

**“A Sad and Bitter Day”**  
**Oral Traditions in the Bay Islands of Honduras**  
**Surrounding the Wyke Cruz Treaty of 1859**  
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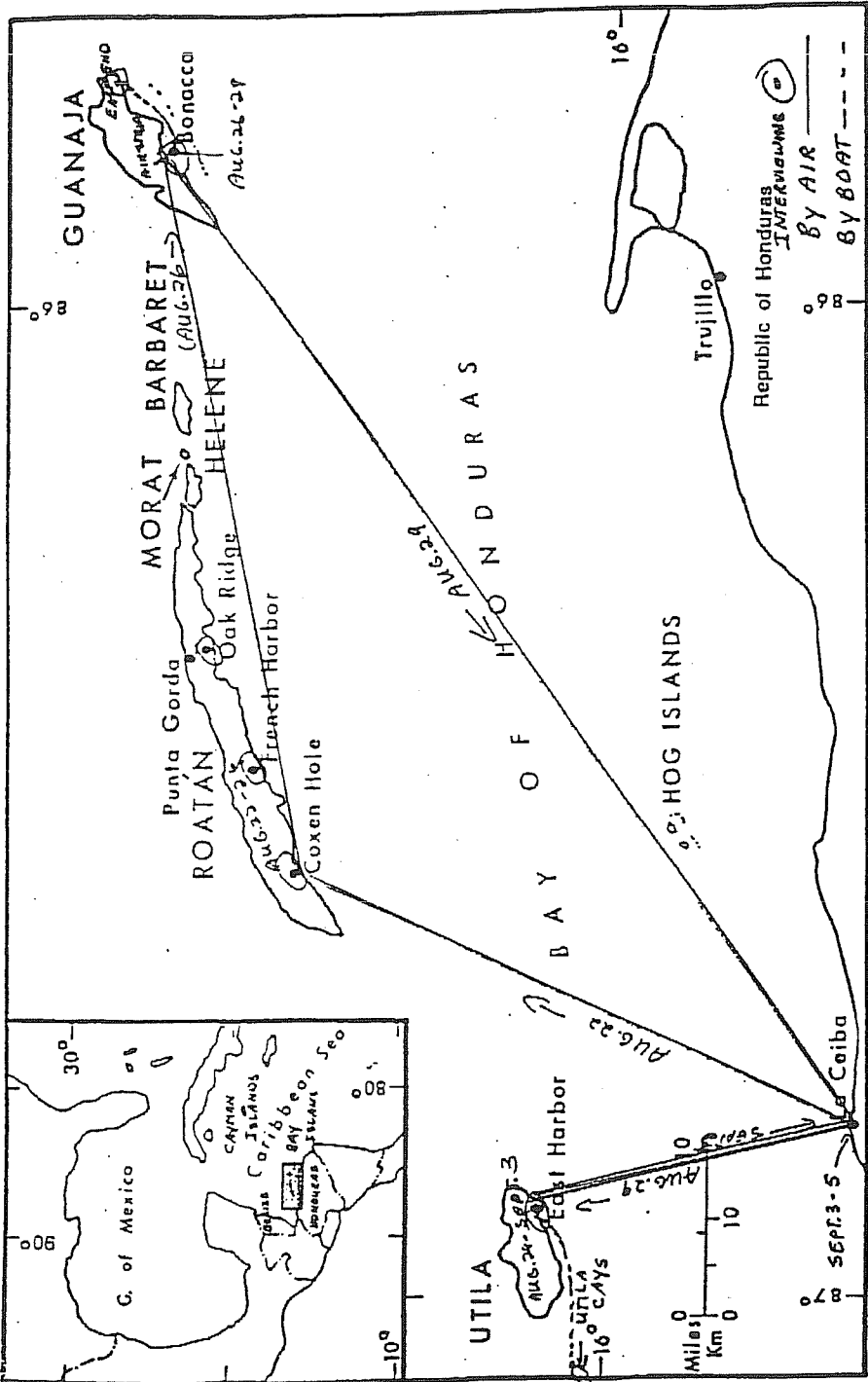
These words were spoken by a 92 yr. old woman of Caymanian descent living in Roatan, the largest of the Bay Islands of Honduras. She was referring to the day the Wyke Cruz Treaty was signed, ceding the Bay Islands, briefly a British Colony, to the then Spanish Honduras. She and the others interviewed spoke as if the ‘day’ was a very recent one, when in fact the treaty was signed on Nov. 28, 1859, fully coming into effect in 1861. Despite the fact that little or nothing about the treaty and of the British involvement in the Bay Islands had been taught in the schools, knowledge of it was still very much alive in 1994, when I spent two weeks interviewing there, and was still influencing the lives of a large portion of the inhabitants. This English-speaking group referred to as Caymanos by many Spanish-speaking Hondurans - are primarily the descendants of Caymanian settlers there, and have, through oral tradition, stubbornly held onto their history, both family history and community history, their culture and their language. In the words of one gentleman: “Why I know about my Cayman roots... I was raised by my grandparents. I lived at home with them. At night-time there was no television... not anything in entertainment, so we sat out on the front porch and listened to these... stories from the old folks.”<sup>1</sup>

