

*Chasing Empire across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713–1763.* By

KENNETH J. BANKS. (Montreal and Kingston, Can.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.

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All too often, studies of the “Atlantic world” fail to venture beyond British or Iberian lands and waters. Although the reviews and articles published in this journal testify to a growing interest in the French Atlantic colonies, comparative works integrating French North American and Caribbean possessions are hard to come by. This relative disaffection for the French Atlantic may be explained by the ultimate failure of eighteenth-century French imperialism. Indeed, the striking inability of the most powerful nation in Continental Europe “to take a leading role in exploiting and settling the New World” (p. xi) has eluded satisfying explanations. In these respects and others, Kenneth Banks’s analysis of the nature and role of communications in the French Atlantic is a very welcome addition to the historiography.

Drawing on a wide array of primary material located in Paris, Bordeaux, Nantes, La Rochelle, and other archival repositories in France, Canada, and the United States, Banks offers an ambitious study of the importance of information exchange in shaping French imperial authority in eighteenth-century Quebec, New Orleans, and Saint Pierre on Martinique. Relying on a concept of communications that emphasizes “the dynamic and even volatile nature of mixing ideas, customs and emotions among people and groups in specific places and times” (p. 11), Banks details how the intricate workings of French Atlantic communications created a cultural rift between metropolitan and colonial leaders that the French absolutist state proved unable to prevent. In all three colonial capitals, he argues, “the challenges posed by transatlantic communications impinged on, modified, and increasingly undermined the French state’s control” (p. 13). While French Atlantic colonies

never ceased to rely on France for “funding, protection, and cultural cues” (p. 42), an introductory chapter convincingly shows that, following the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, colonial subordination to metropolitan France began to erode as the colonial leadership of Canada, Louisiana, and the Windward Islands increasingly asserted their own economic and political agendas. This argument is developed in six topical chapters exploring the transmission of news across the Atlantic, land and sea transportation routes, the use of state ceremonies in colonial contexts, the role of communications in articulating metropolitan and colonial visions of social order, the crucial role of merchants in shaping transatlantic communications, and the impact of patronage on information exchange.

The geographical, political, and cultural distance separating France from its Atlantic colonies is first illustrated by an examination of the sending and reception of the 1713 proclamation of the Peace of Utrecht. This fascinating case study points to the disparate efficiency of communications between the Marine, the state’s metropolitan agency in charge of colonial affairs, and colonial officials in North American and Caribbean colonies. If “the state could only be as strong as its most recent dispatches” (p. 64), its relative strength was comparatively much weaker in New France and Louisiana than in the Antilles. The ocean crossing from French Atlantic ports to the Caribbean took five to nine weeks and was much simpler and shorter than the Canadian or Gulf routes. In addition to climatic constraints closing access to Quebec for six to seven months of the year, sailing up and down the St. Lawrence River was rendered particularly difficult by strong winds, sandbars, and uncharted rock. Although state-sponsored hydrographic studies slowly improved navigation on the St. Lawrence, the voyage from the Grand Banks to Quebec, about one-third of the total route from La Rochelle to Quebec, usually took half of the total sailing time of six to twelve weeks. But Louisiana, on average seventeen weeks away from the French coast, was by far the most isolated colony. While the relative proximity of Saint Domingue allowed New Orleans to gather

metropolitan and colonial news, contacts between Louisiana and Saint Domingue undermined the economic development of the former as ships carrying goods and supplies (including slaves) destined to Louisiana often sold their cargoes to Saint Domingue's planters instead. Local conditions actually determined how information as well as goods circulated in each colonial domain. Banks's analysis of the evolution of colonial water and land transportation systems effectively shows that "once royal orders and personnel reached the ports, colonial traditions, economics, technology, African slave labour, Native allies, and even the cooperation of colonists themselves increasingly dictated how, when, and under what circumstances they circulated" (p. 87).

The colonial iterations of state ceremonies are a case in point. Colonial public ceremonies were much less frequent and "reflected particular colonial fears and concerns" (p. 104). Metropolitan instructions concerning the organization of public celebrations were rarely followed consistently. When in 1729 royal authorities ordered that colonial towns and capitals celebrate the dauphin's birth, only in the Iles du Vent did colonial celebrations adhere faithfully to the metropolitan format of Te Deums, processions, fireworks, and bonfires. If the economic affluence and relative safety of the islands allowed local officials "more faithfully [to] transmit metropolitan models and concerns" (p. 126), the military and diplomatic situation of New France led to much smaller celebrations, designed to convey a sense of security and prosperity to the colonists in attendance. As for New Orleans, Louisiana officials, caught in the Natchez War, decided to ignore the order and forgo celebrations altogether.

