

# *Untapped Source for the Study of French West Indies in the Eighteenth Century*

by Julian GWYN \*

One of the inevitable by-products of war between Great Britain, France and Spain in the eighteenth century was the serious disruption of mail. The hundreds of vessels captured during every war year produced, among other things, thousands of undelivered letters and parcels. The more official-looking letters and despatches were invariably opened, decoded if necessary and translated, before being studied for clues to the enemy's intentions. Such documents have received due attention from historians of eighteenth-century international relations. Yet these official despatches constituted but a small portion of the intercepted post, and for historians interested in social and economic history the rest of the undelivered mail is of far greater importance.

Recently in researching among the papers of the British High Court of Admiralty, I came across thousands of letters that had been captured by British and colonial warships and privateers from the French and Spanish during the various wars of the eighteenth century. The great majority of these pertained to the French colonies in the West Indies, principally Martinique, Guadeloupe and the French settlements on Hispaniola : Cap François, Petit Goave, and Léogane. The heaviest concentration of letters relate to the years 1744-1748, 1755-1762 and 1778-1779. The fascinating aspect of this discovery is that perhaps 90% of the correspondence has never been opened, for the seals are still unbroken. Some of the letters, indeed, are still in the small hemp postal bags of the time and addressed to the High Court of Admiralty.

From the 10% of letters that were opened, one can form some impression of what the whole collection consists. Here we find intimate private correspondence between husbands and wives, between brothers and sisters, between parents and children. Here too are military commissions, signed by the king, notaries' legal documents, newspapers from

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France and the Dutch Republic, new books, playing cards, unpublished musical scores. But the great mass of papers pertain to business activity, the weekly and monthly correspondence between merchants and their agents abroad, together with the detailed accounts of their transactions. Here too are found journals of scientific observations of the climate among the islands. Altogether there appear to be almost as many letters that originated in France, as came from the islands. Taken together they could add greatly to a chapter in the social and economic history of the colonies.

I was curious to see if there were as well letters and papers to and from Nouvelle-France, Isle-Royale and Nouvelle-Orléans. I was successful, in my hurried search, in finding some from Nouvelle-Orléans, but until all the letters are opened and sorted it will not be known if something substantial has survived relating to these other colonies.

For those who might be interested to examine this collection, the letters are available through the Public Record Office, London, England, though they are actually stored in Ashridge, Hertsfordshire. Facilities for using materials stored at Ashridge have been opened in the Land Registry Office, Lincolns Inn Fields, London, W.C.2. The letters are loose in boxes and very dusty, but otherwise in excellent condition. The official P.R.O. reference to the papers is High Court of Admiralty 30 "Miscellanea", the index for which is available only at the P.R.O., from which the following information is taken :

## INTERCEPTED MAILS AND PAPERS

H.C.A.	30/232-234	1743-1749	Dutch and French
	235-246	1743-1749	French
	253-257	1750-1756	French
	260-265	1756-1762	French
	273-274	1777-1779	French
	278	1777-1781	French
	279-310	1778-1779	French
	383	1782	French