealthy climate, where no gold mines had been discovered, and surrounded by many scattering islands, rocks and sands which made it dangerous to sail on either side of it (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 41-42). Regardless of this negative view, Castell claimed that Yucatan was by no means worthless. He mentioned that there were many precious natural resources and that it was inhabited, like Guatemala and Chiapas, by large indigenous groups that would be very happy to get rid of the tyrannical Spanish yoke (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 41). Most important of all, Castell presented the New Spain as being on the edge of collapse and he informed that

«the Viceroy of Mexico and with him all Nova Hispania [*sic*] are revolted, and in open rebellion against the King of Spain» (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 1: 48). For him, the fragility of New Spain was a sign of Providence's will to strip the Spaniards of the lands they had unlawfully taken. The plan that Castell suggested was to enter through Honduras and from there to advance further to take the whole New Spain.

To sum up, the whole book, the petition, the *Short Discoverie* and Rudyerd's speech, called for a state-supported campaign against Spain and permanent settlements in the continent. There is no doubt that Castell supported the parliamentary cause and not the king, as he pleaded to Parliament for help. He hoped that its members would send a powerful and well-prepared navy to the West Indies to subjugate Spain and assure that England could get rid of the Spanish in America get rid of the Spanish in America (Castell & Rudyers 1644, 12: 1-12). Indeed, the Parliament was consolidating its control over the country and had allied with the Scottish Parliament against King Charles I. In 1648, with help of the New Model Army led by Oliver Cromwell, the monarchy was abolished.

Although Castell died in 1645 and Rudyerd was excluded from the Parliament for opposing the trial and execution of King Charles I, the new Republican and Puritan government that resulted from the first English Civil War soon proved to have similar ideas and ambitions to those portrayed in the *Short Discoverie*, as well as to those that the Providence Company had promoted.

## Oliver Cromwell and the West Indies

Parliament's victory in the Civil War resulted in the rise of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England. His policy was one of expanding the British Empire through sea power, trade and conquest. Cromwell was tempted to challenge Spanish power in the Caribbean by Thomas Gage, a former Dominican friar who had spent twelve years in Mexico and Guatemala, and who later converted to Protestantism, returned to England and published his memoirs.

In December 1654, Gage prepared a document for Cromwell called *Some Brief and True Observations Concerning the West Indies...* In this text, Gage explained that the Spanish strength was provided by the American gold and silver and that if the mines were taken away from the Spaniards, their empire would soon

fall and decay. Indeed, he contended convincingly that «for these many years» it had been common talk in New Spain «[...] from some predictions, or as they called them prophecies, that a strange people shall conquer them and take their riches from them» (Gage 1654, 59). He added that there was no other nation that «may better attempt such an expulsion of the Spaniards from those parts than the English» who have been often attacked and stripped of their possessions in the Caribbean (Gage 1654, 59). Gage used descriptions of Spanish cruelties very similar to those in the English version of *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* by Las Casas and in the anti-Spanish propaganda fostered by the Black Legend. He assured that the evils committed by the Spaniards against the indigenous peoples justified a war against them and claimed that the native inhabitants would not oppose the English because they «longed to see the light of the gospel.» To this he added that New Spain was so socially divided that «their present factions may be any other nation's advantage to conquer them again» (Gage 1654, 59, 60). Gage stated that the continent was very vast in land and only thinly peopled and that the Spaniards were lazy and did not expect any attack. They were unprotected as there were «not one gun or field-piece, or wall, castle, or any bulwark [defensive wall]» (Gage 1654, 59). He mentioned that even the bigger cities were vulnerable.

Gage provided Cromwell with a plan to follow which started by attacking La Hispaniola (today Santo Domingo) because it was easy to take, not fully inhabited and also because «it was the Spaniards' first plantation and therefore it would be to them a bad omen to begin to lose that which they first enjoyed.» From there the English should go to Cuba since the castle in Havana could be taken by attacking by sea and land. After, they would continue to Honduras because «there is in all the continent no place easier to land» (Gage 1654, 60). Once garrisoned in Honduras, the English would have to fortify the city, something that Gage assured the Spaniards never did. The path to follow then was towards Guatemala, crossing the mountains, which was acknowledged to be the most difficult part. However, if the English stopped by the indigenous towns to get provisions and gained the people's support, they could easily follow northward to «Chiapa [sic].» There, the Spanish force was very weak, according to Gage, with no more than 200 men. Once they took the country, the English would need immediate reinforcement and supplies from Virginia, New England and Barbados. At that point, they would be able to defend themselves from any attack coming from Mexico, and could then set out to dominate the South Sea and Panama. Later they could go to Veracruz and also take Yucatan and Campeche. He noted

here that «[...] five hundred men will do much upon this place. And all this will be easy [...] once footing is set upon the country of Guatemala» (Gage 1654, 60-61). The key was to take places immediately one after another, before the Spaniards were able to gather any forces and before any aid came from Spain. The plan had a magnificent end: «When neighbours and friends come to join us we can carry on to Mexico northward and to Peru southward» (Gage 1654, 61). With his arguments and credentials Gage convinced Cromwell and an optimistic fleet set sail towards the Caribbean. Nevertheless, the so-called «Western Design» did not develop as he expected. The English failed to take control of La Hispaniola and were unable to advance forward. Instead, they captured Jamaica; a consolation prize that at the beginning seemed too little, but as time passed served English imperial aspirations well.

