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"Thence to the River Plate": steamship mobilities in the South Atlantic, 1842–1869

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This article engages theories of mobility to examine the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's 1851 expansion into South America. Through a focus on cooperative strategies and trans-oceanic connections, the article also considers the interplay between Atlantic and wider world shipping networks. The first part of the paper compares the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's (RMSPC's) South American branch to the more established West Indies route, and probes the significance of the Company's expansion into the South Atlantic in light of the RMSPC's perceived national and imperial role. The second part of the paper turns to the RMSPC's cooperative strategies and connections between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. Considered as a case study, the RMSPC indicates that the boundaries of British imperial influence incorporated a degree of flexibility during this period, pointing to a need to revise rigid conceptualisations of empire. An argument is also made for the continuing relevance of the Atlantic as a spatial unit during this era, despite the increasingly global connections of the nineteenth-century world.

Keywords: Atlantic history; nineteenth century; steamships; empire; infrastructure; Panama

Introduction

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In October 1850, three months before the full commencement of a new steamship line to Brazil and the River Plate, the directors of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC) described their recent actions and outlook:

> [S]trengthened by the confidence of the Proprietors, and by the conviction that public justice and public policy would induce the Government to afford a reasonable support to an undertaking of such national interest, and in which so much British Capital was embarked, [the directors] gradually succeeded in introducing various alterations into the Service, by which means the last few years have been converted into a period of prosperity: and now, with a fresh Contract for a lengthened time; with the new and in all probability increasing intercourse with the Pacific; with the prospect of a Railroad across the Isthmus of Panama, in which this Company must feel the greatest interest; with Vessels capable to command their share of the traffic; and with the introduction of the Brazil service, offering from all calculations the certainty of large receipts; the Directors see with pride the Company in its present position […][1]

In this way the directors simultaneously drew attention to the RMSPC's longstanding service to the West Indies and referred optimistically to the future service in Brazil and the River Plate. Brazil and the River Plate, as Matthew Brown has stressed, were significant areas of British influence during the nineteenth century.[2] Equally significant for this article, the directors highlighted Panama as a site of strategic importance and as a source of future profits. The RMSPC had long enjoyed financial backing from the British government in the form of a mail contract (worth £240,000 a year) and such "reasonable support" had proved essential to the establishment and survival of the Company's West Indies service. The RMSPC anticipated similar public investment as it extended operations southwards in the Atlantic.[3] Thus in outlining the Company's operations old and new, the directors were unambiguous in their claim that this maritime network served the "national interest".

Mobility was crucially at issue in their consideration of the country's economic priorities.

In this paper, "mobility" is understood as comprising the movement of people, goods and information, as this movement relates to questions of power.[4] As Tim Cresswell has suggested, consideration of mobilities requires analysis of both actual movement and representations of such movement.[5] In a nineteenth-century context, this invites questions of how steamship services operated as well as how such services were understood and discussed. If "mobility has consequences", some of the consequences of nineteenth-century steamship mobility were consequences for empire.[6] Steamships helped to alter the relationship between places, heightening the connectivity of some ports, whilst isolating other spaces. In this respect, steamship "rhythms" and "routes" mattered.[7] Seemingly, above all, they mattered for commerce. The extension of the RMSPC – a mobile network – further south into the Atlantic also became symbolically significant. It held practical implications at the local, oceanic and trans-oceanic scales. A focus on these mobilities highlights connections between places and provides an alternative lens through which to interrogate longstanding questions of informal or extra-imperial British relations. In particular, consideration of maritime mobilities helps to nuance rigid conceptualisations of empire, so that, for example, a focus on how people and objects were set in motion between Britain and South America reveals governmental involvement and support.

In differing nineteenth-century geographical contexts, steamships have been cast as both "tools of empire", and "flagships of imperialism".[8] Yet the RMSPC directors' assertions about the relationship between business and national interests indicate that steamships could also function strategically beyond imperial boundaries.[9] In this regard, the RMSPC offers a particularly useful comparative case study for analyzing imperial and extra-imperial relations,

since this company conveyed mail to British Caribbean colonies for a decade (see figures 1 and 2) before it branched into South America (see figure 3). If the RMSPC's original West Indies service was one of numerous "projects of empire", the RMSPC's South American service might even be considered to have functioned as a network of informal empire.[10] Thus analysis of the RMSPC's 1850s extension of service southwards into Brazil and the River Plate sheds light on the mechanisms and aspirations surrounding "'informal empire' in Latin America" in the 1850s, and reinforces the particular pertinence of this concept in the maritime arena.[11]

