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As I was preparing to write this review of Kenneth Banks’s *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763*, I came across a copy of the book on the “World History” shelf of my local bookstore. It initially struck me as odd that this book would find a home on this particular shelf, assuming (no doubt due to my Canadianist preconceptions) that it would be with other works on Canadian history and the French empire in America. On second thought, however, I empathized with the employee who had to categorize Banks’s work, as it could conceivably find a home on any number of shelves: French, European or Latin American. Banks’s book resists classification both in terms of national scope and historiographical mode. At its most fundamental level, it is a book about knowledge in the French Atlantic world of the early-eighteenth century—about its generation and dissemination, about the uses to which it was put by colonial administrators, and about communicating it to those who needed to know while preventing its broadcast to those who did not. The primary function of colonial administration in Paris and overseas, argues Banks, was to gather and disseminate massive amounts of information about Canada, Louisiana and the Îles de Vent, so that despite the many obstacles to this process, the empire kept chugging along. As long as information kept flowing, the empire functioned. “The state could only be as strong as its most recent dispatches” (p. 64). When the flow of information stopped, or contact was interrupted, royal authority could be threatened. Banks takes a generally Eurocentric focus to show that overall the French state was activist and interventionist in colonial affairs (p. 5). Constraints on state control arose not from distance and the ambitions of petty tyrants, but from the “challenge of trying to absorb, comprehend, evaluate and coordinate a very complex number of tasks in a wide variety of climates across a vast ocean which most officials never saw or experienced first-hand” (p. 5).

In seeking to understand the role that communications and information played in the making of the first French empire, Kenneth Banks’s book plays to current historiographical interests in pushing the lines of empire outward, in the Atlantic as a topic of study in its own right and in types of empires how they were made and held together.[1] Banks’s attempt to understand the process of empire-creation is an extremely valuable beginning to an underdeveloped topic in eighteenth-century history; one that does not fall prey to an assumption about the naturalness of European colonialism. The first French “empire” was a collection of overseas claims that were administered as separate entities by the central authority of the Marine in Paris. As an empire, it was “always in the making but never made,” and the making of it required vast amounts of information which traversed the Atlantic Ocean, France, the Caribbean and the vast interior of North America year after year (p. 7). Knowledge of the territory, people, personalities, economies, conflicts and cultures of the colonies became inseparable from the exercise of sovereignty overseas.

Banks explores both the discourse and praxis of empire in the French Atlantic under the overarching category of communications. In terms of praxis, he examines topics such as the efficiency of the mail system by quantifying response times to letters in chapter 3, and merchant networks and their effect on the functioning of the state in the colonies in chapter 6. In terms of discourse analysis, he looks at the ritual and discursive components
of communications—how knowledge was communicated through symbolic ritual in various events and circumstances. For example, in chapter 4, “State Ceremonies and Local Agendas,” Banks examines the discourse and symbolic meaning of state ceremony that surrounded a single event—the birth of the Dauphin in 1729. He seeks to understand what this event meant in the colonies, what its celebration symbolized to colonists at all levels of society, and how and why celebrations differed from those of the metropole and other colonies.

To my mind this is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book as Banks manages to combine discourse analysis with a specific historical moment. Banks’s exploration of the symbolic meaning of state ritual in overseas colonies expands the parameters of legal, economic and political manifestations of empire. By exploring the words, symbols and rituals of state influence in the colonies and the attempts local administrators made to manipulate their own images and that of the Royal authority they embodied, Banks suggests the central importance of image and performance in manifestations of power.

By understanding ceremony as a means of maintaining and asserting state power, however, Banks misses out on the transformative potential of public ritual. For example, he concentrates on Quebec to enumerate the symbolic meaning of various aspects of state ceremonials surrounding the birth of the Dauphin, giving little consideration to audience participation in or resistance to embodied messages, or to how meanings might change in transmission. No doubt colonial authorities were trying to enhance an image of their own power and position in colonial society and create a sense of security through martial displays, but we are told little about reception. For example, how did native peoples present at Quebec on that day view the displays of martial strength—as a security, as a threat, as a sign of alliance, as the symbolic transformation of land from one to another? A comparison with metropolitan state ceremonies leads Banks to suggest that state authorities had little control over colonial celebrations, and that local authorities were relatively free to express whatever messages they desired (p. 126). Does this represent a breakdown in communications, a limit on royal authority or, as Banks suggests, a reaction to local conditions?

