Communications in the French Atlantic


Reviewed by Gayle K. Brunelle (Department of History, California State University, Fullerton)
Published on H-Atlantic (November, 2003)

The ambitious scope of his project, however, and the fact that, as Banks points out, far too little scholarship has been devoted to communications in the French Atlantic, mean that there are gaps in the book, and topics upon which he touches all too briefly, before moving on to another topical "port of call."

Communications between France and its Atlantic colonies depended on a wide variety of factors, some of which the French state could control more easily than others. As a rule, those nodes of the communications infrastructure closer to Paris, such as the French Atlantic ports and the ships that sailed from them, came more easily under the supervision of the French Marine. Once a ship left Bordeaux, Nantes, Rochefort or one of the other French ports from which naval and merchant vessels embarked for the trans-Atlantic crossing, the ability of the crown and its representatives to control the information it carried dropped rapidly. Distance, Banks avers, was less a problem than historians have believed. Neither was the crown lacking in a desire to micro-manage information and its own image in the colonies as successfully as it was able to do in France. But climate, unfamiliar terrain, and the necessity of information to travel via often unorthodox routes, such as in the hands of Native Ameri-
can or even British emissaries or merchants, posed significant obstacles to the ability of the crown to monitor and control how and when information reached the colonies. An even greater hurdle to efficient management of the colonies from France lay in the flood of new, strange, and difficult-to-digest data from the colonies. Ignorance, Banks seems to be arguing, posed a much greater problem for the French government than distance, although it seems likely that distance was in itself a significant factor in fostering that ignorance. There is no getting around the fact that distance greatly increased the time it took information to be communicated even on the smoothest of voyages to the Windward Islands.

Nor, according to Banks, could the French government assume that, once it had communicated vital information to the colonies, such as announcements of new treaties or royal births, the habitants and their governors would react to that information or put it to use in a manner similar to that of French royal officials. Moreover, far more than was true in the relationship between the royal government in Versailles and the provinces, the French government had to listen to and act upon the information, advice, and complaints of its overseas subjects. The inability of the French state to control the flow of information between France and the colonies lessened its ability to control its representatives in the colonies as well. Colonial governors and other royal officials, meanwhile, when not bickering among themselves over sources of patronage, had to innovate in a myriad of ways never envisioned in France to ensure the survival of their colonies. This in turn, Banks contends, undermined the ability of the French state to construct an empire out of its disparate colonies, although Banks also argues that apart from a handful of thinkers, no one in France envisioned the French overseas possessions as an integrated empire either. He leaves it an open question as to whether the inability of the French to imagine their possessions as an empire derived from their realization that they lacked the transportation and communications infrastructure to make such an empire a reality. What Banks does show is that those colonies, such as the Windward Islands, least dependent upon the crown for communication and information, tended also to be the most independent politically, economically, and culturally, from France. Quebec, in many ways a military rather than an economic colony, was both highly dependent on the French Marine for information and military protection and also socially, culturally, and economically more “French,” and its governors evinced less political independence as well.

Banks attempts to bring together in this book the insights of historians of French absolutism regarding the importance of communications and information, and especially of the crown to control the reception and interpretation of that information among the ordinary people. Therefore, although Banks discusses briefly river and land transport in the New World, he concentrates primarily on the flow of ships and information from France to the colonies. William Beik and others have shown that the ability of the state bureaucracy to increase the power of the center depended in great part on its ability to control patronage, and thus its image and that of its representatives, elsewhere in France. Control from the center and the reach of royal power was much weaker in the colonies because it was much more difficult for the Marine in France to amass, manage, and disseminate information to and from the New World, although the difficulties varied from region to region. This, in Banks’s view, explains the “failure of empire” in the French Atlantic. Thus Banks’s study is in some ways Euro-centric in the nature of the historiographical question at its core. This is not a criticism; Europe was as much a part of the Atlantic World as Africa or the Americas and his findings are significant. Still, as a result of his emphasis, he is unable to devote much attention to some of the most interesting problems of communications and transport in French colonial history, including the intriguing issue of cultural brokerage, between royal officials representing French culture, and colonists, especially Creoles, not to mention between the French and Native Americans and Africans. This book covers much ground, but as Banks himself points out, it necessarily leaves many other themes and questions open to further research.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-atlantic


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8415