

Postal history of British south, central and east Africa

Final Thoughts

Artifacts of Empire may provide clues to a better future

The preceding essays about Basutoland may seem an odd place to end this epic journey through the postal history of British imperialism in south, central and east Africa. The choice is dictated by chronology — Basutoland was the last British territory to start issuing its own stamps (in 1933). It also was one of the more orderly and settled of the many British dominions in Africa. Small, peaceful, basically one tribe, Basutoland also put out some very pretty stamps.

Does Basutoland have something to say to the rest of the British stamp-issuing territories, starting back in Cape Town in 1853? The well-insulated Basuto homeland avoided much of the imperial scramble for land that engulfed its neighbors. Elsewhere, the Zulu, Ndebele, Shona and other tribes scuffled with expansive colonial adventurers, military

regiments and land-hungry Boer and English settlers. Much blood was shed, mostly by Blacks whose spears and assegais were no match for the rapid-firing Gatling and Maxim guns of the British.

Stamps issued by rival postal authorities illustrate



South Africa put out this stamp to mark 150 years of stamps in 2003. Below is a picture of the 1853 stamp from Cape of Good Hope.



The Zulus had the edge at the bloody battle of Isandlwana in 1879; the British countered with massacres at Ulundi and Rorke's Drift.

the dramatic story of Boers and Brits going at it, in the Transvaal and elsewhere. Cape Colony stamps from an encircled city during the Boer War are overprinted, “Mafeking Besieged.” Stamps are appropriated and overprinted by whichever side seizes the post office. It is a gesture both of dominance and daily necessity. This humble artifact of daily life — the postage stamp — is also a vivid civic emblem of its time. Imagine the excitement in Durban, Natal, when the first creamy, embossed stamps appear in 1857. Imagine the confusion a century later in Dar Es Salaam, when the neighborhood postal authority changes names half-a-dozen times in 1964.

In war and peacetime, as well as during and after revolutions, stamps were used as propaganda, to raise money, to celebrate victories, settle scores — and to mail letters. Occasionally a stamp would take on significance beyond the mundane, revealing unexpected truths. Like the plucky typewritten labels from early Uganda. Or the last desperate issues from Transvaal President Paul Kruger’s vanishing domain in Pietersburg in 1900. More broadly, stamps reflected the identity and values of their issuing authorities, as well as those of the territory and its people. That some of these stamps were ravishingly beautiful adds to the pleasure of collecting them and having them as guides to the societies they represented.

The imperial project was not nearly as pretty or orderly as its stamps. Yet British racial policy and practices were neither monolithic nor uniformly extreme. Missionaries like David Livingston, Alexander Mackey and James Hannington were driven by spiritual fervor and principle, in holy war against the Arab slave trade. The mandarins of Whitehall disapproved of the racist excesses of the “tribes” of Brits and Boers. London espoused a more genteel version of white supremacy, while long-settled whites laid claim to south, central and east Africa and subjugated its Black and brown people.

Great Britain abolished slavery in its African territories in 1833. Some remarkable experiments in multi-racial democracy took place in the early years of British rule in the Cape Colony. Such practices yielded to a harsh racial hierarchy. Warring Brits and Boers reached an uneasy truce, circled warily, and finally joined to create the white-ruled Union of South Africa in 1910. Long before then, the British government had established protectorates in other territories to hold back marauding tribes, Arab raiders,



The Northern Rhodesia stamp at right was issued Dec. 1, 1963; on Oct. 24, 1964 the first definitive stamps of Zambia appeared.

Since both countries are the same, little wonder they got mixed on this envelope fragment. It still looks weird.

colonial probes from Portugal and Germany, — and white South Africans seeking to extend their racist hegemony.

By the 1930s, the press for Black liberation was under way. The days of white supremacy were numbered — though independence would not arrive for more than a decade after World War II, an interval wracked by the bloody Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. A trip through the postal history of transition in the 1960s was a bumpy ride as territories gained sovereignty, changed their names, in

some cases changed borders to create new nations and new conflicts. Stamps kept coming out, but a great bureaucratic catastrophe loomed. Turns out the imperialists had failed to raise up indigenous leaders and train cadres of disciplined civil servants. The British departed abruptly, chased out after a century of denying Blacks the kind of education and experience needed for the job ahead.

The emancipation of Black South Africans was achieved only in 1994, decades after the empowerment of majority Black populations elsewhere across the continent. South Africans had more than 30 years to study the example of their neighbors, learn from their mistakes and adopt best practices to build a multiracial, democratic state. Today, three more decades since 1994, lessons remain ignored or unlearned — not just in South Africa, but throughout former imperial territories. Stamps can be a guide, a beacon, an absorbing

diversion or a damning witness. This historical review provides continuous evidence of social organization — stamps! Alas, there is precious little evidence backing up the civic aspirations those stamps expressed.

This journey ends where it began, at Cape of Good Hope, the spur in the heel of the continent that greeted Dutch navigator Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, not long after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock; that was visited by Portugal's Bartolomeu Dias in 1487, five years before Columbus reached North America. The journey of Empire was long, officially ending more than 60 years ago. The stamps of Empire gave way to stamps promoting sovereignty. The dreams inspired by the end of imperialism still seem distressingly out of reach. Why? Surely there are clues amid the stamps and stories in these pages that can point a better way forward. **END**

THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES

