

Caroline A. Williams, *Between Resistance and Adaptation: Indigenous Peoples and the Colonisation of the Chocó, 1510-1753*

Liverpool Latin American Studies, New Series 5. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004. 254 pages, Appendix. Bibliography

Jane Rausch / University of Massachusetts-Amherst

In recent decades colonial scholars have been turning their attention to the study of Colombia's lowland regions—the geographic frontiers that historians formerly bypassed to focus on the interaction of the highlands with the Caribbean coast. While much has been learned about the Llanos Orientales and Amazonia, until now developments on the Pacific coast or Chocó have been little explored.¹ With *Between Resistance and Adaptation*, Caroline Williams has gone far to fill this gap. By “charting the process whereby the Chocó came to be incorporated into the political and economic life of the colony,” and analyzing the dynamics of Spanish-Indian relations between the sixteenth and seventeenth century (p. 2), she has produced a fine regional history that also brings to light the features that made Chocó a most unique colonial frontier. Based on a meticulous review of archival sources in Seville and Bogotá, her book will be of interest to Colombian historians as well as the growing number of specialists who analyze Latin American frontiers.

The story of how Europeans came to dominate this “remote and inhospitable region of dense rainforest and heavy rainfall,” that extends along the Pacific coast from the Isthmus of Panama in the north to Buenaventura in the south, and is inhabited by a multiplicity of indigenous groups, for the most part fiercely hostile to outsiders (p. 1), is a testament to the Spanish fixation on the extraction of gold and their determination to surmount all obstacles to obtain this commodity. In her first five chapters Williams describes the nature of the native groups and the variety of Spanish efforts between the 1510 and 1680 to establish political and economic dominance over them. These attempts, that included peaceful overtures, violent *entradas*, and an extraordinarily ineffective missionary enterprise by the Franciscans, were inconclusive until 1676 when the former governor of Antioquia, Juan Bueso de Valdés, was able to concentrate 1,597 Indians into three small towns by using force, native allies and an ample supply of trade goods to win over the people.

The next two chapters describe Spanish administration of the frontier and the resistance and adaptation of the natives to the permanent presence of the intruders. Nominally under the rule of the Gobernador of Popayán, after 1730 the region was divided into three territories: Noanama, Tatama or Chocó, and Citará, but the Spanish failed to establish clear lines of authority. Instead, a bewildering array of *tenientes de gobernador*, *corregidores*, Franciscan missionaries, and secular priests vied for control of the natives and participated in a circle of corruption incited by their desire to amass personal fortunes in gold, the principal resource of the frontier. Black slaves formed the main labor force, but the

natives assisted in the operations by supplying basic foodstuffs, building storehouses, and providing transportation along the rivers via their canoes.

Williams outlines Spanish abuses against the Indians that included decimation by disease, forced labor, and seizure of their lands. An especially abhorrent practice was the government's rigid imposition of the *repartimiento de mercancías*. While many natives did eventually become allies of the Spanish, the majority of the Citará (the principal group she examines), employed three types of resistance after the failure of their outright rebellion in 1684. First, they fled Spanish control by moving to inaccessible areas of the province. Second, those who remained used Spanish legal procedures to protest harsh exploitation and to exacerbate divisions between the secular and religious authorities.

The third, and perhaps most remarkable response, was the natives' complete rejection of Christian conversion. Despite nearly two centuries of wide-ranging contacts with Spanish settlers and priests, the Citará simply refused to accept Catholic practices or to relinquish their traditional forms of religious worship, burial, marriage, and ceremonies that involved dancing and heavy drinking. Likewise they continued their time honored habit of skirmishing with the neighboring Cuna, a type of sporadic warfare that provided them with a source of slave labor and marriage partners. They resisted racial mixture with Spanish and Africans, and their native language remained largely intact. This ability to defend their traditions in the face of intense secular and ecclesiastical pressure has prompted Williams to conclude that the Citará “were among the most resilient of all native groups encountered by Spaniards...and among the most successful at developing strategies that enabled them to preserve much of their culture.” (p. 2).

While Williams includes an appendix listing towns and mining camps in the Chocó, she omits any description of the actual extraction of gold or the role played by African slaves. Since her principal aim was “to throw further light on the evolution of inter-ethnic relations on a contested colonial frontier,” with regard to Spanish-Indian interactions, she admirably succeeds. The settlement of the Chocó frontier with its hostile environment and scattered native communities evokes the conquest of Yucatan so ably analyzed by Inga Clendinnen, but the presence of gold which attracted Spanish miners and their African slaves, along with the utter failure of the missionaries to convert the Indians, suggests a distinctive frontier that will undoubtedly inspire historians to examine other long neglected contested peripheral regions.

Notes

¹ The history of colonial Chocó has not been a complete vacuum. Significant studies in English include William Sharp's, *Slavery on the Spanish Frontier: The Colombian Chocó, 1680-1810* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976) and geographer Robert C. West's, *Colonial Placer Mining in Colombia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952).

² Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (Cambridge, 1987).