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Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. xxii + 319 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-7735-2444-4.

Review by Pierre H. Boulle, McGill University.

In this groundbreaking work, Kenneth J. Banks challenges much of the historical production on the early modern French empire, including that of this reviewer. He states his main thesis as:

“Communications--gathering, analyzing, displaying, storing and disseminating information and representations of authority--lay at the heart of the state's task in building an overseas empire.... The issue was not, as many historians have blithely assumed, that the colonies were too far away and were ignored by the king.... Constraint on state control ... arose 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 state officials [and] leaders never saw or experienced first-hand” (p.5).

In order to test this thesis, Banks focuses on three of the Atlantic dominions of France--Canada, Louisiana, and the Lesser Antilles (especially Martinique)--consciously leaving aside the more complex and less easily accessible records of the most important Atlantic colony, St-Domingue (present-day Haiti), and those areas of the French empire not directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Marine: African and Indian holdings as well as the Indian Ocean islands of Bourbon and Ile de France (present-day Réunion and Mauritius). Although one may regret these exclusions, the choice is legitimate, as the three case studies offer Banks with distinct forms of colonial experiences with which to test his premises: Canada, dominated by the military; the plantation economy of the West Indies, with its large slave population; the insecure and distant society of Louisiana, with its complex ethnic mix. The stress on communications over the more usual economic or strategic approaches to imperial studies is what makes up the work's originality.

A first chapter summarizes, mainly on the basis of secondary material, events in “the French Atlantic,” from its inception in the early seventeenth century, through its maturation in the early eighteenth century and its supposed decline, culminating in the Peace of Paris of 1763. The end date has much to do, one supposes, with the genesis of the book as a Canadian dissertation, for 1763 doesn't mark the end of what has been called the first empire, either economically or in terms of structural innovations in organization and communication, rather the reverse. Rid of New France, the crown reorganized the empire into a more coherent whole, softened mercantilist restrictions, and rebuilt the navy, so that the period between the end of the Seven Years' War and the Revolutionary wars were boom years for the colonial economy.

Further chapters focus on six separate aspects of what the author calls communications. Chapter two, which investigates how news of the Peace of Utrecht (1713) was transmitted to the various colonies, asks why each colony treated the news differently: full celebration in Martinique; nothing more than a Te Deum in Louisiana; no celebration whatsoever in New France. This leads the author to an interesting description of how official news circulated, from the form of the message to the means by which it was transmitted. We learn that news of the signing of the peace had arrived in each colony much ahead of the royal proclamation, by way of the enemy, and that the official news never reached Quebec, thereby prohibiting any form of celebration

Chapter three studies the means of transport available across the Atlantic and within each colony. It offers some of the most interesting observations of the book. Studying sailing times to various colonies, on the basis of a sample of ship logs, Banks comes to the conclusion that it was not so much distance, as is usually argued, as time and impediments to travel, notably contrary winds, that loosened metropolitan control over colonies. Easier cross-Atlantic communications, as was the case for the West Indies, encouraged state control, while the isolation caused by difficulty of travel to Canada and to Louisiana fostered autonomous solutions. Most interesting, perhaps, are the

observations concerning internal colonial communications. He argues that New France, "with an easily accessible riverine/land network ... which required cooperation from colonists to construct and utilize ... appear[s] to have forged greater independence from the state," whereas, in the case of the West Indies, "seaborne contact lent itself to greater state intervention" (p.67). On the other hand, dominant winds provided the West Indies with easy communication on a northeast/southwest axis, so that, if "the ease of the Antilles route invited greater metropolitan control ... the intercolonial route defeated the state's ability to enforce that control." "This conflict," the author concludes, "lay at the very heart of the issue of illicit trade and, ultimately, of Creole autonomy in the islands" (p. 84). Banks shrewdly suggests as well that easy transatlantic communication with the West Indies may have had as much to do with the preference of metropolitan commerce for the region as the type of agricultural goods produced there.