Migration from the Cayman Islands began in the 1830s; in a letter to the Foreign Office in 1854, the governor of Jamaica commented that it had been reported to him that “... at least 800 immigrants [from Cayman] had gone to Ruatan in the last year or two”<sup>2</sup> out of a population of 2000 This

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1. Kern Hyde, French Harbour, Roatan.

2. Public Records Office (London) CO137/322 f115 verso.



Bay Islands, Republic of Honduras

migration from Cayman continued long after the treaty. The descendants of these Caymanians, until very recently the largest section of the Bay Islands population, were the focus of an oral history project undertaken by C.I.N.A. in 1994. Interviews were conducted on the three largest islands - Roatan, Guanaja and Utila - and three inhabited cays.

There are large Caymanos communities on all of the islands and the inhabited Cays, and the fact that these people have retained, and continue to struggle to retain, a separate identity and to resist assimilation, despite pressure by various ruling parties over the years to do so, and the amazing knowledge they have of their history and genealogy, are testimonies to the power of oral tradition. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation almost entirely by oral means and is particularly interesting when one realizes that the driving force behind it is a continuing strong identification with England, despite the fact that the Bay Islands was officially a British colony for less than 10 years, 1852 - 1859, and despite also the wide-spread belief that, as one interviewee put it, "England sold us".

The C.I.N.A. project was interested in several aspects of the history of the descendants of the Caymanian settlers, who refer to themselves as Islanders, a term which includes the descendants of English-speaking settlers from the U.S. and elsewhere who intermarried with the Caymanians. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will focus on oral traditions regarding the treaty itself, and discuss their validity in literal terms as compared with the treaty itself, and their value from the point of view of the effects of these traditions.

Mention of the 1859 treaty - signed in 1859 but not ratified until 1861 - the key event in Bay Islands history, elicited a strong response from all 23 people interviewed. Everyone knew something about it. All knew that it was the document by which England had 'handed over' the Bay Islands to Honduras and all knew that it guaranteed the Islanders certain rights, though some were rather vague as to what exactly these rights were. All knew that their right to retain property was protected, as was religious freedom, but most believed strongly that their right to speak English was also protected, when in fact the treaty makes no mention of language at all. Knowledge as to the actual date was also shaky; most people putting it 20 or 30 years later than it actually was. Most puzzling was the conviction held by many now in their 70s and 80s that if they could have had their births registered in Cayman before they reached 18 they could have had British citizenship. There was a period after the treaty when the citizenship of the Islanders was

in question. This was not dealt with in the treaty; the question seems not to have occurred to the officials at the time, and this ambiguity led to a lot of subsequent confusion. Finally, in 1902, the British sent a frigate, the *Psyche*, to the Islands with both British and Honduran officials on board, and a proclamation was read, telling them plainly that they were not British citizens, but Honduran, to the distress and consternation of the people.<sup>3</sup> One of my interviewees, now in her 60s, told me that her mother, a child at the time, had vivid memories of this and of how upset everyone was. Knowledge of the treaty has also cropped up occasionally in oral history interviews in Cayman, as well as the information about the British ship mentioned above.