## Jamaica and the Plans for Invading the Spanish Main

In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jamaica played an important role as a commercial base and as a stronghold of the English in the West Indies. Various plans to attack the Caribbean considered Jamaica a key place to the strategy and indeed, many of them were formulated in Jamaica, or at least supported by Jamaicans. However, metropolitan control was quite strong and Jamaican settlers were continually negotiating with London on various matters, including trade with Spanish colonies and ventures into the continent.

When the Stuart monarchy was restored in England in 1660, King Charles II adopted Jamaica as a «conquered country» and subjected it to the «King's prerogative» (Go 2010, 42). This meant that Jamaica had its own elective assembly but the crown appointed the colonial governor who, in turn, selected members of the colonial council that served as an advisory group, a colonial court of appeal, and a legislative upper house (Go 2010, 43). Thus, the Assembly of Jamaica was very active in trying to communicate directly with London.

Upon Restoration Sir Balthazar Gerbier was chosen by Jamaican settlers to act as their spokesman in London. He had been a courtier of King Charles I and long since a supporter of plantations in America. During the Protectorate (Cromwell's government), he lived in The Hague and engaged in the trade of American gold and silver, developing close ties with Jamaican traders. In 1660, when the monarchy was restored, he printed a pamphlet in Rotterdam titled «*A Summary Description Manifesting the Greater Profits Are to be Done in the [...]*

*Parts of the Coast of America and How Much the Public Good is Concerned Therein* [...]» He suggested that the best parts of the continent were the hottest ones, that is the Caribbean, and that the continental lands were much better than the islands:

So it is most certain that the firm Land on the coast of America [...] is to be preferred before the islands; for as that coast is not subject to Hurricanes / (as the islands are) it is most fruitful / and hath many convenient Divers for Plantations; and in several parts inhabitants (though very few in number) of very good nature. [...] And as the Lands on the main continent are more fruitful then the islands and wholesome / so are they of a large extent; and doe bear in certain parts costly woods for divers works / and dying [...] (Gerbier Donnelly 1880, 10)

In 1661 the court in London issued *A Proclamation for the Encouraging of Planters in His Majesties Island of Jamaica in the West Indies...* in which the new king assured that he was «fully satisfied» with being in possession of the island of Jamaica, as it was «a pleasant and most fertile soil, and situated commodiously for trade and commerce» for the great advantage of England «and of other kingdoms and dominions» (Charles II 1661). However, Sir Balthazar Gerbier thought that the king was not perceiving fully the potential of the island and he wrote a letter to the king regarding the aforementioned proclamation. In his letter, Gerbier argued that from Jamaica England could extend its dominions into the continent. He guaranteed that it was possible to «acquire great gain» in the Gulf of Mexico, Yucatan and other adjacent places and «promised that this would be of far more great consequence than the possessing of Lima and Potosi» (Gerbier 1880, 68-69). This argument, focusing on the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America as even more important than the mines of Mexico and Peru, was very likely supported by those Jamaicans, who traded legally and illegally with the Spanish Caribbean and who were profiting from, and supporting, the establishment of English settlements of logwood cutters in the Gulf of Honduras and elsewhere in the region. Certainly, the time for an invasion was good for England as the original site of Bacalar in Yucatan had recently been abandoned (in 1652) by Spaniards and the colonial government in Merida, the capital of Yucatan, was distracted by a Maya revolt in the southwest that had started in 1636 and lasted more than thirty years (Barabas 2002, 112-13). Unfortunately for Gerbier and his supporters, King Charles II was not convinced and Gerbier was unable to maintain his influence in the court and abandoned English and Jamaican politics.

However, plans to take hold of territories of the Spanish Main were not discarded in Jamaica. The governor, Sir Thomas Modyford, wrote to London in 1666 to convince authorities there that such an attempt would be successful «finding them [the Spanish] in all places very weak and very wealthy» (Modyford 1889a). Twelve years earlier in 1654, the same Modyford, as a prominent settler of the island of Barbados, had written to the colonial administration with a proposal to settle in continental lands, along the Orinoco River. Back then, he enumerated his arguments to prove that it was better to settle in continental lands rather than in the islands. Firstly, «[...] on the main you will meet with good towns, well peopled with a few Spaniards and many Indians, whom they keep in slavery, and who very probably will be faithful to milder masters.» Second, «you have Indians» as a labour force and «[...] commodities arising from the many settled plantations there.» Third, by possessing that region you can «[...] hinder the passage of the treasure from Peru and lay Peru fairly open to an invasion» and «you cut off his [*Spain's*] correspondence from Peru and all South America» (Modyford 1742).

