

Rafael Reyes and the Putumayo or Içá River: Amazon explorations, cartography and diplomacy (1874–1909)

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Explorer, businessman, politician and cartographer Rafael Reyes (1850–1921) is a key – and scarcely known – character of the Colombian territorial history. In 1874, aiming the fathoming of a steamship trade route between Colombia and the North Atlantic, he crosses the Andes on foot and descends by canoe the Putumayo or Içá to the Amazon river, disturbing thereby established border agreements between Peru and Brazil over this disputed region, also claimed by Colombia and Equator. In order to clarify his situation, Reyes extends his trip to Rio de Janeiro, where he comes to get from Emperor Pedro II – with whom he claims to have discussed the maps of his explorations – a special permission to trade in the Putumayo, that will be effective until the ruin of his business in 1884. This same year Reyes gets involved in the civil wars of the country and enters this way in the world of professional politics. Between 1904 and 1909, as President of Colombia, he promotes a radical territorial reform of the country, dividing the traditional eight or nine Departments in over thirty new sections and seeking to put an end to the border disputes maintained with the neighboring countries. This research seeks to understand the role of Rafael Reyes on the border disputes between Brazil and the Andean-Amazonian Republics, particularly Colombia and Peru, both in his explorer stage and as head of State. Preliminary research reveals that the participation of Reyes was definitive in the course and in the closing of those controversies, specially in relation with the Putumayo river, in whose definition as the border between Colombia and Peru, the precedent of his voyages, recognized by Brazil, weighted significantly. This research is based on diplomatic documentation, as well as in maps and newspapers of the epoch. By analyzing the border controversies developed around the Putumayo river in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, in which Rafael Reyes had an outstanding participation, this research seeks to advance in the understanding of phenomena such as territory, territoriality, borders, States and nations.

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