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Richard R. John. *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995. vii + 369 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-83338-8.

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The U.S. postal system has received surprisingly little historical attention over the years, and even less so in recent historical discussions of the state, politics, political culture, and administration. Even in the latest turn toward the state, notably among the “new institutionalists,” the postal system has remained on the fringes of historical inquiry. While there may be many reasons for this, I suspect that part of the problem is a sense that it has all been said before. After all, conventional wisdom knows that the history of the U.S. postal system is the history of the “spoils system,” of civil service reform, of the weak or non-existent pre-New Deal federal state. And for many historians, the study of large-scale political institutions such as the Post Office Department is mired in the worst excesses of the “old” political history—a place we have left behind and with good reason. Despite some recent works that have attempted to reconsider the subject from various perspectives, the history of the U.S. postal system seems remarkably resistant to a sustained historical inquiry or interest.

In this work, Richard John not only directs our attention to this relatively neglected area of study, but he does so from an innovative interpretive position that opens new ways of approaching and understanding the subject. Taking, as he terms it, a contextualist approach, he examines the postal system within the historical context of the early Republic and the role it played in important social, political, and cultural changes taking place over a nearly seventy year period. In an arena where too few have ventured to show the way, John has set himself a large task—a task made larger by his insistence on understanding the postal system as an agent of social change in its own right, with significant impact on shaping the contours and outcome of certain critical moments. Specifically, he is concerned “not merely to locate the postal

system *in* the social process, but to explore its role *as* a social process, and, in particular, to consider some of the ways in which the communications revolution that it set in motion transformed American public life” (p. 24). This is an ambitious project equal to the size and significance of its subject, and John does an impressive job of developing his thesis with a wealth of detailed historical information and deftly handled political, social, and cultural analysis.

Both symbol and reality of the federal government in the early decades of the fledgling republic, John asks us to consider the postal system’s significance as the centerpiece of a communications “revolution.” As John makes clear, this was a revolution with very decided market implications and intentions, creating a network of federally designed and funded transportation and communications links that drew together the people, producers, and places of an increasingly far-flung nation. In the first chapters of this book, he examines the policy and structural innovations that established and deepened federal postal dominance in this communications revolution. But, true to his thesis, John goes beyond a mere discussion of the politics behind this transformation to the impact of the transformation itself on shaping a new, national, public sphere for this new, democratic republic. According to John, the Post Office Act of 1792 laid the cornerstone for postal impact on American public life when it permitted the transmission of newspapers through the mails, alongside laying the groundwork for a greatly expanded postal network. It also protected the sanctity of the mails from surveillance and other interference—a critically important innovation in a world context where privacy in communications was far from a right in law or in practice.

Then, turning to one of the central political-

administrative figures of the early postal system, Postmaster General John McLean, John identifies the early administrative innovations of this nascent bureaucratic enterprise under McLean's leadership. In so doing, John asks us to reconsider our assumptions about national politics and the federal state in the early Republic, which is an important addition to our understanding of the supposedly "stateless" United States in the period before the New Deal. For historians of bureaucracies and of business enterprises, John makes another significant contribution when he identifies administrative and managerial innovations in a time and a place where we would hardly have expected to find them. It is virtually a commonplace among business historians to date the introduction of middle management practices from the middle nineteenth century and the creation of huge railway enterprises. In this study, John shows that middle level management techniques and principles already existed in a well-defined form within the postal system—a system which could not have functioned without its three-tiered administrative structure and its "hub and spoke" distribution system.

Bringing together the federal level politics and the federal level administrative developments that occurred under John McLean as Postmaster General, John explores and explains the administrative structure being set in place even as politics influenced and shaped the postal system that was being developed—and more. As he concludes: "By greatly expanding the power of the Postmaster General, the completion of the postal network threatened to tilt the delicate balance between the postal system, the rest of the executive branch, and the individual states" (p. 110). It was this consolidation of political and administrative power in the federal state, in the form of the Post Office Department, which would influence the political and administrative battle over "spoils" and states rights in the Jackson presidential campaign and administration. In his later chapter on the Jacksonians, John expands this political analysis in a discussion of the efforts by Jacksonians to hold the federal state administration accountable to their understanding of the classical republican creed. Rotation in office—the so-called "spoils" system—wreaked some havoc with the administrative operations and structure of political institutions like the Post Office Department, but it also laid the groundwork for building the mass party system that the Jacksonians had brought into existence in the election of 1828.

