

Moat Theories and the English Atlantic, 1675 to 1740

I. K. Steele

Volume 13, numéro 1, 1978

London 1978

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030474ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030474ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Steele, I. K. (1978). Moat Theories and the English Atlantic, 1675 to 1740. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 13(1), 18–33. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030474ar>

Résumé de l'article

La croyance que les communications transatlantiques entre l'Angleterre et l'Amérique étaient nettement mauvaises aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles est à ce point répandue qu'on pourrait presque la qualifier de truisme. L'Atlantique prend ainsi l'apparence d'une immense douve, et, de là à dire qu'il a contribué au développement de la nation américaine, il n'y a qu'un pas. L'auteur se propose ici de jeter un nouveau regard sur ces présomptions ou supposées vérités. Que ces idées aient eu des fondements, il n'y a aucun doute. Edmund Burke autant que Thomas Paine ont utilisé l'argument. De même, de multiples auteurs américains les ont véhiculées fussent-ils aussi connus que Turner, Boorstin, Andrews, Dickerson, Bridenbaugh, Morgan ou Greene. De plus, rien de plus facile que d'élaborer sur les dangers de l'océan: de nombreux documents d'époque tels les récits de voyage des Puritains, des "Quakers" et des Anglicans sont là pour en témoigner. Cependant, de dire l'auteur, on a trop souvent oublié de considérer les nombreux voyages que certains ont effectués - les 110 traversées du capitaine Bryant, par exemple - et de mentionner le nombre impressionnant de marins - 7,000 au tournant du dix-huitième siècle - qui sillonnaient l'océan d'alors. De même, on a fréquemment mal interprété l'intermittence de la correspondance entre la métropole et la colonie, n'utilisant presque exclusivement que l'exemple de celle qui s'échange officiellement au lieu de tenir compte de tout ce qui traverse l'océan tout au long de la période. L'auteur s'interroge aussi sur cette notion par trop populaire que la terre unit alors que l'eau divise quand on sait qu'à l'époque, en Angleterre, il en coûte seize fois plus pour expédier des marchandises par terre que par eau. Il s'arrête aussi à la perception du temps au dix-huitième, si différente de la nôtre que l'on a tendance à en oublier la portée. Enfin, selon lui, cette théorie de l'Atlantique-fossé ou barrière fait paraître bien peu plausible la longue durée du lien colonial et elle résiste mal à un examen sérieux. Néanmoins, le fait de la remettre en question ajoute à notre compréhension du premier empire britannique et de l'émergence de l'identité américaine.

Moat Theories and the English Atlantic, 1675 to 1740

I.K. STEELE*

Belief that early-modern English Atlantic communications were “bad” is so widely held that it might well rank among the few remaining self-evident truths. “Bad communications” means both that sea travel was dangerous and that it was slow, infrequent and unpredictable. Once poor communications are asserted or assumed, the Atlantic inevitably becomes a social moat protecting the development of the American “nation”, both as a “people” and as a state. This essay re-assesses some of the evidence and assumptions that support the idea of poor transatlantic communications.

The idea that the Atlantic Ocean made American separatism inevitable was not new when the final crisis of the first British Empire approached, but it proved very useful. Edmund Burke pronounced that “seas roll, and months pass, between the order and the execution, and the want of a speedy explanation of a single point is enough to defeat a whole system.”¹ Less than a year later Tom Paine discovered heavenly endorsement for the impending revolution: “Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other, was never the design of Heaven.”² Patriot historians willingly accepted this argument, but so did such loyalists as David Ramsay. For him the immense distances between England and the colonies made the collapse of the Empire due less to errors than to Britain’s failure to do the impossible.³ Neither Whig nor Tory denied that the creation of the United States of America had a powerful natural or divine assistance in the creation of the globe itself. What was the geography of war for the Tories was cultural geography for the Patriots.

The writing of American colonial history has outgrown all simple explanations, including geographic determinism. Writers who emphasize the emergence of the United States as a conscious aim of colonial life can be accused of teleological sins. Yet Americans must seek their colonial origins in the lives of provincial Americans. Preoccupation with what made colonials different from

* The author thanks the Canada Council for support, and Professors J.M. Bumsted, F.A. Dreyer, and R.L. Emerson for critical reading of the original paper.

1. *Speeches and Letters on American Affairs* (London, 1908), p. 95.
2. *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, M.D. Conway, ed., 4 vols. (New York, 1967), I, p. 89.
3. *The History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1789), I, pp. 29, 54-5.

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

Englishmen elsewhere, rather than with the myriad ways in which they were the same, is therefore understandable. In this context, the Atlantic as a social moat has easily changed from a conscious explanation to an unexplored assumption.

Frederick Jackson Turner and most of his disciples were not colonial historians, but their ideas of the social uniqueness of the frontier experience have been applied easily to colonial America. Daniel J. Boorstin's widely-read and acclaimed *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*⁴ is social history of this Turnerian sort. He asserts the creative pragmatism of the isolated colonial situation and confines the English influence to the limited cultural luggage of the Stuart migrants. For social and cultural purposes, though not for political or economic ones, Boorstin sees England as too far away to have any living and continuous relationship with colonial America.

Boorstin's pragmatic America was challenged, in global terms, by Louis Hartz in *The Founding of New Societies*.⁵ Hartz argues that the ideas brought by initial migrants became the treasured bases of colonial uniqueness. The colonial "fragments" held the founding myths to the exclusion of Europe's past and future.

Both of these general interpretations are stimulating, especially when juxtaposed, yet both presume that the Old World ideas adapted or treasured were merely those that came with the first migrants. This shared assumption does not derive from the need to explain the American Revolution to a century that awards legitimacy to "peoples" in the process of self-determination. Rather it is based upon remarks in much of the monographic literature and this, in turn, is derived from surviving sources.

