

# 'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Eight: Quo Vadis...et Quare? (Where are you Going...and Why?)

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In collecting mail from Australia, generally I have not bothered with items that have transited Australia, but I do make exceptions, such as my WWII airmail cover from Sudan to Australia forwarded to Canada with postage added for the Trans-Pacific Clipper service, and the modest little 2d franking featured here.



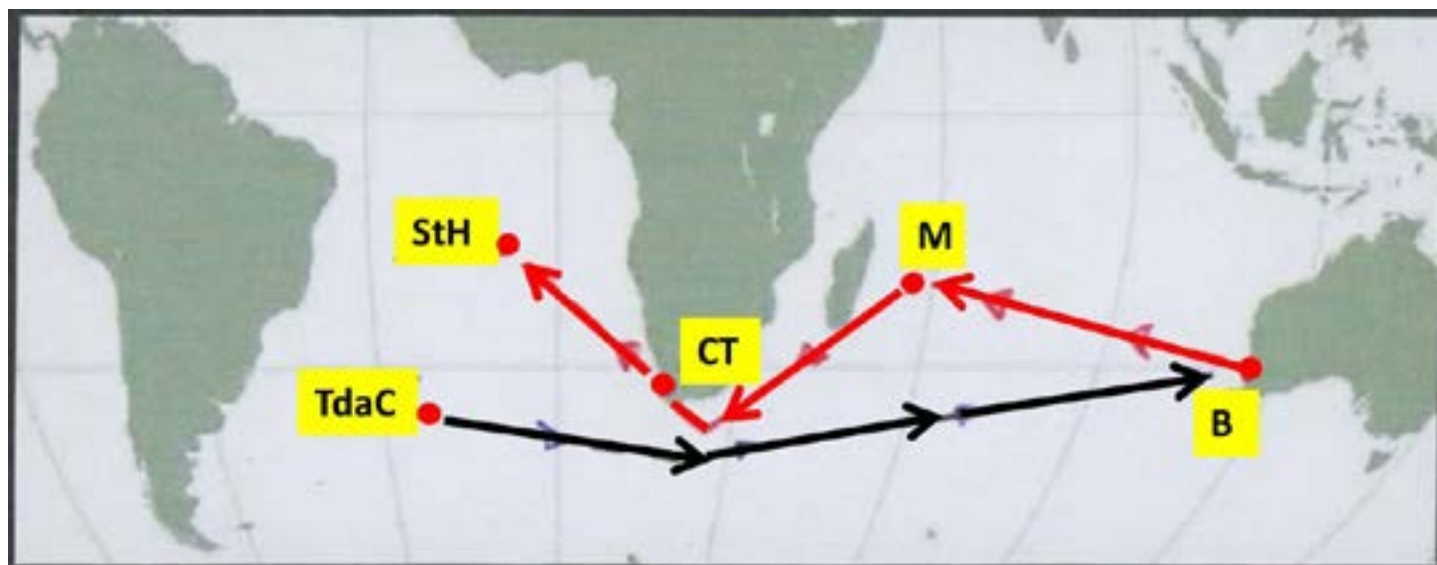
I say modest because the stamp is not worth a dollar, and the Bunbury duplex cancel is common. However, even the most jaded of readers is likely to be entranced by the address and the other markings.

“The Castle/The Island of St Helena” sounds like the setting for a Walter Scott poem. In fact, it was the official residence of the Governor of St Helena and, today, houses the island’s administrative offices. St Helena is a speck in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean and, to say it is remote, is an understatement. It lies some 8,500km south of London; 4,000km east of Rio de Janeiro; and almost 2,000km from the west coast of Africa. Think: Amelia Earhart trying to find Wake Island in the dark.

