

The Influence of Military History on Postal History – Anglo French Rivalry in the Caribbean

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be able to deliver this year's lecture in memory of Stuart Rossiter. **Slide 1** – in the frames you will see my eight-frame exhibit of Mail by British Packet from the West Indies to 1863, that is on show in the UK for the first time, though you may have seen it at Stockholm or Budapest.

Perhaps we should start with a brief reflection on what we mean by Postal History **Slide 2**. To me it is the study of postal systems and their impact on routes, rates, markings and means of conveyance. We take material that has been through a postal system and tell a story whether for an audience or as part of a philatelic display or exhibit. Our material are historic artifacts and whilst we may prioritise the external, the contents are worth examining too!

Military events almost always have significant disruptive effects on postal systems, but they can also be a catalyst for innovation and improvement. Routes change as territory changes hands or sea lanes become too dangerous, new means of conveyance are found from besieged cities, the cost of military action is often inflationary increasing rates though these effects often lag the military events and are implemented when the bills come in. New markings are required both to reflect these changes but also to reflect censorship activity.

All of us will have our own examples and the disruption caused by military events adds much interest to our story – dare I suggest that for many of us this added interest is a significant factor in our becoming postal historians in the first place. In this talk I will try to draw out some of these themes by looking at examples from the long rivalry between Britain and France in the Caribbean, particularly from 1700 to 1815. The sheer number of islands in region means that I will be focusing mainly on the naval rivalry but it did drive significant improvement in global communications that were only really overtaken once the trans American railways opened in the late 1860's, and the development of telegraph and submarine cable services in the same era.

Introductory remarks

To begin with we have to consider why the European powers were rivals in the Caribbean. We all know how Columbus set out in 1492 to look for a route to the riches of the East by sailing West, having appreciated that the world was round and not flat, even if that was not the general opinion of the time, and that the King of Spain wished to evade any possible Portuguese monopoly on routes eastwards. **Slide 3**

We know too that he dramatically underestimated the scale and that in between there were two continents unknown to Europeans and in the middle a large number of, mainly small, islands. The predominant winds took him from Spain to these Islands and as early as 1494 the Pope mediated between the two – the Treaty of Tordesillas which drew a line half way between the Cape Verde and the Antilles. Unwittingly allocating the as yet undiscovered Brazil to Portugal. Note too that the other European powers did not sign and of course there was very little incentive for them to do so.

In the early years of Spanish rule the native americans were ruthlessly exploited to extract the largely mineral wealth from the new colonies. Exhausted and highly vulnerable to European diseases the indigenous population was decimated. After the early years of discovery Spain concentrated on the mainland colonies and larger islands, founding some very successful cities.

This focus led to opportunities for Britain, France and Holland who during the 17th century began to establish their own colonies **Slide 4** shows the early British colonies that survived in the Caribbean, very occasionally items of mail survive where the colony does not – Malcolm Rae Smith showed an item from

Paradise Island from 1627, an island that belongs to Columbia today and too close to the main Spanish interests to be tenable.

The French colonies are similar **Slide 5** in pattern and one St Christopher was even shared. Of course there wasn't much to extract on these small islands and the early settlers were either adventurers or looking to use the climate to grow valuable crops and spices. The chief one, of course became sugar.

A physically demanding crop requiring a plentiful supply of labour to which it was difficult to attract European settlers. The solution that so appals us today was slavery and in the notorious triangular trade trading companies purchased some 80,000 Africans a year for trinkets, chained and shipped them to the markets of Americas and then returned to Europe with sugar to satisfy the latest taste.

In the eighteenth century half of these Africans were shipped in British ships and, as we shall see, the wealth generated was such that at peace conferences many seriously considered the small island of Nevis a more valuable colony than New Amsterdam, today's New York. One needs to appreciate this to understand the rivalry for such seemingly unimportant islands that post abolition would be economic headaches to future colonial governments.

Early letters

Jamaica **Slide 6** was acquired by England somewhat accidentally when Cromwell's Commonwealth mounted an expedition to Cuba, which failed largely due to divided leadership; determined to go home with something to show for the cost, part of the expedition landed in Jamaica and captured the island which was formally ceded by Spain in 1670 and was the largest British Caribbean island Colony by far and from which the most correspondence has survived.

