

A Few of My Favourite Things: Number Twenty-Eight “I’m in Chains” ⁽¹⁾

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Back in the 1970s, I remember there was an explosion in chain-letter scams in Australia. Typically, people would receive mailed instructions to send a small amount of money to those who had preceded them in the chain, and to then copy and send the same instructions to another group of people. The concept was that everyone who participated would make significant sums of money.

To maximise compliance, the standard letter also threatened dire consequences for anyone who ‘broke the chain’.

It might sound harmless enough, but the social consequences of such programmes could be quite devastating. Chain letters had been illegal in Australia since the 1930s - banned under anti-gambling and lottery legislation. However, enforcement of the laws was erratic and such schemes hit the news as recently as 2009, largely replaced in later years by email and online strategies.

Not all chain-letter operations were exploitative. In the early days of the 20th century, correspondence clubs based in America and elsewhere encouraged social contact between members by exchanging postcards. A variation on the theme was for a sequence of people to forward the same postcard to others, usually in different countries, with the final recipient requested to return the card to the original sender.

One such promoter of chain-postcards was a local court official at Laidley, in Queensland’s Lockyer Valley, about 70km south-west of Brisbane. His name was Arthur Staines.

Staines was an enthusiastic Esperantist, who saw chain letters as an inexpensive way to spread the new-fangled internationalist language that, it was hoped, would break down international communication barriers and ultimately result in world peace. ⁽²⁾



L.L. Zamenhof

Esperanto was the brainchild of the Polish-born Louis Lazarus Zamenhof, usually rendered as L. L. Zamenhof who, even as a child, spoke Polish, Russian, Belarusian and Yiddish. In addition, his father taught him French and German and, in school, he studied Latin, Greek and Aramaic. Good grief! You might say he was something of a language nerd. ⁽³⁾

Coming from a multi-ethnic region, it should be no surprise that he was drawn towards the idea of creating a universal auxiliary language.

Esperanto is rendered in English as “one who hopes” and Zamenhof’s great hope was that his constructed language would facilitate universal understanding and lead to a world without armed conflict. Great sentiment. How are we doing with that?

The first Australian Esperanto Conference was held in Sydney in October 1911. I have found no evidence that Arthur Staines

attended but it is certainly possible, perhaps likely, that he did.

Regardless, the conference and subsequent founding of the Australian Esperanto Association, were probably Staines’ inspiration to launch his chain letter.

Sometime probably in late-1912, Staines had a local printer adapt a batch of the then current Queensland 1d Postal Cards for his scheme.

The address-side of each card was overprinted with twelve boxes, at a 90-degree angle from the printed stamp, those on the left-hand side reserved for adhesive stamps and those on the right for names and addresses.

The blank reverse was printed, again in vertical (portrait) format, with detailed instructions for use of the cards and entirely in Esperanto.

