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JOHN BULL, UNCLE SAM, TRANSATLANTIC STEAMSHIPS, AND THE MAIL

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Titolo. John Bull, lo zio Sam, i vapori transatlantici e la posta.

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Abstract
Historical writing on North Atlantic postal communications in the mid-nineteenth century has mostly focused on the gradual ascendancy of the Halifax-based Cunard Steamship Company, which completed its first transatlantic postal voyage in 1840. Largely overlooked in this literature is the long and often ideologically charged debate in the United States over the propriety of subsidizing postal transportation outside of the country's territorial boundaries.
A pivotal event in this debate was the 1849 confrontation in the U.S. Senate between Ohio Democrat William Allen and Connecticut Democrat John Niles. Allen opposed postal subsidies: in his view, the U.S. government should subsidize the circulation of information on public affairs, but not commercial correspondence. Niles, a former postmaster general, supported subsidies as a necessary adjunct to trade. To buttress his point, Allen ventured a remarkably expansive historical comparison between ancient Greece, where the absence of a postal system made representative government impossible, and the modern United States, where the postal system undergirded democratic politics. This debate effectively ended in 1851, when the U.S. Congress rejected its longstanding commitment to balancing postal revenue and postal expenditures, a victory for Niles.

While forgotten today, this debate – and the comparable debate in the British Parliament over mail subsidies – is significant for at least two reasons. First, it marked an early chapter in the still-evolving debate over the role of national governments in what we would today call global information policy; and, second, it spawned a remarkably enduring visual iconography that popularized the figures of John Bull and Uncle Sam.

Riassunto
I testi storici sulle comunicazioni postali nel Nord Atlantico attorno alla metà del XIX secolo si sono focalizzati soprattutto sulla crescente influenza della Cunard Steamship Company*, di Halifax, che compì il primo viaggio postale transatlantico nel 1840. Quel che è stato decisamente sottovalutato nella letteratura specialistica è il dibattito, durato anni e spesso carico di valori ideologici, che vi fu negli Stati Uniti sull'opportunità di sovvenzionare il trasporto postale al di fuori dei confini territoriali del paese.*
L'evento clou di questo dibattito fu il confronto avvenuto nel 1849 nel Senato statunitense tra due senatori democratici: William Allen, dell'Ohio, e John Niles, del Connecticut. Allen era contrario ai sussidi postali. Secondo lui il governo statunitense avrebbe dovuto sovvenzionare la circolazione delle informazioni negli affari pubblici ma non la corrispondenza commerciale. Al contrario Niles, ex direttore generale delle poste, appoggiava le sovvenzioni ritenendole un necessario complemento al commercio. A sostegno della sua teoria, Allen fece un confronto storico molto ampio tra la Grecia antica, in cui l'assenza di un sistema postale rendeva impossibile il governo rappresentativo, e gli Stati Uniti, in cui il sistema postale era alla base della politica democratica. Il dibattito terminò con la vittoria di Niles solo nel 1851, quando il Congresso decise dopo anni di non proseguire più con la compensazione tra entrate e uscite postali.
Un dibattito ormai dimenticato ma, analogamente a quanto successo nel parlamento britannico a proposito delle sovvenzioni postali, significativo per almeno due motivi. Per prima cosa, contribuì a iniziare il dibattito sul ruolo dei governi nazionali in quella che oggi chiameremmo politica globale di informazione; in secondo luogo, diede origine a un'iconografia che durò a lungo e che rese popolari le figure di John Bull e dello zio Sam.

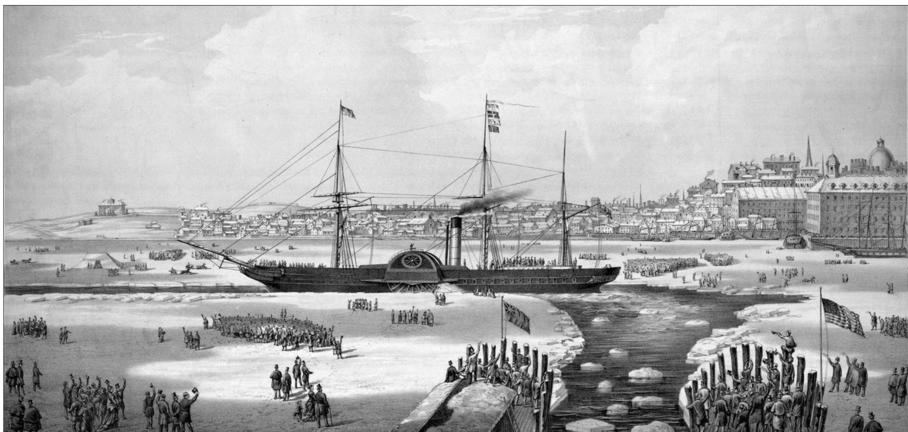
In an age in which the oceangoing steamship was the *sine qua non* of speed, the North Atlantic sea lanes witnessed an epic contest between the British empire and the American republic. Victory became a matter not only of national pride but also of commercial supremacy and military prowess.

