

PAQUEBOT MAIL By R. M. Hosking



Fig. 1: British Sea Post Office mark of 1907. Fig. 2: American Sea Post Office mark of 1914, on board French ship (joint service). Fig. 3: Albany (Western Australia) paquebot mark, on 1913 card from British ship. Fig. 4: Cristobal (C.Z.) "PACQUEBOT" mark (note incorrect spelling) on 1924 cover from British ship. Fig. 5: 1935 Amsterdam paquebot on cover from Trinidad.

(i) Paquebot or Seapost ?

IT is a commonplace that the plethora of stamp issues from an ever-growing number of revenue-conscious stamp-issuing postal authorities has produced a steady flow of refugees from "stamps" (pure or impure) into every by-way of postal history. The collection of paquebot covers, i.e. mail posted on board ship on the high seas, has shared in this enthusiasm, and prices have hardened perceptibly in the last two or three years. It may, therefore, be useful to consider the origins and purpose of the paquebot system, and to explain some of its most interesting results.

The whole concept of paquebot mail is, and always has been, surrounded by a good deal of confusion in both postal and philatelic circles. It is based on the theory that a merchant ship on the high seas is sovereign national territory of the country whose flag she flies (an apt analogy is an embassy) and that, therefore, mail posted on board ship in international waters is entitled to be franked with stamps of, and in accordance with the postal rates of, the country of the ship's registry.

Naturally enough, when a ship reaches port and mail posted by passengers or crewmen is handed over to the local postal authority, a "used abroad" situation arises.

The procedures to be followed were foreseen, and laid down by the 1893 U.P.U. Congress, and have been regularly up-dated since, the last occasion being at Tokyo in 1969. The actual words of the relevant clause of the Convention are (Article 140, paragraph 6):—

"The stamping of items posted on ships rests with the postal official or the officer on board charged with the duty or, failing those, with the post office at the port of call to which these items are handed over 'à découvert'. In that case, the office impresses the correspondence with its date-stamp and adds the indication 'Navire', 'Paquebot' or any other similar note."

In this context "stamping" means in effect "cancelling": and the important distinction is made between the situation where there is a postal official on board, and where there is not. Strictly speaking, the former is not relevant to paquebot mail but to seaposts.

Examples of British and American Seapost cancels are

shown in Figs. 1 and 2. These cancellations would have been applied by an official postal clerk on board ship, and the mail would have been handed over to the post office at the port of arrival in a sealed bag. Paquebot mail, however (Figs. 3 and 4), would have been handed over to the Post Office by a ship's officer, uncanceled and "loose", i.e. "à découvert".

After this bare statement of the basic policies and procedures, we can look at some of the ramifications of the paquebot system.

(ii) Territorial Waters

IT was never intended that mail posted on board ship, other than on the high seas, should be entitled to be prepaid by stamps of the ship's nationality. The U.P.U. Convention (Article 21) specifically provides that:—

"Items posted on board ship during the stay at the two terminal points of the voyage or at any intermediate port of call must be prepaid by means of postage stamps and according to the tariff of the Country in whose waters the ship is lying."

Today, this provision is not particularly important for the collector, since any such mail will probably be accorded onward transmission by air from the port of call concerned. But it should be remembered that when the provision was first introduced, there was no such thing as airmail. Indeed, up to the 1939-45 war airmail services were both exceptional and expensive. Many island communities relied entirely on surface mail for their communications with the outside world, particularly in the West Indies, the Pacific and the Far East. As an aid to such communication, it was the normal thing for free access to be allowed to the ship's posting box while a ship was in port, the mail then being taken to the ship's next major port of call, where international surface mail connections would be obtainable.

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Fig. 6: Boston machine-type paquebot and Canadian National Steamships cachet on 1938 cover from Montserrat.
 Fig. 7: U.S. Trans Pacific Seapost No. 5 cancel on 1925 cover from Hong Kong.
 Fig. 8: American Sea Post Office mark of 1915, on G.B. stamp, with explanatory paquebot mark.

Fig. 9: Harrison Line Cachet on 1938 cover from St. Lucia, showing also Plymouth, Devon, paquebot cancel.
 Fig. 10: Royal Mail Steam Packet Company cachet used wrongly to cancel stamp on 1905 card showing, also, Plymouth-to-Bristol Railway T.P.O.
 Fig. 11: A 1938 cover from Australia with Tulagi (B.S.I.) paquebot and c.d.s.

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To this sub-variation of the paquebot procedure, we owe many of our most colourful paquebot covers. Without it paquebot mail would have been franked almost exclusively with the stamps of the major mercantile nations—Great Britain, Holland, Norway, Germany, France and U.S.A. But as things are, the possible combinations of stamps and cancellations are both fascinating and extensive (see Figs. 5 and 6 for examples).

Incidentally, it should not be inferred that paquebot markings of a particular country are *never* found cancelling stamps of that same country. In certain parts of the world (e.g. Great Britain) this is quite a common practice—and indeed a sensible one, since the secondary function of a paquebot mark is to explain delay between the mailing of a letter and its entry into the regular postal system.