Slide 7 even so very early letters are scarce from any island. The one shown here is from Nevis and sent in 1663. A merchant writes to his wife in Little Minorics which is on the very edge of the area burnt three years later in the Great Fire and I like to think that the stains are not just those of age but also smoke from the fire. More seriously it is likely that a number of early letters were destroyed at this time.

These early letters were carried by the first available ship – in this case the 'Hopeful Venture' and though they bear very little by way of postal markings, an Act of 1660 required them to be put in to the post at the first port of call, These 'Ship' letters were then sent to London where the postage was marked on them – comprising the Ship Letter charge, a fee to reflect the amount paid to the Captain for handing the letter in and the inland postage – the addressee could not get his or her letter until these amounts were paid. Some, but by no means all of these very early letters, show a Bishop's mark, the earliest I am aware is from Nevis in 1662.

This may not have been a very adequate or reliable service but the government saw no need to intervene until war broke out in 1700. **Slide 8** The War of the Spanish Succession followed the death of the childless Charles II – the principal claimants were the French Philip of Anjou, nominated by Charles and naturally backed by France, and Archduke Charles of Austria backed by Austria, Britain, Holland and Savoy. Today we remember Marlborough's campaigns in Central Europe but in Spain the Bourbon faction were successful and when Charles succeeded to the Austrian throne in 1713, the exhausted powers were able to agree a peace treaty – the Treaty of Utrecht.

In the Caribbean, even before the formal declaration of War, illegal trading with Spanish colonies caused friction and the troubled Scottish colony on the Darien Isthmus was attracting French interest and English mistrust. Its final collapse and the economic effects on Scotland, coupled with the extreme cold that led to crop failure and famine in Scotland all contributed to the Act of Union with Scotland in 1707 and so from now in I shall refer to Britain.

Spain were even handed and in 1701 refused to supply the first French fleet to the Caribbean with victuals. The second French fleet sent under Du Casse encountered Benbow's fleet of Santa Martha and though Benbow got the better of it he was fatally wounded and the opportunity to exploit the victory missed by his captains who were later condemned to death for cowardice.

What these early naval actions did show was that France did threaten the lines of communication and the authorities were receptive to the ideas of Edward Dummer which came into effect in 1702. Falmouth had been established as the packet station as early as 1688 but there was no Caribbean service, Dummer, a former Assistant Surveyor to the navy proposed [Slide 9](#) that a monthly service could be established with as few as four fast ships, each journey was expected to take 100 days.

A subsidy was required and was initially set at £9,000 p.a and later increased to £12,500 a very substantial sum in those days and without the military threat most unlikely that the budget would have been found. Marks of origin were ordered and long thought to have been either lost at sea or never sent as no strikes had been found, but in recent years one Barbadoes strike has been discovered in the Lambeth Palace Archives. Unfortunately for Dummer he had guaranteed the Post Office revenues of at least £8,000 per annum and overestimated demand despite or because of the 1s 6d incoming rate.

The principles involved in this packet contract lasted until 1939, that is ships belonging to individuals or companies carried the mail in return for a government subsidy.

In all 53 round trips were made by the Dummer service at an average round trip of 112 days. [Slide 10](#) and nearly all the surviving letters are from Jamaica, identified by the rate and the name of the ship. The packets sailed solo and not in convoy due to their supposed speed but speed meant lack of cargo space and badly affected the economics. So, when peace came the government saw no need to maintain the subsidy and the merchants weren't inclined to pick it up, so poor Dummer went bankrupt.

Trading rivalry with Spain provoked the oddly named War of Jenkins Ear which was fought largely in the Caribbean theatre [Slide 11](#) Anson's capture of the Spanish treasure ship sailing out of Manila after sailing around the world is one truly extraordinary story and on his return the treasure helped fund what had now turned into the broader War of the Austrian Succession, ostensibly about the right of a woman to succeed to the throne of Austria, but as usual, for Britain, a question of maintaining the balance of power. [Slide 12](#). In this War Britain was allied with Austria against France and Prussia.

Anson's heroics may also have helped fund a new packet service notice of which was published on 7 December 1745 that a monthly service would sail from Falmouth for Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, Nevis and St Christopher. Marks of origin were produced, presumably for all destinations, but only three have survived and this may well be the first time in this country that all three are on display in one place [Slide 13](#) the rate was still 1s 6d per sheet and included carriage to London. This is a much under researched area, though progress is being made and 24 sailings of this service have been noted between December 1745 and May 1749 and again just four ships seem to have been used.