In 1666, from a better political position in Jamaica, Modyford supported an invasion of Central America, which was in the middle of the Spanish dominions in America. It divided Peru from Mexico, it was convenient to be invaded by sea, but it was environed by impassable hills, rocks and mountains that made it very difficult but not impossible to be attacked by land (Modyford 1889a, March 1666). Modyford claimed that the English captains John Morris, Henry Morgan and Jackman visited the area of the river Tabasco, Río Lagartos, Honduras, Trujillo and Nicaragua, that is, from the Bay of Campeche to Central America passing through Yucatan, and he assured that the Indians had helped and guided them. Modyford maintained that their testimony proved that «Indians and negro slaves if well-handled will be very considerable» and that even «Creolians» would help the English as soon as they tasted freedom. The governor of Jamaica was convinced that «if anything is attempted against the Spanish Indies, the region of the Yucatan Peninsula and the Gulf of Honduras is the best place to enter and to lay a foundation for the conquest of the whole Spanish Main» (Modyford 1889a, March 1666).

Modyford was very enthusiastic, and although he was in charge in Jamaica, he was not supposed to act without approval from London. Thus, he wrote numerous letters to the King and the Privy Council hoping to get some provisions for an attack against the Spanish Main. He claimed that Jamaica and the settlers in Yucatan were in danger as «the English lying in the midst of the King of Spain's

dominions» were a perfect target for the Spaniards who «inhumanly treacherous and cruelly [...] use the English there that fall into their hands making them work like slaves» (Modyford 1889b). However, negotiations for a peace treaty between England and Spain were taking place in Europe and, although Modyford's dispatches were filled with promises, the king did not show any interest in his offer (McDonald 2015, 22). The licence Modyford granted Captain Morgan to attack Spanish vessels cost him the loss of not only all support from London, but also his political career; in order to promote friendly relations with the Spaniards, the English crown punished him by sending a new governor to Jamaica (Hanna 2015, 116). Modyford and Morgan were recalled to England and imprisoned temporarily in the Tower of London.

The Treaty of Madrid, signed in 1667, established peace in America between England and Spain. In a treaty signed in 1670, Spain acknowledged England's title to Jamaica and England made the compromise to suspend piracy (Humphreys 2010, 1; Toussaint Ribot 1993, 24). Nevertheless, the English in Jamaica feared that, despite the treaty, the Spaniards could attack the island and the English settlements of logwood cutters at any moment, thus, the idea that possessing the Spanish Main was necessary remained alive. Indeed, there is one document that displays that in 1671 the new governor of Jamaica, Sir Thomas Lynch, wrote to inform London about the situation of Jamaica. Lynch made it clear that the English in the Caribbean were in a vulnerable position and that something needed to be done: «Thus may your Lordships read Jamaica circled with enemy's countries, which though not sufficiently stored with people to hurt us, yet are good places to receive and cherish such forces as may come from Europe or Mexico to oppress us [...]» Although he did not propose openly any scheme of invasion, in his letter, addressed to his Majesty's commissioners, Lynch mentioned Yucatan and the Bay of Campeche as «great provinces, thinly inhabited, where our people go to cut logwood [...] with more Indians than Spaniards,» and Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Portobello as «rich, thinly inhabited, with many more Indians than Spaniards and with towns of Indians that deny subjection to Spain» (Lynch 1889).

In the following years, the Crown made efforts to exert more control over its colonies. Parliament passed laws that strengthened London's authority and a permanent committee of the king's Privy Council, called the Lords of Trade, was created to restrict the powers of legislative assemblies and to expand «in scope and specificity the royal instructions given to governors» (Go 2010, 43). Under close supervision from London, and in compliance with the Treaty of Madrid,

governor Lynch prohibited logwood cutting and made efforts to convince the baymen (English logwood cutters settled in Yucatan and in the Gulf of Honduras) to move from the continent to the plantations in Jamaica (Carlisle 1896; Charles II 1896; Lynch 1898). Even without open support from England and Jamaica, and despite various attacks launched by the Spaniards to expel them, the English logwood cutters did not give up and most of their settlements flourished. Only in Campeche they were permanently evicted by Spanish people in 1702.

The Caribbean was not always the highest royal priority. However, the English crown was reluctant to abandon this region, and having a stronghold in the continental area resulted attractive. Thus, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, attacks to English baymen of Honduras continued to be a source of conflict, not only locally but also at the core of the English and Spanish empires. England negotiated carefully that the treaties signed with Spain legitimated English presence in the West Indies. Although the settlers were evicted by the Spaniards on various occasions (1733, 1747 and 1755), the colony in the Gulf of Honduras managed to subsist, just as Jamaican aspirations to establish an English enclave in the mainland, through invasion, persisted.

