

'A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS', Number Twenty-Four 'Exceptions to the Rule'

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Thursday Island (colloquially TI) is the best known of the 270+ mostly tiny islands dotted throughout the Torres Strait, the body of water that separates Queensland from the former Dutch New Guinea (now West Papua) and British New Guinea (renamed Papua in 1906). Its prominence is due largely to its deep-water anchorage which became a scheduled stopping-point for ships travelling east and south to Brisbane or west to the Netherlands Indies and beyond.



European settlement began in 1878. Within ten years there was a thriving settlement boasting two hotels, a customs house and an underwater telegraphic connection with the Australian mainland. Lucrative pearling operations resulted in a workforce drawn from Japan, the Philippines, the Dutch Indies and many Pacific islands, creating a truly diverse community.

The TI post office opened late 1877. Since then, collectors from around the globe have had a real 'thing' for Thursday Island. To me, that is quite bemusing. After all, TI is just another Queensland post office. It's never been a major facility, but it has enjoyed heightened visibility because of its connection with the various shipping routes.

In truth, virtually all mail from TI is unremarkable. Most of the datestamps are common; the numeral cancellations are common; airmail, registered and military covers exist in large numbers; even World War I censored covers are regularly available.

Of course, the romance associated with remote tropical islands is a factor in raising popularity of material but, being objective, the vast majority of TI covers don't have much going for them. Acquiring a good selection of covers from all periods requires little effort.

Of course, there are exceptions, and even the exceptional. Regular readers will be familiar with one of my collecting mantras: "Common items in uncommon circumstances." And the more uncommon the better.

On this occasion, I would like to introduce you to three very uncommon items from TI.



First up is a 1902 usage of a Queensland 1½d (penny ha'penny) scenic postal card featuring 'A Queensland Schoolhouse'. 1½d was the postcard rate to most overseas destinations at this time. The printed stamp is cancelled with the '148'-in-rays device used at the island post office, with the unframed 'THURSDAY ISLAND/QUEENSLAND' datestamp alongside. Such numeral/cds 'ties' are highly collectable and usage of the pictorial Postal Card at TI is unusual and desirable.

The addressee was a lady in Belgium, which is what I rank as a second-tier destination, better than England or Germany, but not in the same league as neighbouring Luxembourg. In this period, it was still customary for an arrival datestamp to be applied, in this case proving a transit time of 44 days. This is about two weeks longer than the voyage should have taken. The part-Brisbane cds on the reverse indicates that the card

was misssent south instead of being placed aboard the next west-bound sailing.

The small '422'-in-circle is a Brussels postman's handstamp.

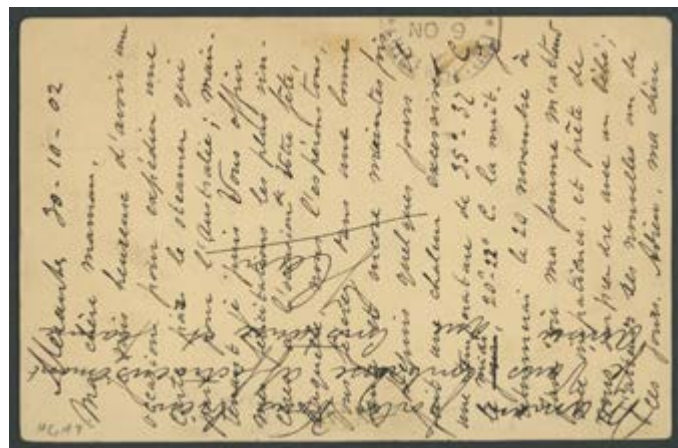
All interesting and all contributing to this being a desirable TI item. However, none of this is earth-shattering stuff. In fact, the quality is not what I would wish for. The soiling is only minor but the scuffing of the illustration is something I would normally consider unacceptable.

However, there is more to this card than has so far met the eye. One of the appealing things about postcards, letter cards and aerogrammes is that messages are an intrinsic part of the whole. Sometimes the message simply trumps any aesthetic concerns.



Anyway, said card is addressed to a town in "Holland"² and again bears the unframed 'THURSDAY ISLAND' datestamp but the stamp is actually cancelled with the Queensland-pattern unframed 'LOOSE/SHIP/LETTER' marking. That's because it was posted aboard a ship, again probably a Burns Philp vessel.

