

'A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS', Number Twenty-One "Thrace. Cool! ... Where Is That?"

Gary Watson FRPSL, FRPSV, FACCC of NSW, FBSAP



In 1902, Doctor Constantine Kyriazopoulos (let's call him "Dr K") migrated to Australia from the ancient city of Andrianople¹, in what was then the extensive European territories of the vast Ottoman Empire. Finding permanent work had been difficult, partly because of a glut of medical professionals in the region and partly because of rising anti-Greek sentiment.

Encouraged by a friend to move to Melbourne, he was disappointed on arrival to discover that his medical credentials were not recognised,

despite his extensive experience including two years as a pathologist in Paris. In fact, it was seven years before he was allowed to establish his medical practice².

Thus 1909 was very significant for Dr K. This was also the year he returned to Europe to finalise his arranged marriage to Antigoni Dimissa, the well-educated daughter of a family from his old neck of the woods.

Returning to Melbourne, they exchanged vows at the new Greek church in East Melbourne³. Their son, John, was born the next year. Efthymia, known to all as "Fifi", came into the world in 1914, during Antigoni's visit to her parents in "the Old Country".

Reunited in Melbourne soon after the outbreak of World War I, Dr & Mrs K became heavily involved in the local Greek community. Antigoni was influential in establishing the Melbourne Greek Women's Society, of which she became president. The Society raised significant funds to support charities such as the Greek War Orphans Relief Fund. Constantine was so well respected that he was later appointed Greek Consul in Melbourne.



Less than one month after the Armistice to end the war was signed on 11th November 1918, Dr K wrote to his mother, Euphrosyne⁴, giving her address as, simply, "Andrinople [sic], Turquie, Europe". It never arrived.

To appreciate what happened to this letter, a short history of the aftermath of the Great War is required.

The defeat of the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungary and Turkey) resulted in a significant re-ordering of the political boundaries in Europe, and beyond, in many cases creating highly charged and violent confrontations.

The success stories, at least in the short-term, were Poland, the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Danzig, Saar and the uncomfortable union of the German-speaking Czechs with the Slovaks, who had Slavic origins.

In the former Russian Empire, ongoing armed conflict between the Bolsheviks and the Royalist "White Russians" presented an opportunity for various nationalist groups to cut ties with Moscow⁵. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Ukraine and the almost totally forgotten Far Eastern Republic all asserted their independence, in some cases despite ongoing internal conflict.

Within a few years, all of them were dragged kicking and screaming into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

As for the Ottoman lands, they were basically carved-up at the whim of Britain, France and Italy, all of whom were keen to extend their "spheres of influence". The arrogant lack of consultation with the local populations caused historic divisions of race, religion, culture and language to be ignored, effectively condemning the entire Middle East to more than 100 years of ongoing political and sectarian conflict.

The stories around the creation of Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia are all relatively well-known. But very few people in 21st century Australia - especially those of British or non-European descent - will have even heard of Thrace. As the eager beaver Elder Cunningham in 'The Book of Mormon' exclaimed on being given his first assignment: "Uganda. Cool! ... Where is that?"

Thrace. Cool! ... Where is that?

Historically, Thrace was a semi-autonomous region in south-eastern Europe. Over the millennia, it was dominated in turn by the Persian, Macedonian/Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. At the start of World War I, the Ottoman Turks controlled a large area of the Balkans, including all of Thrace.

The dismembering of the defeated empires resulted in about two-thirds of Thrace being absorbed into Bulgaria, some 10% being ceded to Greece, with Turkey being allowed to retain the eastern 25%.



This remnant is the incongruous piece of Turkey⁶ that isn't part of Anatolia (essentially a peninsula of continental Asia), located to the west of the Sea of Marmara. Istanbul and Edirne, formerly Constantinople and Adrianople, are both in Turkish Thrace. So is the Gallipoli Peninsula.