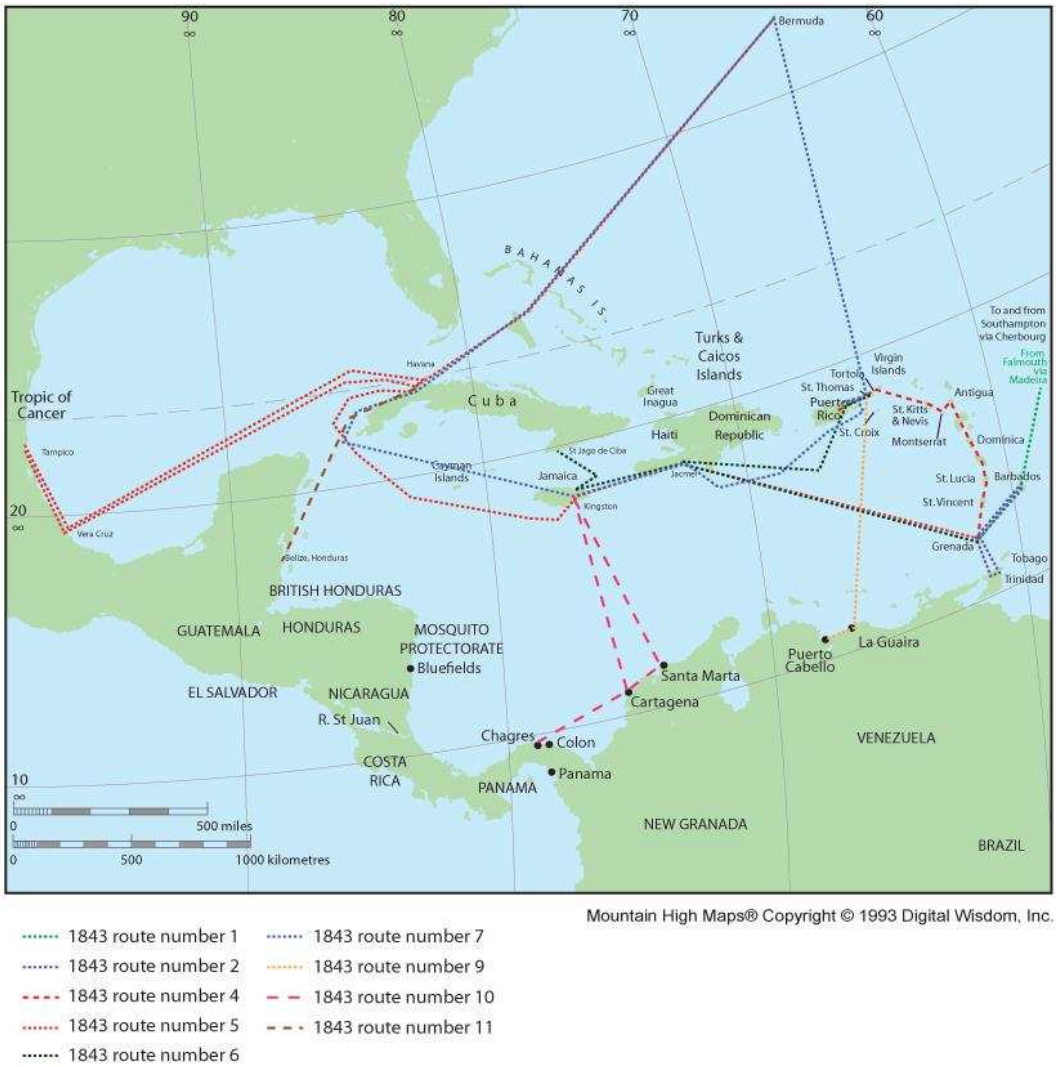

Figure 1 The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's Caribbean routes (1843) (reproduced courtesy of Mountain High Maps)

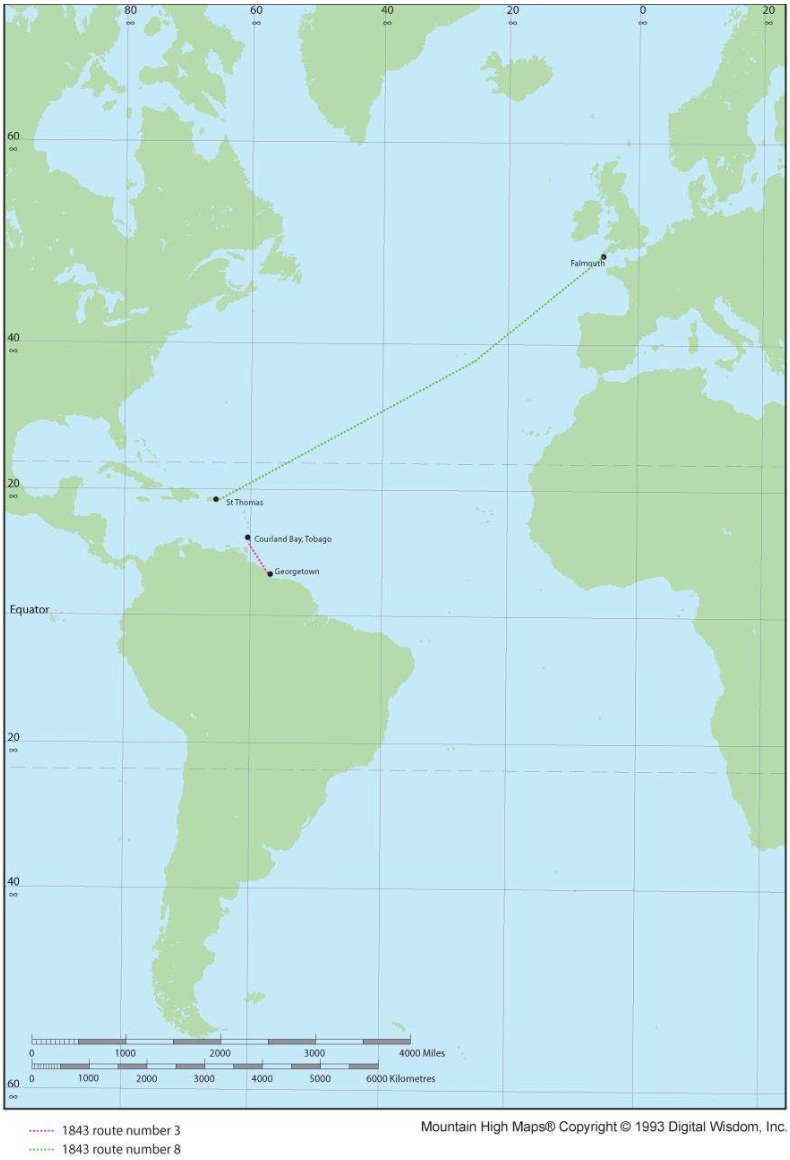

Figure 2 The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's Routes 3 and 6 (1843) (reproduced courtesy of Mountain High Maps)