The principal actors in this morality play were neither admirals nor statesmen, but shipping companies. Each invested heavily in steam-powered vessels designed to cross the Atlantic on a regular schedule; each traded on their reputations as national champions; and each relied on generous government support. Though the mail made up a relatively small part of the steamship's freight, its conveyance was a major rationale for the annual stipends upon which each company relied.

The British entrant in this contest was the British and North American Royal Mail Steam-Packet Company, an unwieldly name that was often shortened to the Cunard Line, in honor of its founder, Samuel Cunard. For the United States, the national champion was the United States Mail Steamship Company, better known as the Collins Line, after its chief promoter, Edward K. Collins. The Cunard steamship *Britannia* completed its first transatlantic voyage in 1840, journeying from Liverpool to Boston via Halifax in a mere 13 days; the Collins's *Atlantic* made its grand debut a decade later.

Cunard faced one challenge at the outset that Collins escaped. Collins's home port in the United States was New York City; Cunard's, in contrast, was the more northerly port of Boston. In the winter of 1844, Boston's harbor froze over, immobilizing the *Britannia*. Fearful of a looming public relations disaster, Boston merchants raised a purse to clear a seven-mile-long channel so that the *Britannia* could reach the open sea.

1. Merchants Protect Boston's Reputation as an All-Weather Port by Freeing the Cunard's Britannia *from its Ice-Bound Harbor (Digital Commonwealth, Boston, Massachusetts).*



The contest between Cunard and Collins engaged a gaggle of lawmakers, lobbyists, and journalists, and has spawned a large secondary literature. [1] Largely unremarked in these popular accounts is a circumstance that would have been obvious at the time, namely, its ideological dimension. [2] The contest *mattered* to contemporaries in ways that reveal much about the two countries governmental institutions and civic ideals. In the United Kingdom, the public debate centered on naval supremacy; in the United States, on the relative importance of territorial consolidation and overseas expansion.

The North Atlantic sea lanes in the mid-nineteenth century were then, as they remain today, one of the busiest trade routes in the world. In the years immediately following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, a fleet of sailing ships linked the United Kingdom and the United States in a communications circuit anchored by Liverpool and New York City. This circuit stretched from Britain's manufacturing heartland to the cotton ports of Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. Among the ships in this circuit were the sailing packets that the British post office had run across the Atlantic since the colonial era on a more-or-less regular schedule. (The name «packet» was derived from the packets of mail that they carried. [3]) The postal packets ceased operation in 1823, having been supplanted by a

[1] DAVID BUDLONG TYLER, *Steam Conquers the Atlantic*, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1939, chaps. 9-15; FRANCIS E. HYDE, *Cunard and the North Atlantic, 1840-1973: A History of Shipping and Financial Management*, London, Macmillan, 1975, chap. 2; JOHN A. BUTLER, *Atlantic Kingdom: America's Contest with Cunard in The Age of Sail and Steam*, Washington D.C., Brassey's, 2001, chaps. 5-6; STEPHEN FOX, *Transatlantic: Samuel Cunard, Isambard Brunel, and the Great Atlantic Steamships*, New York, HarperCollins, 2003, pt. 2; WILLIAM M. FOWLER, JR., *Steam Titans: Cunard, Collins, and the Epic Battle for Commerce on the North Atlantic*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2017.
For an annotated edition of several of the most revealing mid-nineteenth-century American steamship pamphlets, as well as a checklist of the most widely circulated nineteenth-century steamship-related postal pamphlets to have been published in the United States, see RICHARD R. JOHN, ed., *The American Postal Network*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2012, vol. 2, pp. vii-102.

[2] PETER A. SHULMAN, *Coal and Empire: The Birth of Energy Security in Industrial America*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), chap. 1. Missing from the legislative debate over the Cunard-Collins rivalry was a fact that, had it been publicly revealed, would have astonished lawmakers in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Shortly after Collins entered the North Atlantic market, he entered into a secret cartel agreement with Cunard to stabilize the market. EDWARD W. SLOAN, *Collins versus Cunard: The Realities of a North Atlantic Steamship Rivalry, 1850-1858*, «International Journal of Maritime History», 4 (June 1992), pp. 83-100.

