

'A Few of My Favourite Things'

(with homage to Rodgers and Hammerstein)

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In all pursuits, passion will take a person further, faster and closer to his or her goals. Some are passionate about their work, or their friendships. Others are passionate about their sport, or the teams they follow. Me, I'm most passionate about collecting.

My father got me collecting stamps when I was only four years old. About the age of 10, I discovered postmarks.

Unlike most of my contemporaries, I was one of those truly nerdy kids who never allowed tennis, school or other activities to get in the way of acquiring a good stamp or postmark. Right through school and despite the penury that accompanied my tertiary education, I avidly added to my burgeoning collection at every opportunity.

As the years passed, my interest in basic stamps diminished. Postmarks became my passion. I loved them: they were interesting, addictive and, most importantly, cheap!

One day, I had an epiphany: postmarks were so much more interesting and engaging on their original envelopes!

Entering the philatelic trade in 1979, I gained ever-increasing exposure to, interest in, and respect for postal history. The penny dropped that postmarks were only a small, if ever-engaging, element of postal history. Certainly, they elevated the naked mint stamp that never achieved its intended role of being affixed to an item of mail to a level of prominence. And, yes, they had greater status for having been kept on cover. However, what I came to realise was that the markings told only part of the story of the post. If one wanted to truly appreciate the items in one's collection, it was necessary and, indeed, desirable to understand the routes, the rates, the incidents, and most importantly the context of these little paper time-travellers.

And, so, I sort of discovered 'postal history'.

Despite having acquired many hundreds of covers, I recognised that I had never sought to collect postal history *per se*. Apart from having an eye for a good cover, I really did not appreciate what postal history was all about. Reflecting now, I was likely in awe of serious postal historians and unsure if I belonged in their company.

Where should one begin? I sensed that souvenir flight covers had very little to do with postal history. I knew that first day covers rarely qualified. Yet, I had lots from both categories in my postmark collection.

The first items I bought purely as postal history, and really without any appreciation beyond the fact that they were to unusual places, were an early cover to Puerto Rico and a 1920s postcard to the Gabon. This came about because I could not believe nobody else wanted these marvellous items to truly exotic destinations. Rather than have them unsold, I snapped them up.

So began a new collection. My initial thought was to assemble one good item from Australia to every overseas territory or nation. Fifteen years on, that goal has still not been achieved. This collection, now my main collecting focus, is approaching 5,000 pieces, with no end in sight, nor desired.

I digress. By getting a handle on what postal history **is not**, I gained a greater appreciation for what it is. I started to understand

rate structures; how taxing of the mails worked; why redirection fees were sometimes charged but often were not; how the Post Office cooperated with the military and censors in times of war; and why often circuitous routes were required to get the mail from Point A to Point B.

The more I studied covers, the more I was hooked by the tales they told. I also became fascinated by the back-stories that were often more interesting than the covers themselves. A little research – these days often achieved as simply as by consulting Google and Wikipedia – opened up so many avenues for really understanding what made the patient 'tick'. Identifying the sender and/or the addressee could instantly bring a humble little item to life. If the piece was a postcard, an aerogramme or an early entire letter, all manner of information could be gleaned by deciphering the writer's script.

Like so many who have gone before, I embraced the challenges involved in properly 'reading' a cover. In consultation with other enthusiasts, notably my father, I trained myself in deciphering endorsements, identifying half-markings, and getting the chronology of events correct. Rates paid or charged could be utterly confounding. Imagine the satisfaction of resolving a particularly knotty problem. If you have done it, you will know what an adrenaline rush a successful piece of philatelic detective work can impart.

The further I got into my collecting, the more I realised that there was still so much to be learned about numerous elements of postal history. For many fields, there are still few, if any, authoritative reference works. Some of what are available have been written by stamp collectors, even 'philatelists', who really do not understand the concept of 'postal history'. Even the best of the published works offer up problems. When you compare the empirical or 'real' evidence of a cover, or a group of covers, with the published 'facts', often you will sense that the author was off-track, lacked some of the data, or was simply wrong.

Sorting out the correct information is highly rewarding, and great fun.