What is the value of these oral traditions? For one thing, it is, I believe, safe to say that without the oral traditions, knowledge of the treaty and of the English/Cayman/Bay Islands connections would not be nearly as widespread, and indeed might not exist at all. Michael Duncan of the University of Warwick, author of *The Bay Islands or The Gentle Art of cutting the Painter*, commented on the difficulties he encountered in researching his book: "There is only one book and one research article [on the Bay Island] that I could find of any overall use. The first... does not go into the details of cessation. There are considerable archival difficulties. There are not, I discovered laboriously, any contemporaneous public or private records of any use on the islands... The problem of Honduran documentation was highlighted for me by discovering that for the 1840-50s and '60s, no print run exists of the main printed organ, the *Gaeta Official*."<sup>4</sup> In view of the paucity of written records, oral accounts become even more valuable. In fact, it seemed to me that the oral traditions as to the significance of the treaty has led to the preservation of both widespread knowledge of the treaty and of the treaty itself. In the Bay Islands a few precious copies are held in private hands and one is in a small museum in a resort on Roatan. The copy of the Treaty which CINA has, came to us through oral history sources. It is important to remember that most of the people we interviewed had never actually seen the treaty, and the Honduran Government has made no effort to preserve it nor to disseminate knowledge of it (in schools, etc.). The few who had seen copies of it went searching for them after having heard about

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3. *Utilla: Past and Present* by Richard H. Rose, published 1904, F.A. Owen Publishing Company, Dunsville, New York, U.S.A.

4. Pg. 15, *The Bay Islands, or the Gentle Art of Cutting the Painter*, by Michael Duncan. Published by Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AC.

it from parents/grandparents. "[My father talked about the Treaty] some. I studied more about that, now, in later years". - John Jay Wood, former mayor of Roatan.

There is another valuable aspect to these oral traditions. J. and E.M. Wilkie have said, "It is not enough to know what happened, we must also know what people think happened". These oral traditions are valid in that they are in the main correct - there **was** such a treaty and it **did** guarantee the Islanders certain rights. They are also valid in that they have preserved the knowledge of what the people **think** happened, and that is, in a very personal way, **their** history. The treaty was the result of power struggles between large nations remote from the people whose lives it would impact for generations to come. It was formulated without any real concern for these people, or, as the case was in so many places, their being consulted or even informed, until some time after it was a fait accompli. In such cases the oral traditions play a vital role in the struggle to adjust to the reality of being pawns of those with the power, and, as is illustrated by the subsequent history of the Islanders, many of whom have become very successful, seems to bring with it a sort of empowerment, what one might term 'an empowerment of the powerless'. The mythography of the treaty is an important way in which the Islanders have tried to adjust to the reality of it.

It is therefore the **effect** of these oral traditions that is so interesting. Not only are they responsible for the preservation of the Islanders' unique history, both family history and community history, of which they are very proud, but also of their language and their separate identity. Their continuing separateness and refusal to be assimilated into mainstream Honduran life except on their own terms is rooted in their conviction that they are, and have always been, different, and that they have rights guaranteed by the treaty. "The Islanders", writes Michael Duncan, "were fiercely combative about their rights, refusing military service and voluble about taxes and justice in a way that both then [19th century] and now is hardly characteristic of the Honduran compasano."<sup>5</sup>

The following quote from one of my interviews illustrates one way in which this 'empowerment of the powerless' operated: "We used to have a practice here them years then, calling the children different names from what they were registered, presumably so they had a better chance to avoid forced military service."<sup>6</sup> He went on to explain that soldiers would come

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5. Pg. 14, *The Bay Islands or the Gentle Art of Cutting the Painter*, by Michael Duncan.

6. John Jay Woods, former mayor, of Coxen Hole, Roatan.

looking for young Mr. X, who could not be found because he was known to everyone as Mr. Y.