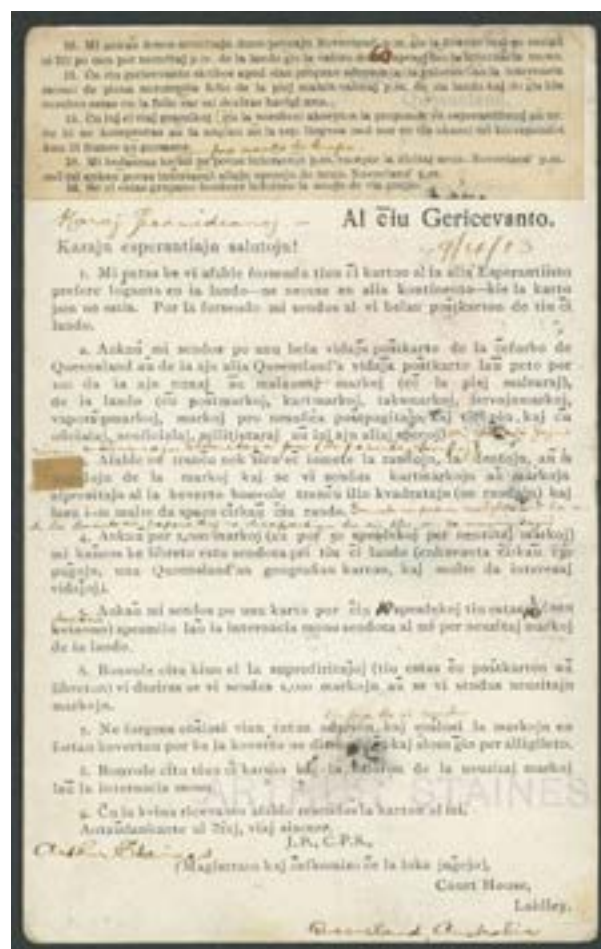


Figure 01

The Google Translator function on my smartphone provided an instant and apparently very accurate conversion into English that essentially verified the hand-written translation I had acquired somewhere along the way. Both versions suggest that Arthur’s grasp of Esperanto wasn’t as good as he thought it was.

The instructions relate heavily to postage stamps and postcards.

I think you will find them interesting, so they are translated in their entirety as a postscript to this article. You may also share my conclusion that Arthur was biting off a bit more than he could chew!

So, let's examine how the system worked in practice.

On 9th April 1913, Arthur Staines sent the card shown here to a British soldier at Nowshera India, a small town near the Khyber Pass in what is now Pakistan. No additional postage was required because India was an Empire destination.

En route, it transited 'TUTICORIN' and 'PESHAWAR', both in India.



Figure 02

As requested, Private Lomas crossed out his own to India address and added the details of a chap in Belgium. He also noted having received the card on 15th May and, in brackets (translated), "I am not a philatelist." He could have said "I'm not really interested in this lark but I'll do as you have asked".

The bilingual 'GENT/GAND' (French/Flemish) cds applied by machine shows the card was received in Belgium on 14th June. The '134' handstamp is the device issued to the local delivery postman in what we call Ghent. (Just this very minor example illustrates the key attraction of Esperanto: one word - Gento - that could be substituted for different variants in multiple languages.)

Apparently, Michel Sebruyne was unimpressed by all the effort which an unknown Australian had invested in the project to connect with him. He committed the cardinal sin of breaking the chain, preferring to retain the card as an Antipodean novelty rather than despatching it on the next leg of its intended round-the-world journey.

I am aware of three similar Postal Cards, none of which made it back to Arthur Staines. One of these is of particular interest to me. It was addressed to Mexico and uprated with a Kangaroo ½d green, converting it into a highly unusual and desirable

Commonwealth/States combination franking. Sadly, while in transit in the United States it was handstamped 'Unmailable' and returned to Queensland.

This item was formerly owned by my old friend, the late Phil Collas, who wrote about and illustrated it in a magazine article during the 1980s. I often wonder where that card is now.

That a small number of round-the-world cards from the Antipodes made the entire journey back to Laidley is proven by my second example.

This card was uprated with a Queensland Widow's Weeds ½d for the foreign postcard rate of 1½d. Again posted at Laidley, on 25th October 1912, the initial addressee was "Sro [= Mr] H Schaiesch/ Udense/Denmark".

"As instructed, he crossed-out his address and forwarded the card, locally within Denmark, to "Hans Peter Hansen/... Odense/ Danmark". Note that he didn't add postage because mail redirected within Denmark usually didn't attract a fee."

Hansen, in turn, sent it on to "Sro H Schleisch/Isafgard/ Iceland", adding a Danish 10ö stamp tied by 'ODENSE/3.2.13' cds. From Iceland, it was forwarded, this time to "Enriquez Muñoz/Bilboa/Hispanijo" (= Spain) with Iceland 10ö tied by a largely illegible datestamp.