### **Attacking versus Negotiating with Spain**

In 1701 the War of the Spanish Succession started. Great Britain and Holland declared war on France and Spain because they wanted to prevent the Bourbons from governing on both sides of the Pyrenees. Soon the Spaniards handed over the much coveted Asiento (the privilege to trade slaves to Spanish America) to the French Guinea Company, a move that threatened British colonies in the Caribbean. While there was consensus in England about the need to avoid the accession of a Bourbon to the Spanish throne, there were different opinions about the strategy to follow to protect the British American trade. In London most of the crown officers and parliamentarians agreed that it was more advantageous to win commercial privileges in America by negotiating rather than by conducting a campaign to seize Spanish ports or territories. However, some Englishmen supported plans for colonising, and invading if necessary, the American continent. For instance, in July 1711, the prominent Daniel Defoe wrote to Robert Harley, 1<sup>st</sup> earl of Oxford, proposing the establishment of colonies, not only to secure trade, but to possess territory and to extract raw materials. Defoe

considered Chile as the best territory to seize due to its distance to the core of the Spanish colonies. He was thinking of invading grounds located quite far from the Caribbean but his arguments were very similar to those who supported invasions of that area: available resources, good tractable natives, little or inexistent Spanish control, and large extensions of wasted land (Defoe 1711). In regard to the Caribbean, in 1710 there was a publication by an anonymous writer who thought that Great Britain should attack and take possession of Havana (Anonymous 1710).

When the war ended and peace negotiations were reached, Robert Harley, then acting as Lord Treasurer, proposed that the Asiento should be handed over to the British (Horsfall 1935). At the end, the Treaty of Utrecht conceded that advantage to Great Britain for thirty years. The government majority, which was Tory at the moment, was impatient for peace and satisfied but there were some in Jamaica and in London who thought the Asiento was not enough. They were convinced England deserved strategic American ports, land, and resources. They agreed that England should secure them for herself without concerning peace between England and Spain; England's natural enemy.

The Asiento brought problems soon, as both Great Britain and Spain complained about each other for not respecting the terms of the agreement. Spain claimed that the British were taking advantage of the licences and dispensations granted by trafficking and trading illegally, and the British argued that the Spaniards were not allowing them to trade as agreed and were hindering merchants and confiscating ships and goods unjustifiably. Indeed, British trade, both legal and illegal, flourished in the Americas at this time. The Caribbean became the heart of British American trade connected to the North and South of the continent, and to the Pacific. Anglo-Spanish disputes ended in broken diplomatic relations. In 1726 the English admiral Francis Hosier blockaded Portobelo and planned to take Panama and Darien, but Spanish troops forestalled his plans.

Parliament often acted in the interests of English business groups and other lobbies at home rather than in the interest of settlers and merchants in the colonies (Go 2010, 44). This time London sought to maintain peace in order to encourage trade (Black 2007, 137-38). However, merchants and politicians interested in logwood trade, and in expanding British control over the continent or simply weakening Spanish power, promoted information that supported their cause. News about the abuses of the Spanish coastguards started to appear in the *London Gazette* regularly, along with information about the logwood cutters and their settlements in the Gulf of Honduras.

Travel accounts about the area were published and sold in various editions. *A Journey Over Land, from the Gulf of Honduras to the Great South Sea* by the mariner John Cockburn, published in London in 1735, clearly shows that information about Yucatan and Central America was highly valued. The anonymous editor of the book claimed in the preface that the insights offered by the travel account were strategic since «nothing can more nearly concern us [...] than to be well acquainted with the West Indies in general, and particularly with the area described by Cockburn, which otherwise is concealed from the English by the Spaniards.» Thanks to Cockburn, he continued, the English knew exactly «how much the Spanish strength in America is divided by distance of place, how weak they almost everywhere are, how effeminate and unmanly they are grown, how completely they have exhausted their immense tracks of native inhabitants, and how cruelly they tyrannize over the poor spiritless remainder of the unhappy Indians.» He was certain that the information provided could damage the Spaniards more than they could have ever imagined by informing and shaping a possible «material disturbance to Mexico and Peru from without.» Cockburn's account was published at a time when England and Spain were at peace under the terms of the Treaty of Seville. The preface recognised that the friendship between Spain and England could be short and assured that the knowledge provided by John Cockburn «might come to be very useful in cases of rupture» (Cockburn 1734, IV-VII).