It is not surprising that the Honduran government considered the Islanders, as Michael Duncan say, "... an administrative pain in the neck; a largely non-Spanish, English-speaking anomaly."<sup>7</sup> This situation has led to the government taking different approaches over the years, from virtually ignoring them to trying to forcibly stop the speaking of English, none of which worked. The Islanders continued to refuse to become assimilated.

A particular source of annoyance was the Islanders' obstinacy in continuing to maintain close trading ties with Belize, the former British Honduras, where English is widely spoken. A native of Utila explained:

*Belize was where they did all their business. This island didn't buy from Honduras, you know. She bought anything she needed from Belize or Tampa... stoves and pots and pans and lumber and machetes and hoes and axe and guns and cartridges and cigarettes and tobacco and rice and beans; that came from Belize or Tampa, we didn't do no business with the coast. Here in the '40s, that was stopped. You had a president called Careas, he put a Coast Guard out here, that the boats couldn't go Belize and come back loaded with stuff... So he kept out there blocked off, and forced them then to go to the coast to buy their goods.<sup>8</sup>*

The Islanders persisted in maintaining their separateness; as another interviewee said: "[We kept ourselves] separate from Honduras, in every way."<sup>9</sup> The most obvious aspect of this is their language, which many feel is the most important part of their heritage. Some elderly ones took pride in telling me that they had refused to learn Spanish, others that they only "learned enough Spanish to get into trouble". Here again a frustrated Honduran government tried to stop the teaching of English by force. A former mayor of Roatan explained:

*... the last year I was here in school, we changed the President over here and his education policy... allowed no English to be taught in the schools. So quite a few different people around then, would teach what they would call a private school, in between the hours of the*

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7. Pg. 14, *The Bay Islands or the Gentle Art of Cutting the Painter*, by Michael Duncan.

8. Osgood James, Utila.

9. Homer Woods, French Harbour, Roatan.

*Government school, they would teach a little bit of English reading and writing. In some ways we fought hard to keep the English traditions.*

*Well, they were mostly lenient with the people, but I remember one time, one Inspector of Schools, as they call it here, he got at the people down here and one evening I remember especially, children from, I guess, three or four different private schools was herded up there, to Government schools. They had a municipal policeman or somebody went down there, and ordered the children away from the private schools.<sup>10</sup>*

Another elderly gentleman said: "From the time I was a kid, you had to go to the Spanish school, from the time you seven years old, and they didn't want you to go to no English school. If they knew you were going in the [English] school, then they want you to pay a fine."<sup>11</sup>

The situation was the same on all the Islands, even the Utila Cays: "... we was treated pretty roughly by the Spanish people. The children got to be, our children, where if they spoke a word in English, they had to pay five cents for every word they used in English in the Spanish schools, in our schools [on the Cays], and they were treated pretty roughly."<sup>12</sup>

This rather drastic treatment seemed to increase the determination to preserve the language, a determination that was rooted in the strongly held, but mistaken, idea that the treaty guaranteed them the right to speak English. Several people told me of a visit Prince Phillip made to the Islands (or as one put it "One Englishman on a yacht") in the 1960's, which in their minds was to make sure that Honduras was treating the Islanders according to the terms of the treaty, including the right to speak English: "I don't remember which year it was that Prince Phillip came here... and it was things that he said, that the islands still had... to teach English, but that has never been carried out, because they don't want you to teach English here on this island... Yes, that was in the Treaty."<sup>13</sup>

The determination to ensure that their children learned to read and write English was very strong. One lady told me that her father, a farm laborer, would teach his family to read and write English on rainy days when he

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10. John Jay Woods, Coxen Hole, Roatan.

11. Homer Woods, French Harbour, Roatan.

12. Edith Howell, Utila Cays.

13. Cora Abbott, Oakridge, Roatan.

could not work on the land, sending to Belize for books. Most however, went to little private schools in between classes at government schools, run by old ladies who are much revered.