[3] DANIEL WALKER HOWE, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 120.

commercial line of sailing packets run out of New York City. The commercial packets were faster and more reliable and quickly became the favored carrier for mercantile correspondence, which was, in this period, by far the most important category of mail. The most famous commercial packet fleet – the Black Ball Line – ran for several decades between New York City and Liverpool. Known to all by the painted circle on it its topsail, it was a floating advertisement for the city's maritime prowess. [4]

The first ship to cross the Atlantic under the power of steam rather than wind was not a Cunarder, but the *Great Western*. The *Great Western* was a wooden paddle-wheeler, built by the famed British civil engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, that completed its maiden voyage in 1838. (The *Savannah*, a steam-power-equipped vessel built in New York City, had crossed the Atlantic in 1819, though it mostly relied on sail.) Steam-powered vessels had of course been a fixture on British and American rivers long before 1838. Ocean navigation was much more demanding. Bad weather posed a constant threat, especially in the winter, as did the occasional iceberg. A further challenge was the length of the run. Every North Atlantic steamship in this period relied on coal to power its engines. Unable to replenish its coal supply at a coaling station at mid-passage, the *Great Western*, like all of its successors, had been equipped with coal bunkers sufficiently large so that it might complete its voyage without hoisting its sails, and arrive in port, as the phrase went, entirely under its own steam. [5]

The advent of the transatlantic steamship confronted the British admiralty with a dilemma. In time of war, would it be able to commandeer enough steamships to enable it to prevail on the high seas? To help ensure that the British retained their vaunted naval supremacy, the admiralty lobbied Parliament in 1839 to fund Cunard. The advent of the oceangoing steamship, warned one MP, in defense of Cunard, had exposed the United Kingdom to «more sudden and more imminent peril than she has been subjected to at any previous period in history.» To protect the homeland from attack, the admiralty had an obligation to support a fleet of ocean steamers sufficiently robust so that it could be swiftly commandeered should a rival naval power, such as France, weaponize the new mode of transportation to launch a seaborne invasion. [6]

4 Seija-Riitta Laakso, *Across the Oceans: Development of Overseas Business Information Transmission, 1815-1875*, Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society, 2007, chap. 2; Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *Square-Riggers on Schedule*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1938.

5 P. A. Shulman, *Coal and Empire*, chap. 3.

6 *Hansard*, HC Deb (29 March 1852), vol. 120, col. 269.

Parliament obliged, rewarding Cunard – but not the owners of the *Great Western* – with a lucrative contract to build and operate a fleet of dual-use steamships. In peacetime, the Cunarders would transport people, goods, and the mail; in wartime, their steamships could be retrofitted for military service. The dual-use capability minimized concerns about overspending; it received a practical test during the Crimean War when, to keep the government's war machine humming, the admiralty pressed several Cunarders into service as troop convoys.

The parliamentary debate over Cunard engaged the perennially vexed question of monopoly. Would it not be more economical to encourage competition, one MP wondered in 1846? Most certainly not, another responded, since Cunard, and only Cunard, had successfully established on the North Atlantic a year-round "communication," by which contemporaries meant what we would today call a transportation link. (The *Great Western* had not attempted an Atlantic crossing in the stormy winter season.) «Was it not obvious,» the MP asked, «that the employment of two companies for accomplishing the same object would have been more expensive to the public, and probably less effective, even supposing them both able to face the difficulties of the undertaking?» [7]