Historians, including some who are justly celebrated for enlarging the physical boundaries of colonial American history, have made unequivocal denunciations of communications between England and America. C.M. Andrews, O.M. Dickerson, Carl Bridenbaugh, Edmund Morgan and J.P. Greene might head a very long list.⁶ Although many of their comments are incidental, these constitute an uncommon unanimity. Michael Kraus⁷ and Harold Innis have questioned the orthodoxy, again rather incidentally, but without much of an echo in

4. New York, 1958.

5. New York, 1964.

6. C.M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, 4 vols. (New Haven, 1934-8), IV, p. 421; O.M. Dickerson, *American Colonial Government, 1696-1765* (Cleveland, 1912), pp. 134-41; Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Spirit of '76* (New York, 1976), p. 10; E.S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma* (Boston, 1958), p. 96; J.P. Greene, "An Uneasy Connection," in S.G. Kurtz and J.H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1973), p. 41. Darrett B. Rutman refers to the Atlantic as moat in *Reviews in American History*, I, p. 180, and the point is made at its bluntest in Harry M. Ward's "The Search for American Identity: Early Historians of New England," in *Perspectives on Early American History*, A.T. Vaughan and G.A. Billias, eds., (New York, 1973), p. 40.

7. *Atlantic Civilization: Eighteenth Century Origins* (Ithaca, New York, 1949), especially p. 25.

recent scholarship.⁸ This is because, at first and most direct reading, much of the surviving evidence describes Atlantic communications as both dangerous and tardy.

The dangers of the ocean are easily demonstrated. The English paid a grim tribute in lives to the unknown Atlantic from the days of their first expeditions. A whole five-vessel fleet under John Cabot was lost in 1498, a major, if rare, early tragedy.⁹ The annals that were gathered and popularized by Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas may have been intended to inspire the daring and energetic, but the stories of Thomas Cavendish, Richard Grenville, Humphrey Gilbert, John Hawkins and Francis Drake all ended in death at sea. Although mariners always risked their lives afloat, the "Western Ocean" meant a host of new dangers. Unknown shorelines, with their currents, shoals and reefs, were worse than the unknown ocean. Despite all that the English learned about Atlantic travel from the Spanish and the Portuguese, many mariners would be lost before they discovered the best routes and safest harbours of English America.

As chroniclers of Atlantic passages, the Tudor seamen were succeeded by Stuart landsmen. Thousands of seventeenth-century Englishmen made their living aboard trading and fishing vessels on the Atlantic, but they and their contemporaries regarded most of what they did as unremarkable and unexceptional. Literate officers occasionally published their impressions of new lands, but the published sea journals of the time, both real and fictitious, described voyages beyond the Western Ocean.¹⁰ The landsmen who explored and settled the New World came to write most accounts of Stuart Atlantic travel. These landsmen often found the Atlantic crossing itself one of their most frightening ordeals, and deliverance upon dry land was regarded as a mercy of God.

Indeed, surviving a sea passage was viewed as a special providence by many devout Puritan, Quaker, and Anglican travellers. William Bradford's brief de-

-
8. H.A. Innis, *The Bias of Communications* (Toronto, 1951), pp. 61-2. Ira Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York, 1972), pp. 356-7 shows concern for this matter. R.R. Palmer's *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959-64) includes some discussions of the communication of political ideas in a multi-cultural Atlantic civilization. See especially I, pp. 242-53. If much of the reaction to Palmer's thesis centred on cultural barriers to communication, A.A. Fursenko attacked Palmer on the premise that the Atlantic was a major physical barrier to communications: "The American and French Revolutions Compared: The View from the U.S.S.R.," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 33(1976), pp. 488-9, translated by G.H. McArthur.
 9. J.A. Williamson notes that through the whole sixteenth century "there is no instance of a multi-ship expedition having been entirely wiped out by an unknown disaster; and we are entitled to say that the odds were heavily against it in 1498." *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 105.
 10. This natural development is evident from Edward G. Cox, *A Reference Guide to the Literature of Travel*, 3 vols. (Seattle, 1935-49), especially I, pp. 6-15; II, pp. 34-105. William Dampier and Woodes Rogers were the most popular non-fiction seafarers of the early eighteenth century. Daniel Defoe placed both Robinson Crusoe and Captain Drury beyond the familiar.

scription of the *Mayflower's* unexceptional passage of just under two months is a moralized tale of suffering and deliverance.¹¹ John Winthrop's journal of a comparable passage on the *Arabella* shows more confidence. Winthrop thanked God on occasion, but regarded crossing the Atlantic as within the competence of man.¹² Perhaps belief in the "errand into the wilderness" presumed a passable ocean. But Winthrop's jottings of what he found curious or interesting would later be remade into religious allegory by Cotton Mather. The theme of spiritual deliverance found in Bradford, Thomas Shepherd, Roger Clap, or John Hull would be imposed upon Winthrop in Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. The *Arabella* became an ark of Noah, and the crossing of the Atlantic a divine dispensation greater than the parting of the Red Sea. The whole enterprise, indeed the whole American continent, became part of God's plan for a New Jerusalem: England was transformed into Babylon and Winthrop to Nehemiah leading his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land.¹³ Part of the colonial history of Boston was the story of vain efforts to insulate a growing seaport town from influences that were never far enough away. A broad and frightening ocean was useful to the New England Puritan perspective in 1700, and would have related uses long afterwards.