In our first instance, the letter was written while the ship was at or had recently departed Merauke and was so-endorsed. On this occasion, instead of the message being headed "Port Moresby", "Samarai" or "Daru" it is actually inscribed "Thursday Island" and dated "Sondai 12th Sep". That is actually the date of the TI cds. A Google search confirmed that 12.9.1909 was indeed a Sunday, or Zondag in Dutch.



That is the case here. The letter, in French, begins "Cher Maman" (Dear Mum) and comments on temperatures in the mid-30s, and low-20s at night. Riveting stuff!

What really grabbed my attention was the scribbled first word. "Alexander?" Non. "Mesants?" Que? What about ... "Merauke"? Mais oui! Sacre bleu!

Merauke was a tiny settlement on the remote south coast of Netherlands New Guinea. The Dutch had established an administrative post there only in 1902, the year this card was written, so this is very early mail from the region.

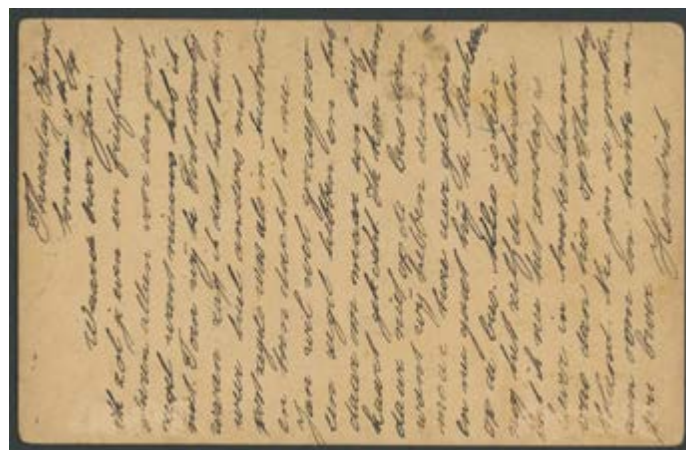
Burns Philp Ltd, the prominent Australian shipping line, had promptly added Merauke to the route for their trading vessels. It is likely that Queensland stamps and postal stationery were available on board.

Ordinarily, mail posted aboard a ship was processed at the first port of call using a paquebot or similar marking. However, in this instance, the card was probably taken directly to the post office by a member of the ship's crew and treated as if it had originated on TI.

It's the extra-territorial origin of the card that makes it so special.

Our second item has a number of similarities with the first.

Here we have a social usage in 1909 of a British New Guinea (BNG) 1½d Postal Card. As noted earlier, in 1906 BNG was renamed Papua, but a large number of the 1901 cards remained on hand so they were never replaced. This seems odd, because in 1906 and 1907 all the remaining BNG adhesive stamps had been overprinted 'Papua.' That's philately for you: questions, enigmas (should that be 'enigmata?'), and conundra ('conundrums' if you prefer).¹



The message does mention Port Moresby so there seems no doubt that the card was acquired there and the letter written as the ship approached TI. The processing with a Loose Ship Marking was consistent with the *Universal Postal Union Regulations* that required acceptance by any UPU member of ship-board mail bearing postage of any other member. For that reason, the impressed stamp that would otherwise have been invalid in Australia was accepted and no postage due was assessed.

From TI, the card took 15 days to reach Singapore, indicating that there was quite a delay at TI for the next west-bound mailboat. Only a further 25 days was required for the card to be received as addressed, with the 'HILVERSUM/22.10.09/ 2' arrival datestamp. As with the Belgian example, the small boxed cachet is a postman's handstamp, unfortunately partly illegible.

Philatelic examples of the BNG 1½d and 1d Postal cards are common, many of them posted at Moresby or Samarai on the First Day of Issue which was 1 July 1901. Commercial or social usages are very elusive. A shipboard usage like this is a highly unusual and desirable piece.



There is definitely a theme developing here. My final offering is also a ship-borne transit usage, this time a Netherlands Indies picture postcard, with the message headed Batavia - which on 27th December 1949 was renamed Jakarta - the capital of Indonesia.

The sender was a traveller from New South Wales who handstamped his address at the upper-left of the reverse of the card. He endorsed the card 'via SS Montoro' (one of the Burns Philp fleet) and added his personal handstamp so the instruction reads 'via SYDNEY...' Passage was eastwards and the card was again treated with the Loose Ship Letter marking of TI, this being the first port after Batavia. The larger framed 'THURSDAY ISLAND/11OC13/QUEENSLAND' cds had been introduced in 1911.