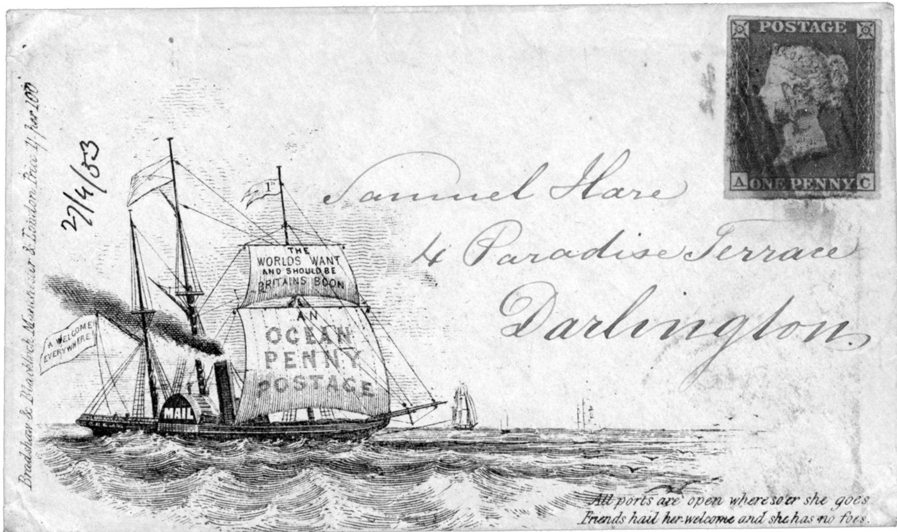
Arguments of this kind focused more on the efficacy of the Cunard contract than on its justice. In so doing, they echoed the logic of Rowland Hill's celebrated rationale for lowering the cost of letter postage. Penny postage, Hill famously argued, matched price to cost, which was quite different from proclaiming it a public good whose cost bore at best an oblique relationship to its utility. [8]

Outside of Parliament, contemporaries looked to the steamship not merely as a technical advance but also as a catalyst for moral progress. For British free traders, steam power would lower the cost of overseas mail delivery – culminating, should Rowland Hill's logic prevail – in «Ocean Penny Postage,» which was, at the time a substantial reduction in the price of mailing an overseas letter.

For the American peace activist Elihu Burritt, steam power would hasten a quasi-millennial age of cheap and convenient long-distance commu-

7 *Hansard*, HC Deb (24 January 1846), vol. 87, col. 1425.

8 The rationale for cheap postage in the United States was more expansive than the rationale for penny postage in the United Kingdom. British lawmakers matched cost to price; American lawmakers, in contrast, balanced self-support against popular access. RICHARD R. JOHN, *The Political Economy of Postal Reform in the Victorian Age*, «Smithsonian Contributions to History and Technology», 55 (2010), pp. 3-12.



2. British Steamship with Unfurled Sails Championing Free Trade and the Commercial Merits of «Ocean Penny Postage» as «The Worlds Want» and «Britain's Boon» (James L. Grimwood-Taylor, Devonshire, England).

nications. By encouraging mutual understanding, or so Burritt tirelessly proclaimed, this steam-powered communications revolution would hasten world peace. «The World Awaits Great Britain's Greatest Gift – Ocean Penny Postage,» announced a specially designed engraved envelope that championed Burritt's cause. To crystalize the relationship between steam power and human betterment, the envelope featured a paddlewheel steamship with an unfurled sail bearing the logo *Ocean Penny Postage*. A succinct encapsulation of Burritt's creed could be found underneath: «To Make Home Everywhere and All Nations Neighbours.» [9]

The British debate over steamship contracts rarely strayed far from military exigency. In the United States, in contrast, the framing was quite

[9] David Duncan Turner, *Ocean Penny Postage, Ocean and Imperial Penny Postage, 1840-1918*, London, Great Britain Philatelic Society, 2014, front cover; James L. Grimwood-Taylor, *International Postal Reforms*, vol. 2: *The Birth of the Postage Stamp and its International Effects 1840 to 1898*, London, Royal Philatelic Society, 2020, chap. 23. See also Peter A. Shulman, *Ben Franklin's Ghost: World Peace, American Slavery, and the Global Politics of Information before the Universal Postal Union*, «Journal of Global History», 10, no. 2 (2015), pp. 212-234, and Michael Laurence, *Icon of Postal Reform: The 1869 Pictorials at 150*, «The American Philatelist» (June 2019), pp. 522-529.

different. To be sure, the military issue was hardly ignored: Collins's contract, after all, had been being funded by the Navy. Yet, on balance, other issues were more pressing. Lawmakers pondered not only whether Congress should fund more than one steamship line, but also whether it should fund any steamships at all. For some of Collins's critics, it was an article of faith that Collins's most grandiloquent congressional supporters had been bribed. To contend that Collins's steamships could be a military asset, these critics charged, was a lobbyists' trick. In fact, the Collins line had been designed to maximize speed rather than battle-hardiness, rendering it useless as a weapon of war. [10]

Still others raised matters of equity that rarely came up in the British debate. Why, these Congressmen wondered, should the government fund contractors to carry the mail several thousand miles from one port to another on a route that provided no facilities whatsoever for the anyone in between? Was it not better to increase public access to information for the many Americans who lived in thinly settled districts inside the United States? And if the government were to subsidize steam power, why not the steamboats on the Mississippi? «I cannot understand,» declared one Arkansas Senator in 1852, «why American legislators should attach more importance to, and be more anxious about, the expedition and regularity of the mail communication between New York and Liverpool, than the more really valuable and interesting mail communication upon the roads and rivers within our own country.» [11]