This analysis of the spoils system is not altogether a new one, but John ties it to the power of the postal system as the centerpiece of a central, federal state—the

very thing that states' rights advocates like the Jacksonians were concerned to limit. For political historians, the power of his analysis lies here, by showing how the Jacksonians manipulated the power of appointment to public office to bring together their political *creed* of the democratic republic and their political *need* to build the mass party that had brought them into power. In other words, it might be said there was an internal logic to the spoils system that, abuses notwithstanding, was not entirely at odds with earlier assumptions about the role of the postal system in creating an informed and politically active public among its widespread communities and citizens. The nineteenth century notion of "the egalitarian ideal, which held that every citizen had the necessary ability to hold public office and in this way to participate directly in the affairs of state" (p. 135), was widespread, but not until the Jacksonians would it become policy.

But this policy, like the politics behind it, was limited to free, white men. In one of his most fascinating discussions, John looks at the public spaces controlled by the postal system. Here he argues that the postal system facilitated "an imagined community that incorporated a far-flung citizenry into the political process" (p. 168)—and this despite, or perhaps because of, the constraints placed on free blacks and on women in that public space. This is a wide-ranging discussion, which deals with the aristocratic tradition and influence in securing public office, the introduction of the military model for public officers, the exclusion of free blacks from mail delivery, and the problems faced by women in the male-dominated public space of the post offices. Arguing that "official norms helped to shape public attitudes regarding the boundaries of American public life" (p. 142), he concludes that "(t)hrough a combination of customs, laws, and social conventions, the central government and ordinary Americans had together constructed a new social type—the citizen as free, white, and male—and a new kind of social space—an imagined community that was more or less congruent with the territorial confines of the United States" (p. 168). As the only public institution as widespread as the citizens of the nation it served, the postal system was a central factor in creating and regulating that new social space.

However, it is also here, as well as in his chapters on Sabbatarianism and on abolitionism, that some may find it difficult to see the postal system as an *agent* of social change with such powers to shape the emergent nation's political culture and social conflicts. John's treatment of the Sabbatarian controversy—transmitting the mails and opening the post offices on the Sabbath—

is compelling, as is his argument that this needs to be seen as “a struggle over the proper role of the central government in American public life and not, as is often presumed, merely a struggle between competing social groups” (p. 191). Likewise, his discussion of the abolitionist controversy—the mailing of unsolicited abolitionist literature to southerners—brings to light an important incident in the battle over states’ rights vs. federal authority in the years preceding the Civil War. However, it is less convincing in these cases to see the postal system as the *agent* of change. It seems more reasonable that the postal system was the *medium* used to provoke change, or was the *space* in which certain battles over social change would be fought. John himself seems to suggest this when he notes of the Sabbatarian controversy that “it demonstrated how easily a small group of activists could take advantage of the communications revolution that had been wrought by the postal system, the stagecoach industry, and the press to mobilize public support throughout the United States” (p. 202). Who is agent and who is subject here?

I am not interested in splitting hairs, and I am more than willing to accept the postal system as an agent of social change. And, certainly, John seems to equate “agent of social change” with the “communications revolution” he has so ably shown the postal system to have initiated in this period. However, that seems to me less a clarification of “agency” and more an opening to explore what it means for the state to *act* as an agent of social change. Published in 1995, John’s study came out at a time when new works on the state, ideology, law, policy, and institutions had somewhat recently begun to appear—some in response to the much earlier effort to “bring the state back in”. Many of these works take as their central premise the notion of the state or its institutions as agents of social change, and a vibrant discussion emerged among the political scientists, sociologists, and historians who take the state seriously as an agent in its own right. In a very important way, I believe John’s study contributes

to that discussion, although without directly engaging it, and that is to be regretted. For example, his short conclusion takes us back all-too-briefly to the “communications revolution” where, in his interpretation, it all began. But after such a journey through administrative history, politics, political culture, public life, and social conflicts, it would have helped tremendously to tie it all together with some more generalized attention to how the postal system *acted* as the agent of social change and in “shaping the boundaries of American public life” (p. 283).

Even so, this does not diminish the power of John’s study, or his astute analysis of the postal system in this early period of U.S. history. Situating this postal history in its larger historical context and political significance, John has done a very fine job with a huge, complex, and unwieldy subject. This is an exhaustively researched study and it draws on a wealth of detail to make its case. More than that, it raises some important new ways of understanding events, such as Sabbatarianism and abolitionism, that should be of interest to historians of nineteenth century America. Political historians will be especially interested in his treatment of Jacksonian democracy in action and his attention to political culture and American public life. Business and economic historians will find his discussion of the communications revolution and the expanding postal network useful additions to our knowledge of government policy influences on the early development of the national market in this period. And those of us who study the state and state formation should find this a welcome contribution as well, not only for taking on a neglected and important subject, but also for taking that subject in new directions.

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