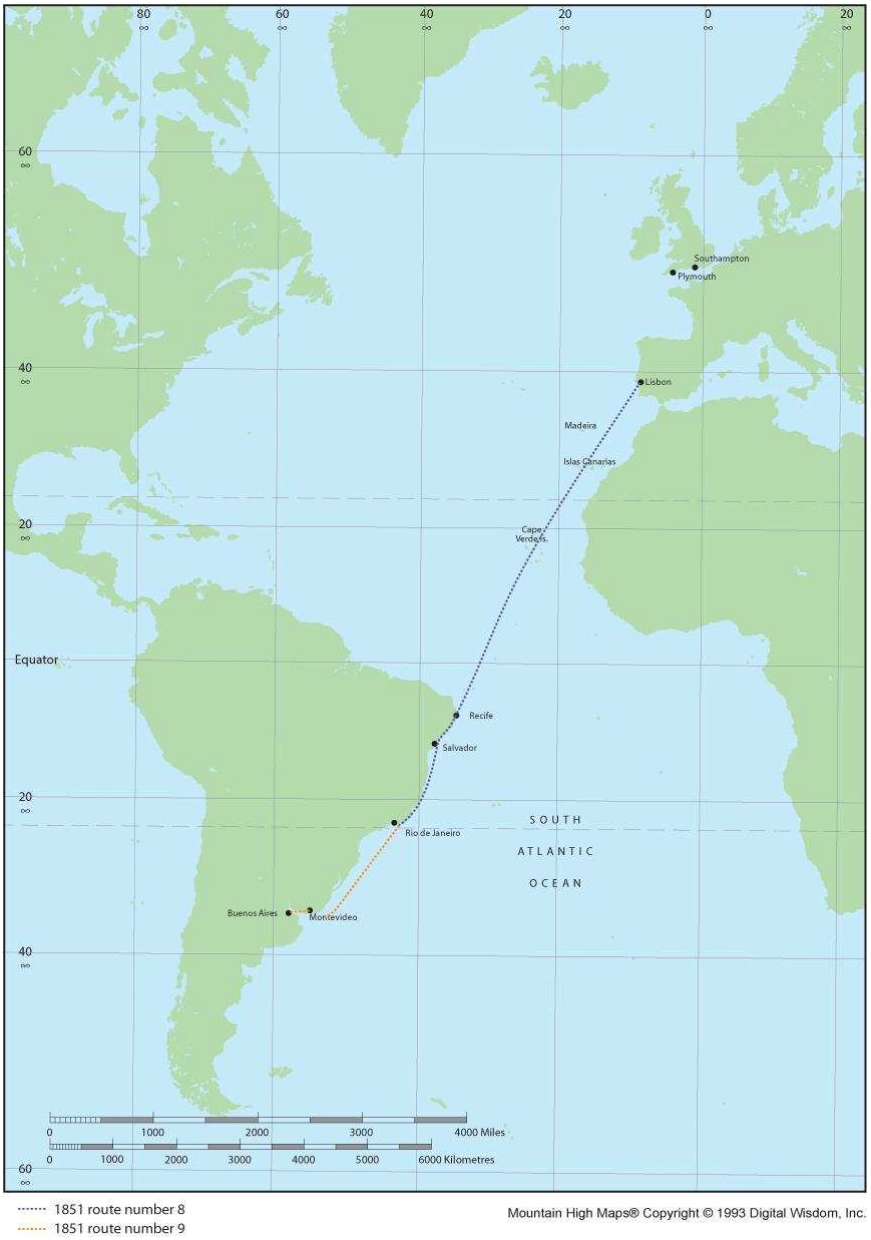

Figure 3 The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's 1851 extension of service (reproduced courtesy of Mountain High Maps)

Notably the RMSPC, as a networked imperial project, was similarly debated and responded to in regions where Britain had a more or less formal stake. Furthermore, the RMSPC made deliberate use of imperial structures and agents in order to extend its infrastructure southwards in the Americas. In fact, the networked nature of the enterprise allowed for logistical consistency when developing the service in colonial and other spaces. Furthermore,

it was through developing infrastructure and cooperative sites bridging the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean that the Company was able to bolster its commercial position and gain access to global routes. Ironically, it was therefore in extra-imperial spaces that the Company edged closer to a realisation of the original imperial vision of the RMSPC's founder James MacQueen. The development of an extensive network more closely aligned with MacQueen's ambitious A General Plan for a Mail Communication by Steam between Great Britain and the Eastern and Western Parts of the World (1838) called for a return to thinking on a large scale. In practice, this required mobility through the Atlantic Ocean to be carefully coordinated with passages through the Pacific. This process of developing global routes belies suggestions that the Atlantic Ocean ceased to become a relevant scale of operations during the nineteenth century,[12] since the increasingly interconnected maritime world remained dependent on the stitching together of distinct services based in specific oceanic domains.

Empire and maritime logistics

La Plata was a region in which British naval intervention proved problematic during the 1840s. David McLean ascribes these complications to the difficulties of routing "metropolitan authority" through the actions of men on the spot; he asserts that during this period, "the suggestion that governments in London even recognized, let alone promoted, the fortunes of British trade becomes contentious".[13] However this article's focus on merchant rather than royal naval activities during the following decade offers a markedly different picture. Having learnt the lesson "that influence in South America was not readily attainable by the coordination of diplomacy and naval power, Britain's relationship with La Plata was transformed"; this transformation occurred through the kind of negotiation and investment in evidence through analysis of the RMSPC.[14] Within the arena of merchant naval activities, the

mechanisms of informal intervention are starkly apparent. This was a period that also brought British capital investment in South America. As Richard Graham outlines, "[w]hereas the amount of British capital in Latin America in 1850 was still small, it increased steadily during the 1850s and 1860s".[15] In this moment of heightened commercial interest in the region, the RMSPC's interactions with the British government indicate systematic, if not always successful, efforts to promote British trade with South America. Alongside broader investment patterns, investment in mobile infrastructure reinforces a sense of British involvement in the region.

The original rationale behind the RMSPC was commercial. Prior to the establishment of the company, "imperial careerist" MacQueen argued for the need for steam communication with the West Indies in commercial terms, stressing that "[i]t is, in fact, quite impossible that the commercial interests of any country can ever compete with the commercial interests of another country, unless the one have equally rapid, frequent, and regular opportunities and means of correspondence and conveyance with the other".[16] MacQueen served as the manager of a Grenadian sugar estate before going on to become "one of the most trenchant and vociferous proslavery propagandists" in the early nineteenth century.[17] MacQueen was also a geographer and highlighted "commercial and geographical" British interests in other Atlantic spaces, particularly through his promotion of a "Niger scheme" for increased commerce with West Africa.[18] Thus MacQueen's plans for British shipping, outlined in A General Plan for a Mail Communication by Steam between Great Britain and the Eastern and Western Parts of the World, formed part of a broader view of imperial commerce in the Atlantic world. Although the West Indies service was the Company's first major region of operations, it was the Brazil and River Plate line that ultimately proved more successful in serving British commercial needs. Nevertheless, the Company's experiences in South

America were highly reminiscent of its established operation in the West Indies. The case study of the RMSPC indicates that when it came to nineteenth-century infrastructural networks, the boundaries of empire were somewhat blurred.

The Brazil and River Plate service emerged out of several years of deliberation. In 1844, the RMSPC approached the Admiralty with a proposal to develop a branch line from the West Indies to transport mail to Brazil. This early suggestion was declined, but four years later the British Government put the conveyance of the Brazil and River Plate mail out to tender. The RMSPC submitted the winning proposal and the Admiralty accepted the Company's bid in 1849.[19] Having secured the government mail contract, the RMSPC began full operations on the South American route in January 1851. The RMSPC deployed six of its original fleet of fourteen steamships on the new South American route, including the RMS Teviot, which journeyed to Brazil under the command of Captain Richard Revett in 1851.[20] New steamers ordered by the Company in the early 1850s were for the established West Indies service, with older vessels being placed on the new line.[21] While the South American route was initially treated as a secondary concern, the financial significance of this region to the RMSPC's operations increased markedly over time.

