

'A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS', Number Twenty - Five Heard Mentality

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Wow! Twenty-five columns or six years in harness. I think that's a new record for me. Silver Jubilee stuff, indeed! Ta-rah!

I expect you, dear reader, have heard of Heard Island. You probably know of it as one of Australia's several Antarctic Bases. However, based on what I have learned about Heard Island in the course of preparing this piece, I would hazard a guess that's likely all you really know about it.

For instance, did you know that the first European sighting of Heard Island was in December 1853? ⁽¹⁾ Or that it had a large population ... of elephant seals? Being otherwise uninhabited territory, a dissolute bunch of miscreants of indeterminate origins were drawn to the island. They turned it into a slaughterhouse and by 1877 had exterminated the local elephant seals. A great job done, they simply packed their bags and left.

In June 1910, the captain of a passing whaler was gripped with jingoistic zeal and felt the urge to claim the now even more uninhabited Heard Island for Old England. Of course, human nature being what it is, when somebody decides to own something that nobody has previously wanted, a new claimant will inevitably emerge, in this case La Belle France. However, the Parisian posturing came to nothing and the nothing that was Heard Island was duly annexed by the multi-tentacled British Empire.

Before discussing the geographical location of Heard Island, let's briefly consider the far-better known Macquarie Island, which is located about 1500km south of Hobart. ⁽²⁾

You will agree that's pretty remote. Well, Heard Island is just under 5300km west of Macquarie Island. No, that's not a typo: five thousand three hundred kilometres, or significantly greater than the distance between Sydney and Perth, which comes in at 3300km. ⁽³⁾



And, from Perth, it's 4100km south-west to Heard Island, which is also some 1700km north of Mawson Base, on the Antarctic Continent. This is not where most of us would expect to find a

tiny piece of rock that became part of Australia.

In fact, the nearest land of any consequence is the French-controlled Kerguelen Islands ⁽⁴⁾, a scant 450km to the north-west. No wonder our French friends were peeved that their most constant colonial competitors had swiped Heard from under their very noses.

Before Britain could actually do anything to exploit Heard Island, a couple of pesky world wars intervened, draining the Poms' interest in committing any resources to a tiny speck in the vastness of the great Southern Ocean, and causing them to deftly flip it our way which happened to coincide with the creation of the Australian Antarctic Territory in 1947. ⁽⁵⁾

On 17 December 1947, Group Captain Stuart Campbell - he of BANZARE and Fly River fame - headed the advance party that struggled ashore at Atlas Cove, the only protected landing spot on the north coast of Heard Island, to establish a forward base for 14 Australian scientists.



Aubrey Gotley

Campbell stayed on Heard for only 18 days, conducting the highly symbolic flag-raising ceremony on 29th December. He left on HMAS 'Labuan', after handing over command to the senior meteorologist, Aubrey (Aub) Gotley. ⁽⁶⁾

Until 1955, the meteorological station at Atlas Cove was continuously occupied by bronzed but frost-bitten Aussies, interrupted in January 1948 by a rather Trumpian incident when America objected to the Australian incursion into the Antarctic sphere, over which they recognised no territorial claims but their own! No, I'm not making this up. ⁽⁷⁾

By now, if you are still with me, you will have a clear picture that Heard Island is one of the remotest, most inhospitable and commercially useless spots on the planet.

My regular readers will know that my collecting passion is mail from Australia to all overseas destinations, with a soft spot for the exotic and the splendid.

Heard Island is neither exotic nor splendid. However, for eight years it was home to a tiny corps of hardy expeditioners who were assured that a regular two-way mail service would keep them connected with family and friends.

Unfortunately, that was far easier said than done. Any mail, and supplies for that matter, needed to be landed on a craggy coast in the midst of treacherous ocean-currents and storm-riven skies. And by 'regular', that meant only once a year.

Which, finally, brings us to the subject of this column. Well, almost.

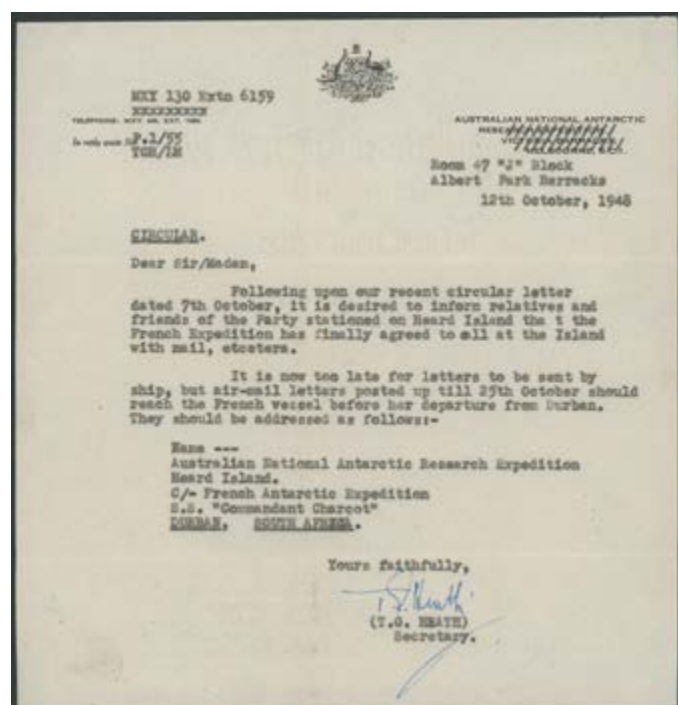
1948 was particularly onerous for the Heardites ⁽⁸⁾, who must have experienced serious abandonment issues at their dismal camp at Atlas Cove when weather and bureaucracy conspired to delay any mail delivery to their sorry little settlement.