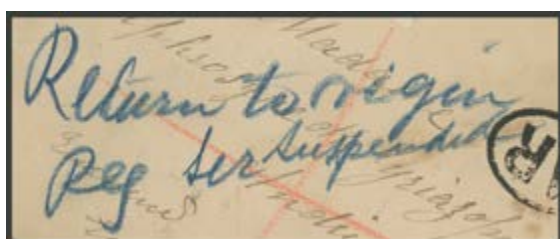
The messing-up of Thrace caused all manner of disruption, notably voluntary population exchanges (think India and Pakistan but without the millions of consequential deaths), from which the Muslims in Greek Thrace were excluded. Racism in all its ugliness caused further migration of Christians to the west, and Muslims to the east, well into the 1920s.

The impact of cultural cleansing continues to the present day, especially in Greek Thrace, where ethnic Greeks are now the majority population and enjoy better living conditions than the Turks whom they prevented from leaving. And the Greek language now dominates, even in Muslim schools.

Hopefully, this is all as clear as mud, because it provides necessary context for the non-delivery of our subject letter.

Our hero, Dr Kyriazopoulos, would have been kept abreast of the ructions in his homeland and the broader crumbling Ottoman Empire. In view of the situation, he wisely chose to send the cover by registered post to ensure that it was afforded a greater level of security than the ordinary mails. In addition, he paid for the Avis de Réception or, in English, Advice of Receipt service to make sure that he was informed that the letter had been delivered.

There was just one practical problem. If a registered letter was lost or otherwise not delivered, the sender was entitled to financial compensation. However, there have been many instances in which the Post Office decided not to be exposed to such loss by abrogating its responsibilities in this matter.



Such was the case here. Boldly inscribed on the face in blue pencil is the endorsement "Return to origin/Reg Ser Suspended".

It might be expected that this was applied at the General Post Office in Melbourne, although in Australia the instruction would almost have certainly been "Return to sender". On the reverse is a partial strike of an Egyptian datestamp, presumably of Cairo, dated 30JA19 that strongly suggests the addition was made in the Egyptian capital.

This also indicates that the registration service to Thrace may still have been in force prior to Christmas 1918⁷.

Whatever the case, the cover was sent back to Victoria, where the 'DEAD LETTER OFFICE/7MR19/MELBOURNE' (DLO) cds was struck on the reverse in black. Because Dr K's name and address were given in raised embossing in red on the flap, it was not necessary for the cover to be opened at the DLO and it would have been delivered to the doubtless rather chagrined sender in the next day or so.

Great destination. Terrific back-story. But wait ... there's more.

This is an early example of war tax being paid on a letter. With impeccable timing, the Australian government imposed a war tax of ½d per article effective from 28th October 1918. That's literally a mere two weeks before the Armistice was signed.

What to do? No more war should mean no more war tax. However, that would have meant introducing disabling legislation only a fortnight after the enabling legislation came into force. Sacre bleu! C'est non possible! (Apologies for the detour into the official language of the Universal Postal Union.)

It actually took the government two years to develop an elegant solution. On 1st October 1920, the war tax was repealed. At the same time, the basic postage rates were increased by half a penny.

But on 18th December 1918, the rate to foreign countries was 2½d per half-ounce, plus ½d war tax, plus 3d registration, a total of 6d, paid with a single Third Watermark 6d blue. Interestingly, the Avis de Réception (AR) fee was held at 2½d, pre-paid with a single 2½d Kangaroo, no war tax being added for the reply.



And quite amazingly, the AR form has actually survived with this article, and only because it could not be delivered. In the normal course of things, the form would have been posted back from Andrianople to confirm receipt of the letter by Dr K's mother. The two parts would likely never have been reunited.

The mechanics of the AR service were quite remarkable. The form was actually pinned or stapled to the reverse of the envelope. By lining-up the telltale pinholes, it is revealed that the form actually faced outwards, so the entire text was exposed when the envelope was turned-over. In addition, there are no pinholes at the base of the form, which shows that it was not folded horizontally at the time it was attached to the envelope.

Presumably, the form was folded before being placed in the secured pouch for registered mail. It would have been less likely to become detached if folded forward to cradle the envelope. The addressee's details were repeated on the AR form so it would not have been necessary for postal clerks to disturb it except to add a transit marking to the envelope. The only place this was done was in Egypt, where the journey was aborted.

Back in Melbourne, the form was opened-out and the envelope folded-back. I can be confident this was the process because the Dead Letter Office datestamp was struck on the reverse of both articles, in almost the identical orientation.

A couple of other comments may be of interest.