Initially the journey from Southampton to Chagres was allocated 23 days and 23 hours, with the timetable allowing for a speed of nine knots per hour. The mail was gathered in London on the 2nd and 17th of each month.[22] The RMSPC charged a high rate on freight and therefore carried low bulk goods at high prices, as well as transporting specie from commerce and mining back to Britain.[23] Steamers carried passengers, currency, gold, silver, diamonds, and produce such as coffee, lemons, and oranges. For instance, on Wednesday 9th July 1851 the RMS Teviot sailed from Southampton to Lisbon, Madeira, Teneriffe, St Vincent,

Pernambuco, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Buenos Aires. The Teviot carried forty-five passengers on board, as well as currency valued at over £47,000, a large cargo and mail. Although, as indicated by the Teviot's journey, passenger numbers from Europe to South America were initially modest, freight and passenger traffic between Europe and South America ultimately became a significant source of RMSPC revenue. In 1851, the RMSPC's total passenger income was £180,000; over a decade later in 1864, the Company achieved double this amount.[24] From the 1850s, the RMSPC developed and enjoyed some years of high profits, although the Company suffered a reversal of fortunes during the final decades of the century.[25] The Company established an additional freight line to South America in 1873.[26] Livestock, and later refrigerated meat, became significant items amongst the Company's shipments.[27] In the 1880s, the RMSPC adapted its vessels to carry frozen meat from South America to Europe.[28]

Alongside a range of goods, the RMSPC focused its attention on wealthy passengers. In 1866, L. Dillon travelled from Southampton on the RMS Douro to Rio de Janeiro and "thence to the River Plate".[29] Dillon undertook this journey in order "to see what kind of a speculation sheep farming might be in that quarter of the globe". In the 1860s, the RMSPC was one of the more expensive services to South America. The 1865 publication The River Plate (South America) as a Field for Emigration recognised that "[o]f late years the River Plate has been brought into rapid and frequent communication with this country by means of steamers expressly constructed for the conveyance of produce and passengers", and outlined the traveller's options. First amongst these was the RMSPC, but the guide warned that RMSPC rates were high, at £70 for a single cabin, £55 for a berth in a cabin, and £45 for a smaller berth on the lower deck forward. By contrast the Liverpool direct steamers, which offered rates of £35 for a saloon cabin, £25 for second class, and £16 for third class were

deemed "more likely than any others to attract emigrants of the artisan and humbler classes".[30] While there was potential for healthy passenger profits, the RMSPC's market position meant that it particularly facilitated elite mobilities between Europe and South America. During the 1880s, European emigration to South America became more significant, but the Company's longstanding interest in catering to elite groups meant that it was slower than other lines to capitalise on the possibilities for steerage-class travel.[31]

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Brazil and River Plate route became the more profitable of the RMSPC's two areas of operation. The mid-nineteenth century brought about internal transportation developments in South America (such as railways), as well as increased trans-oceanic links. As Eugene Ridings has argued, business interest groups in nineteenth-century Brazil "promoted the introduction of modern systems of communications", albeit in ways that were not necessarily in the best long-term interests of the country's development.[32] The RMSPC offered a partial solution to trans-oceanic business needs, since Latin America's export economy depended upon foreign shipping lines during the second half of the nineteenth century. As R.G. Greenhill has stressed, "with a headstart in the development of international steamshipping and enjoying established maritime links with Latin America, Britain inevitably supplied the bulk of transoceanic shipping on which the republics depended".[33] In the 1850s, government-backed lines such as the RMSPC and the Pacific Steam Navigation Company dominated British steamship services to the region. Although the "initial economic impact of steamshipping in Latin America was unimpressive", these lines nevertheless "formed part of the infrastructure crucial to growth", since South America relied on commodity exports.[34] Indeed the export of primary commodities increased during this period, as Latin America experienced notable (if unremarkable) economic growth.[35] This development of trade in turn provided opportunities

"for brokers, insurers, shippers and other commercial middlemen, of whom many were foreigners established in Latin American ports" and brought Latin America into closer economic relationships with Europe and the United States.[36]

British officials' representation of the Brazil and River Plate branch indicates that the RMSPC as well as its agents viewed the new line as a "flagship" of British imperial power, albeit beyond imperial boundaries.[37] In April 1851, the directors reported on the new line and suggested that the first ship to travel out on the route, the Teviot, "was received with great and general satisfaction throughout".[38] In a similar vein, in August 1851, British Vice Consul and Acting Packet Agent H. Christopher wrote to the Admiralty from the British Consulate in Pernambuco on the subject of the RMSPC. Christopher praised the new maritime operation and suggested that "the performance of this beautiful service has caused much surprise and admiration among the natives, and does us honour in their eyes".[39] Although the new line involved interaction with "foreign nations", concern with the reception of the service, as well as its potential to act as a symbol of British achievement and influence, demonstrates the rhetorical construction of steamships in South America as important symbols of British power.[40]

As a service with perceived symbolic as well as logistical import, the local and national impact of this transport link was carefully weighed. Much of the discussion of the new service highlighted the public investment in this commercial undertaking, and it was on these terms that individuals debated the local points of connection in the network. With the RMSPC's services departing from Southampton, Liverpool asserted its rival claims to act as port of connection with South America. In this respect, debate over the port of departure echoed previous discussion over whether the RMSPC's West Indies service should depart

from Falmouth, Plymouth or Southampton. Liverpool was a main port for British exports of goods such as textiles to South American countries and therefore had direct involvement in the region.[41] Liverpudlian interests proved critical of the Admiralty's contract supporting the RMSPC's service from Southampton.

In January 1850, The Times re-published a piece from the Liverpool Albion on the subject of the new South American contract. The article lamented "that a manifest injustice was perpetrated against the interests of Liverpool, and the manufacturing towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire, by the adoption of a south coast port as the central station for receiving and despatching the mails".[42] Additionally, the article bemoaned the anticipated twelve month delay before the new service could be commenced. The Liverpool Albion commented:

> **So flagrant a breach of a public engagement ought certainly not to pass by unnoticed**; and we would emphatically impress upon the merchants and manufacturers engaged in the South American trade the duty of memorializing the Government to withdraw the charter granted to the West [India] Steam-ship Company, and throw open the service anew to competition amongst more practical, more energetic, and more spirited individuals.[43]

Thus Liverpudlian interest groups stressed the public finance supporting this private company and the RMSPC's accountability to the public purse and reputation. Although the Liverpool merchants were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempts to strip the RMSPC of the mail contract and move the service to a Liverpool base, in their protests they deployed a language of "commercial and political relations", which had repeatedly been used to underscore the importance of the West Indies service.[44] The entanglement of public and private within merchant naval enterprises provides evidence of the kind of informal intervention in commerce in the 1850s that McLean finds so notably lacking during the 1840s.