But, never fear. Back in Melbourne, in the relative luxury of the forbidding bluestone Albert Park Barracks, a plan was being hatched. Mail would be flown across the Indian Ocean to South Africa, from where it could more readily be carried by sea. Or could it?

There was just one *leetle* problem. The sea-leg was expected to be undertaken by the French. This was perhaps a tad presumptuous, considering that the French were still smarting from the virtual poke-in-the-eye they received when, as they saw it, the Aussies had invaded and occupied French Antarctic territory not twelve months earlier.

One can imagine this simmering international incident being front-of-mind for the imperious and very tall General Charles de Gaulle, and of that towering leader of the Free French intoning "Let zem eat shellfish!"

This may actually have happened, because on 7 October 1948, a broadcast email ⁽⁹⁾ was sent to all the expeditioners' loved-ones, advising that the French had declined to play ball.



However, only five days later, a similar memorandum advised that "the French Expedition has finally agreed to call at the Island with mail, etcetera".

The ANARE Secretary, TG Heath, continued: "... air-mail letters posted up till [sic] 25th October should reach the French vessel before her departure from Durban. They should be addressed as follows: ...Heard Island, c/- French Antarctic Expedition, SS Commandant Charcot, Durban South Africa."

With this memo is the ANARE envelope in which it was despatched by air to 'Miss D Struthers, Victor Harbour [sic], South Australia'. This young lady was the fiancée of Aub Gotley, the leader of the party on Heard Island.



Et voila! Here is proof that this scheme was actually initiated: an airmail envelope addressed exactly in accordance with the Heath memo, to the aforesaid Aub Gotley, in the hand of his mother. ⁽¹⁰⁾

As far as destination mail goes, and this was to go pretty much as far as any, this is the stuff of legends. To put this into context, on the GW Scale of Difficulty of Acquisition, mail to England and America, which is as common as muck, scores a 1 out of 10. On the basis that I have never encountered another example of non-philatelic mail to Heard Island; it is a clear 10 out of 10. ⁽¹¹⁾

The location is ridiculously remote and inaccessible. At the best of times, the population has been miniscule. In the 20th century, the island was 'permanently' occupied for only eight years. Mail was scheduled to be delivered only once in every 365 days. On top of all that, there was a once-only effort to coordinate a mailing to South Africa to connect with a foreign expedition for a very out-of-the-way and inconvenient drop-off.

This is crazy stuff, straight from the Theatre of the Absurd. ⁽¹²⁾

During both world wars, organisations such as the Red Cross in Switzerland and other neutral countries acted as intermediaries to facilitate the delivery of mail between the belligerent nations. This was third-party involvement on a grand scale.

Our subject cover was despatched under similar conditions, but during peacetime. It required coordination between Australia, South Africa and France, on a once-off *ad hoc* basis.

In his notes, Kevin Dwyer notes the existence of only two other covers that survived Operation Cross-Your-Fingers-And-Pray.

He didn't specify if any of the three was actually **delivered** to Heard Island.

The previously quoted Heath Memo advised that “*air-mail letters posted up till [sic] 25th October **should***” achieve the connection at Durban. But ‘should’ and ‘will’ are somewhat different, the one a hope, the other a guarantee. It is clear that the Gotley cover literally missed the boat.



The reverse of the cover boasts a superlative strike of the impressive cachet for Australia's High Commissioner ⁽¹³⁾ in South Africa. There is an equally striking dater impression of '26 JUL 1949', fully nine months after Mrs Gotley mailed her letter on 25 October 1948.

One can only speculate as to what happened. The flight from Australia into Johannesburg may have been delayed. The connection to Durban may have been missed. Post Office workers at either end may have been on a go-slower than usual. Whatever the case, the 'Commandant Charcot' had quit Durban before the mail from Australia reached that port.

As an undeliverable article, the letter would normally have been appropriately marked and returned to Australia, by sea. On arrival at the Dead Letter Office in Sydney, the envelope would have been opened to determine the sender's name and address, then resealed with an appropriately addressed label. Clearly, that scenario did not play-out.

Instead, while Aub Gotley waited in vain for news from home, his letter languished in South Africa. Perhaps there was one or more failed attempt to consign it to Heard Island via a different ship, or per the 'Commandant Charcot' after it returned to Durban. No joy.