Most Quaker travellers who published memoirs were "ministering friends" who travelled the Atlantic as they had travelled the British Isles and continental Europe to share their vision of Christ and encourage their co-religionists.¹⁴ These memoirs were spiritual autobiographies designed to be exemplars.¹⁵ No other type of travel account can be quite as devoid of description or wonder at the worlds encountered. For George Fox, whose journal set the pattern for most Quakers on similar missions, the ocean was the scene of divine deliverance from storms, pirates and other enemies.¹⁶ With their religious hope, the chroniclers were usually the only ones aboard who remained calm. Like evil men, the ocean tried to hinder the progress of truth, but failed.

Anglican divines were less drawn to spiritual autobiography, but some could

-
11. *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Harvey Wish, ed., (New York, 1962), pp. 57-9.
 12. See E.S. Morgan, ed., *The Founding of Massachusetts* (New York, 1964), pp. 204-25.
 13. See Sacvan Bercovitch, "Colonial Puritan Rhetoric and the Discovery of American Identity," *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, VI, pp. 131-50, and his *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, 1975), especially pp. 117-9.
 14. See Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York, 1960), pp. 12-6, 25-9, and his *The Atlantic Community of the Early Friends*, supplement no. 24 to the *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* (London, 1952).
 15. Daniel B. Shea, Jr., *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton, 1968), chaps. I and II.
 16. *The Journal of George Fox*, John L. Nickalls, ed., (London, 1975), pp. 592-3, 612, 615, 659-61. See *Journal of the Life of Thomas Story* (Newcastle, 1747), pp. 152-3; *Collection of the Works of . . . Thomas Chalkley* (London, 1791), p. 13; and *An Account of the Life of . . . John Richardson* (London, 1843), p. 61 for examples of providential assistance. George Fox also recorded a miraculous passage from the Netherlands to Harwick in 1677: *Narrative Papers of George Fox*, Henry J. Cadbury, ed., (Richmond, Indiana, 1972), p. 146.

sound like their Puritan or Quaker counterparts. In 1736, John Wesley recorded his party's reaction to the storms of a passage to Georgia.

We returned God thanks for our deliverance, of which a few appeared duly sensible. But the rest (among whom were most of the sailors) denied we had been in any danger. I could not have believed that so little good would have been done by the terror they were in before.¹⁷

The purposeful contrast between godly passengers and cursing seamen was common enough;¹⁸ yet it remains hard to imagine the able seamen, who was up in the sheets in all weather, being terrified while the landlubber was calm. The religious representation of the ocean was hostile, was printed, and was widely known.

Despite supporting evidence, and its social utility, the notion of the deadly ocean creates some difficulties. Members of the colonial elite—the fortunate few of a time when few were that fortunate—made their wills, prayed, bid tearful farewells, and then set out on ocean voyages. They went to lobby for colonial appointments or causes, to supervise the buying and selling of cargoes, or to gain status-giving education, friends, or experience.¹⁹ Were these people daredevils driven by vanity and greed? Was Edward Randolph, son of a Kent physician and eventually Surveyor General of Customs in America, desperately possessed to cross the Atlantic seventeen times?²⁰ How could John Smith (Harvard 1722 and a prominent Boston drygoods merchant) risk a regular annual trip to London on business?²¹ And what folly led Captain Bryant of New York to complete fifty-five voyages from his homeport to London, for a total of 110 Atlantic crossings?²² For those of us cursed with the scent for solid statistics, these examples may no longer exemplify. Yet there must have been many John Smiths and Captain Bryants, even if mercy demanded that there were not many Edward Randolphs.

If the people at the captain's table are puzzling, what of the men in the fo'c's'le? There is plenty of evidence that theirs was a hard life, and the journal keepers among them often reflected on their unwise choice of work as they scrambled from a wreck, were taken prisoner, or pulled on the oars of an Algerian galley.²³ Yet some seven thousand seamen worked ships in English American

17. *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley*, Ernest Rhys, ed., 4 vols. (London, 1906), I, p. 19.

18. Cotton Mather's *The Sailour's Companion and Counsellour* (Boston, 1709) is a good example of this perspective.

19. William L. Sachse, *The Colonial American in Britain* (Madison, Wisc., 1956) discusses colonial travel to Britain systematically.

20. Michael Hall, *Edward Randolph and the American Colonies 1676-1703* (Chapel Hill, 1960), *passim*.

21. C.K. Shipton, *Silbey's Harvard Graduates*, VII (Boston, 1945), pp. 121-4.

22. Sachse, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

23. *Barlow's Journal*, Basil Lubbock, ed., 2 vols. (London, 1934) is replete with these understandable feelings. *Adventures by Sea of Edward Coxere* (London, 1946), pp. 81, 119-21 is another example from a sea journal first published in the twentieth century.

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

waters at the turn of the eighteenth century.²⁴ Some may have joined to escape even more desperate circumstances ashore and some, like Robinson Crusoe, may have been lured by free passage to the unknown.²⁵ Yet a merchant seaman's peacetime wage of 24s. per month ranked him with skilled labour, since he paid for neither food nor lodging while afloat (and often received little of either). The outbreak of war in 1689 brought wages up to 45s. immediately, and they would reach 55s. in subsequent years of poor naval convoy protection.²⁶ These wage increases with increased risks, and refusals to sail without "smart money",²⁷ suggest that the merchant seamen were able to price their risks. Colonial wage scales for seamen are yet to be compiled but, even in James Henretta's Boston, the pool of desperate men would not man all the port's ships.²⁸ Some of those who might have lived on Walden Pond or some frontier farm actually chose to go to sea instead.