In 1938, Tristan da Cunha became a Dependency of St Helena, which gives you some idea of how inconsequential it is. Tristan was found by accident in 1506 by a Portuguese mariner who, with an eye on his place in the pantheon of great explorers, named this inhospitable volcanic outcrop after himself. It was another 14 years before anybody landed there, and a further 130 years before anybody bothered putting it on a map. It was such a salubrious destination that the British considered Tristan for a penal settlement before deciding on New South Wales!

So, just where is Tristan da Cunha? It is almost 2,500km south of St Helena; more than 2,500km west of Cape Town; and 4,000km ENE of the Falkland Islands. Consequently, it is generally regarded as the most isolated inhabited island on the face of the earth.

As far as a combination of origin and destination goes, this cover is rather special. But what makes it a truly remarkable item is the fact that it did not travel directly from Tristan to St Helena. Instead, it was deliberately put aboard a ship heading in the wrong direction, south to catch the Roaring Forties, and then east to Australia.



The route: TdaC = Tristan da Cunha, B = Bunbury, M = Mauritius, CT = Cape Town, StH = St Helena

During the 19th century, whaling – mostly by American vessels – was a major undertaking in the South Atlantic. In the mid-1870s, some 60 or 70 American ships visited St Helena each year before heading south to Tristan. However, by the turn of the century, the industry was in terminal decline and the Americans were more interested in geological oil than whale oil.

Things got so bad for the Tristanians that in 1907 the British government offered to evacuate the island and advised that, if the islanders declined to go, the Crown would no longer be able to assist them. Of course, being a proud (read ‘pig-headed’) bunch, they refused to budge. The consequence was that between 1909 and 1919 very few ships called at the island!

However, in 1908, the island had acquired an undated postal marking inscribed ‘TRISTAN/DA/CUNHA’ in three lines. Some reports suggest this was the property of a mission station on the island. (Talk about drawing the short straw. Shades of Elder Cunningham in *The Book of Mormon*: “Uganda? Cool!...Where is that?”, only much worse.) Whatever its origins, because of the decade of virtually no visits to the island, the handstamp saw very little use, most examples being light under-inked strikes from the period after 1919.

Back to our story. With the British having washed their hands of the islanders, they no longer had the luxury of choosing which ship they should use to send their mail. As noted above, our featured cover was first sent to Australia, arriving at Bunbury on the Western Australian coast south of Fremantle in February 1909. This piece was formerly in the collection of the late Jack Cole, who believed that the southbound ship was the Norwegian whaler *Eldessides*. He may have been correct. However, there is no entry on Google for this word in any context.

Presumably, the sender had given the ship’s captain coins to pay for the postage back to St Helena, plus a gratuity. A Western Australia 2d yellow was affixed and cancelled at Bunbury on 22 February 1909. (Two other covers seen to England were taxed at Fremantle for being unstamped. Another in my possession was sent to England via Sydney(!) where a NSW 2d was affixed.)

As fate would have it, another ship must have been soon to leave Bunbury or Fremantle for the Atlantic and the cover was placed aboard, arriving at St Helena 57 days later, as indicated by the arrival cds of AP20/09. All up, the entire journey must have taken the best part of four months, and who knows how long the letter had been delayed at Tristan in the first place?

As for the addressee, “Mr Bagley”, I have been unable to pinpoint his identity. There had been Bagleys on St Helena since at least the early 18th century. One Orlando Bagley was born on the island some time between 1712 and 1720! The recipient of the cover was almost certainly a descendant of one of Orlando and Martha Bagley’s eleven children. His address being given as The Castle, he was probably in the service of the Governor.

At the time, that position was held by Lt-Col Sir Henry Galway, whose claim to fame was that he reintroduced capital punishment to the island. (From 1911, he was Governor of the Gambia, before taking up the same role in South Australia between 1914 and 1920, where he was, according to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, regarded as tactless, impertinent and incorrigible! A perfect fit for his next role as chairman of the Big Brother committee, a scheme for displacing British youths as farm labourers in Australia!)

With a back-story like this, it should be no surprise that this little beauty is one of My Favourite Things.