One memorable exchange on the relative merits of what one might call the transnational and the subnational realms of postal communications took place on the Senate floor in 1849. Though both protagonists – William Allen of Ohio and John Niles of Connecticut – were Democrats, they differed widely in their assessment of the merits of Collins's contract. Allen derided Collins's subvention as elitist, while championing as democratic a bill that would have eliminated the postage on every newspaper sent by mail within thirty-mile radius of its publication. In his view, postage-free newspapers were a boon for ordinary folk, while the benefits of transatlantic mail redounded primarily to wealthy merchants:

[10] *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., 17 May 1852, pp. 608-609; MARK W. SUMMERS, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 104-106, 206, 230, 262.

[11] *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., 27 May 1852, p. 703.

The mail running between this city and Augusta, in Maine, or Savannah, in Georgia, scatters its benefits all along the road, through a populous country, and to a thousand points, diffusing its blessings as it goes along to millions of people; but here is one mail running across a trackless waste of waters, touching only at one point, except that from which it starts, and we pay for that mail for carrying merchants' letters twelve times a year as much money as we shall lose by diminishing this tax upon reading proposed by the amendment now submitted to the Senate. [12]

To buttress his point, Allen compared communications facilities in the modern-day United States with those in ancient Greece. The Greeks had no postal system, Allen reminded his colleagues. For this reason, representative government was impossible, since only city dwellers could remain abreast of the news. In the modern-day United States, in contrast, the postal system linked city and countryside, making it possible for even the most remotely situated citizen to remain well-informed. «No historian has told us about the farming population of [ancient] Greece coming into the cities to vote,» Allen pontificated: «And why, sir? Because, for want of a medium of communication between the Government and the extremes of the country, it was impossible, in the nature of things, for there to exist anything like a free and independent yeomanry.» The Greeks could have «no representative system under that state of things.» The «sole reason» for this – for «they were as wise as we are» –was that there was «no sufficient medium of communication between the citizens themselves, and between the citizens and the government.» Had the Greeks established a representative government – as had, of course, the framers of the U.S. Constitution – it would have «proved an utter and absolute abortion» and «rotted down in five years.» And so, too, would the American government in a decade, if there were «no newspapers published in the United States.» [13]

Niles responded by raising the question of cost. Should Congress permit newspapers to travel short distances postage free, the Post Office Department might be forced into debt, an outcome that, as a former post-

12 *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess., 24 Jan. 1849, p. 344.

13 *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess., 24 Jan. 1849, p. 343. Allen's speech was never issued as a pamphlet, which in ordinary circumstances would have insured its obscurity. Allen's ruminations on the ancients and the modern would, however, reach a wide audience two years later, when the journalist Eli Bowen reprinted several paragraphs from Allen's speech, without attribution, in a widely circulated compendium of postal data, history, and lore. Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 13-15.

master general, he deplored. No one expected the Post Office Department to return an annual surplus to the treasury, like, for example, its British counterpart. Yet lawmakers widely assumed that the organization should, as a matter of prudence, cover its cost. (If it did not, what possible mechanism could restrain the lawmakers' cupidity?) Allen was simply mistaken, Niles elaborated, to presume that funding for oceangoing steamships and low-cost newspaper circulation came from the similar pot. There was, in fact, no zero-sum game: the Post Office Department paid the contractors who carried the mail within the territorial boundaries of the United States out of its revenue, while Collins's fleet was being bankrolled not by the Post Office Department, but the Navy. [14]

This debate between Allen and Niles presupposed that the Post Office Department should balance its books, or, at the very least, not run in the red. Congress lifted this constraint in 1851. For the next century, the Post Office Department ran a deficit in almost every year, which Congress funded out of general revenue, typically after a long, tedious, and soon-forgotten debate.

This policy shift had no obvious relationship to the debate over Collins's funding, which continued to come from the Navy. Yet it would coincide with the ramping up of the arguments advanced by Collins's congressional supporters. To justify keeping Collins afloat, lawmakers debated the relative merits of safety and speed, the potential value of Collins's steamship service for the merchant marine, and the likelihood that the deep-pocketed insurgent Cornelius Vanderbilt might enter the market. [15]

While the legislative debate over Cunard and Collins is little-known today, it deserves to be remembered as an early chapter in the history of what we today might call global communications policy. In this debate, British and American lawmakers had different priorities. For the British, naval supremacy loomed uppermost. For the Americans, in contrast, overseas expansion would ultimately lose out to territorial consolidation.