With chapter four, we turn to colonial ceremonies of power. Through the study of the ceremonies marking the arrival of new governors, principally that of La Galissonnière at Quebec City in 1747, and the celebrations marking the birth of the dauphin in 1729, Banks attempts to demonstrate "divergences from practices in France," the existence of "an independent public" in the colonies, and "how little control metropolitan authorities in fact exercised over public colonial celebrations" (p. 126). To be sure, it was the state's agencies, rather than municipalities, as was the case in France, that arranged such celebrations; one would be surprised of the reverse, given the weakness of colonial municipalities. It may be as well that the colonial social hierarchy differed from that of France, though Banks' analysis, based on Governor La Galissonnière's reception (p. 112) is hardly convincing.[1] Nor was the use of classical motifs on celebratory arches particularly innovative, and the distancing between elite and commoners evidenced by the use of Latin phrases has been noted in the case of early modern royal entries.[2] More to the point, conclusions drawn from various events are somewhat far-fetched. Whether instructions sent to officials concerning celebrations were vague so as to leave leeway for local customs (p. 116) or because it was assumed that the form of such standard functions was sufficiently well-known not to require elaboration remains to be seen. And was the firing of cannons and muskets during the Quebec celebration of the dauphin's birth really intended, as the author suggests, as "a means to assuage colonists' anxiety over possible encroachments from their Anglo-American and Native enemies" (p. 124)? This reviewer at least found more similarities between French and colonial practices than evidences that "French practices collided with colonial traditions" (p. 110).

The next chapter deals with attempts to control the "'fourth estate' of the marginalized" (p. 128), composed of soldiers, convicts, *petits blancs*, slaves, and free blacks as well as Native and non-Catholic peoples. The author suggests unusual cooperation within this group, or at least among members of the same colour, whether free or unfree, a type of cooperation which worked against official efforts to isolate each group and which, whether real or imagined, seriously worried the dominant groups. Escaped soldiers appear to have obtained the support of the population and those remaining in service appear to have been reluctant to quell rebellions. Louisiana regulations attempting to control the consumption of alcohol were regularly ignored, and slaves and free blacks maintained contacts despite the stringent regulations of the *Code Noir*. Banks' interpretation of the latter correctly stresses the importance of the religious clauses as a means of attempting to limit contacts to those approved by the church. The overall image given by this chapter is generally accurate, though one would have wished more attention to *maronnage* (albeit more prevalent on St-Domingue than on Martinique and Guadeloupe, because of the size of the former) and, in the case of Canada, to the presence of a safety valve--the vast hinterland--as an explanation for the apparent easier control of the lower orders.

Chapter six deals with mercantile networks, parallel to and vastly more efficient than the official ones, ultimately connecting local and metropolitan merchants. Banks correctly notes that, without the services of merchants, the state could hardly have communicated regularly with local administrators or, at times, obtained reliable information concerning colonial affairs. He stresses the relationships that developed between merchants and administrators and the uses made by the former of the information they gathered, at times to circumvent official policies. Interesting details are provided concerning ship movements and the role of commercial correspondence. The author ends the chapter with the failure of the state's effort, following the disasters of the Seven Years' War, to reassert its control, concluding that, particularly in the West Indies, "the ability of merchants ... to establish trading links beyond the control of metropolitan and colonial authorities ... [had] long-term consequences. ... [Having] established their own postal systems ... and, most importantly, developed their own means of collecting and gathering information ... metropolitan and colonial merchants began to criticize the state, even as planters and local colonial merchants evaded state supervision" (p. 183).

