8. The Americas

There is a marked contrast between the three long international boundaries in North America and the 35 long and short boundaries in Central and South America. The boundaries, in the two continents, were produced by distinct processes and they will be considered separately.

North America

Nicholson (1954, 5) described briefly some of the boundaries between indigenous groups in the period before European colonization. However, he concluded that these pre-European boundaries had little or no effect on the evolution of the Canada-United States boundaries. The boundary between Alaska and Canada was first negotiated between the British and Russian empires in February 1825. It was generically similar to the Portuguese-Spanish boundary of 1777 in South America, the Sino-Russian limit of 1864 in central Asia and the Anglo-French line of 1890 in West Africa. They were all boundaries negotiated between imperial powers, whose knowledge of the areas being divided was imperfect. Canada’s southern boundary and Mexico’s northern boundary were distinct from these colonial boundaries. In the area that became the United States European colonists successfully seceded from the metropolitan powers. In the north they negotiated a boundary with Britain and in the south they settled a boundary with Mexico that had seceded from Spain in 1821.

In 1763 France was eliminated from the North American continent and was restricted to St. Pierre and Miquelon Islands, that still form part of France. In 1972 Canada and France settled the maritime boundary between the islands and the Canadian mainland (Alexander, 1993, 387-98). In 1992 a Court of Arbitration completed the delimitation of the marine area attached to St. Pierre and Miquelon Islands (Charney, 1993, 399-401). The area consisted of an irregular shape around the islands with a maximum width of about 60 nm and a minimum width of 37 nm, from which a corridor 10.5 nm wide and about 175 nm long projected southwards.

After the defeat of France the hegemony that Britain secured lasted less than 20 years. The American War of Independence ended in 1783 and Nicholson has
recorded that Britain was left in the position occupied by France in 1697, with the American colonists playing the British role of that period.

It was natural then that the United States should press for the same boundaries between themselves and Canada as Britain had claimed against the French, and the ultimate result was that Great Britain retained Quebec, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland of 1763, but lost the Illinois country and the lands south and west of the Great Lakes that had been included in Quebec by the Act of 1774. (Nicholson, 1954, 18)

Paullin (1932, 52-5) has provided a well illustrated account of the negotiations that led to the definitive Treaty of Peace on 3 September 1783. On 19 March 1779 the American Congress defined the boundary to be claimed at the end of the war. From the Bay of Fundy the proposed boundary lay close to meridian 67° west as far as the junction of the watershed south of the St Lawrence River. This watershed was then followed southwestwards to the Connecticut River, that was followed to parallel 45° North. This parallel formed the boundary westwards to the St Lawrence River and from this junction the boundary passed directly to the south end of Lake Nipissing. From this point the boundary went directly to the source of the Mississippi River (Paullin, 1932, 52).

By 8 October 1782, after many proposals and counter proposals by both sides, and some contributions by French and Spanish diplomats, the American and British representatives agreed on a line very close to that defined by the American Congress three years earlier. The British Government declined to accept the new line, and one month later after some minor adjustments an agreement was adopted by both parties that was settled formally in 1783 (Figure 8.1).

The new boundary followed the course of the earlier line as far as the St Lawrence River. It then followed that river and passed through the middle of Lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron and Superior to the Lake of the Woods and on to the source of the Mississippi River. An alternative line was offered to Britain at the same time, which would have given it parts of Wisconsin and increased the area of Ontario. The British authorities declined the offer, preferring to keep riparian rights in all the Great Lakes except Michigan.

The Treaty of London, signed on 19 November 1794 raised two difficulties (Douglas, 1930, 9). The first related to the possibility of the Mississippi not extending as far north as the parallel extending westwards from the Lake of the Woods. The second concerned the identity of the St Croix River, that had been a problem since 1764. Both countries nominated a commissioner to deal with the St Croix difficulty and they then chose a third commissioner. Four years later the three commissioners decided that the River Schoodiac and its northern branch called Cheputnaticook were the true St Croix River. A monument was erected at its source.

Ermen (1990, 82-3) reproduces a 1797 map, at a scale of 1:6.9 million, showing the boundary from the coast to the Lake of the Woods. It was published by William Faden of London, publisher of a series of boundary maps from 1784.