Of those who calculated the risks of shipping, few were more precise than the underwriters. Insurance not only covered losses in a ship sunk suddenly with all hands, but also protected against losses in a ship that had to be cast away or had to be lightened, or one that took in enough water to damage a cargo like sugar or tobacco. A peacetime insurance rate of 2 to 2¹/₂ per cent covered all these risks, and also provided substantial profits for underwriters. Therefore the odds against

-
24. This preliminary, but very conservative, estimate is based upon an English fleet in the American trades of about 70,000 tons and a colonial fleet of some 25,000 tons. The first figure is taken from Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry* (London, 1962), p. 17 and the second is calculated from the surviving English port books and colonial naval officers' lists for the years 1695 to 1700. For seven thousand men to handle those 95,000 tons, they would had to have accomplished a very optimistic tons-per-man ratio of more than 13.5. Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 71, and James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade and the Economic Development of Colonial North America* (Cambridge, 1972), Appendix III, tables 12-6, 23-5, indicate tons-per-man ratios that should have resulted in some ten to twelve thousand active mariners in the English Atlantic.
 25. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, M. Shinagel, ed., (New York, 1975), p. 8.
 26. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
 27. Smart money was compensation paid naval seamen for injuries received in action. Crewmen of the *Royal Hudson's Bay* refused to sail without the Company's assurance that smart money would be paid in case of an engagement. *Hudson's Bay Copy Booke of Letters Commissions Instructions Outward 1688-1696*, E.E. Rich, ed., (London, 1957), p. 76, 252. Crewmen of the Falmouth-Lisbon mail packet acted similarly in February of 1705/6. General Post Office Archive, London, Falmouth Packet Book, fol. 35, 88. See also *The Voyages and Travels of Captain Nathaniel Uring* (London, 1928), pp. 66-7.
 28. James Henretta found 188 propertyless adult males in Boston according to the tax lists of 1687. "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XXII(1965), p. 76. After a decade of war the town had 6,443 tons of locally-owned shipping. B. and L. Bailyn, *Massachusetts Shipping, 1697-1714* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), Table V. What the intervening decade had done to tonnage is not clear. What is evident is that the fleet of 1698 would employ some 475 men, presuming the optimistic tons/man ratio mentioned in note 24, but also presuming full utilization of the fleet at some point in time.

a damage claim of any kind must have been at least a hundred to one, and the chances of drowning even more remote. Richard Price's actuarial work showed special concern for the high mortality rates in large cities, but both the premiums and the arguments for his life insurance scheme for commanders of East Indian Company ships suggest that the risks to life on land and sea were seen as comparable.²⁹

By 1675, when the first English sea atlas appeared,³⁰ most of the safest and fastest North Atlantic routes had been discovered. Although the ocean continued to take lives and inflict sufferings, were the risks still of the same order as a lifetime earlier? The Reverend Charles Wolley, Anglican chaplain to the New York garrison in 1679-80 and no seaman, recognized that prospective migrants might be worried about the voyage:

. . . but oh the passage, the passage thither, *hic labor, hoc opus est*: there is the timorous objection: the Ship may flounder by springing a leak, be wreckt by a Storm or taken by a Pickeroon: which are plausible pleas to flesh and blood, but if we would examine the bills of mortality and compare the several accidents and diseases by the Land, we should find them almost a hundred for one to what happens by Sea. . . .³¹

Wolley's statistics are doubtful, but perhaps our reading of ships' logs could be improved. Sea logs and diaries served several practical purposes. They provided evidence for captains and shipowners, as well as courts, on the management of ships at sea. Lawsuits were often launched by merchants whose goods arrived damaged—a sign that arrival itself was not taken as a miracle. The logs also determined pay owing to deceased seamen, and because of that incidentally served as parish registers, although admittedly the registers of all-male parishes—all deaths and no births.

Wolley's timorous traveller existed. However, it is interesting that, by the early eighteenth century, colonial doctors were recommending sea voyages for the recovery of one's health,³² and ship surgeons were being eliminated as unnecessary from the crews of most transatlantic merchantmen, though they were still used on Hudson Bay, Mediterranean, African and Indian voyages.³³ Chaplain Wolley's *A Two Years Journal in New York* . . . (London, 1701) was encour-

29. On insurance rates see Lucy S. Sutherland, *A London Merchant, 1695-1774* (London, 1933), pp. 78-9; *Atlantic Merchant Apothecary: Letters of Joseph Cruttenden*, I.K. Steele, ed., (Toronto, 1977), pp. 54, 78, 105; J.R. Ward, "The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650-1834," *Economic History Review*, XXXI (1978), p. 200. R. Grassby argues that two-thirds of insurance premiums were retained as profits in the late seventeenth century. "The Rate of Profit in Seventeenth Century England," *English Historical Review*, LXXXIV (1969), p. 742. Richard Price, *Reversionary Prices*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1792), I, pp. 119-21.

30. John Seller, *Atlas Maritimus* (London, 1675).

31. *A Two Years Journal in New York* . . . (London, 1701) reprinted in Cornell Jaray, ed., *Historic Chronicles of New-Amsterdam, Colonial New York and Early Long Island* (New York, 1968), pp. 60-1.

32. Sachse, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 44.

33. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 112; and Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, HBC C 2/1-3.

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

aging, concluding with one of Lord Bacon's apophthegms. In this, a mariner mentions that his great grandfather, his grandfather and his father all died at sea.³⁴ A landsman reacted: "If I were you, I would never go to sea." When challenged as to where *his* ancestors had died, the landsman proudly replied that they all died in their beds. The mariner's obvious retort was "If I were you, I would never go to bed." What we know of a seaman's life may say something of life for many people then. It does not necessarily mean that seafaring people were either fools or martyrs.