Without arrival and departure date stamps it is hard to tell how efficient the service was, nor do the letters indicate a ship or captain's name, though the Barbados one is clearly endorsed 'By the Packet'.

The Peace Treaty of Aix la Chapelle in 1748 brought the war to a close and restored the territories lost by France in the Americas, Louisberg in particular. In the West Indies two British assaults on Santiago da Cuba were repulsed, St Maarten was occupied and a French assault on Anguilla repulsed. [Slide 14](#) Dominica, St Lucia, St Vincent and Tobago were confirmed as neutral. Come the end of the War the packet service was cut once again. The amount of subsidy paid and the operators of this packet service await discovery.

Government Packet Service

Just a few years later following some dramatic changes to the diplomatic alliances where France allied with Austria and Britain with Prussia war broke out once again, though it had scarcely been peaceful in the Americas in the intervening years with the ongoing French and Indian Wars.

From 1755 a monthly government service was established and from then carried on right through to the twentieth century. The contract was signed on 7 November 1755, ran for seven years and granted an annual subsidy of £9,000 and compensation if a vessel was lost to enemy action. [Slide 15](#)

With 8 carriage guns and six swivel guns the packets were not excessively armed and relied on speed against naval opposition but were prey to privateers who invested in well armed and swifter craft than those employed by European navies. Here we have a 1758 cover from Jamaica with straight line mark of origin and showing the 1 N 6 rate. This vessel encountered a privateer and was chased in to Basseterre before being able to return to Britain.

The number of vessels the Royal Navy had is extraordinary. In 1757 there were 159 ships of the line (down to 6th rate), 43 sloops and 37 other vessels, a fleet that would more than double in size by 1804. This enabled Britain to try to blockade the French ports and also to maintain a standing fleet in the West Indies, something the other European powers simply couldn't do. Though the French did manage to avoid the blockade and sent convoys to the West Indies, the standing fleet gave Britain a real advantage in the Caribbean theatre and this has had a profound influence on the postal history of the region. [Slide 16](#)

British strategy was masterminded by William Pitt, the Prime Minister, and though the war started badly for Britain with the loss of Minorca, following which Admiral Byng was executed in the words of Voltaire 'pour encourager les autres'. Whether encouraged by this example or not, the Admirals did do better. In the Caribbean, Guadeloupe was captured in 1759 and the French relief squadron badly mauled by Vernon, so that in 1762 Martinique, St Lucia and Havana were captured. By then, in Europe, Prussia and Austria and fought to a stalemate and were exhausted and Britain was no longer financing Prussia – peace at last.

At the peace treaty these four territories were returned to France and Spain respectively, but in addition to the enormous gains Britain made in Canada and India, the neutral islands were awarded to Britain – Dominica, Grenada, St Vincent and Tobago. Britain also received Florida but returned Cuba (and the Philippines) to Spain. France received the vast Louisiana territory from Spain, famously sold some 40 years later by Napoleon to the fledgling United States, but we are getting ahead of ourselves.

[Slide 17](#) this time the government were not so short sighted and rather than cut the packet service the minute peace was declared they expanded it to the new territory. The early routing went first to Barbados, then to Grenada, St Christopher, Jamaica, Pensacola, St Augustine, Savannah and Charlestown before returning to Falmouth. One can readily appreciate that there could be a better route plan and by 1770 this had been modified so that the packet returned to Falmouth after Jamaica and there was a feeder service to carry the mail there from the southern ports of continental America. This greatly improved the regularity of the service. From 1765, the price fell to 1s per single sheet to and from London.

[Slide 18](#) the French too established a Royal packet service, which ran from San Domingo to La Flotte on the Ile de Re, just off La Rochelle, this also served Guadeloupe, Martinique and other French possessions. The Colonies par La Flotte oval mark was in use from 1765 until 1791.

Marks of origin were required to identify from whence the letters came and for some islands a whole host of marks were sent to the packet office, suggesting that Antigua and St Christopher were busy offices, these various strikes could make a separate paper, [Slide 19](#) shows a number of these.