For the Liverpool merchants, failures in the steamship service were presented as threatening to both the future of British steamship technology and the commercial wellbeing of the nation, offering an opportunity to the "enterprising capitalists of the United States".[45] In this respect, the Liverpool merchants echoed the original arguments of MacQueen, who, when justifying the Caribbean steamship service in 1838, had pointed to the threat posed by the United States as "another commercial and rival state" upon which Britain was dependent "for the transmission of commercial correspondence".[46] Thus critical discussion of the new South American branch sustained the kind of normative rhetoric that had earlier stressed the need for "regular" and reliable communications with colonies such as Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad.

Mercantile responses to teething problems on the new line were also reminiscent of earlier opinions on the West Indies service. To illustrate, an article appearing in The Times on the day of the Teviot's departure outlined the merchants' grievances:

> We have several times alluded to the inconveniences experienced by the insufficient stoppages of the Brazil Royal mail steamers, both on the outward and homeward routes, at the several South American ports. At Pernambuco and Bahia, particularly, the evil was so great that the merchants made heavy complaints, to the effect that the packets only remained so short a time that they were unable to prepare correspondence for despatch to the southern ports, and it several times happened that the steamers had left in prosecution of their voyages before the mercantile community had received their letters from the post-office, and were thus entirely precluded from preparing correspondence and advices respectively from the southern ports or for Europe, based upon the advices brought to them by the steamers.[47]

The merchants' complaints indicate the role played by this transportation network in facilitating British investment and involvement in South America. Mercantile demands for service revision echoed earlier calls for longer stoppage time from those situated in British colonies such as Jamaica.[48] Thus both from the perspective of those running and using the service, the RMSPC had a similar role to play in a region of formal influence such as the West Indies and an informally networked area such as South America. Mercantile representations of the new line provide further evidence that steamship links were perceived to have similar strategic but also symbolic roles within and beyond imperial boundaries.

Yet it was not only this strategic perception that provided continuity between the RMSPC's Caribbean and South American service. Expansion into Brazil and the River Plate involved similar logistics to the West India line: hiring premises, building up coal stocks at depots and appointing packet agents.[49] However the process in South America was more protracted, as the Company called on Foreign Office support to negotiate for privileges at ports of call. In response to such requests for privileges en route to South America, the Foreign Office reported in September 1850 that the Portuguese Government was willing to grant steamship privileges similar to those enjoyed by equivalent services at Madeira, but that the vessels would be treated, for fiscal purposes, as foreign merchant vessels. They would therefore be subject to port charges and payments for imported coal. Similar applications for privileges were made to the government authorities at Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Montevideo "to afford facilities to the Royal Mail Steam Packets".[50] In January 1849, Brazilian authorities at Rio de Janeiro communicated to the RMSPC via the Admiralty that the government was "convinced" the steamship service would "essentially benefit the commerce and the public of the two countries".[51] Accordingly, it was willing to waive import dues until June 1850 and would ask the legislative body to grant exemptions from port charges (with the exception of

import dues for the Misericordia Hospital). The Brazilian authorities offered a range of other facilities and exemptions to the RMSPC "for the purpose of animating this new method of accelerating the communication between the two countries".[52] In the South American context, the RMSPC built on the precedent of earlier negotiations such as those that had taken place in Cuba. Not only did the rhetoric surrounding the service echo earlier discussion of the West Indies line, the processes facilitating service extension were necessarily similar as well.

The similarities between the operation of the maritime network within and beyond colonial spaces become further apparent through the RMSPC's negotiation for service infrastructure. The development of maritime infrastructure in foreign territories depended heavily upon British governmental mechanisms and resources. The RMPSC's development of a South American service therefore relied upon co-opting imperial agents to the Company's cause. In 1848, the Company secured the Foreign Office's permission to have the British representatives Consul Rouse at Valparaiso and Consul Barton at Callao acting as RMSPC agents.[53] Thus men in the service of the British Empire worked to promote this company's interests alongside British diplomatic interests.[54] In this respect, the RMSPC's activities provide "evidence of commerce and investment which shape political and diplomatic relationships".[55] In granting permission for government consuls to represent the RMSPC, Lord Palmerston was standing by his belief that government should "open and secure the roads for the merchant".[56] The RMSPC directors' heavy reliance on government diplomacy and representatives is highlighted by their note of thanks in 1851 to the "British Representatives in Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and the River Plate, for the exertions they have used on the recommendation of Viscount Palmerston, and for their zealous co-operation in promoting the enterprize by every means in their power".[57] The RMSPC's extension into Brazil and the River Plate involved a private company relying upon government support,

resources and diplomacy in order to foster communication, and therefore commerce, with South America.

Conversely, since the RMSPC's communication network received financial backing from the government, complaints about the actions of the Company's men on the spot were channeled through government departments. In April 1853, for example, the British Admiralty received a letter of complaint from the Post Office agent based at Montevideo. The agent detailed how "repeated complaints" had been received at the British Packet office there due to the "total want of civility shewn by William Valler, the master of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Prince in his intercourse with them".[58] The Agent reported:

> From my own experience I can vouch for the justice of these complaints but I have been reluctant to listen to them and desirous of making every excuse for the ill temper of a man having many duties to attend to at the same moment'.[59]

The RMS Prince served on the RMSPC's Brazil and River Plate route and men such as Valler were simultaneously implicated in advancing private business interests and, in a sense, representing British interests and honour abroad. Similarly, RMSPC Captain Robert Woolward recalled his early years of service on the Brazil and River Plate route in the 1860s and noted that it "took considerable space in the local newspapers to publish the abuse lavished on me".[60] Once he had safely conveyed H.R.H. the Duc de Nemours and his son, Comte D'Eu to Rio de Janeiro and later the Comte and Comtesse d'Eu to Southampton, Woolward described that he "was a made man in the opinion of the Brazilians, and was no longer abused in the newspapers".[61] The entanglement of public and private interests in shipping lines such as the RMSPC meant that Company employees seemingly represented more than just the Company abroad. Formal and informal diplomacy proved key to establishing and maintaining smooth steamship operations.

Representation of the RMSPC by the Company's directors, government officials in Britain and South America, and by branch users such as merchants, constructed the service as an important symbol of commercial ties between Britain and South America. At the same time, the Company's logistical arrangements were developed through a heavy reliance on British representatives and diplomatic channels as the service was extended from its original area of significant formal British control to a new arena. The high level of continuity between the rhetorical and operational norms of the service within and outside of British colonial space suggests that this company acted as a mechanism of British influence, but the commercial significance of steamship services becomes particularly apparent through a focus on Panama. As the second section of the article will suggest, the RMSPC edged closer to achieving the original global vision of MacQueen precisely by developing links beyond the boundaries of empire.