This issue points to the central weakness of the book as a whole—a tendency to treat large and complex questions in a rapid and often suggestive fashion. No doubt this problem is a symptom of the very scope and ambition of the work which has much to say in the broad context but less in its details. Banks, at times, succumbs to the temptation of inductive reasoning, by drawing large, general conclusions from very specific evidence. For example, following a section about the career of the Inden- dant of the French Caribbean Islands, Michel Bégon, and his various interests (which included collecting the flora of the Americas, leading to the naming of the begonia in his honor) and vast correspondence, Banks concludes, “in short, informing well and being well informed on transatlantic issues comprised the sinews of power for overseas administrators such as Bégon” (p. 27). This is perhaps true, but the evidence presented does not clearly point to the conclusion reached. The problem is not necessarily in the conclusion, but rather that the evidence lacks depth and leaves the reader wanting more.

Banks’s work is often too general, and at times lacks analysis. Banks only alludes to the issue of how the metropole attempted to reconfigure the colonies according to its own patterns and limited understandings. His concentration on central administration and the ruling orders results in little attention paid to issues such as the place of natives in land-based communications systems and alliances in the interior of each colony. Father Duverger’s diary accounts of his trip through the interior of North America in 1753-1754, for example, seem to present the pays d’en haut as a bastion of French civilization. The tone of this account seems too romantic to be of much use in describing travelling conditions as Banks wishes it to do, and could benefit from a more critical reading (pp. 94-96). Likewise, Banks’s treatment of the lower orders of society remains an under-developed part of the book. Chapter 5 posits a relationship between communications and political freedom, but neglects local sites of resistance for a legalistic view—examining law codes to determine elite responses to nebulous and ill-defined threats such as news exchange, gossip, voiced discontent or violence (p. 144).

Such criticisms, however, do not entirely do justice to Banks’s book and threaten to overshadow its larger contributions. The juxtaposition of events in France with events in New France and the Caribbean is a useful and much needed addition to the literature on the French Atlantic empire. By drawing attention to the crucial issue of communications, the book nuances our understanding of the role of royal officials in the administration of the empire. The wide geographical scope of the work allows the author to explore the French Atlantic without overly privileging any one region. Banks avoids making the colonies a subordinate part of a French attempt.
to build an imperial hegemony, and equally manages not to render France a mere shadowy background— the unknown and unknowing metropole— to localized colonial histories. The root of the book is, instead, found somewhere on the North Atlantic of the eighteenth century where two ships passing in the fog of the Grand Banks, one heading east and the other west, might pass each other without ever knowing of the other’s existence. This book pushes well established boundaries set as much by modern national divisions and the wide distribution of archival material as by historical circumstances and events. Banks’s concentration on the process of empire creation, rather than the created entity, brings into relief the combination of contingency and planning that led to the incorporation of the Atlantic into Europe’s cultural and political orbit and the colonization of non-European lands and cultures. The result is a truly ambitious comparative study (with a European focus) of cultural, political, economic and social communications across vast spaces, multiple climates and drastically different creole and native cultures.

Banks has taken on an enormously ambitions project, highly imaginative in scope and content. His research is broad, concentrating on letter correspondence primarily in French Archives, but also in archives in Canada and the United States. Due to a lack of depth, the book perhaps promises to do more than it actually achieves in the end, but in the promise it forces us to expand our thinking about the eighteenth-century Atlantic world and the French empire. In the final analysis, this is its greatest strength and attribute and the best reason for reading the book. This is a book that was needed. Banks’s agility in negotiating the historiography of regions as diverse as Quebec, Louisiana, France and the Caribbean demonstrates the great utility of a comparative approach to French Atlantic history. He aims to provide a “true synthesis of experience” and, if the details are somewhat lacking in places, he does manage to give an impression of the vastness of the subject and its many nuances—an achievement in itself (p. xii).

Notes
