

Slavery on the Spanish Frontier: The Colombian Chocó, 1680–1810.

By WILLIAM FREDERICK SHARP. Norman, 1976. University of Oklahoma Press. Maps. Illustrations. Tables. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xvi, 253. Cloth. \$9.95.

The Colombian Chocó is unique. It is the world's rainiest lowland, with close to 400 inches of annual precipitation. Racially it is the most negroid area on the American mainland.

William Sharp was introduced to the area through the Peace Corps, and thus has a genuine feeling for both the culture and environment, but it is the archives of Bogotá and Popayán that provide the underpinnings of this study. He has here sought to investigate how the institution of slavery functioned on this isolated and sparsely peopled frontier of colonial New Granada. In the process he has also produced a trailblazing economic history of this rainforest province that is washed by two seas. Along with the works of geographer Robert C. West, he provides the best entry to an initial historical understanding of this intriguingly different and neglected part of Spain's colonial empire.

The Chocó produced some seventy-five million pesos of placer gold in the two centuries prior to independence, and even today dredges are extracting metal from terrace gravels on tributaries of the San Juan and Atrato rivers. The colonial mining economy depended almost exclusively on forced African labor. The Indian population, although seriously depleted by disease, played a minor supporting role as producer of *plátanos* and maize to feed the *cuadrillas* of miners. Under the administration of Popayán until established as an independent *gobernación* in 1726, the Chocó moved beyond the rough frontier stage. Closure of the Atrato River to trade from 1698 to 1784 encouraged a massive contraband traffic. As much as half of the bullion produced in the Chocó probably left without paying the quinto. Climatic and health conditions made the area unattractive to Spaniards who came in on the trail from the Cauca valley intent on making their fortune and getting out. Almost no Spaniards cast their lot permanently in this rain-soaked, disease-ridden environment, where the blacks seemed often to thrive.

The mineowners in far-off Popayán were interested in bullion production, not in the economic and social development of the Chocó. Concern for the welfare of the slaves had an economic rather than

a humanitarian basis, but physical and psychological abuse seems to have been rare. The dispersed pattern of mining and the absence of any urban centers or the “Big House” seems to have served to minimize dissatisfaction and unrest. Uprisings seem to have been relatively few. The censused slave population peaked at 7,088 in 1782, when there were 340 whites and nearly 4,000 free blacks, then declined as the richer placers were exhausted and profits slacked off. At the time of emancipation in 1851, there were 1,775 slaves reported in the province and several times as many free blacks.

Already by the end of the eighteenth century *libres* outnumbered slaves. Freedom could be obtained either through self-purchase or by voluntary manumission by owners, usually of older slaves. During slack times or on weekends slaves hired themselves out to other operators (a *jornada* of one peso a day was paid to the owner), or they could pan or sluice to their own account. Many in this way accumulated the 300 to 500 pesos necessary to purchase freedom. In contrast to slave economies elsewhere, there was a relative balance between the sexes in the Chocó. Family life and religious instruction were encouraged. At least in the later colonial period black birth well exceeded black deaths. Escape must have been relatively easy for women as well as men, but with no cities to offer jobs or refuge, *cimarones* had no group identity as they wandered off into the forest to carve out their subsistence. Contacts between *libres* and slaves were apparently minimal.

The Chocó experience seems to the author to offer some support to the theses of Frank Tannenbaum and Herbert Klein that under Spanish rule ‘the peculiar institution’ could be relatively benign. But the force of the Church, and of Spanish law, while present in the Chocó, do not in themselves appear to have been very important in regulating slavery. It was simply good business to keep the blacks healthy and productive. The basic intent of the owners was always economic exploitation. Life on a Chocó *cuadrilla*, too, could be nasty, brutal, and short.

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