In the Caribbean tensions remained between France and Britain. To both countries the cost of war was ruinous and new taxes had to be raised to pay for the debts built up in times of war. The British government thought that the Colonies should pay something for their own defence, the Colonists thought that if they were to do so then they were entitled to representation in the British Parliament. Goodwill could have resolved the dilemma one would have thought, but it was not to be, the famous tea party in Boston, a heavy handed response from some of the Colonial officials led to open rebellion and the declaration of Independence in 1776. Of course it was seven years of bitter struggle before that was achieved and then only after French intervention in 1778 threatened Britain's ability to support the land forces engaged. Britain's priority was continental America and in the Caribbean France took advantage. A large fleet commanded by Admiral d'Estaing was based in Martinique with land forces commanded by De Bouille,

Slide 20 shows a scarce (at least in Britain) letter from Dominica which was captured on 7 September 1778 and is sent by the deputy commander to his uncle the Comte de Visieu who was in charge of the coastal forces in Normandy. The entry mark D'Hollande is interesting as it shows the effectiveness of the British blockade of the Channel and Atlantic Ports – it was not a happy time on Dominica hurricanes struck the island twice, in London relief funds were raised for the victims, but when the funds were spent it was to build a new stone jail for the island!

Britain also blockaded the continental north American ports and this significantly disrupted trade in the Caribbean. Some neutral islands continued to supply and there were many daring escapades involving blockade runners, corrupt officials and zealous naval officers like Nelson determined to put a stop to it. Nelson married Fanny Nisbet from Nevis.

Britain responded to the seizure of Dominica by capturing St Lucia in 1779, the French then took St Vincent and Grenada. The following year Rodney sailed half the British fleet back to Europe to avoid the worst of the hurricanes, the new French Admiral sought shelter in North America and the remaining half of the British fleet, under Hood, could not drive them from Chesapeake Bay and so led to Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown. This led to a tacit peace on the continent whilst peace feelers were put out.

In the Caribbean France increased her efforts and captured St Christopher in 1782 and a joint operation with the Spanish against Jamaica was planned. The threat to all the British possessions only came to an end in April 1782 when Admiral Rodney decisively defeated the de Grasse's fleet in the straight between Dominica and Guadeloupe – we know it as the Battle of the Saintes, but to the French it was the Battle of Dominica and restored British naval supremacy. The American's got their independence but in the Caribbean things went back as they were. France was financially exhausted by the effort of sustaining the naval war and joined the peace. **Slide 21**

During this war some 24 British packets were captured, but despite the very significant risks and the heavy cost to the treasury as you will recall that owners were now compensated, the service steadily improved and from 1780 we see one packet going to the Leeward Islands and the next to Jamaica and by the wars end there was now a fortnightly rather than monthly service.

Though these losses are heavy, Britain continued to invest in the packet service providing a regular one for those in the British colonies. For the French colonies things were less certain as the Royal Navy tried to blockade the whole western European coast. Here we see a letter from St Lucia, in British occupation, that was put on to a packet vessel in Antigua. At the end of the War the islands largely returned to their previous controllers.

The Napoleonic Wars

Once again, the period of peace was short. Partly due to the dire state of the nations finances, revolution came to France in July 1789 and though war did not follow until 1792 when the First Coalition of Austria and Prussia came together. The execution of King Louis and Marie Antoinette who had attempted to flee, further inflamed matters but still Britain did not join. France declared war on Britain on 3 February 1793, when Whitehall was alarmed by the French invasion of what is the Austrian Netherlands (today's Belgium) and the two were at war for the next 23 years apart from two short intervals in 1802 and 1814.

The French revolution introduced a whole new calendar which commenced with the autumn equinox so 22 September 1793 was the start of Year II, there were twelve months to the year (each given a new name), each of 30 days made up of three weeks of ten days and you only got the tenth day off – indeed each day was divided in to ten hours made up of 100 minutes each of which had 100 seconds. [Slide 22](#) Letters from this period are fascinating and tend to be addressed to 'Citoyen' rather than Madame or Monsieur. The currency was reformed at the same time and the sous was replaced by the decime. Curiously weights and measures did not go decimal until 1800 and those reforms lasted, whilst the calendar did not survive long after Napoleon was made Emperor in 1804. Being formally abolished on 10 Nivoise Year XIV (1 January 1806).

In 1789 San Domingo produced 60% of the world's coffee, 40% of the sugar consumed in France and Germany and was France's most important possession. The ideas of the revolution inspired the slaves and the revolt, which started in August 1791, would end in the one revolt of slaves that led to an independent state, despite British intervention in 1796 and Napoleon's intervention in 1802.