Evidence that Atlantic communications were slow, unpredictable and infrequent is as common in surviving literature as the suggestions that the ocean was dangerous. Historians can hardly be blamed for accepting the evidence. One major source for English Atlantic history, the *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series*,³⁵ includes some 3,270 letters exchanged between colonial governors and the Lords of Trade in London during the sixty-three years following 1675. They include many references to lost letters, shortages of shipping, convoy restrictions, and unexplained silences from the metropolis. There are no accounts of splendid communications, save from the manager of the West Indies packet service in its best years.³⁶ Even the launching of this ambitious mail sloop service did not prompt any extravagant praise. When the service began to falter, though, governors were quick to complain.³⁷

The Empire was run through instructions, rather than letters, and perhaps it was as well. Governors were chosen for their military or political services or abilities, not their clerical ones. Royal governors wrote an average of one letter every three months and received only half that many from the Lords of Trade in London.³⁸

The pace of official correspondence should not be mistaken for the pace of Atlantic communications. A governor sought to impress local notables with his excellent metropolitan connections and these were seen in timely letters from patrons and government offices.³⁹ He also sought to impress those same govern-

34. Wolley, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

35. *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and the West Indies*, W.N. Sainsbury *et. al.*, eds., 43 vols. (1860-1963), hereafter cited as *CSPC*.

36. *CSPC 1702-3*, no. 323; Dummer to Thomas Pitt, 10 March 1702/3 in British Library, London, Add. MSS. 22852, fols. 111-2 are examples.

37. *CSPC 1704-5*, no. 1343; *CSPC 1706-8*, no. 973; *CSPC 1708-9*, no. 96.

38. The annual average of letters, 1675 to 1737, of royal governors to (from) the Lords of Trade were Jamaica 6.8(2.0); Leeward Islands 5.8(2.1); New York 5.8(2.2); Barbados 5.5(2.2); Massachusetts 4.9(2.0); Carolinas 3.8(.8); Virginia 3.2(1.4); Bermuda 3.0(1.0); Bahamas 2.8(.6); Maryland 2.7(1.7). Average for above colonies 4.4(1.6). Only royal government periods are included here, and Lord Bellomont's governorship of New York (1698-1701) is excluded, as he wrote as Governor of Massachusetts at the same time. His phenomenal rate of forty-three letters to the Board of Trade in the thirty-five months of his tenure suggests something of the possibilities. Note: all letters written within a week of each other are considered as one, and simple covering letters are not included. *CSPC*.

39. See *CSPC 1700*, no. 622 and S.N. Katz, *Newcastle's New York* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 197-200 for explicit examples.

ment offices with how far away he was, how busy he was, and why he could not keep up a fuller correspondence with meddling London bureaucrats. Governors also preferred to send their letters by men-of-war, and what they called a "lack of opportunity" to write was not complete isolation.⁴⁰

Comparisons between the letter-writing of British West Indian governors and of Royal African Company agents at the same places and times are suggestive. Company factors at Barbados reported to their superiors twice as often as the governors did to the Plantation Office, and received more than three times as many replies. At Jamaica, the differences between the government and the slaving company were similar.⁴¹ The Royal African Company records provide comparisons seldom available for business over a number of decades, but they substantiate the suspicion that merchants made fuller use of communications facilities than did the government. A few governors, like the Earl of Bellomont or Jonathan Belcher, wrote with regularity every few weeks from colonies which had no packet service and were also subject to winter, but these men illustrate what was possible rather than usual.⁴²

The governors' letters indicate another major misunderstanding that has contributed to the notion of the Atlantic as a moat. The letters suggest that eighteenth-century mariners were much less cautious about sailing seasons than are twentieth-century historians. The sources for short, well-defined seasons had seemed so solid and unequivocal, and supported by common sense. Governors' defensive remarks about the opportunities to write are reinforced by merchants' recommendations about *the* best month for the convoy to sail for each trade.⁴³

40. Royal instruction to report "upon all occasions" to both the Secretary of State and the Lords of Trade were issued to most governors after 1702 and to some as early as 1679. *Royal Instructions to British Colonial Governors, 1670-1776*, L.W. Labaree, ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1935), II, pp. 747-8. For Joseph Dudley's comments on shipping, as an example, see *CSPC 1702-3*, no. 1094; *CSPC 1704-5*, nos. 680, 1274; *CSPC 1706-8*, nos. 305, 443, 947, 1186.

41. The Average Number of Letters per Year, 1675 to 1737^a

	sent by			
	governors	agents	Lords of Trade	R.A.C.
Barbados	5.5	11.4 ^b	2.2	6.7 ^c
Jamaica	6.8	10.3 ^d	2.0	4.7 ^c

SOURCES: *CSPC*; Public Record Office, London, T 70/8, 12-14, 57, 58.

a. See above, n. 38. b. 1684-1719 c. 1687-1715 d. 1689-1715

42. During twenty months of governing from New York, Bellomont wrote letters to the Board of Trade dated in twelve months. There were no letters sent January-March 1697/8. When he wrote from Boston, for fifteen months, he only missed one month, December 1699. Governor Jonathan Belcher wrote fifteen letters to the Board of Trade in 1731.

43. Even in the sugar trade, convoy discussions led to a decision on the single best month for sailing, though alternatives were debated. See, for example, *CSPC 1693-6*, nos. 986, 1758; and *CSPC 1696-7*, nos. 267, 287.

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

Nature herself dictated Atlantic shipping seasons: winter had gales and ice-locked harbours; summer had teredo worms that destroyed ships in the Chesapeake Bay and fevers that destroyed crews; autumn brought hurricanes. Economic priorities reinforced the seasons: West Indian sugar was ready early in the New Year; New Hampshire timber came down with the ice; the onshore cod fishery at Newfoundland began when the fish arrived in May.