There is my key word: 'FUN'. If collecting is not enjoyable, I would encourage you to have a good hard look at what you are doing and why. If you struggle to engage with your collection, perhaps it is time to look for something that will re-connect you with what collecting is all about ... and that is relaxation, entertainment, and stimulation. In short, fun.

I read a lot of auction catalogues. It is mostly to educate myself about what is happening in the market and what is available to buy. Often, I will have an instant response to seeing the picture of a cover: "I'd like to own that!" This usually leads to making a bid, then waiting impatiently for the results. A win is uplifting, a loss briefly deflating. I much prefer to win, and I hate being the underbidder!

Occasionally, I'll see an item that stirs me beyond the norm. That usually elicits a sense of wonderment and an accompanying: "I **must** own that!"

These, then, are 'My Favourite Things'. These are the postal history items – and occasionally other pieces – that get my heart

racing, that stir the acquisitive juices, that cause me to prepare album pages before the auctions have even taken place. Being able to add a prize item to any of my collections makes for a great day. And because I have several wide-ranging collections, I find that I have many great days.

In this series, I would like to share with you some of the covers, mainly, that unapologetically bring out the wild thing in me. Man the Hunter! Man the Great Acquisitor! I hope you will be entertained, even enthralled, by these delightful fragments of nostalgia that have come my way.

If you are inspired to take up the postal history cudgel, my heart will race with yours. My task will be fulfilled.

“Romeo! Romeo! Wherefor art thou?”

My first offering is one of my most recent acquisitions (see Figure 1). It popped up in an English auction where the minor blemishes on its face encouraged the describer to assign a truly modest estimate. Now, that’s gold! Other bidders forced the price to more



Figure 1

than double the estimate, but still less than half my bid, at which level I was quite delighted to be the buyer!

Redirected mail has a special fascination for me. The more often a cover is re-forwarded, the more transit markings and endorsements it is likely to possess. Which means, the more fun it is to determine exactly what has happened, in the right order. Those who have attempted to untie such a Gordian knot will know that this can be a frustrating but eventually fulfilling task.

So, let us dissect this 1901 envelope from Queensland. Most obviously, it was paid at double the overseas letter rate of 2½d per half-ounce (about 14 grams). It was initially addressed to JF Hollings in care of a British trading house at Yokohama in Japan. Excepting mail from the pearl divers of Thursday Island and telegram envelopes addressed to Kobe, Japan is an uncommon destination.

Concealed beneath the British 1d at upper-left is the endorsement “via Hong Kong” and, indeed, there is a Hong Kong transit marking on the reverse. On arrival in Japan, it was found that Mr Hollings had taken his leave, so a clerk at S Strauss & Co changed the address to 36 Fitzroy Square in London. No further postage was payable and the local post office applied the ‘YOKOHAMA/JAPAN’ rubber datestamp to the face.

Our subject cover departed Japan on or soon after 22 April 1901. The London datestamps on the face suggest it took two months to reach England. (Note that the date slug ‘JU’ represented June, not July.) That, however, is unlikely. The transit time between Japan and England was usually about four weeks. Eight suggests something exceptional occurred.

The truth, though, is less dramatic. It would seem that Friend Hollings had decided to do his bit for Queen and Country and made a beeline for the Boer War in South Africa. However, when this letter arrived at Fitzroy Square on 23 May, as indicated by the London arrival backstamp, it is likely that his forwarding address was not yet known.

When the letter was finally re-consigned to the mails on 24 June, it had been in England for a month. GB postal historian, Graham Hayward has confirmed that this was well outside the prescribed time of only one day in which an unopened letter could have been forwarded without further postage being required. From September 1899, the Empire rate to all British Colonies was 1d per ½oz, and that fee was paid using the ubiquitous 1d lilac.

The absence of any further postal markings suggests that the story largely ends here. It is presumed that Sgt Hollings eventually received his now rather-stale news in South Africa. It may be that this cover, along with much other mail for the troops on the veldt, was sent by ship in a sealed bag. On arrival, it would have been handled as a single consignment and the disgorged contents delivered to the intended recipients.

But while the postal story has come to a halt, the real fascination of this cover is yet to be explored.