Co-operative strategies

Although the Atlantic was increasingly incorporated into global trading networks during the nineteenth century, the RMSPC's development of Panama as a strategic transit site indicates that the oceanic scale retains relevance as a unit of analysis beyond the high era of an integrated Atlantic economy. In this case, a nineteenth-century global hub was managed with reference to regional frameworks: the Pacific Steam Navigation Company (PSNC) transported currency and bullion across the Pacific, and the RMSPC conveyed it across the Atlantic (see figure 4).[62] In order to render Panama a key site in the scheme of routes, the RMSPC sought to adapt and synchronize local infrastructures. In this respect, the development of the RMSPC's service in the Americas necessitated financial and infrastructural intervention.

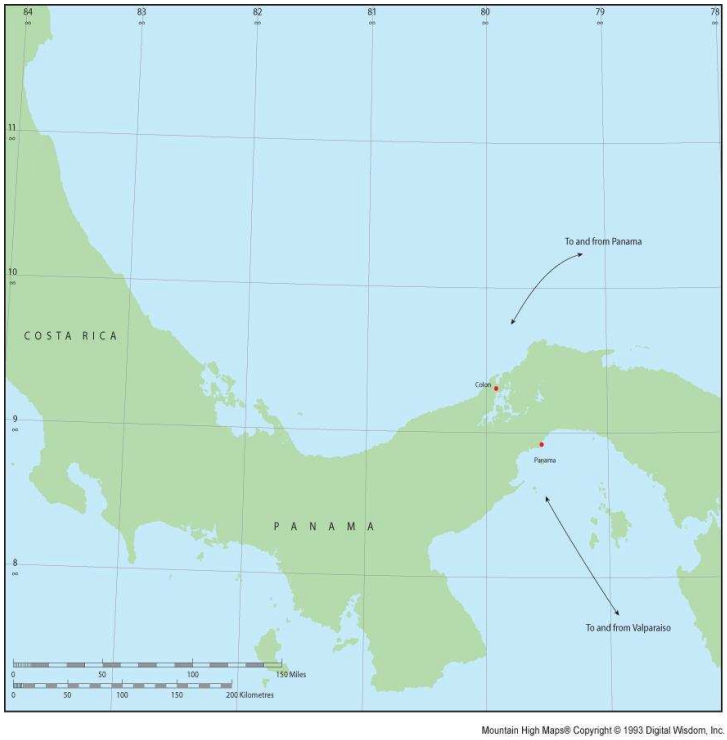

Figure 4 Maritime connections with Panama (reproduced courtesy of Mountain High Maps)

Panama held strategic significance within the RMSPC's scheme of routes prior to the Brazil and River Plate extension of service. The Panama region was included in the timetable from the outset of operations in 1842, with Mr Perry acting as agent at the Isthmus of Panama and Don Julian Ramos his deputy at Chagres. The 1843 revised scheme of routes provided one RMSPC schooner each month from Kingston to Santa Martha, Cartagena, and Chagres.[63] Three years later this arrangement was developed further when the RMSPC's service was synchronized with the mail contract operations of the PSNC. In 1845, the RMSPC sent Colonial Superintendent Captain Liot to report on the advantages of a trans-isthmian route. Travelling with Crown Surveyor of Jamaica, Mr McGeachy, Liot proceeded to Chagres. The joint report resulting from this trip led to the establishment of a Royal Mail overland route in 1846, which consisted of travel by canoe and mule.[64] In the same year, the PSNC undertook to convey the British mail from Panama, connecting with the RMSPC's service to Colon.[65]

Writing and accounting practices proved key to routing freight across this nodal site, as quantities and values were accurately checked and recorded as they moved between the two companies' services. Freight was charged from the west coast of America at 2¼ per cent to the Bank of England, 2⅛ per cent to British Guiana, 2 per cent to Jamaica and Cuba, and 1⅞ per cent to Santa Martha and Cartagena.[66] The PSNC earned ⅞ of the freight money on treasure shipped through Panama, and the RMSPC was entitled to the final ⅛. When transporting such freight, the PSNC packed bars of bullion, specie, jewellery and precious stones in wooden or iron cases on board its vessels. Five copies of the bills of lading for such freight were drawn up: three copies retained by the shipper, one part kept by the PSNC's agent, and the final copy handed to the RMSPC's representative at Panama.[67]

As well as writing practices, standards were laboriously synchronised between the two services. The PSNC transported treasure to Panama and delivered it to the RMSPC's agent, where it was examined and weighed on scales supplied from London. If an item appeared to differ from the bill of lading, the freight was opened in front of the commander of the vessel and the RMSPC's agent. The package was then certified on receipt, which was handed by the RMSPC's agent to the PSNC's agent. In this way, the ability to quantify and produce written records of the treasure in situ became crucial to profits. This, in turn, depended upon matching standards. Thus in June 1848, at a meeting with the PSNC, Captain Liot pointed out the inconvenience that would result if treasure on the west coast were measured by steelyard instead of using scales, as was the practice by the RMSPC's agent at Panama.[68] Not only did steamship routes have to coincide, but the infrastructure supporting material flows also had to correspond, with matching measuring and accounting mechanisms. As Bowker and Star indicate with reference to infrastructure, "the depths of interdependence of technical networks

and standards" become apparent, and this process was a necessary part of the synchronization of steamship services.[69]

In sum, the cooperation of the two companies and the strategic integration of their networks via Panama was by no means a straightforward process. It was only through "frequent and tedious" meetings between Captain Liot and the directors of the PSNC in Liverpool that an agreement between the two companies on the transit of treasure could be drawn up.[70] For example, the ⅞–⅛ division laid out in the November 1846 agreement was the result of negotiation. In January 1846, after the PSNC refused to accept a ¾ share of 2½ per cent on currency shipped from the Pacific to the Bank of England, the RMSPC offered an improved ⅞ of the share on currency delivered at Panama.[71] The two networks were thus carefully synchronized not only through the production of written records, and through the measuring, weighing and tracking of items in transit, but also by negotiating the division of profits. A great deal of preparatory work went into creating the Panama region as a site of steamship cooperation.