Yet, the year-round nature of travel, indicated by the dating of governors' letters, is confirmed by the English port books, the colonial naval officers' lists, and the colonial newspapers.⁴⁴ Aside from Hudson Bay, which was subjected to overwhelming winters,⁴⁵ the English Atlantic ports of North America were seldom sealed by ice for more than two or three weeks.⁴⁶ Outward-bound shipping, naturally, could respond to changing local conditions better than ships bound for ports north of the Delaware River in January and February. The seasons of the tobacco shipping trade were not effectively dictated by nature; they underwent a fundamental change of season early in the eighteenth century.⁴⁷ At

44. See below, notes 46-51.

45. Resolution Island, aptly-named, was the rendezvous for the westbound Hudson's Bay ships. The first week of July was the earliest safe passage through the tide-driven ice blocks of the Strait, and the ships were to be out again by the end of September. Captain William Coats, *The Geography of Hudson's Bay: Remarks of Captain William Coats*, J. Barrow, ed., (London, 1852), pp. 5-13, 19; Public Archives of Canada, HBC C 4/1, The Ship Movement Book 1719-1929; *Labrador and Hudson Bay Pilot* (Ottawa, 1955), pp. 13-4.

46. Boston harbour seldom froze, but the threat of winter storms on that coast meant that January to March saw little inward traffic, and that was from the West Indies. New York could have trouble caused by ice clogging the harbour, but this seldom persisted more than a few days. Philadelphia was much more likely to be frozen in for a few weeks in a cold winter. Research is still in progress on this matter, but these conclusions seem evident from the ship movement lists in the *Boston News-Letter* and the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

47. Davis, *op. cit.*, noticed the English end of this season shift. See pp. 285-6.

Virginia Entries from Britain by Month 1699-1700, 1737-8

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	TOTAL
1699-1700	13	10	11	5	3	1	-	1	5	8	17	13	87
1737-8	3	9	10	13	18	13	6	2	-	1	4	4	83

Virginia Clearances for Britain by Month 1699-1700, 1737-8
(as a % of total number of cases)

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	no. of cases
1699-1700	3	6	15	25	24	19	3	4	1	-	-	-	143
1737-8	-	-	4	5	10	20	13	21	22	4	2	-	101

SOURCE: Public Record Office, CO 5/1441; *Virginia Gazette*.

HISTORICAL PAPERS 1978 COMMUNICATIONS HISTORIQUES

English ports,⁴⁸ and those between the Chesapeake⁴⁹ and Barbados,⁵⁰ ships were moving in all months of the year. Some masters found better markets for what they had to sell if they did not arrive with everyone else. There were seasons of heavier traffic (which, ironically, included the hurricane season for New England vessels at Barbados)⁵¹ but letters, invoices, news and rumour moved directly or by ricochet around the English Atlantic in all seasons.

As with the notion of the deadly Atlantic, the idea that communications were so precarious as to prevent continuing social interchange (or even bad enough to constitute a significant precondition for the fracture of the political and economic Empire) can be challenged on grounds of logic as well as evidence.

The first British Empire lasted seven generations. For the first migrants to English America, a few ships a year maintained connections between the novel and laborious New World and the family back home. A century later many colonials lived settled existences linked to an Atlantic political economy. The staple

-
48. An ox roast on the Thames was an event of a lifetime by 1700. One was reported in January of 1715/16. *Boston News-Letter*, no. 624.

English Customs and Colonial Trades, by Month, 1696-1700

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	TOTAL
Entries ^a	67	21	25	30	54	100	138	106	78	101	89	78	887
Clearances	54	41	51	26	46	26	41	46	40	50	73	114	608

SOURCES: Public Record Office, E 190/ series, complete for outports. London figures for 1696 and 1697 only.

a. These dates are of the first landing of any goods entered from an arriving vessel and the last items that cleared customs aboard a departing vessel.

49. Note 47 above illustrates this, but refers only to transatlantic traffic. Intercolonial traffic was even less concerned with seasons. The log of the *Essex Prize*, Virginia's naval guard vessel for 1698-1700, reveals the year-round operation of the man-of-war, and also includes log entries for merchantmen saluted, met, and challenged as they entered or cleared the Chesapeake in all seasons. Public Record Office, Adm 51/291.

50. Barbados Entries from Britain, by month, 1696-1700

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	TOTAL
	34	54	55	51	51	56	44	18	25	24	29	41	482

SOURCE: Public Record Office, CO 33/13.

51. Barbados Entries from North America, by month, 1696-1700

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	TOTAL
	110	54	33	26	35	40	77	60	54	49	48	47	633

SOURCE: Public Record Office, CO 33/13.

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

trades drew hundreds of ships a year to the colonies.⁵² An English visitor or migrant would have less to learn upon arrival in New England in 1740 than was the case a century earlier.⁵³ In a sense, the Atlantic contracted further in the generation before the American Revolution, though some new interior American settlements would be more isolated. Colonial cries of tyranny, Stuart or Georgian, themselves suggest that provincial Americans feared the reach of the metropolis. Even if they exaggerated, they still felt it was worthwhile to maintain lobbyists in London because the Atlantic was not wide enough to prevent legal, political and economic interventions.

Presumption of poor Atlantic communications is affected by the idea that land unites and water divides. Lands have histories, but oceans are only the broad boundaries between those histories. Of course, it is neither land nor water that has history, but people. Admittedly, water efficiently obliterates the track of man and maritime history must be written from the evidence that survives on land. Yet the land-oriented bias derives less from the sources than from the nineteenth-century revolution in land transport. Maritime empires have come to be regarded as unnatural, while continental empires are, if they succeed, seen as fulfilling natural destinies.