Indeed, peace was difficult to maintain, and although some in London, such as Sir Robert Walpole, were reluctant to go to war, very soon the English and the Spanish were fighting the so-called Asiento War also known as the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-1748). Walpole had stated that peace was the safest and wisest situation for the general interest of trade even if «some private persons might suffer, with whatever reason they might call out for justice upon Spain» (Black 2007, 138). Finally, the view that considered the West Indies as the place to defeat Spain prevailed in Parliament. In 1739, the English admiral Edward Vernon attacked Portobelo (on the coast of what is now Panama), a hub for galleons carrying treasure to Spain, with just six ships. Vernon destroyed two of its three fortresses, and continued to Chagres, causing serious damage to the fortress of San Lorenzo (Hall & Pérez Brignoli 2003, 143). After these events, Vernon became a British national hero, and as the pressure on the government for a strong response against the Spanish increased in England, he was asked to lead it. A pamphlet printed in London in 1740, expressed the urgency of making conquests in the West Indies, arguing that treaties and negotiations will

never settle the disputes between England and Spain there: «we could only do by distressing the Spaniards in the West Indies and making proper settlements there» (Anonymous 1740, vii, 23-28).

Vernon warned his superiors against an amphibious effort to capture Spanish territories, citing the difficult terrain and the many illnesses that had devastated previous expeditions (Nicoll 2019). The Duke of Newcastle and Sir Charles Wager proposed an attack on Havana (Syrett 1970, xiii), but Vernon chose Cartagena as the target believing that a naval attack would facilitate a rapid capture. Vernon set sail from Port Royal, Jamaica, with a force of 23 000 men and 124 vessels. This was the largest expeditionary force sent to the West Indies. The battle lasted many days, and it ended up in a failure for the British.

Afterwards, Admiral Vernon captured Guantánamo Bay in Cuba but he had to abandon it after a series of defensive attacks by the Spaniards along with a strong illness that decimated his men (Durell 1741, cartographical note). He returned to Portobelo in 1742 and captured the port for several weeks. His plans to cross Panama were thwarted by Spanish troops and his second attack on Chagres was also repulsed. Three large naval expeditions were dispatched from England with the aim of attacking other Spanish ports in the Caribbean and rounding Cape Horn to the Pacific coasts of Peru and Panama, but none achieved any permanent results (Hall & Pérez Brignoli 2003, 143).

In the following years, the English presence continued on the coasts of Yucatan and Central America, and although the settlers and their activities expanded naturally, no English military action took place in the area. At the beginning of the 1740s, the Crown had increasingly vetoed laws passed by colonial legislatures and tried to exert even more control through the Board of Trade, in charge of most matters regarding the West Indies, by making appointments to issuing instructions to governors on trade, security, defence, and of course, possible expansions (Go 2010, 33, 43). London sent naval squadrons to help protect commerce as well as prosecute and punish piracy in the Caribbean. However, it was not until the end of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), in August 1762, that the British landed an expedition, this time to occupy Cuba. It happened almost at the end of the war, and came as the culmination of a long and difficult campaign against France and as a retaliation against Spain for joining the French side. The British decided to attack Havana, Louisiana and Manila. They chose Havana in the Caribbean because it was the centre of Spanish power in the area, which would be seriously weakened by its loss.

It is important to mention that the British government was not in complete agreement about attacking Havana. The Duke of Newcastle thought that the British position should be reinforced in Portugal not in the Caribbean. There was opposition from Jamaica as well because, while the invasion was planned, a French ship was captured and a number of letters indicating that the French, in conjunction with the Spanish, intended to invade Jamaica were found on it. Captain Arthur Forrest, the senior sea officer at Port Royal, transmitted these documents to William Henry Lyttelton, Governor of Jamaica, who in turn presented them to his council. It was resolved that the best way to meet the invasion threat was «to send [...] for reinforcements and to keep the squadron at Jamaica at Port Royal» (Syrett 1970, xvi). The civil authorities at Jamaica wanted all ships at Port Royal to remain there. British captains in the Caribbean agreed that security in Jamaica had to be reinforced, and Captain Rodney from Martinique claimed that «Jamaica could not be lost.» However, orders from England demanded that all the ships had to participate in the attack on Havana. Fortunately, by April it was clear that the enemy was not going to attack Jamaica and the British attack on Havana took place in June (Syrett 1970, xiii, xv, xx).

The British assembled an army of sixteen thousand men from England, North America and the West Indies. The attack was a success. The Spanish forces were caught off guard. The British occupied Havana for ten months until the terms of the Peace of Paris entered into effect. The peace came just in time, since British forces had been ravaged by disease and lack of water (Syrett 1970, xxix, xxxiii). Just five months later, in October, Captain Pocock reported to the Admiralty that his squadron was incapable of taking offensive action, as those supporting an invasion to continental lands would have liked. England had to settle for using British control over Havana as leverage in the negotiations with Spain, instead of launching an attack on the whole island and the Spanish Main. Havana was exchanged for Florida and it served to pressure Spain into granting the English the right to cut logwood in the Gulf of Honduras (Humphreys 2010, 3).