In addition to diplomatic negotiations and synchronized technical standards, the RMSPC's network required localized infrastructure. At Panama, a key element of supporting infrastructure was a road. In 1838, William Wheelwright of the PSNC wrote that there were:

> [T]wo roads or mule paths to Panama; the one from Gorgona and the other from Cruces; the former is somewhat longer, but in the dry season it is mostly good galloping ground and may be rode over easily in six or seven hours; during the rains, it is muddy; the latter is broken, stony and precipitous; it was formerly a paved road but, being neglected, the stones are very annoying; the mules, however, are sure-footed and there is no danger; the muleteers having their relations and friends at

> Cruces, endeavour to persuade passengers to take this route in preference to that of Gorgona.[72]

In February 1848, the RMSPC informed the British Government of its intention to loan 21,000 dollars to the Republic of New Granada for repair of the road between Panama and Cruces.[73] Captain Liot was dispatched to Bogota to pursue negotiations and to enter into conditional arrangements for the commencement of the work.[74] The RMSPC appealed to the Foreign Office for diplomatic assistance, and the Foreign Office instructed Mr O'Leary, HM Chargé d'affaires at Botoga, to persuade the New Granadian government to accept the RMSPC's proposal for the road repairs.[75] On 20 May 1848, Mr O'Leary agreed to sign a contract with the government of New Granada on behalf of the RMSPC for repair of the road between Cruces and Panama.[76] As with other infrastructural developments for the steamship service, the emergence of Panama as a strategic site was reliant on government support and diplomatic efforts.

The contract was signed on 24 May 1848. The first article of the agreement required the RMSPC to provide 180,000 reals, or the equivalent of 90,000 francs for the work. The road was to be completed by January 1851, and the RMSPC would provide 10,000 reals annually for three years to mend and improve the road. The New Granadian government was to repay this money, at an interest of 6 per cent annually, in monthly instalments. The payments would be made to HM General Post Office, deducted from the sums owed to the New Granadian government through the postal convention of May 1847. The laws of New Granada allowed all articles needed for repair of the road to pass through the custom houses free of duty.

At New Granada, a military workforce was maintained to provide land-based infrastructure for the RMSPC. The authorities at New Granada agreed to keep at the disposal of the

directing engineer at least two hundred "sappers", unless prevented by unforeseen circumstances,[77] and O'Leary reported that the local authorities of Panama would provide more than the "stipulated number of sappers".[78] The RMSPC paid the expense for these individuals, and was refunded by the New Granadian authorities.[79] However "unforseen circumstances" had occurred by July, when the RMSPC wrote to the Foreign Office remonstrating against the fact that the "sappers" had been disbanded. O'Leary soon discovered that the discharge of the workforce was due to an outbreak of cholera. The Foreign Office provided reassurances that it would pressurise the New Granadian government to replace the workforce.[80] The RMSPC's construction of Panama as a nodal port of call was thus partially dependent upon land-based infrastructure, provided by RMSPC and New Granadian government cooperation and the mobilisation of a corps of workers in the Americas.[81] The development of Panama as a key site of transit between oceans involved investment and the strategic deployment of labour to provide a necessary chain of interlinking transportation infrastructure. The RMSPC's increased prominence as a carrier providing transit across the Americas was necessarily preceded by infrastructural intervention at numerous scales as well as a different kind of public-private cooperation, through the RMSPC's negotiation and contracts with the authorities in New Granada.

Although Panama had long been a site of interest, its potential to the RMSPC increased significantly once the Company increased the coordination between Atlantic and Pacific passages. When negotiations for the new Brazil and River Plate line were underway during the late 1840s, the RMSPC's discussions with the government for its new service referred to the need for "more powerful Steamers, (particularly between England and the Isthmus of Panama,) giving the Pacific its Mails twice instead of once a month".[82] As work began on the Panama Railroad, the RMSPC was aware of the potential for profits. The Company declared

that "the line by the Isthmus of Panama is one which must command the support of this Company, as from its central position it affords the most ready means of transit; not only with the northern and southern ports of the Pacific, including Chile, Peru, California, Oregon, and the Sandwich Islands; but that it is also the safest, the shortest, and the most economical route between Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia".[83] Panama as a site of transit was significant in its ability to support both imperial and extra-imperial mobilities. It was important too as a site of connection between oceans. Yet Panama could only function as a key site of steamship connection through the careful adaptation and synchronization of local infrastructure and administrative practices between the RMSPC and PSNC. The development of Panama as a global hub was both a slow process and a process worked out through negotiations across specific oceanic domains. The construction of global nineteenth-century routes depended upon the melding together of a number of smaller operations. The RMSPC did not seek to become a global enterprise itself, but rather sought to coordinate its efforts with services operating in different oceanic contexts. The shrinking of distances or "annihilation" of space,[84] celebrated and highlighted by transportation and communication companies such as the RMSPC, required more than the application of technology. In the case of Panama, it involved the stitching together of distinct oceanic units to support trans-oceanic routes. Such "channelling" of global mobilities across oceans was set to become even more important during the following the decades, with the opening of the Suez Canal.[85]

Conclusion

The discursive and material construction of this steamship service in a region of stronger and weaker British influence suggests that the RMSPC's mobile network had a similar symbolic and strategic function within and outside of British imperial boundaries. Although there were

key differences, such as the ease of diplomacy and the costs associated with port usage, the Company relied on similar tactics and structures at different places across the network. Whilst not operating as any kind of direct instrument of power, this transport link was deemed particularly important due to its potential to support trade. If there were numerous similarities between the RMSPC's early operations in Brazil and the River Plate and its established service in the West Indies, this was perhaps because the Company's earlier service had in and of itself been trans-imperial and reliant on extra-imperial hubs such as St Thomas. As a complex mobile network, the RMSPC exceeded imperial boundaries from the outset. In this respect, the imperial vision of MacQueen depended on mobilities beyond the boundaries of empire. There was, perhaps, an inevitability that an effective mobile network would necessarily expand beyond a narrow set of imperial bounds. This paper's focus on a maritime operation with mobility at its heart suggests that a mobile and offshore view troubles the distinctions between imperial and extra-imperial spaces.

At the start of this paper, mobility was presented as the relationship between movement and power. The RMSPC's steamers were perceived as symbols of British power in the Americas and as vectors for British commerce. As the maritime network expanded into its new region of operations in South America, the RMSPC built on Caribbean precedents to seek privileges and exemptions. It also relied on Foreign Office and diplomatic support to pave the way for the new branch line, which suggests at least a degree of government commitment to fostering commercial relations in this period. The strengthening of steamship services in the region in turn affected the broader economic relationship between Britain and South America.

For McLean, it is unconvincing to assert that Latin America formed part of Britain's informal empire during the 1840s. He argues that "[f]or governments to coordinate their actions with

the needs of economic expansion implies a perception of interest and a measure of control, both of which demonstrably were lacking".[86] While the British government lacked control over the politics of the area, this case of a private company working with government backing to promote commercial interests in the region provides evidence of the means through which the government worked alongside coordinated maritime enterprises in order to promote British interests in the region. Unlike some Atlantic historians, the RMSPC's Atlantic world was certainly not one which "excluded Latin America".[87] On the contrary, South America was crucial as a strategic site and as a source of profits.