This fundamental shift in perception adds to the difficulty in understanding the early modern seaborne empires, including the British. No part of England was further than ninety miles from salt water,⁵⁴ and the mother country was land-locked compared to her Atlantic colonies in 1700.⁵⁵ When ships were faster than

52. Estimated Number of Ships Importing Tobacco & Sugar into Great Britain (Annual Averages) 1683-1740						
	1683	1686-1688	1701-1710	1711-1720	1721-1730	1731-1740
Tobacco ^a		221	217	226	265	316
Sugar ^b	143		149	221	303	323

SOURCES: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, 1960), Series Z, pp. 231, 238; R.S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves* (Chapel Hill, 1972), p. 203; Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar*, 2 vols. (London, 1949), I, pp. 193-8.

a. Calculated at 126,750 lbs. per ship derived from J.M. Price *France and the Chesapeake*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor, 1972), II, pp. 901-2.

b. Calculated at 127 tons, the average size of some 615 vessels entering Barbados 1696 to 1700. As this includes 358 London ships (averaging 159 tons) and 257 outport ships (averaging 82 tons), this is a conservative estimate for the sugar trade as a whole. See Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-1. The under-reporting of carrying capacity might be offset by excess capacity.

53. Although he is not satisfied with it, Clyde Kluckhohn offers a very useful reflection on this in "Parts and Wholes in Cultural Analysis," in Daniel Lerner, ed., *Parts and Wholes* (New York, 1963), p. 113.
54. That was Edmond Halley's estimate. For the consequences of this fact for industrialization, see Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 73-4.
55. See Herman Friis, "A Series of Population Maps of the Colonies and the United States, 1625-1790," *Geographical Review*, XXX (1940), pp. 463-70.

land travel, when they were the only vehicles that routinely operated day and night, and when they moved goods at one-sixteenth of the cost of wagon carriage,⁵⁶ did water divide and land unite? Compare the pace and pattern of exploration of the North Atlantic Ocean with that of the much smaller North American continent.

Another assumption that is central to modern assessments of early modern communications is a Newtonian view of time as an abstracted constant. Although time perception is complicated, it is a learned social value developed from observable motion.⁵⁷ The English language remains littered with anachronistic metaphors for speed that were developed when mice, hares, hounds, deer, winks, and winds were among the fastest things around. These were not just quaint sayings in the English Atlantic of the first Georges. The pace of human communication would not then serve as a source for new metaphors for speed.

Yet the pace at which mail, news, and gossip travelled did not have to be "accepted" or "tolerated with resignation",⁵⁸ for travel had not been quicker earlier. Feats of speed, daring, endurance and recklessness performed on a lathered horse or on an oversailed sloop were the subjects of wagers, crowds and comments. In 1745, for instance, Cooper Thornhill of Stilton, Huntingdonshire, wagered that he could ride a 213 mile course to London and back in fifteen hours. After he accomplished the trip in less than twelve and one-half hours, a contemporary recorded in amazement: "This is deservedly reckon'd the greatest performance of its kind ever known. Several thousand Pounds were laid on this affair; and the roads for many miles lined with people to see him pass and repass."⁵⁹ This breakneck race, which must have exhausted a number of horses as well as innkeeper Thornhill, was run at an average speed of 17.3 m.p.h. (c. 29 km/h). It may be asking a great deal but, until we can share that surprise, we cannot appreciate the communications of the lifetime that preceded that ride.

Thornhill's achievement grows when placed in context. A royal courier on a frantic ride from London to Plymouth averaged 7.7 m.p.h.⁶⁰ Average speeds of six m.p.h. were possible for post riders or light coaches on the comparatively good roads of the London area, but most of the carrier wagons averaged less than three m.p.h. In Cornwall, in most of England north of the Wash, and in the sister kingdoms, the reach of London was slower, wagons and coaches were of less use, and pack trains were still common on many routes.⁶¹ Infrequent travel, rather

56. T.S. Willan, *The English Coasting Trade, 1600-1750* (Manchester, 1938), pp. xii-xiv.

57. J. Piaget, *Le développement de la notion du temps chez l'enfant* (Paris, 1946).

58. A.H. Cole, "The Tempo of Mercantile Life in Colonial America," *Business History Review*, XXXIII (1959), pp. 280, 282, 284.

59. *The Torrington Diaries*, C.B. Andrews, ed., 4 vols. (London, 1934), III, pp. 39-40.

60. Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 473. According to the *Guinness Book of Records, 1976* (London, 1976), p. 285, George Osbaldeston covered two hundred miles in eight hours and forty-two minutes at Newmarket in 1831. He used fifty mounts to gain an average speed of 22.9 m.p.h. (36.99 km/h).

61. See J. Crofts, *Packhorse, Waggon and Post* (London, 1967); and Joan Parkes, *Travel in England in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1925), chap. IV.

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

than longer travelling time, meant that remoter areas of Scotland and Ireland were as far from London news as were Barbados and Massachusetts. Many British migrants to the new world had only moved from one province to another.