The fall of Havana amounted to a loss of prestige from which Spain never recovered, and although the British army was severely damaged after the war, in the following decades English presence in the Caribbean grew consistently. The only exception was the time when the Governor of Yucatan, Felipe Ramírez de Estenoz, attempted to expel the English from New River and Rio Hondo in the Gulf of Honduras and launched various punitive expeditions (Zerbe 2013, 212). England complained to the Spanish authorities in Madrid who forced Ramírez de Estenoz to abandon his aggressive policy.

In 1765, in the midst of diplomatic exchange of promises and threats, the admiral in Jamaica Sir William Burnaby sent a mariner called John Cook (name-sake of the famous voyager, but not the same) to the Gulf of Honduras and Merida in Yucatan, with some dispatches for governor Estenoz. Cook's travel was apparently ambassadorial but it was also to evaluate and report on the defensive power of Yucatan (Rastell 2013). Cook provided Burnaby with a report and his account was sent to England where it was published under the title *Remarks on a Passage from the River Balise: In the Bay of Honduras, to Merida: The Capital of the Province of Jucatan in the Spanish West Indies...* (1769). The book offered a detailed description of the places Cook visited, in terms of geography, resources, defences and distance from one town to another. Cook provided important information about how to break Spanish vigilance, claiming, for instance, that the Spanish officers in Bacalar enjoyed receiving «little presents» from the English, that the place was «ill-built» and unpopulated, and that the few soldiers there «were very undisciplined and ill-clothed» (Cook 1769, 5, 11, 13). Cook also pointed out that the Indians had been very friendly and helpful throughout his voyage (Cook 1769, 14, 19, 28). In regard to Merida, he stated that it was so wealthy that the people appeared to be «living on their own private fortune» and that it was poorly protected as its castle or citadel was of «no consequence» and the troops living there were very scarce (Cook 1769, 23, 25–26). The picture he depicted suggested that the region was a very good target for an invasion or an attack.

Jamaicans tried to keep an eye on the Belize settlement and to obtain strategic information from the accounts of various admirals. In November 1765, William Burnaby sent information of the proceedings of the squadron under his command to London, and included the reports of various captains about the strength of Spanish ports in the Caribbean: Captain Grower of Havana, Captain Falconer of Portobelo and Captain Locker of Veracruz (Burnaby 1878). Despite all the information gathered and shared with London, Jamaicans could not secure the support of the authorities in England to attack and to attempt to take control of the Spanish Main. London was neither willing to yield to Spain with respect to the settlements of the logwood cutters nor willing to start a war.

### Attacking the Spanish Main in the Context of the War of American Independence

When rebellion broke out in the thirteen British colonies in North America, Spain considered this as an opportunity and provided support to the American

rebels. Spain intended to retrieve important colonies such as Jamaica, Gibraltar and Florida and to evict the British definitely from the Gulf of Honduras. In 1779, Spain and France signed an alliance against Britain and war was declared. Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the American Department of King George III, authorised attacks on Spanish territories in continental America, including New Orleans, and Central America, Belize, Panama and Darien. The English strategy included destroying Spanish fortresses and trying to conquer a corridor across the isthmus to the Pacific (Hall & Pérez Brignoli 2003, 146).

In June 1779, Lord Germain wrote to John Dalling, governor of Jamaica, referring to the accounts he had sent to London and mentioned that he was optimistic that with the assistance of the «Musquito Indians» and of some «free-botters from the Islands and Continent of America,» who might be interested in plunder, the English could make an incursion into the Spanish settlements. Germain suggested that the first step was to supply the Indians with arms and ammunition and to encourage them to make inroads (CO 137&74. Germain to Dalling, 17 June 1779).

In August 1779, Dalling proposed and made preparations for an attack on Bacalar in the Yucatan Peninsula. His intention was to attack the city of Merida and take the whole region of Yucatan «resulting in enormous economic benefit.» Moreover, he assured that if Spain wanted to recapture it, it would need to divert «the whole of her forces,» leaving it feeble elsewhere. Dalling relied on the element of surprise claiming, in a second letter sent in September, that it was necessary to attack Spanish settlements «long undisturbed and far from support» (Secretary of State 1779a). Dalling alleged that some men were on their way from Jamaica to the Mosquito Shore and that he had already sent Captain William Dalrymple of the Loyal Irish Corps to Belize. Dalling also wrote to James Lawrie, superintendent of the Mosquito, claiming that it was possible to attack the castle of St. Philip at Bacalar with the assistance of the Indians and the baymen.

Dalrymple wrote to Dalling recommending to reinforce English forces on St. George's Caye, whose natural position was very strong, to prepare for a «most ambitious attack on Bacalar,» and to execute a surprise attack (Campbell 2011, 195-96). Dalrymple claimed that the place was to be easily overpowered as it was defended only by some hundred, very ill-prepared men.