*And there was an old lady here that was educated in Belize that taught my father, my mother and taught me and taught my 19-year-old daughter. Went through about five generations of teaching English here... she was 80 years old and she was still teaching. Oh, she was teaching for nothing, for a couple of cents a month, you know, so she was a godsend to French Harbour. Without her, people would grow up to be ignorant of the English language. She had so many kids to teach, she taught the small ones in the morning from 9:00 till 11:00, from [age] 3 till 7, she would teach them. At age 7 you had to go to the Spanish school, so... then in the middle of the day she would teach the ones that was a little older. She would give us a midday class of one hour. [At lunchtime] I ate and zooped right over to her to catch a little English at lunchtime. And then from 4:00 o'clock in the evening, she would teach the ones that was a little older, like say from 13 to 15. That was the onliest way you could get any English here.<sup>14</sup>*

This stubborn insistence on keeping the language has had positive results. These younger Bay Islanders are totally bilingual and their ability to speak English has given them a distinct advantage in the present tourist boom. Roatan in particular has become quite popular with Americans, and the need for English speaking hotel workers, etc., has led to the government reversing its language policy. I was told that starting in 1995, English would be a compulsory subject in the Islands' schools. Human nature being what it is, the older generation of Islanders was not happy about this and saw it as a threat to their heritage.

Recently the government, in their efforts to assimilate the Islanders, tried to institute a celebration of the handing over of the Bay Islands, without success. One old lady told me of this attempt: "Everybody said... they're putting on black dresses. Go in mourning."<sup>15</sup>

Another way separation was maintained was by discouraging marriages with the Spanish-speaking Hondurans, referred to as Spaniards or Latins.

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14. Dudley Woods, French Harbour, Roatan.

15. Nora Johnson, French Harbour, Roatan.



"My mother said, 'if I could take the little Spanish blood out of me, I would do it.' She say, 'Now you girls never marry a Spanish guy' ", one lady in her 80s, said, laughing. She continued, "We Islanders... the old people was very prejudiced against them - Spaniards. They didn't want us to even speak to a Spaniard. We got where we would keep away."<sup>16</sup>

The islanders clung (and cling) tenaciously to their way of life and language, and their loyalty to things English, despite a lingering sense of betrayal over the treaty. As another lady, now 84, recounted:

*My daddy's father settled in Bonacca, he owned property there, from the English time, because we flew the English flag at first. He used to say, "They sold us to the Spaniards and I don't believe they paid for us". And that kind got to him, he didn't like the idea of them taking the English flag and the Spanish people taking possession of the islands. Poor old fellow, he was kind of despondent, because England had sold us.*<sup>17</sup>

The continuing loyalty to England despite the facts, has required some imaginative reasons, or excuses, for her actions to be passed on, which could be said to be part of the adjustment - empowerment process referred to earlier - if you don't know all the facts and the ones you do know conflict with your instilled loyalties, one way of coping is to find reasons you can accept. A woman now in her 90s, told me:

*Now [as a child] what I was told was that England owned us, we belonged to England. We were all English people and they owned the place. I think they [Honduras] owned... a place by the name of Puerto Barios, that belonged to Honduras, but England wanted that, or needed it, for some transportation or the other. So England gave us to Honduras and Honduras gave them Barios. That's how I understood it. I don't know whether it's the right story or not.*<sup>18</sup>

This explanation has an element of truth, in that one of the concerns of Honduras at the time of the treaty, and the subject of the first article of the

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16. Melba Jones, Bonacca.

17. Emily Phillips, Bonacca.

18. Edith Howell, Utila Cays.

treaty, was to ensure the Bay Islands' neutrality in light of the proposed trans-continental railway, very important in this pre-Panama Canal period.

One gentleman, in his 80s, blamed it all on the U.S. and the Vanderbilts: "The government was pressured - that is the British government - was pressured by the U.S. government to give over these islands back so that they could make that trade without any interruption from the British, you see. They wanted the trade, Vanderbilts - and it ended up by the islands being turned over to Honduras."<sup>19</sup> This too has an element of truth as the U.S. did indeed "put on pressure" as they saw the colony of the Bay Islands as a violation of the Munroe Doctrine.