The "territorial waters" clause had its effect on official sea post offices as well, and explains why their cancellations are to be found on stamps of other countries (Fig. 7). Official unease about this procedure led to the introduction on a few American, New Zealand and Japanese seapost services of paquebot marks (Fig. 8). These were the only official paquebot marks ever to be applied actually on board ship, though there have, of course, been numerous ships' cachets both official and (in more recent years) unofficial. These were never intended to cancel postage stamps on high seas mail (Fig. 9) but they were occasionally (and wrongly) used for this purpose (Fig. 10).

(iii) Different types of marking

AS already explained, the paquebot system remains largely unaltered today from when it was originally introduced 80 years ago. Its principal uses now are cruise-ship mail, and crew mail from cargo ships: British aerogrammes are by far the cheapest method of communicating with home from anywhere in the world—provided, of course, that you are on the high seas!

Two main types of paquebot cancel are in use. The first, and by far the most usual, is a simple, straight-line, separate STAMP COLLECTING, October 31st, 1974

hand-stamp (Fig. 11). The letters may be of any size or type-face, and may or may not have a frame round them. From the collector's point of view, this type has the disadvantage that, unless accompanied by an ordinary date-stamp of the office concerned, it may not be readily identifiable with a particular place. Normally, of course, it will be so accompanied, but earlier generations of collectors have prised many worthless stamps from what would have been priceless covers.

The second main type of paquebot cancel is a proper date-stamp (Fig. 12) or machine die which includes the name of the town. These tend to be made of steel, and are, therefore, less easily worn out/lost/mislaid/thrown away than the straight-line type and are usually (not always) used over a longer period as a result.

Then there are the paquebot equivalents—some of them in fairly general use, other highly idiosyncratic. Many are anglicisation or corruptions of the word "paquebot" e.g.

- PACKET BOAT (New Zealand and the Pacific) (Fig. 13)
- PAQUEBOAT (Hawaii)
- PAQUETE-BOTE (Philippines)
- PAQUETE (Portuguese territories)
- PAQUET (Gambia)
- PACKET (Bahamas)
- PAGUEBOT (New Orleans)

and many other mis-spellings too numerous to itemise, but including a PACQUEBOT from Folkestone in 1968.

Equivalent markings are SHIP LETTER (Fig. 14), SHIP, and NAVIRE (which may turn up anywhere) and the following localised items:—

- LOOSE SHIP LETTER (Australia) (Fig. 15)
- LOOSE LETTER (New Zealand)
- FROM STEAMER BOX (S.E. Asia)
- STEAMBOAT (U.S.A. and Puerto Rico)
- SHIP MAIL (U.S.A. and Bahamas)
- POSTED ON BOARD (Barbados)
- POSTED ON BOARD SHIP (Dominica)
- POSTED ON STEAMER (Freetown, Sierra Leone)

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Fig. 16: "Skeppsbrief" (paquebot equivalent) mark of Helsinki on 1936 cover from England.
Fig. 17: Dunkirk straight-line town mark used as paquebot equivalent on 1936 cover from British ship.

Fig. 18: Unrecorded type of paquebot from Monte Carlo, 1930.
Fig. 19: Unrecorded type of paquebot mark from Moji, Japan (1914).

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no longer pertains: alsatians are no longer kept, but treasures no longer come cheap. In fact, trash does not come cheap either, since paquebot covers, however common and trivial, are now "known" to be something special.

Should a collector try to service his own paquebot covers? I see nothing reprehensible in this at all: where would we be without the servicing activities of several well-known collectors in the inter-war period? But servicing is not simple: it is very time-consuming and very expensive. True, some of the traumas disappear if you are a personal friend of a passenger or crewman. But if you plan to write "cold" to the Purser, be prepared for a failure rate of 80%. (N.B.—For ships sailing under the convenience flags of Greece, Panama, and Liberia, the failure rate is unconditionally guaranteed at 100%!)

Since paquebot covers from philatelic mailings are difficult to achieve, it is sensible to ensure that any successful covers look reasonably respectable, and for this purpose addresses should be hand-written (not rubber-stamped), envelopes should be of reasonable quality, and franking should be by means of the correct postage rate in definitive (not commemorative) stamps. These should be as few in

number and as light in colour as possible (to show up the cancellation). Adherence to these few simple precepts will add greatly to the attractiveness of any "home-made" paquebot collection.

Finally, what about values? As already indicated, prices of paquebot material have been revised substantially upwards in the last few years. In many cases (but not all) this has been quite justified. There are still many collectors to whom a 20th century cover is modern (= unworthy of consideration). This is a perverse view: many cancellations of the later period are very rare indeed, because envelopes tended to be thrown away, whereas in the earlier period the cover was kept because it was part of the entire letter, with the result that a good deal of earlier material has been preserved. Figs. 18 and 19 show items in my own collection of which I have never seen another copy, nor even seen recorded—yet they should exist in reasonable quantity. And then there are other paquebot marks, duly recorded, which in the course of 20 years of active collecting I have never seen, let alone acquired.

So the problems are there, and the challenges, and the rewards—all the things that make for an exciting philatelic interest.