Britain made a significant effort in the West Indies theatre even in the early days of the war sending 35,000 men and chartering 100,000 tons of shipping (about a seventh of the entire British merchant fleet), capturing Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1794 and 1795 respectively. [Slide 23](#) along with several ports on San Domingo – disease was the major problem for the soldiers. The motivation for Britain was not only to undermine the flow of wealth to France from the plantations but also to deny bases to French, and American, privateers raiding British commerce.

For both sides the inflation was one of the consequences of war. From 4 January 1797 the packet rate only took a letter to Falmouth and the inland postage had to be paid on top. This was the first of a number of effective price rises and was enforced. [Slide 24](#) a cover from St Kitts sent December 1796 but arriving a few days after the 4 January has the packet rate 1s crossed out and 1s8 replaces it to include the inland postage to London.

1797 was a curious year for the navy, shut out of the Mediterranean, but achieving a great victory at Cape St Vincent only to be followed by a mutiny at Spithead. In the West Indies Trinidad was captured.

These were risky times for packet captains and 17 vessels were captured in the three years 1798-1800. The owners of one merchant vessel that was lost shortly after sailing from Martinique were suspected of taking out an insurance policy on the ship after knowing it had been lost and sending the policy paperwork by the fast packet service. Lloyds were understandably put out and lobbied the post office. Freeling agreed and within a month had obtained approval to modify the mark of origin to include a date of origin – a post mark. [Slide 25](#) Not only had he got approval but he had the devices made and put on the packet, at least to Jamaica the following month, this slide shows the earliest date stamp of anywhere in the Caribbean. No uses are known from elsewhere until March 1799 and it is possible they went on a subsequent packet, [Slide 26](#) shows a number of these devices – 13 are recorded and I show 9 of these, both Barbados and St Vincent are the sole known use from 1799 and note the two used in Martinique as there were offices at both Port Royal and Fort de France.

An early version of the Y2K issue arises as the year is shown in YY format and is about to change to 1800. Disease was a major issue in the West Indies, malaria, brought from Africa with the enslaved, and yellow fever decimated both the slave population in San Domingo, 50% died within a year, and also European troops wiping out much of the British invasion force of 1796 and leading several regiments to mutiny when told they were going to be sent there.

Few of the soldier's were literate and so we learn little of the complaints of the ordinary trooper but for those who were they were entitled to reduced rates of postage. [Slide 27](#) see the letter from Simon Prior. Collectors tend to focus on the postal history of particular islands but the correspondents often moved from one to another. The letter on this slide was described as from a Simon Brian in the auction catalogue, which seemed unlikely, but the Brooks sale had a letter from St Kitts in the same writing described as written by Simon Prior and altogether better deciphering of the signature. Soldiers' letters are relatively scarce but add significantly to a postal history display of this period.

War is expensive and puts pressure on government revenues and so we see an affect on rates. Until 5 April 1801 Britain had a fixed 8d inland charge for a single sheet going over 150 miles. These were 'reformed' to introduce rather more bands and were an effective price rise so the postage from Falmouth to London went up from 8d to 10d as we see on this letter from Montserrat [Slide 28](#) with its rather fine three-line date stamp.

Whether or not the third line made it fragile, Montserrat was one of only three offices in the West Indies to receive the new horseshoe style date stamps when they were rolled out in 1803 to inland offices as the commercial pressure for date stamps increased. Only three are recorded for the Caribbean and are on show here for the first time in the UK- the others are for Trinidad and Demerara [Slide 29](#), and their introduction we can relate to military events.

The War of the Second Coalition against France came to an end with the Treaty of Amiens signed on 25 March 1802 when a somewhat reluctant Britain signed after her exhausted continental allies sued for peace. In the Caribbean, Spain came off worse ceding Trinidad to Britain whilst Martinique, Guadeloupe and Tobago were restored to France and the Guianas to Holland.

Napoleon became 'First Consul for Life' in August 1802 and continued French expansionism in Europe, so the Peace only lasted until May 1803 when Britain declared war. In Europe Hanover soon fell to France, and Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor in May 1804, In Britain these were the years under the threat of invasion, as Napoleon concentrated his resources on invasion preparations.

But in the West Indies, Tobago was re-taken by Britain almost immediately, [Slide 30](#) and it seems the Freeling style date stamp was still there and was simply used again, as seen on this letter from Surinam to St Vincent and note the 4d interisland packet rate that lasted from 1710 to UPU.