Melbournites will be aware that the building that used to house our General Post Office, and that is now an H&M store (good grief!), is in the major north-south thoroughfare of Elizabeth Street. Between 1917 and 1964, the GPO was actually located in an ugly industrial-modern building on Spencer Street, one kilometre further west and opposite the railway terminus for country and interstate trains.



During this 47-year period, the original building was rebranded as the Elizabeth Street Post Office. Consequently, the datestamp on our cover is inscribed 'REGISTERED ELIZABETH ST/MELBOURNE'. The adjacent registration label reads 'Elizabeth St. P.O.' without 'Melbourne'.

This legend, with 'P.O.' at the end is very unusual. I can't recall having seen another example of this label, or any other Victorian R label similarly worded.

Finally, a word about how I acquired this cover.

More than a decade ago, a large cache of mail mostly to the Kyriazopoulos Family was consigned to a Melbourne auction house by Constantine and Antigone's descendants. When it came up for sale in large miscellaneous lots I must have been hibernating because I completely missed it.

Fast forward a couple of years, I was skimming an interstate catalogue and noted a depressingly small illustration of a cover that might be of interest. Going to the description, I saw that it was from the Kyriazopoulos hoard. I was surprised to read that it was addressed to England and had been returned as undeliverable.



Something clearly wasn't right. Why would the registration service to Britain have been suspended? Of course, it hadn't been. The auction describer had misread "Turquie" as "England". Seriously! That well-known seaside town, "Andrinople", had obviously been construed as "Hartlepool".

Am I being too harsh? I don't think so. The text was repeated, without obstruction, on the AR form. Did the error work to my advantage in buying the lot inexpensively? We'll never know, and it's of no importance, but I think it gives a nice twist to the tail of the tale.

The brief war tax period following World War I is one of my pet Overseas Destinations subjects. This is the only in-period 'AR' article I have been able to obtain. That the AR form is still with it is extraordinary. So are the destination and the back-story. That's why these twinned pieces are among my favourite things.

Endnotes

- 1 Originally named Hadrianople after the Roman emperor who established the city. Between about 1370 and 1453, it was the Ottoman capital until the capture of Constantinople (later Istanbul) and was renamed Edirne, although the Anglicised Greek form Adrianople remained in common use. After the Turks adopted the Latin alphabet in 1928, Edirne became the internationally recognised name.
- 2 It was only in 1962 that the Australian Medical Association was founded, as the result of an amalgamation of the State chapters of the British Medical Association. Who said the Colonial Era was finally laid to rest after World War II.
- 3 Located at 186 Victoria Parade, East Melbourne, the Holy Church of The Annunciation of Our Lady, also known as Evangelismos Church, is the second-oldest Greek Orthodox church in Australia. The official opening of the newly constructed building was on 23rd June 1901. In 2016, the roof was badly damaged by fire. The major restoration project was largely funded by donations from the Greek community in Edirne, which Greeks still call Adrianople. It reopened in March 2024.
- 4 Euphrosyne (pronounced yoo/fro/zen/ee) translates as "Joy". It is rarely used these days. By the way, her daughter-in-law's name, Antigone, is pronounced an/tig/on/ee.
- 5 Between 1712 and 1918, when the Bolsheviks established themselves in Moscow, the imperial capital was St Petersburg. At the start of World War I, the city was renamed Petrograd. In 1924, after the death of Lenin, it was renamed Leningrad in his honour. In 1991, a referendum resulted in reversion to the traditional name of St Petersburg.
- 6 On 26th May 2022, Turkey officially changed its name to the republic of Turkiye. This might have gone largely unnoticed but for the extensive media coverage of the devastating earthquakes in southern Anatolia on 6th February 2023. It might require another major disaster for the world to notice that Swaziland has also changed its name. Known as Eswatini since 19th April 2018, international bodies have been slow to adopt the new name. At the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, athletes from 'Swaziland' were present but there was no mention of Eswatini: don't believe online propaganda that claims otherwise. At the recent Paris Olympics, Eswatini got a guernsey (or bib) but the code for their competitors was 'SWZ'. Not good enough, IOC.
- 7 Mail services returned to normal only in 1922, after Turkey had triumphed in the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922.