Dalrymple assured that if Bacalar was defeated, as many as 100 000 Indians, who were tired of Spanish yoke, would join the English. Merida, the Spanish capital of the province of Yucatan, would be the next place to invade and then

the whole Yucatan Peninsula would be at English hands. Moreover, if Spain attempted to recapture this region, it would require a formidable invasion that would divert her forces from the war (Campbell 2011, 195-96).

The scheme planned by Germain, Dalling and Dalrymple was never carried out. The Spaniards from Bacalar followed a similar plan. They moved first and launched a punitive expedition against the English settlers at St. George's Caye in Belize, which caught them by surprise (Secretary of State 1779b). The Spaniards had previously attempted to expel the colonists on six occasions, but this time the English settlement was completely destroyed, all inhabitants were removed and taken prisoners to Merida and Cuba (Floyd 1967, 134; Naylor 1989, 61).

Captain Dalrymple was in the Mosquito Shore when he learnt about the Spanish attack. He informed Lord Germain that he had been able to gather sixty Indians and some other volunteers and sailed to St. George to help the baymen. He pointed out that they had regained the St. George's Caye but even with the backup of some ships from the Royal Navy, they were unable to attack the fort of St. Fernando de Omoa in the Gulf of Honduras. They exchanged some shots, «but not having a sufficient Land Force to attack on shore, they were obliged to leave it» (Dalrymple 1779). However, he agreed with Commodore John Luttrell that the fort could be taken by attacking by sea and land at the same time. Therefore, they formed a force of 500 men, including the Indians, the detachment of Loyal Irish, and baymen from the Mosquito Shore and «the islands of Rattan and Bonnaccas» (Roatan and Guanaja or Bonacca off the north coast of Honduras). They all met in Trujillo and from there started to advance towards Omoa:

Our intention was to have marched directly on in the night to surprise and escalate the fort; but the distance proving greater than was imagined and the roads very bad which they passed, such as I may venture to affirm no European troops ever marched before in this climate, (being obliged at times to walk on account of impenetrable Mangroves, out into the Sea which damaged their Cartouches, and at other Times through Lagoons, Morasses and narrow foot paths, over mountains, rendered almost impassable from the late rains, having precipices on each side, and forced to grope our way by lights made from cabbage trees) (Dalrymple 1779).

Although some of the men failed due to fatigue, others lost the line of march in the darkness of the night and still others were lost due to the difficulty of keeping up in paths only passable by Indians, the expedition was successful as the

fortress of Omoa was reduced and occupied for six weeks. The English took 365 Spanish prisoners with the aim of exchanging them for the baymen «inhumanely taken away with their families to Merida.» (Dalrymple 1779). When Spanish forces arrived in Omoa, the British retreated without a fight because they were outnumbered.

Dalrymple commissioned Lieutenant Cardan of the 60<sup>th</sup> regiment, who had accompanied him in the expedition to Omoa, to travel to London and inform the British king. Dalrymple's account of the events was published in *The London Gazette* (Tuesday December 14 - Saturday December 18, 1779 issue 12040) along with a copy of the convention for the exchange of prisoners and other related documents. With the spread of such news, popular hate against the Spaniards increased significantly, supporting any action taken by the government to retaliate.

John Dalling took advantage of the ebullience in London to raise the issue of taking Spanish territories. He wrote a letter to Lord Germain with the aim of revisiting the plan for gaining possession of the province of Yucatan (Dalling 1780). In his letter, Dalling stated that this time, the plan was to enter through Nicaragua and that he had based his strategy on the best available map of the region, which had been recently published by Thomas Jefferys, the royal geographer, in his *West India Atlas or A Compendious Description of the West-Indies* (1775). Dalling compared his plan with one «of Mr. John Christopher,» which suggested attacking Spain through Portobelo and Darien. According to Dalling that plan did not have any chances of being successful not only because it would require much more manpower but also because the Spaniards would be in a better position to resist the attack. Instead, he assured that taking control of the province of Yucatan was the key for a successful invasion. His plan was to enter through Nicaragua advancing into the interior and crossing the isthmus through Guatemala down to the other side at the South Sea and from there going to Yucatan. Dalling outlined various benefits of his plan. First, it would open a new market for English merchandise and secure logwood and trade articles such as tortoise shells. Secondly, he claimed that the possession of Yucatan and Pensacola in Florida would interrupt Spanish trade with the bay of the Gulf of Mexico and would be of help in securing the interior. Dalling claimed that he was ready to execute his plan «in person» and assured that with an army of 15 000 men, counting volunteers and Indians, the English could take Lake Nicaragua and all the region up to Yucatan.

