

Postal history of British south, central and east Africa

Basutoland

First stamps: 1933



Moshoeshe circa 1833

Basutoland/Lesotho is a small, improbable country. Its dry, mountainous highlands are entirely surrounded by South Africa. It owes its existence as much as anything to its remoteness, and to its tribal king. Moshoeshe (*mo-schwe-schwe*) was a charismatic leader and skilled diplomat whose reign extended from 1820 some 50 years, three decades into the Victoria's era. Basutoland was variously manhandled by Great Britain, the Cape Colony, Boers from Orange Free State and Griqualand, Zulu tribal warriors and other troublesome neighbors. Basuto tribes fought among themselves, but somehow emerged intact as a nation under King



He reigned until 1870

Moshoeshe. Basutoland became a British protectorate, which enabled the nation to resist incorporation into South Africa in 1910. Basutoland rejected apartheid and remained under Britain's wing until independence. British rule was relatively light and supple. Central administration was under a resident commissioner. Tribal leaders ran things under a paramount chief, with a high court convening when needed. Basutoland got its first elected legislature in 1959, and became the independent state of Lesotho in 1965.

(Do not confuse Basutoland/Lesotho with Swaziland/Eswatini, another small nation surrounded by South Africa. (More at <https://mancrymf.com/2021/11/>) Both nations also stand apart from those phony-baloney South African "homelands" — Transkei, Venda, Ciskei and Bophutatswana — that were separatist creations of the apartheid regime of South Africa. They did issue some pretty stamps that continue to be listed in the Scott catalog. (More at <https://mancrymf.com/2024/08/22/philatelic-phiction-south-african-homelands/>)

Since this is the final postal authority in our



survey of British south, central and east Africa stamps, let's enjoy a comprehensive review. What follows is a page-by-page tour through my Basutoland collection. A deep dive into 30 years of stamps that preceded Basutoland's independence also allows a closer look at the "omnibus" sets that were issued in other British dominions around the world. We thus gain one last glimpse of the final decades of British Empire in Africa.

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Why didn't Basutoland get its own stamps until 1933? (I don't yet know.) What stamps did local folks use to mail their letters before then?

Stamps of South Africa, for sure, and from Cape of Good Hope and elsewhere. Although the Union of South Africa began issuing its own stamps after 1910, all the surrounding postal authorities of earlier years— Natal, Transvaal, Orange River Colony, Zululand, Cape Colony — continued to use their stamps, interchangeably. Basutoland, a separate and distinct British dominion, went on borrowing its stamps for 23 more years. How odd. Stamps from Cape of Good Hope, Transvaal, Natal and Orange River Colony remained valid for postage throughout South Africa until 1937, so Basutos could take their pick.

I found this remarkable envelope (below) online, offered for about \$40 as I recall. (I didn't buy it.) Postmarked Maseru (Basutoland's capital) in 1933, it carries stamps from six postal authorities. Left to right: Basutoland, Transvaal, South Africa, Orange River Colony, Natal and Cape of Good Hope.



BASUTOLAND

British colony. Area: 11,716 square miles; Population: 583,000 (1953); Language: English (official) and Basuto; Capital: Maseru. 12 Pence = 1 Shilling; 20 Shillings = 1 Pound.

ISSUES OF 1933-37



Basutoland's first set (left) is strikingly exotic — engraved, with a profile portrait of George V above a stylized scene of a crocodile basking by a river, with mountain peaks behind. I'm missing the higher values, but my partial set, complete to the one shilling value, is worth a few bucks and makes an attractive display, don't you think?

At right is Basutoland's version of the universal or "omnibus" set of stamps commemorating King George V's jubilee in 1935. After a successful 25-year reign, the 70-year-old king was fading. He would die Jan. 20, 1936. The stamps are handsome engravings of the king and Windsor Castle in regal colors: carmine and blue (1d); gray black and ultramarine (2d); blue and brown (3d); bright violet and indigo (6d). These are very familiar stamps for British Colony collectors, and remain elegant studies in color and design.



TO BE CONTINUED