The reluctance of U.S. lawmakers to match the British government's investment in transatlantic mail delivery was not lost on journalists familiar with international affairs. Consider, for example, the revealing cartoon that Frank Bellew drew for an American humor magazine at the height of the Cunard-Collins set-to in 1852. This cartoon is well-known today for its personification of the U.S. government as a preternaturally tall man clad in

[14] *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 2nd sess., 24 Jan. 1849, p. 346.

[15] W. M. FOWLER, *Steam Titans*, chaps. 12, 15. See also T. J. STILES, *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt*, New York, Vintage Books, 2009, chap. 10.

striped pants, a top coat, and a stovepipe hat. Endlessly emulated by later illustrators, these visual elements would become recognizable features of «Uncle Sam,» a much-beloved symbol of American national identity. Yet Bellew's cartoon is worth considering for a second reason: for it also provides insight into the mid-century debate over transatlantic communications.

While Bellew is remembered primarily for Uncle Sam, in his own age he was also admired for his respectful caricature of an impossibly lanky Abraham Lincoln, his biting indictment of railroad corruption (he was almost certainly the first cartoonist to portray big business as an octopus), and his ingenious visualization of the growing chasm between rich and poor.[16]

Born in British India, Bellew lived as a young man in France and England before moving to the United States in 1850. Few American cartoonists had a more cosmopolitan background, giving him an unusually wide-angled perspective on a range of issues, including the mid-century debate over transatlantic communications, that his contemporaries often viewed through a more parochial lens.

Bellew's steamship cartoon, *Collins and Cunard: Raising the Wind; or, Both Sides of the Story* poked fun at the parsimony of Congress.

3. Cartoonist James Bellew Lampoons the Reluctance of U. S. Lawmakers to Back Collins's Challenge to Cunard (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

[16] Richard R. John, *Proprietary Interest: Merchants, Journalists, and Antimonopoly in the 1880s*, in *Media Nation: The Political History of News in Modern America*, ed. Bruce Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, pp. 10-35, 207-211.

In Bellew's depiction, American lawmakers, personified as a complacent and ineffectual Uncle Sam, watched passively from the sidelines as a hapless Collins tried to blow his steamship across the Atlantic. The British Parliament, in contrast, symbolized by a stolid and no-nonsense «John Bull,» is patiently pumping a bellows to ensure that Cunard prevails.

Bellew's prediction proved prophetic. Though Collins's steamships sometimes outpaced Cunard's, they were more expensive to run, and could not match Cunard's safety record. Of Collins's first four steamships, two sank in the Atlantic – the *Arctic* in 1854; the *Pacific* two years later. Even had Collins proved less unlucky, rival steamship promoters, including the irrepressible Vanderbilt, would soon demonstrate that they could run an ocean-going steamship empire in the absence of public largesse.

Collins lost his funding in 1858 and went into bankruptcy soon thereafter. His last steamship, the *Adriatic*, would live on in popular memory as one of the first oceangoing vessels to be immortalized on a postage stamp, which it was in 1869, several years after it had gone out of service.

4. Collins's Adriatic *Sails the Atlantic on a U.S. Postage Stamp (National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C.).*

Cunard's steamships, in contrast, stolid and reliable, and secure in their government funding, would remain a fixture on the North Atlantic for decades to come. The contrasting priorities of British and American lawmakers had a clear spatial bias. For American lawmakers, it was simply not that important to project power in the North Atlantic. Far more consequential was the territorial consolidation of the trans-Mississippi West, a process that, while underway in the antebellum era, would advance following the Civil War at an accelerated pace. [17]

[17] STEFAN LINK and NOAM MAGGOR, *The United States as a Developing Nation: The Peculiarities of American History*, «Past and Present», 246 (February 2020), pp. 269-306.