The coordination of the RMSPC's and PSNC's services through Panama indicate that despite the construction of important global nineteenth-century routes, smaller oceanic units remained significant. Longer trans-oceanic passages were created by melding together manageable operations at a smaller scale. This, in turn, was dependent on minute synchronization and standardizing practices. As the RMSPC's development of its service in the Americas underscores, during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, we cannot comprehend the increasing emergence of the global without remaining mindful of discrete oceanic activities.

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[1] National Maritime Museum Royal Mail Steam Packet Company Archive (hereafter RMS) RMS 54/1, 10 October 1850.
[2] Brown, "Introduction," 8.
[3] The RMSPC's mail contract increased to £270,000 with the extension of service.
[4] Hannam, Sheller and Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," 1.
[5] Cresswell, "Towards a politics of mobility," 17.
[6] Anderson, "Exploring the consequences of mobility," 1.
[7] Cresswell, "Towards a politics of mobility," 24.
[8] Headrick, Tools of Empire; Harcourt, Flagships of Imperialism.
[9] Brown, "Introduction," 1.
[10] Lambert and Lester, "Introduction: Imperial spaces, Imperial subjects," 9.
[11] Brown, "Introduction," 1.
[12] Armitage, "Three concepts of Atlantic History," 12.
[13] McLean, War, Diplomacy and Informal Empire, 3–4.
[14] Ibid., 206.
[15] Graham, Britain and the Onset of Modernization in Brazil, 5.
[16] Lambert and Lester, "Introduction: Imperial spaces, Imperial subjects," 1–2; MacQueen, A General Plan, 3. By Lambert and Lester's definition, "imperial careerists" were men and women who lived for a substantial amount of time in one colony before moving to another colony, and in this way developed an "imperial career".
[17] Ibid., 3.
[18] Lambert, Mastering the Niger, 1.
[19] NMM RMS 1/3, p. 104; NMM RMS 54/1, Report 10th October 1850.
[20] Nicol, *MacQueen's Legacy*, 31–32.
[21] Ibid., 43.
[22] "The West India and Brazil Mail Steamers," The Times, 4 January 1851; NMM RMS 7/2, 6 June 1850; RMS 6/3, 11 April 1853.
[23] Ibid., 77–80.
[24] Greenhill, "British Shipping and Latin America," 75.
[25] Ibid., 6.
[26] Greenhill, "British Shipping and Latin America," 114.
[27] Ibid., 116-117.
[28] Greenhill, "Latin America's Export Trades," 258–259.
[29] Dillon, *A Twelve Months' Tour*, preface.
[30] The River Plate (South America) as a Field for Emigration, 33–34.

[31] Greenhill, "British Shipping and Latin America," 113.
[32] Ridings, "Interest groups and development", p. 225.
[33] Greenhill, "Latin America's Export Trades," 256.
[34] Ibid., 265.
[35] Bushnell and Macaulay, The Emergence of Latin America, 181–182.
[36] Ibid., 184 and 187.
[37] Harcourt, Flagships of Imperialism, 1.
[38] RMS 54/1, 10 April 1851.
[39] NMM RMS 6/6, 13 August 1851.
[40] RMS 54/1, 9 October 1851.
[41] Llorca-Jaña, The British Textile Trade in South America, 75.
[42] "The Brazil Mail Contract," The Times, 2 January 1850.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] MacQueen, A General Plan, 3.
[47] "The Brazil Mails," The Times 10 July 1851, p. 2.
[48] Anim-Addo, "'The Great Event of the Fortnight'".
[49] RMS 54/1, October 1850.
[50] RMS 6/6, 17 June 1850.
[51] RMS 6/6, 13 January 1849.
[52] Ibid.
[53] NMM RMS 6/5, 18 March 1848; NMM RMS 6/5 31 March 1848.
[54] NMM RMS 6/5, 18 December 1849.
[55] Brown, "Introduction," 21.
[56] Platt "The Imperialism of Free Trade," 297.
[57] RMS 54/1, 10 April 1851.
[58] RMS 6/3, 22 April 1853.
[59] RMS 6/3, 22 April 1853.
[60] Woolward, Nigh on Sixty Years, 187.
[61] Ibid., 188.
[62] The Pacific Steam Navigation Company (PSNC) was founded by an American, William Wheelwright, who had served as the first U.S. Consul at Guayaquil, Gran Colombia. See Fifer, William Wheelwright.
[63] NMM RMS 36/2, Modified Plan for Performing the West India Mail Packet Service, May 1843, Table No. VI; NMM RMS 36/3 May 1843 timetable, Table No. X.
[64] Bushell, *"Royal Mail,"* 87.
[65] In 1846, the Pacific Steam Navigation Company extended the Valparaiso service via Guayaquil to Panama. This service connected with the RMSPC's Southampton to Colon route, and created an overland Panama route to Valparaiso. See Haws, Merchant Fleets 8.
[66] 2 ⅛ per cent was also charged to Bermuda, Vera Cruz, Tampico and Fayal. 2 per cent was charged to Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, St Thomas, the Windward Islands, Venezuela, Honduras and Nassau, and 1 ⅞ per cent was charged to San Juan de Nicaragua.
[67] NMM RMS 82/1, agreement 10 November 1846.
[68] UCL RMSP 7, 27 June 1848.
[69] Bowker and Star, Sorting Things Out, 34.
[70] UCL RMSP 6, 8 December 1846.
[71] UCL RMSP 6, 12 January 1846.
[72] Wardle, Steam Conquers the Pacific, 71.

[73] UCL RMSP 7, 15 February 1847.
[74] UCL RMSP 7, 16 February 1847.
[75] NMM RMS 6/5, 17 February 1848.
[76] NMM RMS 6/5, 7 July 1848.
[77] The government of New Granada agreed to pay the maintenance of this workforce "for the purpose of securing an adequate supply of labour to effect the repairs of the road". See RMS 7/2, 14 February 1848.
[78] NMM RMS 6/5, 9 August 1848, enclosure dated 30 May 1848.
[79] Ibid.
[80] NMM RMS 6/5, 29 December 1849.
[81] As well as providing a loan for the construction of the road, the RMSPC also lent financial backing to the transformation of Panama through the construction of the railroad. When the venture was struggling with a lack of funds in 1850, the RMSPC loaned the Railroad Company 125,000 dollars (£25,000). See Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, A Link of Empire, 76.
[82] RMS 54/1, 10 October 1850.
[83] RMS 54/1, 10 April 1851.
[84] O'Hara, "New Histories of British Imperial Communication," 610; Cresswell, On the Move, 4.
[85] Huber, Channelling mobilities; Fletcher, "The Suez Canal and World Shipping".
[86] McLean, p. 190.
[87] Cañizares-Esquerra, "Some Caveats," 2.

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