

Islands of English historians

The archipelago of San Andrés has given English language historians a unique vantage of a failed colonial experiment in the Caribbean, believes Colombian historian and columnist Jorge Orlando Melo.



The first colonization of San Andrés and Providencia, two islands which until 1629 served only as temporary shelter for stranded sailors of sunken ships or those which got stuck on reefs, was the result of an English puritan overseas ambition. In 1628 the island of San Andrés became a refuge for 30 men of a lost sea vessel belonging to Robert Rich, the 2nd Earl of Warwick. That same year, the puritans with a Royal Charter began looking to create more than a colony – a united “Commonwealth” in the New World. Coordinating their religious advance in New England with their stake in some fertile islands in the Caribbean, Providencia was considered attractive, peaceful and with good possibilities for plantation agriculture.

In 1629, several boats from the Company of Adventurers of the Island of Providence or Catalina, Henrietta or Andrea and the Adjacent Island arrived at Santa Catalina, and the settlers quickly set out to change its name to something more puritan: Providence. The English immigrants wanted a religious and hard working society. On this first voyage, men from other islands arrived as well, bringing with them their Dutch servants to help manage the first cotton estates. During the 11 years this adventure endured in the Caribbean, the English Puritans managed to trade with the Mosquito Indians of Central America and bring down from New England 15 Pequot tribesmen. The settlers began trading in slaves, despite opposition from the directors of the “Company.”

Until this tropical utopia became

more firmly established in British hands and lost to Spain as a territory, the Spanish crown had shown little interest. They had heard accounts of Spanish ships being attacked by pirates who still sailed the seas, seeing a more lucrative business in marauding than planting cotton. In 1614, the governor of Cartagena, Francisco Diaz de Pimienta, organized an expedition with 600 men to take back the islands on behalf of the Spanish realm. The siege resulted in the surrender of the English settlers, and until the end of the 18th century, the islands changed owners frequently and never had a steady process of colonization, despite the fact that the few inhabitants who remained continued to consider themselves English.

The history of the early settlers and their religious fervor has been documented in detail by two English historians. In 1914, Arthur Percival Newton wrote *The Colonizing Activities of the Puritans: The Last Phase of the Elizabethan Struggle with Spain*. This masterly work, based on a thorough investigation by Newton, would propel this young historian to become an esteemed member of the Victorian historical circles. The book examines the colonization process of Providencia as part of a larger more regional objective of the English in the Caribbean, such as Old Providence and Tortuga, and follows in detail the religious strife in England between Protestants and Catholics. It also looks at business interests, which came with the early settlers.

After a book which essentially covers every aspect of the Elizabethan experiment in Providence, Karen Ordahl

Kupperman, a professor at New York University with a PhD from Cambridge University, published *Providence Island, 1630-1641: The Other Puritan Colony* in 1993. With this work, Ordahl won the prestigious Albert J. Beveridge Award for best book of American History. Like Newton’s investigations, it is a prestigious work, which presents a solid profile of the Godly men who wanted to establish a religious and merchant foothold on Providence Island.

The settlers of Providence Island turned out to be less Godly than they had imagined, however. Politically-motivated infighting among the settlers as to how to best organize crops and the role of the Stuart soldiers, stumped economic interests. From Massachusetts to Bermuda, Chesapeake to Providence, a puritan ideal to best represent English society in the Indies was faltering. “For ideological reasons, the investors denied Providence Island planters ownership of their lands and uncertainty over tenure fueled economic failure,” states Ordahl.

Although the desire to create the ideal society on earth failed, the story of Providence Island is one of religious zeal pitched against economic abandonment. Even until the 19th century, some of this puritan dream lingered on, and some historians claim it remains a fixture of island character.

With Spain’s indifference, the archipelago was settled by new English colonizers who brought with them slaves from Jamaica. A protestant society emerged, with English as the spoken language, and until the mid 20th century, San Andrés and Providencia preserved

a way of life based on fishing and coconut exports.

The arrival of mass tourism and commerce began to impoverish the islanders. Besides Newton and Ordahl Kupperman, the great geographer James Parsons dedicated in 1955 his work on the geographic history of the islands. The anthropologist Thomas Price studied exhaustively the culture in his *Saints and Spirits* (1983) and another anthropologist, Peter J. Wilson, narrates the story of a man in Providencia with his book *Oscar: An inquiry into the nature of Sanity*. In *Crab Antics: the Anthropology of the English Speaking Negroes*, Wilson looks at the continuing conflict between practical and ideal moralities as revealed in the struggle between “reputation” and “respectability” in the western Caribbean. The title hints at the struggle crabs face when leaving a barrel. Those that lead the way end up at the bottom of the heap due to the weight of those that follow.

Now that Colombians are interested in San Andrés and Providencia, it’s time to read these works and possibly translate them into Spanish, especially those books that for decades were abandoned and ignored by a country, which like Spain, only looks at the islands when it feels it might have lost something.

Newton and Parson’s books were published by the Banco de la República and *Crab Antics* by the Universidad Nacional. The other three works mentioned have yet to be translated into Spanish.