

## Book Review

### **British Long Distance Mail Packets 1793 to 1815** by Colin Tabcart

Viii + 500 pages, A4 hard bound. £45 + p&p.

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Review by John Hossack MRSB, PhD

Mails sent abroad from Great Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were carried exclusively by sailing vessels. This book describes voyages by mail packets, mainly from Harwich or Yarmouth to Germany, Holland, Netherlands and Sweden in Northern Europe, and from Falmouth to Spain, Portugal, the Mediterranean, North America, the Caribbean and Brazil and Surinam in South America. An appendix deals with mails to India, although during the period of interest this was not a packet service. Much of the information is from contemporary newspaper reports.

The packet ships were usually private vessels contracted by the Post Office to carry mails. They sailed to schedules arranged in London, which are described together with routes taken. Weather was a constant variable affecting ships' movements. Changes to schedules were often forced when unfavourable winds stopped ships from leaving port. Extreme weather conditions such as ice, storms and hurricanes could delay, or prevent completion of, a voyage. Sometimes mails were delayed *en route* from London to port.

The effects of diseases, for example yellow fever, are explained. They could take a heavy toll of crew members and cause ships and mails to undergo quarantine, creating considerable delays to mail delivery.

Accounts of conflicts and their consequences are given. For example, wars in Europe would affect access to certain ports at different times. Attacks in the Atlantic by French or American privateers were frequent. Mail ships were usually small with minimum armaments, yet on occasions heroically overcame very heavy odds against them to protect the mails. Sometimes mails were thrown overboard and sunk to avoid capture, or ships and crews could be taken. In fact a whole chapter describes the packets which were captured or lost at sea

Another chapter is devoted to the myriad of postage rates that applied during these years.

Despite the hardships the mails did, mostly, reach their intended destinations. This enabled communications, trading and diplomatic activities to take place between Great Britain and elsewhere. Subsequent progress in the world is, in no small part, due to the determination and hardiness of the captains and crews of those little ships which carried the mails more than two hundred years ago.

The research into this project has been most thorough and painstaking and the result is a unique and detailed record of voyages, presented in tabular form, between the home ports and destinations. Ships and captains for each voyage are almost all named in the tables. There are copious descriptive notes relating to individual voyages. The work is also liberally enhanced by illustrations of letters and covers, as well as other interesting items. In addition there is an index of the ships which operated on the packet services.

The author has now made available an important and significant part of maritime history, and I congratulate him on this splendid achievement. This book would be a valuable addition for any collector of maritime mails or students of maritime history, and I am happy to recommend it.

