

# The 'PAQUEBOT' CACHETS of BRITISH BORNEO

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Having been asked to chair the discussion group on this subject at the Annual Meeting I very quickly realised during the animated discussion which ensued, and the material which was being produced, that far from answering any questions, we were merely asking many more. I have, however, during the dark reaches of the night — or rather early morning (4.30 a.m.), when I usually consider such matters — already come to a probably controversial conclusion, which I think may go a long way to answering most of our questions. It all arises from Articles 51 and 132 (6) of the Universal Postal Union, 1897 regulations, which, for the benefit of those who do not have access to a copy, are as follows:—

- *Article 51 — Correspondence posted aboard ships, in a box or handed to an office of a vessel, may be prepaid by means of postage stamps, and according to the postage rate of that country to which the said vessel belongs to or by which it is maintained. If the posting on board takes place during the stay of the vessel in any of the ports of call, the prepayment is valid if effected by means of postage stamps, and according to the postal rates of the country in whose waters the vessel happens to be.*
- *Article 132 (6) — governs the use of Paquebot cancellations and reads:— The postmarking of correspondence posted aboard ships is incumbent upon the officer aboard in charge of the service, or in his absence, upon the post office at the port of call where such correspondence is delivered in open (loose-letter) mail. In such case the post office strikes the article with its datestamp and places on it the note*

*'Navire' (ship), 'Paquebot' (mail steamer) or a similar notation.*

Both the above Articles are sufficiently vague to allow a fairly liberal interpretation. Dealing first with Article 51 — mail posted on board a vessel of any nationality sailing from Singapore to Sarawak's 5th Division, via Labuan and Brunei, could use the stamps of any of the countries at which it entered port — Straits Settlements, Labuan, Brunei, North Borneo or Sarawak, and of course, if the vessel was registered elsewhere in the world, of that country as well. This, I think, is quite clear. The same would apply to the return journey. This also, I believe, lends substance to an earlier proposal of mine that Brunei or Labuan stamps with Brooketon cancels, or Straits Settlements stamps with Lawas cancels were also part of the Paquebot process.

Article 132 (6), I believe, answers most of our questions "...the officer on board in charge of the service..." is not definitive. On an ocean-going mail ship this would probably be the Purser, and the handling of mail would undoubtedly be included in his job description. The relatively small vessels travelling from Singapore to British Borneo, or up and down the Sarawak coast from Kuching to Lawas, certainly would not have such a person and the onus rested upon the Master, who could of course delegate it, but still retain responsibility. This is confirmed by the various edicts from the Sarawak Government requiring Masters to deliver any mail in their charge to an Officer of the Post Office on arrival at their port of destination. The main pre-war reference to this is Post Office Order P – 5 (Post Office) 1930, Sections 39 (i) and (ii). There are earlier and later ones.

Mail on the Kuching to Singapore run was, by the 1920's and 30's fairly regular and carried on a limited number of vessels. The Masters of these vessels would fully understand the procedures and would hand in the mail posted on board to the Post Office, probably bagged, [??— Ed] where it would receive the appropriate Paquebot c.d.s., or c.d.s. plus Paquebot cachet.

The other general, but not always regular (!) service was that of the coastal steamers

which trundled up and down the coast of British Borneo from Kuching to Miri, Baram, Labuan, Brunei or Brooketon, or those from Singapore to the eastern states of British Borneo. Some of these had scheduled ports of call, but even these could be, and often were, altered. Rather than issue a Paquebot cachet to each of these outstations I propose that the cachets were issued to those vessels on the regular service — quite possibly those authorised to carry registered mail — and the 'Officer in charge' would stamp the mail prior to arrival at the port of destination. There would be nothing unlawful about him doing this, and it would be little different from the ship-marks that were brought into use after WWII, and appear to have superseded the Paquebot cachets. It appears to me highly probable that the ship marks were deliberately introduced to replace the Paquebots because they had the advantage of indicating the name of the mail vessel, which the Paquebots did not. There were, of course, many small sailing and trading vessels which also carried mail, but not on a regular basis. These would not be involved with Paquebot marks simply because the mail was handed to them already bagged by the postal authorities, and in any case, such few passengers as they carried were probably only semiliterate, and certainly very unlikely to be writing letters during the voyage.

I suggest that this readily solves the problem of attribution, and explains why there appear to be the same cachets used by, for instance, Kuching, Simanggang and Sibul, as shown in Hoskins. It also accounts for Paquebot cachets appearing on mail arriving at, say, Simunjan, which might have only one or two such items in a year. The second part of the requirement of Article 132 (6), that of applying the date stamp, could of course be easily carried out by the postal clerk at the arrival port, which was the normal practice for much incoming mail. In most cases this will be on the stamp if the Paquebot is elsewhere on the cover.

If, however, the office on board ship has placed the Paquebot on the stamp, then the clerk on arrival will probably use the c.d.s. as an arrival mark, often placing it on the back of the cover.

During the discussion group Frank Rivett stated that a friend had told him that Paquebot cachets had been distributed to 39 (?) outstations in Sarawak. With no disrespect to Frank, his friend manifestly must have been talking nonsense. I can't imagine a clerk at Belaga sitting in his workplace and solemnly applying a Paquebot cachet to a letter that had been brought up through the rapids from Kapit by an Iban in a dug-out canoe! In any case, it would already have a Kapit c.d.s. on it. The Rajah kept an all-seeing eye on the Postal Service and I cannot conceive that he would have permitted such a state of affairs, it savours more of the sort of arrant stupidity that we in Britain now get from Brussels!

There may be someone still alive who was involved in shipping in the Borneo area pre-WWII, although he will be well into his 80s if he exists, who can confirm or deny my theory. Anyway, I rest my case, and will be very glad of any comment or material either in support of it or proving it wrong, since it is only a hypothesis. The only thing to do now is to try and attribute the different cachets to the various vessels! ■