This spatial bias had enduring consequences. For example, though the multi-nation negotiating team that lay the groundwork for the Universal Postal Union (UPU) had been headed up by the American diplomat John Kasson, the United States would remain a minor player for many decades in UPU deliberations, in large part because of the preoccupation of U.S. lawmakers with domestic concerns. [18] The refusal of the United States to join the International Telegraph Union would, similarly, limit its ability to shape cross-border telegraph protocols. [19]

The spatial bias of American communications policy found expression not only in law, but also in popular culture. Consider the pictorial representation of *American Progress* that the Prussian-born, Brooklyn-based illustrator John Gast conjured up in 1871. Gast had been commissioned to create *American Progress* by a New York City publisher as a keepsake for the purchasers of a guidebook detailing the wonders tourists could expect to encounter as they traversed the continent aboard the newly completed transcontinental railroad. To allay the anxiety of would-be railroad passengers, Gast depicted the United States panoramically from above. From such an elevated vantage point, the landscape below was reassuringly safe, inviting, and easily traversed. Neither forbidding mountains, nor hostile Indians, nor even the once intractable issue of slavery in the trans-Mississippi West impeded the settlers' steady westward trek. Hovering over this morally edifying scene at mid-continent was a guardian angel clutching a telegraph wire in one hand and a school book in the other. Far below two railroads chugged along from East to West. For Gast, his client, and his audience, the territorial consolidation of the trans-Mississippi West had become a *fait accompli*.

Technical advance, Gast's vision implied, has papered over the rift opened up by the still-recent Civil War. Yet not all innovations are equal. Barely visible at the far right were the cities New York City and Brooklyn,

[18] Richard R. John, *Projecting Power Overseas: U.S. Postal Policy and International Standard-Setting at the 1863 Paris Postal Conference*, «Journal of Policy History», 27 (July 2015), pp. 416-438.

[19] Richard R. John, *The Public Image of the Universal Postal Union in the Anglophone World, 1874-1949*, in *Exorbitant Expectations: International Organizations and the Media in the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries*, London, Routledge, 2018, ed. Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer, Heidi J.S. Tworek, pp. 38-69; Idem, *When Techno-Diplomacy Failed: Walter S. Rogers, the Universal Electrical Communications Union, and the Limitations of the International Telegraph Union as a Global Actor in the 1920s*, in *History of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU): Transnational Techno-Diplomacy from the Telegraph to the Internet* eds. Gabriele Balbi and Andreas Fickers, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 55-75.

where Gast himself lived and worked. Though the Brooklyn Bridge had not yet been finished, Gast duly depicted it, along with two steam powered vessels in New York City's harbor: a transatlantic steamer flying a British flag (presumably a Cunarder), and an American steamboat plowing the Hudson.

While the bridge and the vessels were clearly visible to the discerning viewer, Gast's design left little doubt that, in the larger scheme of things, it was the continent-spanning telegraph and railroad that deserved pride of place.

5. Illustrator John Gast Visualizes «American Progress»: Railroads and Telegraphs, But Not Steamships Dominate the Landscape (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

American Progress illustrated a feature of post-Civil War expansionism that is easily forgotten. The territorial consolidation the trans-Mississippi interior had advanced with astonishing speed. In the realm of transatlantic communications, however, the United States remained aloof. Not until the takeover of the country's fledgling wireless infrastructure by the U.S. Navy during the First World War, a network that had previously been

under the control of British wireless promoter Guglielmo Marconi, would the U.S. government begin to aggressively assert itself in transnational communications, a role that would accelerate during the Cold War, with the bankrolling by the U.S. Defense Department of the interconnection of standalone computers to improve the accuracy of transcontinental missile-firing, a project that would eventually transmogrify into the Internet.

For historians of communications, the contest between Cunard and Collins can provide insight into how best to chart the evolution of the communications networks that have become so ubiquitous today. Several rules-of-thumb suggest themselves. First, to be faithful not just to the present, but also to the past, we should be mindful of *spatial bias*, attentive to unfamiliar frames – including, but not confined to, the *transnational* and the *subnational* – and alert to the seductive distortions of *nation-centrism*. The nation is not always the only or even the most logical unit of analysis. Second, we should recognize the exaggerated autonomy with which not only contemporaries, but also historians, have often invested technical imperatives and economic incentives. Cultural norms matter and governmental institutions can also be agents of change. By reframing the past, we should be better positioned to understand how even once-widely discussed controversies, such as the transatlantic rivalry between Cunard and Collins, have become enshrouded in myth, and to invest with new meaning for our own age a multitude of events that too often have been trivialized, misconstrued, and ignored.

RICHARD R. JOHN, *John Bull, Uncle Sam, Transatlantic Steamships, and the Mail*

1. Merchants Protect Boston's Reputation as an All-Weather Port by Freeing the Cunard's Britannia *from its Ice-Bound Harbor (Digital Commonwealth, Boston, Massachusetts).*

2. British Steamship with Unfurled Sails Championing Free Trade and the Commercial Merits of «Ocean Penny Postage» as «The Worlds Want» and «Britain's Boon» (James L. Grimwood-Taylor, Devonshire, England).