After nine months, it was in the possession of the High Commissioner, who almost certainly returned it to Australia in a diplomatic bag to Canberra, from where it was likely sent under cover to ANARE HQ in Melbourne. At Melbourne, it would have been identified as being from Gotley's mother. From there, it would have been sent in another envelope, likely with a brief covering letter regretting that it had proven impossible to deliver the letter to her son.

Here's the rub. By the time Mrs Gotley was so advised, weather-beaten Aub had been back home for some months, having completed his stint at Club Heard in February 1949. Both ironic and truly bizarre.



But wait, there's more. On 7 October 1948, Delightful Doreen sent three envelopes with enclosed letters from Victor Harbour to her betrothed. She endorsed them 'Heard Island' but, following protocol, addressed them care of ANARE HQ in Melbourne.

Obviously, these were mailed well before the October 25 deadline mentioned in the Heath Memorandum which, itself, was despatched only on October 12. Because they were all underpaid for the 1/6d airmail rate to South Africa, they were detained until the relief ship departed for Heard on 21 January 1949.

That means they would have been handed to Aub Gotley by the crew of the ship that duly arrived to return him to Planet Earth! Whilst his mother's fully-paid airmail letter was stranded in South Africa.

While mulling over this wacky situation, let's finish off with a few more fun facts about Heard Island and its even less hospitable neighbours, the thoroughly useless McDonald Islands.

They are all Antarctic Islands 'belonging' to Australia, but they are not part of the Australian Antarctic Territory. Rather, for reasons that only a career bureaucrat could appreciate, they have been designated a separate external territory.

It gets even sillier. Technically, these pinpricks of land are administered from Canberra by the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) of the Federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water headed, from the sounds of it, by the Lord-High Everything-Else Shades of Scott Morrison.

Despite practical management being devolved to ANARE, now based in Hobart, the civil laws of the Australian Capital Territory apply to the islands, but any criminal matters - "Skua Skewers Petrel!" - are within the jurisdiction of Jervis Bay which, despite what we were taught at school, is technically **not** part of the ACT.

Considering that nobody lives on any of these islands, and that there are no tourists, this nonsense plays out like a script for the absurdist classics, 'Yes, Minister!' or our own 'Utopia'. Another thing we learned at school is that Australia's highest summit is Mount Kosciuszko, at a relatively modest 2228 metres (= 7310 feet). Also technically not true.

Mawson Peak, an active volcano on Heard Island, peaks at 2745m (9006ft). And it's only our third-highest mountain, being surpassed by Mount Menzies (3355m; 11,007ft) and

Mount McClintock (3490m; 11,450ft), both located on the Antarctic Continent.

If you already knew all these strange facts about Heard Island, award yourself a gold star **and** an elephant stamp. If, like me a week before putting fingers to keyboard, you didn't have a clue, I hope you've shared my enjoyment of discovery.

In summary, in amongst the almost incomprehensible remoteness, the spectre of international intrigue, the deliberate abandonment of a tiny group of scientific Robinson Crusoe-esque castaways - *sans* sand and coconuts - and bureaucratic absurdity, sits one of the great Australian postal history items of the past 80 years.

Is it any wonder that the Gotley cover is One of My Favourite Things?

The discover was Captain John Heard, master of the American merchant ship 'Oriental'.

This is relevant because the current hub for ANARE operations is at Kingston, a seaside suburb some 12km almost due south of Hobart. ANARE, pronounced "an/ar/ee", stands for the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition.

I bet you're wondering how this compares with the north-south distance between Cape York and Wilson's Promontory. That's a 'mere' 3200km.

Also known, appropriately, as *Iles da la Désolation*, or the Islands of Desolation.

For the benefit of my fellow pedants, it was actually in February 1951 that the United Kingdom advised Australia that it was relinquishing its claim to Heard Island, and backdating this momentous decision to 26 December 1947. Merry Christmas, Australia!

I am grateful to my old friends, Antarctic tragic Kevin Dwyer and his wife 'Cocos Kim' Dwyer for use of the photo of Aubrey

Gotley, and of the 'No 3' cover referred to below.

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The title they chose. I would have opted for 'Hardies'.

Alright, a roneo'd memo on official letterhead, despatched by snail mail.

We know this because the previous owner of these items, Kevin Dwyer, acquired Gotley's personal archive directly from the family.

This is quite unlike the FIP Scale of Philatelic Importance. Despite also being a 1 to 10 scale, Team Leaders have been heard to state 'You can never give less than 4'. I beg to disagree. By just about any measure, Heard Island's philatelic importance is a 1.

"The theatre of the absurd is a post-World War II designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s. It is also a term for the style of theatre the plays represent. The plays focus largely on ideas of existentialism and express what happens when human existence lacks meaning or purpose and communication breaks down. The structure of the plays is typically a round shape, with the finishing point the same as the starting point. Logical construction and argument give way to irrational and illogical speech and to the ultimate conclusion - silence." A quote from 'The Hutchinson Encyclopedia' Millennium Edition of 1999, which is itself an absurdism. The current millennium commenced on 1 January 2001.

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