What on earth was the ‘Composite Volunteer Cycle Company’ to which Hollings was now attached?

If you have an interest in the stamps of the Boer War, you will be familiar with

the Mafeking 1d that features a very young man, a boy of 12 in fact, Sgt-Major Warner Frances Andrew Goodyear, riding his bicycle (see Figure 2). Beyond that, little is generally known about the part played by the humble bike during this major conflict.

Writing in 1979, Thomas Pakenham made not a single mention of the use of bicycles in his massive book, *The Boer War. The Times History of the Boer War in South Africa* gave them merely a passing glance.

Much of what is known was presented by John Marks in *The Anglo-Boer War Philatelist*, Vol. 58 No. 1, March 2015, from which I quote as follows, with my own additions in bracketed italics:

“Lt Col Plumer from his base at Gaberones [*now Gaberone, Bechuanaland*] used [*cyclists*] to keep in touch with his outposts at Mashapa, Kanya and Mashwane. The Rhodesian Volunteer Cyclist Corps was organised under Lt Duly by Col Holdsworth...a



Figure 2



Figure 3

group of 6 officers and 79 men were involved in the Defence of Kimberley. The Cape Colony Cyclist Corps was formed in January 1901 and was some 500 strong...”

John Marks goes on to mention a book, *Bicycles at War*, by Martin Caidin and Jay Barbee (New York, 1974) in which an unnamed British commander is said to have “gambled upon cycle units which could travel where horses would be affected by disease and sickness, in pursuit of the foe”. Seriously!? More likely, horses were in short supply and bicycles were regarded as a useful expedient.

Marks speaks of “A new cycle, the Dursley Pederson folding cycle, weighing only 15 pounds... [for which] the troops devised carrying straps and slings...enabling them to...carry the bicycles across difficult terrain. With full equipment it was possible on good terrain to travel some 40 to 60 miles in a day...”

Many readers are probably aware that at Abacus Auctions we handle more than just stamps and postal history. In our ‘Coins, Medals & Banknotes’ sale of 23 May 2017, we featured a book entitled *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1900* and illustrated in our catalogue one of the pictures from the book (see Figure 3).

This extraordinary image is of eight soldiers with rifles slung across their shoulders, riding two abreast on four-seater bicycles, with another pair bringing up the rear. What was not immediately evident is that the bikes were joined by fixed supports, that the wheels were grooved, and they were actually being ridden along a railway line!

Clearly, our Sgt Hollings was involved with one of these several cycle units, though the title ‘Composite Volunteer Cycle Co’ has not been elsewhere encountered. This brings us back to John Marks’ article in which he stated that “...in March 1901 Lord Kitchener appealed throughout the UK for 1000 volunteer cyclists



Figure 4

to form eight companies. The appeal was [largely] unsuccessful and only two companies were finally raised...”

It would appear that Kitchener’s half-baked idea of recruiting non-military cyclists from around the British Isles for a bit of peddling across South Africa was embraced by none other than JF Hollings Esq, recently returned from the Orient.

Referencing the photograph (Figure 4), slouch hats are widely believed to have been an Australian innovation, and it might be thought that our railway cyclists were therefore indeed Aussies. That may have been the case especially as the author, Col Wanliss, was Australian.

However, the postcard shown here is of the slouch hat-wearing members of the Cycle Section Corps of the Transvaal Light Infantry at Johannesburg. In fact, variations of the slouch hat have been worn by soldiers from many countries.

The serendipity that ties all this together is that, in April 2015, I received my copy of *The Anglo-Boer War Philatelist* and drooled over the envelope illustrated on the front cover. It was sent from Queensland, to Japan, to England, to a soldier at the Boer War. Yes, it was the same treasured item that I have introduced to you here: One of My Favourite Things.



Gary Watson has worked in public auctions since 1979. He is a Fellow of the RPSV, RPSL, ACCCoNSW and BSAP. His collecting interests have ranged from datestamps and Postal Stationery of Victoria to all aspects of Ceylon philately, especially World War II postal history. He also collects Aerogrammes of Eastern Arabia, and Ceylon picture postcards. His major interest is Commonwealth of Australia Mail to Overseas Destinations 1901-1965.