4. Collins's Adriatic *Sails the Atlantic on a U.S. Postage Stamp (National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C.).*

5. Illustrator John Gast Visualizes «American Progress»: Railroads and Telegraphs, But Not Steamships Dominate the Landscape (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

INDICE / *SUMMARY*

Presentazione 5

Presentation 7

Programma / *Programme* 9

Archivio di Stato di Prato, Per lettera. Forme e modi della comunicazione epistolare, dal mercante medievale all'Unità d'Italia 15

Prato State Archives, By letter. Layouts and Ways of Communication through Letters, from the Medieval Merchant to the Unification of Italy 17

Testi / *Papers* 19

Andrea Giuntini, Postal History: the state of the art of the studies in Italy and Europe 21

Didier Gazagnadou, About the Possible Middle Eastern Origin of the Relay Post of the Duchy of Milan (14th century) 33

Martina Hacke, I messaggeri delle nazioni dell'Università di Parigi nel tardo Medioevo 43

Paolo Marcarelli, Strade, stazioni postali e viaggiatori in posta nell'Umbria Pontificia 59

Alberto E. Minetti, L'efficacia del sistema espresso postale a cavallo 61

Pérola Maria Goldfeder Borges de Castro, "Gathering Vassals Around the Throne": The Political Economy of Postal Communications in 19th Century Brazil 71

Rocío Moreno Cabanillas, Government by Mail: the implementation of the Spanish-American Postal Reform in Cartagena de Indias in the 18th Century 99

Diane DeBlois & Robert Dalton Harris, 19th Century American Genre Paintings: reading Newspapers in Tavern Post Offices 115

Katerina B. Korrè, La rete postale in Cipro veneziana nel Cinquecento 131

Liliana Tangorra, La cartolina postale. Testimonianze della metamorfosi urbanistica tra XIX e XX secolo. I casi di Parigi e Bari 153

Guillermo Navarro Oltra, *Lieu de mémoire* within *lieu de mémoire*: Historical Monuments on the Postage Stamps of Francoist Spain 167

Maria Grazia Chiappori, L'architettura postale italiana tra Futurismo e Razionalismo 185

Stephan Sander-Faes, State Formation Transposed. Central Institutions and Local Power in Lower Austria, 1800-1850 187

Giacomo Alimenti, L'antica via Lauretana: il percorso umbro-marchigiano 189

Donatella Schürzel, Esempi di corrispondenza commerciale da e per l'Adriatico Orientale tra fine Ottocento e la prima metà del Novecento 190

Álvaro Casillas Pérez, Proteger la comunicación, proteger el mensaje. Espías y secretos en el Mediterráneo del siglo XVI 191

Richard R. John, John Bull, Uncle Sam, Transatlantic Steamships and the Mail 193

Simonetta Pelusi, "Taxis, id est, ordo": epistole dedicatorie a Ferdinando Torriano de Tassis (1652-1721) 209

Maria Antonia Blat, L'edizione del carteggio di Raimondo de Tassis, mastro di posta 257

Júlia Benavent, La posta a Genova: la nomina di Rodrigo de Morales 267

Mark Brayshay, Messengers, Pursuivants and Couriers Agents of the English State, *c.*1512 - *c.* 1640 279

Carmen Espejo Cala, Nuevos enfoques metodológicos para el estudio de las redes de noticias de la Edad Moderna 319

Ester Capuzzo, Viaggio al femminile. Lettere dall'Italia di Lady Philippina Deane Knight a Elisabeth Francis Drake (1775-1795) 325

Francesca Brunet, Postal geography, spaces and times in the Alpine Arc. Trento in the European communication network between the 16th and 18th centuries 339

John Willis, The Internationalization of the Canadian Mails, à la belle époque 375

Marco Occhipinti, La miniera della Società Anonima Carbonifera Arsa (Arsia, Istria): un carteggio inedito 377

Kristian J. Sund, Liberalization and Emergent Competitive Strategy in the Nordic Postal Market at the Start of the New Century 403

Muriel Le Roux - Sébastien Richez, About the edition A Concise History of the French Post Office: disruption and progress in research in French postal history since the mid-20th century 405

Mario Coglitore, "Fare rete": le organizzazioni internazionali delle comunicazioni 417

Graziano Mamone, Storia postale contemporanea. Dignità di una disciplina 419

Indice dei nomi / *Index of names* 427