Admiral Hood and General Picton were two members of the three man commission sent out to govern Trinidad and they took up their posts at the beginning of 1804 and from the dates must have taken the date stamps with them – Demerara was re-occupied in September 1803 and so military events also drove the need for a new post mark.

Spain did not join the war until December 1804, but at sea this doubled the number of ships of the line available to Napoleon to 102, against 83 British ships of the line. Blockade of the French Channel ports was still feasible but could not be extended to the Mediterranean. Napoleon's invasion, surprisingly, involved the West Indies. Admiral Villeneuve escaped the blockade and with some Spanish ships sailed for Martinique to collect the Caribbean fleet, planning to return and secure mastery of the Channel for long enough for the invasion barges to cross it.

Villeneuve reached Martinique on 16 May 1805 and the combined fleet set sail on 4 June with orders to capture British colonies before sailing for Europe, but learning that Nelson had arrived in the Caribbean

set sail for Europe immediately and Nelson set off in pursuit two days behind. The fleets did not meet and the Franco-Spanish fleet reached ports in France and Spain there to be blockaded. The invasion of Britain was off but Napoleon ordered his fleets to the Mediterranean, Villeneuve was most reluctant but when six British ships from the fleet blockading Cadiz left to be resupplied the combined fleet left harbour and at Trafalgar the British achieved a decisive victory removing the major naval threat for the rest of the war, Nelson dying a hero's death. On the same day however, the Austrian's surrendered at Ulm, within 7 weeks Prime Minister Pitt was dead and then in December 1805 Napoleon achieved a decisive victory over the Austro-Russian armies and so destroying Pitt's third coalition. Spain was perhaps the real loser and with no fleet began to lose control over her colonies in the Americas.

The heavy costs of war led to a 1d increase in the packet rate to 1s 1d from the beginning of 1805 and an increase in inland charges from Falmouth to London of 1d, an overall increase to London of 2d. New format 'fleuron' date stamps were sent out in 1805 [Slide 31](#). No exact dates of despatch are recorded, but it is noticeable that in Dominica the earliest use is from 1806, The French attacked Dominica in February 1805 and burned Roseau to the ground, but they then accepted a ransom and left rather than remain in occupation.

It is hard from this distance in time to put oneself in the position of the islander. A letter from Samuel Athill (part of the Codrington correspondence) of February 1805 states **"... we were thrown into a state of great anxiety and alarm by the arrival of a very large force in line of battle Ships and Troops from France which immediately attacked Dominica and have since visited St. Kitts, Nevis and Montserrat burning the Shipping and laying the islands under Contribution...."**

In 1807 Denmark was forced to align with Napoleon in pursuit of policy of excluding British trade from continental Europe. This had consequences in the Caribbean as the British occupied the Danish West Indies establishing a packet office in St Thomas in 1809 [Slide 32](#) and St Croix in 1811. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the islands were returned to Denmark, but the British packet service had proved so useful that the packet agency remained there, free of charge, for most of the rest of the century and St Thomas was an important hub when the packet service moved over to steam in 1842. A military intervention that had most important consequence for postal history.

The four South American mainland Dutch colonies had already been occupied by Britain; Curacao followed in 1807 and St Maarten in 1810. [Slide 33](#) However the British only introduced the fleuron hand stamps after Holland was incorporated in to the France Empire in September 1810 as part of Napoleon's continental system and the United Provinces became Departments Conquis,

We have seen how there were naval mutinies and that troops refused to go to San Domingo, well in 1810 the packet crews mutinied, [Slide 34](#). The point of the packet was that it was fast and supposed to outsail adversaries, taking a cargo would slow the vessel down and so the captain and crew were prohibited from trading on their own account, but this was only honoured in the breach and viewed as a perquisite. When an overzealous new customs official tried to clamp down the crews mutinied and for a while the Admiralty tried to run an alternative service out of Plymouth – so if you find packet letters carried between late October 1810 and 15 February 1811, they were taken in to Plymouth.

After Trafalgar the main threat to the packet service in the Caribbean came from Privateers both French and American. Both President Jefferson and then Madison had sympathy with the French cause and in June 1812, imagining they were joining the winning side after Napoleon's invasion of Russia, the United States declared war on Britain – Jamaica was almost completely blockaded by privateers and in eight months to June 1813 the post office lost ten packets [Slide 35](#). If threatened with capture packet captains

were instructed to weight the packet bag and throw it overboard at the last moment. This letter bears a lengthy explanation as to how some letters survive - pr 1st Octr Packet – which was taken near Barbadoes 22 Novr. By "Fox" American Privateer and carried to La Guaira on Spanish Main. Postage of this letter

25/9 it was sent up with other letters from the main after being opened – these letters from Harsberg put on board the Packet after the mail was closed escaped being thrown overboard when the packet was taken as above. Recd 17 Jan 1814 answered 22 Jany by the 2nd October packet.