So why did Mr Beckmann mark the card 'Via Sydney'? Well, now we get to the best bit.

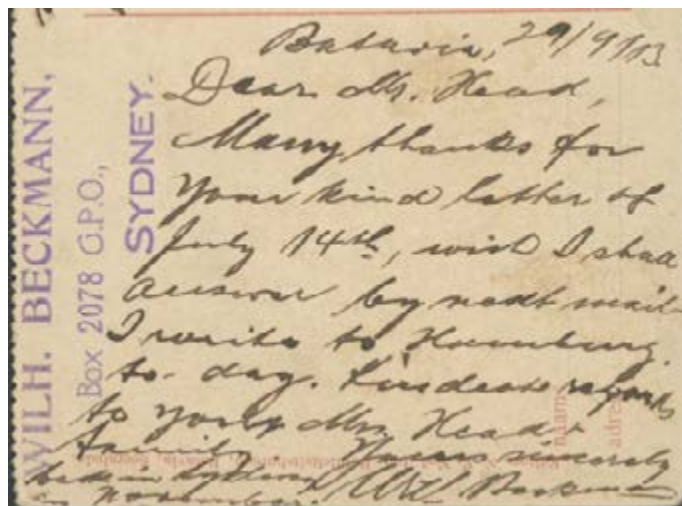
The most engaging element of this item is the destination: 'Niue/via Auckland/New Zealand'. One of the world's largest coral islands (not an atoll) it is perched within a notional triangle bounded by the Cook Islands, Tonga and Samoa. It really is in the middle of the Pacific, and is truly an exotic destination.

Historically, from 11 June 1901, Niue was 'brought within the boundaries of New Zealand'³ as a 'dependency', rather like Australia's external territories. Even today, despite being nominally independent, Niue is effectively under benign Kiwi oversight. Perhaps not surprisingly, 95% of all native Niueans live in New Zealand!⁴

Many collectors are familiar with the fact that many of Niue's stamps from the 1930s and 1940s are very similar to the issues

of the Cook Islands. It is hardly surprising that they draw the conclusion that Niue is or was part of the Cook Islands. From an administrative standpoint, New Zealand would probably have preferred it that way, but the Niueans have always been stridently opposed to the idea.

Just as Niue is hard to find on a map, so it is hidden in catalogues published by Stanley Gibbons Ltd. It isn't listed under 'Niue'. It isn't appended to the Cook Islands, as are Aitutaki and Penrhyn. Rather perversely, it is tacked on to the New Zealand listing, following Tokelau Islands and Ross Dependency which, of course, makes perfect sense, at least at 399 Strand in London.



On my Destination Scale, Niue is a strong 7 (out of 10). I have other covers to Niue, all of them on Post Office business. But this little gem bears an entirely social message: "Many thanks for your kind letter ... I shall answer by next mail ... Kindest regards ... Back in Sydney in November." Short and sweet, but in no sense philatelic.

The three postcards discussed here highlight the importance of reading any associated letter, whether it is written on the item itself or contained in an enclosure. Often little or nothing of note will be revealed. But, every now and then ... voila!

Returning to my introductory comments, like it or not, there is a strong ho-hum factor permeating most postal items from Thursday Island. But, as seen here, there are exceptions to that 'rule'. The circumstances of these three transient visitors to TI transport them to an entirely different level and reinforce why they are among My Favourite Things.

¹ Pedantry has a hold on me. If you would like to dive down a rabbit-hole, check out any number of online fora ('forums' if you insist) on the subject of Latin versus (never 'verse' or 'versing'!!) modern English idioms.

² The Dutch really don't like their country being referred to as "Holland". That's because the formal name is The Kingdom of **the Netherlands**. The country is divided into twelve provinces, of which two are North Holland and South Holland. Referring to the entire country as 'Holland' is therefore gallingly inaccurate. Never mind that many Dutch, especially in the past, have called their own nation "Holland", as is the case here.

³ See 'Commonwealth and Colonial Law' by Kenneth Roberts-Wray, London, Stevens (1966) at page 897. No I haven't read it!

⁴ 'QuickStats About Pacific Peoples', published by Statistics New Zealand (2006).