Figure 03

To this point, the chain was going along very satisfactorily. Sr Muñoz transmitted the card to "Sro Angelo Buzzo/ Sampierdavena/Italia" (4) with a Spanish 10c tied by a double-circle 'BILBAO/20FEB13/...' cds. From there, the next stop was ".../ Grenoble/Francia", a town in the French Alps.

So far, each recipient had resisted any temptation to simply keep this interesting novelty item. Our (Gre)noble Frenchman was also true to the cause.

He sent it back to the by now likely very anxious "sinjoro Arthur Staines/magistrate haj cefkomizo/ce la loka jugcio/courthouse

Laidley". The affixed French 10c was tied by a small-part Grenoble cds that was also applied to the initial Queensland franking.

Success! Considering the almost certain pitifully low completion rate of such cartophilic journeys, we can imagine Arthur Staines commandeering the local tavern for a celebration the likes of which had not been seen in Laidley since itinerant fruit-picker Tom Jones won 5/- in one of Tattersalls' persistent sweepstakes.

Staines added the endorsement "24/4/13", (almost certainly the date of arrival back at Laidley), just one day short of six months since setting out on its vain attempt to emulate the feat of the gentleman-adventurer Phileas Fogg.⁽⁵⁾

Even if that was all to this story, it might go down as an epic. However, as the K-Tel spruiker used to promise: "But wait ... There's more!"

Indeed, my eagle-eyed readers will have noticed that the stamp and address boxes on this card were neatly ruled by hand, rather than being printed.

What we have here is a forerunner to the cards previously discussed. In fact, all the instructions on the reverse were laboriously entered in a tiny Esperanto script!

I find this almost unbelievable. It certainly demonstrates Arthur Staines' commitment to the Esperantist cause and his determination to spread the word.

Considering the labour involved, you can perhaps forgive me for thinking that this was a unique precursor. However, Canberra postal stationery enthusiast, Ian McMahon, shattered that naïve conceit by sharing with me his similar handwritten example.

I do hope you have been entertained by these peculiar multi-destination postcards. They certainly conform to my collecting mantra "Common items in uncommon circumstances". None of the various stamps have any real value. It's the unity of frankings and the peculiar journeys they took that raise them far above the banal.

These items are certainly not great postal history. However, they are a lot of fun.

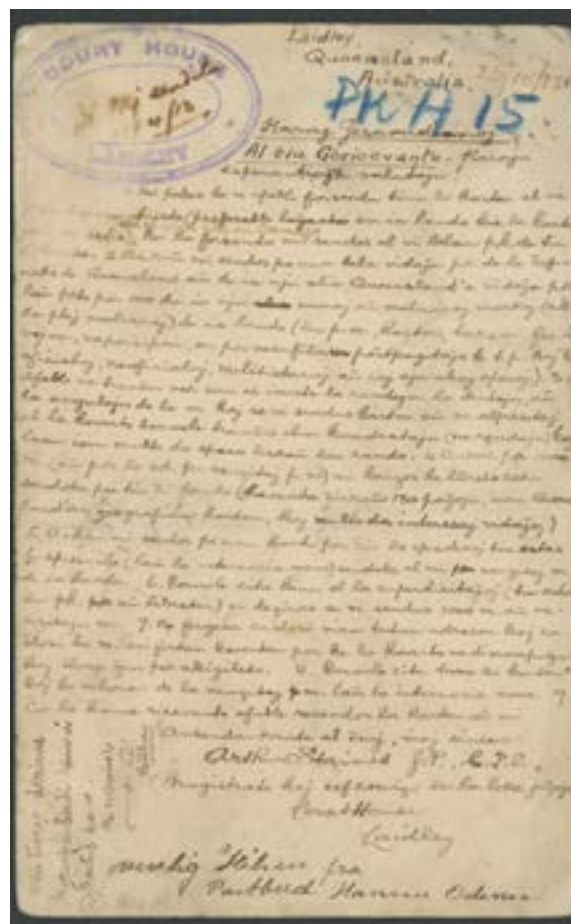


Figure 04

The purist may sneer but I am certainly happy to include these philatelic chimeras⁽⁶⁾ among my favourite things.