The peculiar threat that Indians, slaves, and unruly indentured servants and soldiers posed to the colonial social order induced metropolitan and colonial authorities to attempt to restrict the movement and interactions of all three groups. Although Banks devotes only twenty-six pages to this issue, he does an excellent job of outlining the ways in which local circumstances shaped the ruling elite's responses to the challenges of this "marginalized estate" (p. 152). This section shows

the leverage certain “inferior” groups could exercise in the varied contexts of New France, Louisiana, and Martinique. While their lot left much to be desired, colonial soldiers everywhere “could express dissatisfaction within certain bounds and have their demands respected by colonial authorities” (p. 138), since the colonial hierarchy depended on their goodwill. Similarly, the mission Iroquois of New France of Sault Saint Louis and Lac des Deux Montagnes, on whom the colonial leadership depended for valuable military information, exercised even greater independence from colonial authority.

In his analysis of French metropolitan and colonial attempts to control the slave population, Banks shows that “limitations on learning, travel, and assembly, all components of effective communications” (p. 141) were the primary objectives of the 1685 and 1724 versions of the *Code Noir* promulgated for the Antilles and Louisiana. In a welcome departure from some recent interpretations of the *Code Noir*, Banks convincingly argues that the first five articles, imposing Catholicism in the colonies and ordering that slaves be baptized as Catholics, represented more than a mere attempt “to maintain a Christian sense of order” in the colonies as they “also effectively sealed slaves off from ideas, education, and even fellowship not directly supervised by the church” (p. 142). In showing how Caribbean and Louisiana planters adapted or disregarded certain provisions of the *Code Noir* and how slaves were able to raise planters’ anxiety by successfully undermining efforts to monitor their movements and collusion with poor whites, Banks echoes much of the very good scholarship produced on these issues. He is not inclined to romanticize race relations in that colony and provides excellent New Orleans vignettes at the beginning and the end of his fifth chapter.

Subsequent examination of transatlantic merchants’ role in shaping the relationships between the metropolitan state and its American colonies uncovers yet another important and thus far largely ignored aspect of the limitations of metropolitan control over colonial affairs. Between

1715 and 1765, the ministry of Marine relied on the hundreds of merchant vessels carrying letters and supplies to keep information flowing between France and its colonies. The crucial role of merchants in disseminating metropolitan orders and colonial responses led them to make “the short but significant leap from news suppliers to policy advisers quickly, and from advisers to critics even faster” (p. 173). While colonial-based merchants occasionally challenged authorities in Quebec and New Orleans, the pressure of transatlantic merchants was most effective in the Iles du Vent, the focal point of French transatlantic shipping. Despite repeated efforts, royal authorities and colonial administrators proved unable to supervise merchant activities in the Antilles. If colonial merchants and metropolitan merchants did not always see eye to eye on a number of issues, especially when it came to allowing foreign slave traders to supply the islands, they rarely hesitated to criticize the state openly or to evade official commercial regulations.

Banks’s ability to render and interpret the intricacies of information exchange in the French Atlantic is best seen in the final chapter, an admirable overview of the complex relationship between the metropolitan state and the colonial elites. The description and analysis of colonial power structures in the French Atlantic alone should be required reading for all students of the Atlantic world. Always mindful of “the diversity of power relations” (p. 214) in New France, Martinique, and Louisiana, Banks shows that, despite the systematic incorporation of colonial elites into the Marine’s administration and the seemingly “well-articulated, integrated, and hierarchical organization in each colony” (p. 194), constant disagreements and competition for promotion and honors both undermined “the facade of elite unity” (p. 219) and confronted the state with a myriad of often contradictory and unreliable information. Thus tensions in the colonial elite and between metropolitan and creole leaders (especially during wartime) proved the greatest challenge to the French state’s ability to control its overseas possessions.

This highly readable study of communication and the exercise of power in the French Atlantic world sheds new light on an important aspect of an understudied colonial system. As Banks himself points out, his work does not pretend to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Saint Domingue, for instance, is left out despite its transformation into the most important French overseas possession during the first half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, his book should be read by all Atlanticists, especially those unfamiliar with the French context. Kenneth Banks's comparative approach, his use of often ignored archival resources in France and in North America, and his familiarity with early American and early modern French scholarship could also be a model for future scholarship on the French Atlantic.