The final chapter addresses problems and conflicts occasioned by what Banks elegantly calls “the fractured royal voice” (p. 194), that is, the different and often competing expressions of authority by the various agents of royal power. The author notes how Marine officials in France, unfamiliar with colonial reality, were dependent on information received from the colonies and how contradictory that information could be. Two sets of cultural divisions, sometimes overlapping, are stressed. The first is between French and Creole agents, the other is between military and civilian officials, for whom Banks uses the terms “robe and sword” as a shortcut.[3] Two particularly well-known personal conflicts during the Seven Years’ War are used as case studies: the disagreements between Louisiana Governor Kerlérec and *commissaire-ordonnateur* Rochemore, who opposed each other and, in the kind of power vacuum occasioned by the absence of directives from the mother-country during the war, sought public support within the colony, thereby creating factions. The other is the even more famous disagreements in Canada over strategy, the quality of local militias and Native allies, and much else, between the governor, the Québec-born marquis de Vaudreuil-Cavagnial, and the head of the French troops, the marquis de Montcalm, each followed by their own subordinates which formed a set of clients. Banks stresses here the differences in culture and life experience between the two groups; he appears to place the principal blame on the French-born, or at least on the circumstances which gave them too little time to acclimatize to the local situation. More to the point, Banks addresses the quandary in which conflicting reports about the others placed officials at Versailles, left unable to judge precisely the situation and relegated to issuing platitudes about getting along. The author concludes the chapter with the efforts of the duc de Choiseul, the minister at the end of the war, to rethink metropolitan-colonial relations, by giving more say to local sentiment, notably by appointing a Creole governor to Martinique and, later, a Creole as his *premier commis*. Banks sees this, and other measures, notably economic (what Jean Tarrade has called the “*exclusif mitigé*”[4]) as Versailles’s “virtual confess[ion] that the colony was slipping beyond the grasp of metropolitan authority” (p. 215). This interpretation ignores the spread of colonial sentiments to the French elite, and, particularly, Choiseul’s own connections to the West Indian planter elite.[5]

Banks does not claim to have produced “a ‘definitive study’” but, rather, “an extended essay serving as an introduction to what I hope will become a large domain of enquiry” (p. 12). The assessment is correct, as it proves rather difficult to put the various issues associated with “communications” into a coherent whole. Yet intriguing paths are proposed and, as I have attempted to indicate, acute observations emerge from each chapter. Clearly, future historians of the early modern colonial world will have to take Banks’ vision into account. One would only have wished that the author had refrained from constantly dismissing previous scholarship, sometimes correctly but often gratuitously and occasionally mistakenly.[6]

NOTES

[1] La Galissonnière seems to have been presented first to the military and civilian administrators, then to the clergy, then to the colonial nobility, and finally to the principal merchants. On the basis of a dubious identification of all administrators with either the sword or the robe nobility, Banks argues a reversal of ranking between first and second orders, akin to local perceptions of hierarchy. Should we consider administrators, instead, as the king’s representatives, followed by the clergy, the French hierarchy would be replicated exactly.

[2] On this subject, see, among others, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975). Concerning Latin, one must say that if the phrase “*sunt munera Divum*” was meant, as Banks stresses, to refer to the classical gods rather than to the Christian one, the colonial author’s Latin left something to be desired (pp. 123 & 249, note 72).

[3] The use of the term “the robe” is unfortunate, as it suggests that all civilian positions, including that of intendant and *commissaire-ordonnateur*, were venal. Were any? And were all holders of colonial commissions, even in the army, nobles? The stress placed in the chapter on patronage and rewards by promotions (pp. 194-97) suggests that colonial posts were not purchased. This seems to be the case even for positions on the superior councils, despite the fact that the latter served some of the functions of the French *parlements*.

[4] *Le Commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'ancien régime. L'évolution du régime de l'exclusif de 1763 à 1790*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

[5] See my own "France Overseas," co-authored with D. Gillian Thompson, in *Old Regime France, 1648-1788*, ed. William Doyle [*Short Oxford History of France*, vol. 3] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132; "La Construction du concept de race dans la France d'ancien régime," *Outre-Mers, Revue d'histoire*, 89, nos. 336-337 [*Traites et esclavages : vieux problèmes, nouvelles perspectives?*, ed. Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau] (2002): 171.

[6] Examples abound throughout the book and, notably, in chapter six. One example, taken almost at random, will serve. In the particularly interesting chapter three, on "Sea and Land Communications," Banks blames early modern historians, with the exception of a Canadian author, John Bosher, for considering the Atlantic as a barrier rather than as a zone of contacts, totally ignoring the much earlier and highly influential Godechot-Palmer thesis concerning the emergence of an Atlantic civilization, spanning colonial and metropolitan zones and fostered by exchanges across the ocean. The slight is perhaps intentional, for Banks will later focus on the emergence in the colonies of indigenous cultures, different from that of Europe.

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