

## Introduction to the Documents

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a dispute arose over the border between Venezuela and Guyana (then the Colony of British Guiana). The border was not demarcated and the Government of Great Britain, the colonial ruler of Guyana at that time, claimed all the territory comprising the basins of the Essequibo, Cuyuni and Mazaruni Rivers. This territory also included lands up to the right bank of the lower Orinoco River.

On the other hand, the Venezuelan Government made a number of counter-claims to the same territory which the British Government controlled as part of the Colony of British Guiana. One of these Venezuelan claims was to all territory west of the Essequibo River.

In 1895, the Government of the United States of America intervened in this affair and expressed support for the Venezuelan cause. The United States even went further to establish, by the order of President Grover Cleveland, a United States Venezuelan Border Commission to investigate the issue to determine the border between Venezuela and Guyana. In this process, the Commission collected copies of a large quantity of historical documents from the archives of Spain, Holland and Great Britain. Both Venezuela and Great Britain also cooperated with this Commission by also providing copies of documents they possessed.

Eventually, after both the Governments of Venezuela and Great Britain decided in 1897 to arbitrate the dispute, the Commission was disbanded. Much of the documentary materials it had gathered were made available to Venezuela for the preparation of that country's case before the Arbitral Tribunal which met in Paris during 1898-1899.

The five-member Arbitral Tribunal also examined hundreds of historical documents and geographical studies relating to the disputed area, and finally in October 1899 it issued an Award which delimited the border in precise terms. During the next six years, a joint team of British and Venezuelan surveyors marked the border as defined by the Arbitral Tribunal.

This collection, which I have entitled *Guyana's Western Border*, is a compilation of many of the historical documents gathered and examined by the United States Venezuelan Boundary Commission and the Arbitral Tribunal. They also include the Arbitral Award and the agreement of the joint survey team that marked the border.

All the documents from Dutch and Spanish sources (reproduced here) were at that period (the 1890s) translated into English. Those with Spanish and Venezuelan authors were originally in the Spanish language; those written by Dutch officials were originally in the Dutch language. However, in a few exceptions, French was used as the original language. In such cases, the original language is noted below the document.

In March 1896, the British Foreign Office, in a preface to the collection of documents presented by the British Government to the United States Venezuelan Border Commission, stated that the Spanish manuscripts were gathered from the records of the "Indies" existing in the "Archivo de Simancas," in the "Archivo de Indias," at Seville, and in various public departments of the Spanish Government. Extracts were also made from the private library of the King of Spain, and the Manuscript Department of the "Biblioteca Nacional," Madrid.

The Dutch documents were copied from the "Rijksarchief" of the Hague. They are chiefly despatches from the Director-General of the Dutch Colony of the Essequibo to the Chambers of the West India Company.

All of the documents which originate from Spanish and Dutch sources provide background information of the early colonisation of Guyana and have a direct bearing on the nineteenth century border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana which was eventually settled by the Arbitral Award of 1899. They deal with the European exploration and settlement of the northern part of South America in the late sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century. They also account for the period after 1724 when Spanish missionaries first entered the territory of the Lower Orinoco to establish Missions in some areas populated by Amerindians. In addition, they describe the development of Dutch colonisation of Essequibo to the time when that Colony as well the other Dutch Colonies of Demerara and Berbice were captured by the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The post-1802 documents in this collection are mainly from British and Venezuelan sources. In addition to showing the diplomatic exchanges between the two Governments, they provide information about further exploration of Essequibo by the British during the nineteenth century. I have also included statements by the United States Government, and a number of letters pertaining to the border issue which were exchanged between the British and the American Governments during the 1890s.

The passage of time has affected the condition of the documents collected and published by the United States Venezuelan Boundary Commission and by the Arbitral Tribunal. Even in the Library of Congress, from where I obtained copies of sections of the Commission's Report, many pages show signs of damage, and in a few cases, some words are undecipherable. Scanning them and collating the text proved to be very onerous and time consuming, but I have made the greatest effort to maintain accuracy.

This collection of historical documents can also be regarded as a supplement to my earlier work, *The Trail of Diplomacy*, a documentary history of the Guyana-Venezuela border issue. I have grouped the documents according to chronological periods for easy reference and, as far as possible, notation is also made as to their original source.

Readers and researchers are free to use and reproduce these historical materials. However, I would appreciate if reference could be made to this current source whenever they are used.

**Odeen Ishmael**

February 2001