CHAPTER TWO

SURVEY OF NICARAGUAN PROTESTANTISM
(1556–1978)

Isolated cases of Protestantism in Central America are known from earliest colonial times. In the sixteenth century the Inquisition chronicled twenty-one instances on the isthmus, the very first recorded in Nicaragua in 1556. Further cases led Spain’s Philip II to issue a cédula in 1564 ordering the incumbent bishop to root out all followers of Luther and Calvin in Central America. Consequently, there was hardly any Protestant activity in Central America until the nineteenth century.

Nicaragua’s geography is such that it divides naturally into two regions, each separated from the other by mountains and inhospitable jungle. The isolated incidents detailed above were recorded in the Spanish Pacific region. However, the origins of a coherent Nicaraguan Protestant history find their roots in the Atlantic coast, within the British sphere of influence.

Puritans, Pirates and Priests: Protestantism in Eastern Nicaragua

The Mosquito Shore (a.k.a. Mosquito Coast, or Mosquitia) is the home of the Miskito Indians. From Cape Gracias a Dios (the Honduras-Nicaragua coastal boundary) it stretches westwards into Honduras and southwards into Nicaragua beyond Bluefields. The bulk of the Shore, then, falls within Nicaragua. Much of this tropical coastline remains untamed to this day, its beauty belying an inhospitable, fever-ridden, hot and humid climate and rugged terrain habitually lambasted by fierce tropical storms that leave devastation in their wake. These factors,

1 Wilton M. Nelson, Protestantism in Central America (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s, 1984), 7–8.
together with the hostility of the Miskito Indians and the view that the Shore yielded little worth exploiting, led Spanish conquistadores to ignore the region.3 The absence of a Spanish presence led to the Shore falling under British control, eventually paving the way for the arrival of Protestantism in eastern Nicaragua.

As Spain plundered Latin America, her treasure-laden galleons represented attractive targets for Caribbean privateers and pirates. Their actions were often sanctioned and financed by rich and influential (mainly English) aristocrats keen to see an end to Spain’s domination over the New World. Among these was Robert Rich, second earl of Warwick, who outfitted privateers to attack Spanish ships during the early seventeenth century.4 As a Puritan, he was also eager to promote religious colonisation ventures (he sponsored the original New England Plymouth colony). In 1629, Rich learned of an uninhabited island—Providence—off the coast of Nicaragua, located within an important Spanish shipping lane. Together with other prominent Puritans (including John Pym), Rich decided to create a colony there along religious principles.

In 1631, the first colonists arrived in the Seaflower.5 Eventually, they made contact with the Miskito Indians, who had already come into conflict with the Spanish and were only too happy to forge a friendship with their enemy’s enemy.6 Trade ensued, and a Miskito Indian was elevated to ‘king of the Mosquitos’ by the English traders. This Miskito ‘monarchy’ served to unite the Indians against the Spanish and provided the British with a quasi-official presence on the Shore at the invitation of the Miskito king. The British presence also permitted the influx of Protestantism on the Shore.

The Puritan colony did not last long. Providence was ideally located for attacking Spanish ships and quickly attracted so many unscrupulous characters that it soon became one of the most famous pirate lairs

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5 Cf. the Mayflower, the ship transporting the New England colonists.