Most however believed that they, and England, were simply victims of geography. One lady in Bonacca explained:

*These islands are very close to the shores here. I think it's 15 miles between Utila and the mainland. And it's the closest; [closer than] we are here. It's 30 miles right across here. So we are all so close. And I guess England saw where he would... they would have to... we'd always have trouble or something with the Spaniards. So close.*<sup>20</sup>

*I heard that England gave these islands to Honduras with the orders not to touch these people and their land. Well, that is about all I hear about it. Plenty of them in these days feel like going back to England, [Laughter] but they can't. We are too close to Honduras. That's all we know so we have to... [make the best of it]*<sup>21</sup>, said another, in Utila.

One man in Roatan felt it necessary to excuse to me the eventual reluctant acceptance of Honduran rule, which he said happened in his grandfather's time: "This is what I'm going to explain to you: we could not survive without Honduras. They realized that we had to commerce, and to be out here isolated, just commercing with Belize and then having a battleship in between 30 miles of water, you know, they realized it was impossible, so they accepted to become Honduran citizens."<sup>22</sup> Despite this acceptance, though, the Islanders continued to think of themselves as British. The same gentleman said, "All these people that had that British name still got that British feeling, that they're still British."

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19. Victor Ferrera, Bonacca.

20. Melba Jones, Bonacca.

21. Osgood James, Utila.

22. Dudley Woods, French Harbour, Roatan.

Inevitably, this separation has led to animosity on both sides. As one man explained, “ [The Honduran government], well, I think they think we are outsiders. I think so. That's why there is a little envious feeling between the Spanish and the English. You know, they say that we hate them and we say they hate us, but it's not that. It's just a little hard feeling because I think the people here were treated little hard with the Spanish, because it's when they come here, they is in charge. They give the English people a kind of hard time, and... I think it's a little resentment in what they done to us. So this goes right down to your kids. You know what I mean? Somebody do you something real bad and it keeps going on.”<sup>23</sup>

In recent years the Bay Islands have been experiencing an economic boom in comparison to the rest of Honduras, thanks to the Islanders' development of shrimp fishing and canneries as well as tourism. This has led to what they term an “influx” of Spanish speakers from the mainland looking for work, and to what is perceived as a threat to the Islanders' separate identity. “It's gone... it's gone from us. We no more English”, one old lady said to me sadly. This concern was echoed by many of the elderly people interviewed. Not everyone thought that however. Several younger people I spoke with and who were very helpful in arranging interviews, expressed great interest in their heritage and a determination to preserve it. One optimistic man in his 40s, who strongly believes that the Bay Islands are on the brink of real economic success and that the English-speaking Islanders have a bright future, intends to ensure that the oral traditions continue in his family. He put it this way:

*My grandfather would sit down and give me all the yarns, and I would lay down in his lap and listen at night. I tells my son and my daughter the stories my grandfather told me; they sat down on that porch and they listened to their grandfather with these yarns over and over again... till he died, and now I tells them*<sup>24</sup>.

As long as he, and others like him who understand the value of oral tradition keep on ‘telling the yarns’, their heritage will endure.

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23. Homer Woods, French Harbour, Roatan.

24. Dudley Woods, French Harbour, Roatan.

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Example of one of the 'yarns':

Family histories were replete with delightful stories like this one, related by an elderly gentleman in Coxen Hole: "My great grandfather... this was Touzlin Woods - he was an African, went down to Caymans - and he was serving the governor of Cayman, a slave, whatever you want to call it - and they used to get around pretty good, you know, him and his master - so the emancipation came up, they started to talk it, you know - so he was 'long with my grandmother, which was Emma - Emma Woods after she married to him - Emma Solomon. And he said to his master, he said, "Whenever the emancipation comes through", he say, "I would like you to marry me to Emma"; the woman he was 'long with - in those days, the slaves didn't marry, you understand, so he asked this request of his master, to marry him whenever the emancipation came through. And when the governor received the emancipation from England, he called him and he tell him the emancipation is here. Then my grandfather told him, "Well, is you ready to marry me?" So he tell him yes, bring the wife and he'd marry them. That made him make history - 'cause he was the first slave that got married in Cayman."

- Mr. Dillow Brooks, Coxen Hole, Roatan