Lord Germain was convinced by Dalling and, in March 1780, an expedition led by Captain John Polson sailed from Jamaica to the undefended mouth of the San Juan River, reinforced by men in Zambos Mosquitos, and proceeded up the river. However, the expedition encountered many obstacles: volunteers were not conscripted in the expected numbers; the Spaniards counterattacked, the terrain was very difficult and ultimately, the tropical conditions and the diseases repelled the English before they could arrive at Lake Nicaragua (O'Shaughnessy 2013, 167; Sudgen 2012, 153-74). From April 11 to 28 the English laid siege to the Spanish fortress at Inmaculada Concepción. Captain Polson wrote to Dalling excusing his delay in fulfilling the original plans arguing that the Indians were slow to join the British but claiming proudly that the castle of St. John was in British hands (Polson 1780).

Reinforcements from Jamaica, led by Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Kemble arrived in the middle of May. The British were able to hold the fortress for eight months but were unable to progress further up the river. As the wet season set in, their numbers were depleted due to disease, and the supply of food and drinking water ran out. No further reinforcement arrived from Jamaica and men in Mosquitos refused to help because Captain Polson had mistreated them (Campbell 2011, 208). The British tried to take Black River from the Spaniards but failed. The whole expedition was disastrous; the Spaniards recaptured their fortress and evicted the British from Belize and Mosquito. Governor Dalling was recalled to London and substituted.

When peace was signed at Versailles in 1783 neither Spain nor Britain emerged as the clear victor in Central America (Hall & Pérez Brignoli 2003, 147). The Convention of London of 1786 (Anglo-Spanish Convention) settled the issue of the log cutters. Spain gave permission to the British to cut mahogany and logwood from south to the Sibun River, but strongly forbade the British to settle any formal government or to carry out any other economic activity. The Convention specified that in return for the concessions Spain had made, the British were to give up all of their other settlements in the region, notably the Mosquito Shore and the island of Roatan. As a result, the inhabitants of these areas had to be evacuated and taken to Belize. In 1798 the Spaniards mounted their last and greatest attack on Belize, but were defeated by the British in the Battle of St. George's Caye.

Despite English victory against Spain in the Gulf of Honduras, the loss of the thirteen colonies had left the British crown more pessimistic than optimistic in respect to the Americas, more concerned with a defensive strategic survival

than with a positive expansionism (Hyam 2010, 76). The end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century seemed barely promising for those English that held imperial aspirations for Yucatan and Central America, as despite their best efforts they neither had not been able to invade and to take control of the region, nor could appropriate the vast territories of New Spain and Peru with its rich mines. Furthermore, now the Parliament and the crown seemed to be turning their attention away from America and looking towards Asia.

## Conclusions

During more than two centuries, the strong desire to attack and capture the Spanish Caribbean region occupied the thought and energy of various Englishmen. Private and local actors (planters, merchants, adventurers, governors, navigators, logwood cutters, revenue seeking army officers, etc.) made vast efforts and set in motion the enticements to shape the imperial and colonial policies that were handed down from London. Their efforts were inextricably connected to an imperial vision since they were interested not only in acquiring personal wealth and richness but also in pushing England to struggle geopolitically for power and supremacy. From their perspective, Yucatan and Central America were strategically located in the Caribbean, connecting the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as well as the North and South of the continent.

Yet, many plans to take control of continental lands never took place. English official support to these projects was weak and most of the times non-existent. Colonies, such as Jamaica, where many of the plans were forged, were subordinated to the will of the Crown and Parliament, which often meddled and hindered colonial interests in favour of their own. The lack of governmental will and the difficulty in securing the necessary political support and financial resources definitely had a negative impact on the projects for British expansion towards the continent. Even when the plans were implemented, the overestimation of the willingness of the indigenous peoples to collaborate and the underestimation of Spanish defences in the area determined failure. Needless to say, the tropical weather, poor hygiene and deficient medical attention also made things worse.

Today it is clear that the efforts of the Englishmen who coveted Yucatan and Central America and worked hard to persuade the imperial government to support an invasion of the region were fruitful. Significant gains resulted from the persistence of private venturers, stubborn advocates and resolute baymen. In the end,

the British government officially took sides with the English settlers of Belize and reclaimed their rights of possession. The concessions obtained from the Spaniards, through war and diplomacy, contributed to secure the British right to extract woods and to settle permanently in land that was originally part of the Spanish Empire. This settlement developed into a colony and the government in London became involved in its defence and administration, embracing the idea that Yucatan and Central America were part of the sphere of influence and expansion of the British Empire.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> «Empire» is understood here as a political entity with *imperium*, or independence, and total sovereignty; and *dominium*, or the right to possess and rule territory under its jurisdiction, and with an expansionist impetus. The expression 'imperial aspiration' refers here to the ideas, expectations and ambitions that guided and shaped (sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently) the discourse and the strategies and methods by which England claimed, maintained, expanded and justified its empire both to English subjects and to the subjects of other European countries (Mancke 2002, 236; Armitage 2000, 121; MacMillan 2006, 6).