Ships could not match Thornhill's average speed, but they could outrun the post rider for days and nights on end.⁶² When Edmund Dummer proposed a one-hundred-day schedule for his West India packets to Barbados, the Leeward Islands and Jamaica in 1702, it was considered impossible.⁶³ He was understandably proud when his sloops accomplished that speed with some regularity. The West Indies were closer to England than was the Levant.⁶⁴ Like the Mediterranean of Philip II had been, the English Atlantic was approximately forty to seventy days across in 1700.⁶⁵

It seems evident that English Atlantic communications could be good, bad, or indifferent, and can only be judged against the legitimate expectations of contemporaries of Edmund Dummer or innkeeper Thornhill. Each route would have its own range of passage times and anxiety about a ship was evident only when it failed to arrive within twice the time of a good passage.⁶⁶

The frequency of ship arrivals and departures was another aspect of communications which produced local expectations of some variety. Except in Hudson Bay, where the ice of Hudson Strait limited access as effectively as the Company monopoly, the annual ship from England was already history by 1700. A monthly opportunity to receive and answer mail from England was promotional puffery in 1657,⁶⁷ but a peacetime reality for the West Indies by the end of the century.⁶⁸ The same objective prompted the wartime packet boats and the scheduling, after 1717, of winter horse posts north from the open waters of Chesapeake Bay.⁶⁹ Philadelphia gained considerable economic advantage from first access to European and West Indian market information moving north along this route. Merchant shipping carried the mail most frequently to the staple colonies, but the intercolonial provisions trade circulated news northward when direct transatlantic shipping to the northern colonies was light. For English and colonial govern-

62. Dummer's West India packet boats averaged thirty-five days from the West of England to Barbados, or just over 120 miles a day.

63. Board of Trade to Nottingham, 22 June 1702, PRO, CO 318/3, fol. 164-5.

64. Ralph Davis, *Aleppo and Devonshire Square* (London, 1967), p. 3.

65. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, 2 vols. (London, 1972), 1, p. 370, suggests some comparisons here. Westward English Atlantic passages to the Chesapeake averaged closer to seventy days, and the Hudson Bay was reached in an average of seventy-five days (Downs to York Fort or Churchill).

66. See the author's "Time, Communications and Society: The English Atlantic, 1702", *Journal of American Studies*, VIII (1974), p. 20.

67. Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, 2nd ed. (London, 1673), p. 111. The first edition was in 1657, and the second simply a reissue of the first.

68. See note 50.

69. The *Boston News-Letter* carried an advertisement for the new service in nos. 708 and 709, and the first Williamsburg note appeared in Feb. 1717/8, no. 723.

ments, naval vessels or hired advice boats could be used to send important public news in any season.

The transatlantic flow of correspondence, newspapers, pamphlets, books, fashions, and medicines challenges the moat theories as effectively as do the returning travellers, “ministering friends”, merchants and seamen who brought family news and metropolitan gossip. In provincial America, as perhaps in provinces everywhere, their reception was bound to be mixed. Curiosity about the sophisticated metropolis might focus upon its most decadent fads and foibles. The newly-arrived might be interrupted by a lecture on the honesty, friendliness, general virtue and good health of the locals. And if the colonial wanted the latest fashion he derided, or was himself dreaming of or planning a trip to the metropolis, the mask of provincial self-respect would hide it.

Not only do moat theories make the longevity of provincial America hard to explain, they make the end of the first British Empire harder to understand as well. The relationship did not snap like some dead and formal link that had become irrelevant. The Empire broke gradually and painfully, leaving many of all ranks who could not accept the changes when they finally came.

With the assistance of instant electronic communication, we have seen the evaporation of empires that were built in the age of sail. Perhaps we should be particularly reluctant to presume that “poor” communications are a solvent of empire. The national context of most history writing and teaching ensures that the Atlantic as a moat will remain a powerful notion, but discounting it will add considerably to our understanding of the first British Empire and of the emergence of American social and political identity.

Résumé

La croyance que les communications transatlantiques entre l'Angleterre et l'Amérique étaient nettement mauvaises aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles est à ce point répandue qu'on pourrait presque la qualifier de truisme. L'Atlantique prend ainsi l'apparence d'une immense douve, et, de là à dire qu'il a contribué au développement de la nation américaine, il n'y a qu'un pas. L'auteur se propose ici de jeter un nouveau regard sur ces présomptions ou supposées vérités. Que ces idées aient eu des fondements, il n'y a aucun doute. Edmund Burke autant que Thomas Paine ont utilisé l'argument. De même, de multiples auteurs américains les ont véhiculées fussent-ils aussi connus que Turner, Boorstin, Andrews, Dickerson, Bridenbaugh, Morgan ou Greene. De plus, rien de plus facile que d'élaborer sur les dangers de l'océan: de nombreux documents d'époque tels les récits de voyage des Puritains, des “Quakers” et des Anglicans sont là pour en témoigner.

Cependant, de dire l'auteur, on a trop souvent oublié de considérer les nombreux voyages que certains ont effectués — les 110 traversées du capitaine Bryant, par exemple — et de mentionner le nombre impressionnant de marins — 7,000 au tournant du dix-huitième siècle — qui sillonnaient l'océan d'alors. De même, on a

MOAT THEORIES AND THE ENGLISH ATLANTIC

fréquemment mal interprété l'intermittence de la correspondance entre la métropole et la colonie, n'utilisant presque exclusivement que l'exemple de celle qui s'échange officiellement au lieu de tenir compte de tout ce qui traverse l'océan tout au long de la période. L'auteur s'interroge aussi sur cette notion par trop populaire que la terre unit alors que l'eau divise quand on sait qu'à l'époque, en Angleterre, il en coûte seize fois plus pour expédier des marchandises par terre que par eau. Il s'arrête aussi à la perception du temps au dix-huitième, si différente de la nôtre que l'on a tendance à en oublier la portée. Enfin, selon lui, cette théorie de l'Atlantique-fossé ou barrière fait paraître bien peu plausible la longue durée du lien colonial et elle résiste mal à un examen sérieux. Néanmoins, le fait de la remettre en question ajoute à notre compréhension du premier empire britannique et de l'émergence de l'identité américaine.