I appreciate assistance received from Ian McMahon and Mark Diserio in the preparation of this column.

⁽¹⁾ I've pinched this title from the refrain in the song "Chains" by Tina Arena, one of my favourite Australian singers. Written by Tina, Pam Reswick and Steve Werful, it featured on her third studio album, "Don't Ask", released in 1994.

⁽²⁾ Little seems to be recorded about Arthur Staines beyond his involvement with chain letters. In 1913, he was fined 3/- for failing to send one or more of his children to school! This was reported by the 'Ipswich Times' of 30th October 1913: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/118656635>

⁽³⁾ See the Wikipedia entry https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L._L._Zamenhof

⁽⁴⁾ Probably the town of Sampiera on the southern coast of Sicily.

⁽⁵⁾ Phileas Fogg was the hero of Jules Verne's 1872 novel 'Around the World in Eighty Days'.

⁽⁶⁾ In Greek mythology, the chimera was a hybrid creature composed of parts from different animals. Cool!

Postscript: AI-assisted translation from Esperanto to English.

To every recipient. Dear Esperanto greetings!

1. Please forward this card to another Esperantist preferably living in another country - not necessarily on another continent - where this card has not been. For doing so, I will send you a beautiful postcard from this country.
2. Also, I will send you one beautiful postcard of the capital of Queensland or any other Queensland postcard upon request for 100 of any current or old stamps (even the rarest) of any country (whether postmarks, card stamps, tax stamps, railway stamps, steamship stamps, stamps for insufficient postpayment, and so on, and whether official, unofficial, military or any other type.)
3. Please do not cut or even slightly cut the edges, the teeth, or the edges of the stamps and if you send card stamps or stamps printed on the envelope, please cut them square (and not round) and a little space around the edge.
4. Also, for 1000 marks (or for so many tens of marks in unused marks) I will cause a booklet to be sent on this country (containing about 130 pages, a Queensland geographical map and many interesting views).
5. I will also send one card in exchange for the international money to be sent to me in unused marks for any country.
6. Please indicate which of the above (i.e. a postcard or a booklet) you would like if you were sending 1000 stamps or if you were sending unused stamps.
7. Don't forget to include your full address and include the stamps in a strong envelope so that the envelope doesn't get torn and close it with a zip tie.
8. Please quote this card and the value of the unused marks according to international Currency.

9. Will the fifth recipient kindly return the card to me. Thanking you all in advance, yours sincerely "Arthur Staines" JP CPS (Magistrate and chief clerk at the local courthouse), Court House Laidley. "Queensland Australia"

Further instructions are printed on a label affixed at the top of the message. It is just transparent enough to discern the words 'Laidley/Queensland/Australia', providing assurance that it is not obscuring anything of significance, such as an earlier version of the affixed instructions, that read.

10. I will also send New Zealand half-pence coins up to the amount but not exceeding 10 for unused coins of any country up to that value.
11. Will the recipient write next to his own address a) the value in international money of a full unbroken sheet of the lowest value coins [clearly an error for "stamps"] of his country because I want to have one back.
12. Will some of your friends (up to a certain number) accept the offer in Esperanto? If they do not understand English or the Esp language (but only in that case) I will correspond with them in French or German.
13. I regret that I cannot exchange p.m. [= postmarks?] except for the aforementioned New Zealand but I can also exchange other types of New Zealand p.m.
14. If you are a group member, kindly inform the members of your group.

The whole thing is rather incoherent - perhaps AI isn't quite up to mark yet - and I would be surprised if anybody was inclined to read further than the first paragraph. In particular, the additional instructions on the affixed label are little short of gobbledygook. As noted above, I think the nuances of Esperanto were beyond the well-meaning Arthur Staines.