The invasion of Russia was a complete disaster for Napoleon and his men. By 1814 the allies had invaded France on all sides occupying Paris on 31 March and enforcing peace and Napoleon's abdication and exile to Elba. This allowed Britain to focus on the War with the United States and in August a landing force of just 5,000 men was able to cause the devastation of Washington DC. [Slide 36](#) This letter of 8 October 1813 is sent by an artillery officer Captain John Michell to his wife. He writes the day after his battery had provided artillery support for Wellington's army to cross the Bidassoa and enter France proper. Once the peace was enforced Britain could send forces to the Americas and Michell and his battery were part of the landing force that attacked Washington and he was known to his regiment as 'The Man who Burnt the White House'.

Even before this Madison had recognised that the war was not going well and was also economically disastrous, exports collapsed from \$45m in 1811 to \$7m in 1814 and sent peace negotiators to Europe. The United States joined the general peace in December 1814 but news did not return in time to stop the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815.

Napoleon did not stay in exile for long and he landed on the French coast on 1 March, the men sent to capture him joined him and followed on the road to Waterloo on 18 June. The victors refer to this as the hundred days, but it is actually a little more than that. [Slide 37](#). Even these seemingly European events find an echo in the Caribbean, here we have a letter handed in to the packet office in Dominica on 24 May (fleuron stamp) after news of his escape had reached the islands causing alarm and panic. This letter was withdrawn from the packet service and entrusted to a warship – HMS Shannon which took it direct to Portsmouth where it was treated a Ship Letter. Of course by the time it reached Portsmouth Napoleon was a guest of the Royal Navy and would spend the rest of his days in the rather more distant exile of St Helena.

An unusual perspective of the Napoleonic wars is given to us [Slide 38](#) by Prussian Field Marshall Gneisenau, "There is no mortal to whom Great Britain has greater obligation than this blackguard (*Napoleon*) for it is the events which he has brought about which have raised England's greatness, security and wealth so high. They are lords of the sea, and neither in this domain nor in world trade have they any rivals left to fear".

Conclusions

I will leave this tale of largely naval military rivalry between Britain and France there, it issued in the period of Pax Britannica and laid the foundation for the rapid growth in trade and communications that characterised much of the remainder of the nineteenth century.

So, what are the biggest influences of our tale on postal history?

Firstly, the routes [Slide 39](#) the single biggest impact is on the territory contested and as it changed hands so it entered different systems. The British invested heavily in the packet service and it was open to all nations to use. Agencies were established all over the Caribbean and Latin America and whilst the service was often a premium one, its regularity and reliability saw it widely used, giving us colourful frankings right up to UPU and seeing designations such as Voie d'Angleterre on this cover from Martinique to France, or Via d'Inglaterra on this cover from Savoy to Buenos Aries or via Panama and Southampton on this cover from Peru to Hannover.

Secondly war affects the rates, generally by increasing them and we see the steady rise in the costs of the British packets. In France inflation caused even more frequent rises and sleights of hand by playing with the rate bands. **Slide 40** it was not until the postal reform of 1840 that rates came back down to the 1s of 1765, another famous temporary measures of the Napoleonic era is income tax and that is still with us. This cover from Montserrat shows the earliest use of the new date stamps and rates that came in during 1840 even if the steam ship replacements for the sailing packets were delayed until 1842.

Finally, we see the impact on the markings **Slide 41** these primarily reflect change of control and in some instances destruction of the previous marks. Guadeloupe changed hand 5 times in this period and Martinique four, here we see a couple of different markings brought in instead of fleurons – Guadeloupe 1810 and an Octagonal Martinique. The marking changes are largely subsidiary ones to the prime effect of military activity on the routes and the secondary impact on the rates; but they do add very considerably to the postal history interest.

Understanding the military history background enables us to be better postal historians and helps communicate our story to the wider world.

Thank you for listening and if you have not done so already do take a look at the material in the frames on the floor below.

Simon Richards

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