

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Eleven: Prodding the Bear

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Image courtesy Paul Ward (CoolAntarctica.com)

If any of our readers were born in the 1970s (or, Heaven forbid, more recently!), they may be unfamiliar with the *Islas Malvinas*. For those with longer memories, I expect the reference will conjure up memories of the military operation known in British circles as the Falklands War. For ten weeks in 1982, the full imperial might of Great Britain was mobilised against an under-powered Argentina that sought to wrest control from Britain of the Falklands, called by them the *Malvinas Islands*.

By the 1980s, England's empire was much diminished. About all that was left was a tenuous and ultimately doomed claw-hold on Hong Kong, and an assortment of rocks, such as Gibraltar, Tristan da Cunha, the Chagos Archipelago, St Helena and the Falklands.

Of course, when you are down to your last few islands, you fight like a wounded mother bear to retain possession of them. And that is what Britain did in the Falklands.

The Falklands, or *Malvinas* (which is actually derived from the French '*Isles Malouines*', the name given to the group by Louis Antoine de Bougainville in 1764) have had an interesting history. In short, French and British settlements coexisted without either being aware of the other's existence! (You cannot make this stuff up!) In 1766, France ceded possession to Spain which, four years later, finally found the British outpost which, of course, it took by force. Britain, naturally, kicked up a fuss, successfully demanding the return of "their" territory but, only three years later, they withdrew voluntarily. In legal jargon, they 'abandoned' their claim to the Falklands.

By 1811, the Spanish had also pulled out, giving us all a sense of in how little regard the Falklands/*Malvinas* were really held. In 1816, Buenos Aires (then a separate state) lay claim to Spain's territories in the South Atlantic and, in 1823, granted a German-Spanish merchant the rights to re-occupy the former Spanish settlement.

Things went swimmingly for a few years until an American whaling captain declared the dissolution of the Islands' government! Then, in 1832 Britain, recognising the jewel it had lost, bowled back in and re-asserted its sovereignty. The Argentine Confederation promptly lodged a protest with London, insisting that its historical claim and the geographical proximity of the islands (only 600km east of the Argentine mainland, compared to 13,000km south of England and, by the way, only a stone's throw from the Antarctic continent) meant that they were the rightful owners.

Britain demurred and, ever since then, Argentina has deflected the attention of its people from economic disaster, social upheaval, coups and chaos by regularly reminding the world that Big Bad England stole the *Malvinas/Falklands* from Poor Little Argentina.

Tensions increased during the 1950s when a chap named Juan Peron, (yes, the husband of Evita), started making some serious noise about the issue. Then, in 1966, a group called 'Condor' decided to support Argentina's claim by hijacking an internal flight with 26 passengers on board. The pilot was told to fly to the *Malvinas* where, because there was no airport, the plane crashed on the racecourse, probably for sheep, not racehorses. (Do not laugh: this is serious stuff.)

At about this time, Britain actually negotiated for the return of the islands to Argentina. But they had not reckoned on the recalcitrance of the local fisher folk and seaweed gatherers (known somewhat derogatorily as 'kelpers'), who insisted they were British, and wished to remain British.

The cost of retaining the Falklands was now more important to Britain than any sovereignty issue so the Great Belt-Tightener, Margaret Thatcher, tried to give the islands, and the associated costs, to Argentina but was encouraged by the ultra-conservative elements in her party to change her mind.

Fed up with this nonsense, Argentina sent a small force to the Malvinas...and it was on for young and old. The fracas resulted in the deaths of 255 British and 649 Argentine military personnel, and three unfortunate islanders, and was all over in less than three months. To save face, the British then invested millions in upgrading infrastructure and stationing a large garrison of troops in the Falklands. Major employment opportunities were created for the locals to clear the extensive minefields that had been laid by the Argentinians.

All very interesting, you say, but what has it got to do with postal history? I am glad you asked, because it has given me the opportunity to move on to My Favourite Thing for this quarter.



In 1927 somebody, probably a relative of the addressee, sent a letter to “GI Turner Esq/Port Stanley/Falkland Islands”. Franked with a boring KGV 1½d scarlet, tied by a carelessly applied datestamp of 23JE27, apparently at Newcastle (NSW), it was just another fairly innocuous Empire rate cover. Apart from the destination!

According to the most recent census, the population in the Falklands is just over 3,600. That is twice the number of 1,854 people registered in 1980. Interestingly, the average population between 1921 and 1931 was approximately 2,200. (In the global population rankings, the Falkland Islands has consistently come in at number 232.)

Although the area of the islands is more than 12,000 square-kilometres, about half the size of Wales, there is a heavy concentration in the capital, Port Stanley, and the neighbouring area. As in all small towns, “everybody knows everybody”. But, back in 1927, it seems that “nobody” knew Mr GI Turner, so the envelope was stamped on the face ‘INSUFFICIENT ADDRESS’. (I cannot be sure that this handstamp was applied at Stanley because it is not recorded by Ted Proud [1] or Stefan Heijtz [2]. But, it can hardly have been applied anywhere else.)



Now it starts to get interesting. When we flip the cover over, we find a lengthy endorsement in Spanish that, roughly translated, begins “Return to sender...” and ends “Islas Malvinas”, with the date “Sep 13 1927”. This provides some enlightenment regarding the roneo’d label affixed to the face that advises “Devuelta al Rte, por Orden Superior”.

The American dealer who sold me this cover thought the ‘Orden Superior’ was a ship, presumably a BIG ship. In fact, the label is a précis of the endorsement on the flap and translates as “Return to Sender, by Higher Order”. Note the abbreviation “Rte” is not for “route” but “Remitante” or Remitter = Sender.

I have other mail to the Falklands that was sent via Uruguay, presumably to avoid irritating the Argentinians. However, for whatever reason, this cover was routed back through Argentina and the nature of the roneo’d label suggests that this was a fairly routine occurrence.

Considering the historic spat between Britain and Argentina, it is perhaps surprising that the Argentine propaganda on the cover is so muted, limited just to the “Islas Malvinas” reference. Note that the label is tied by the ‘BUENOS AIRES/SEP12/1927/ EXTERIOR’ cds that was applied to foreign mails as a matter of course.

One would expect that after being released by the Argentine Post Office the cover would be returned, if not to Newcastle, at least to Sydney. But the reverse shows that it was received at Adelaide, on 14NO27. That is odd. There are no further markings, but there is an indication that the cover did get back to the original sender.

The envelope was opened quite unceremoniously, inflicting a lengthy tear across the reverse, fortunately clear of both the manuscript endorsement and the Adelaide datestamp. This is not the work of a postal clerk but of the final recipient who was too keen to learn what might have happened to his epistle during its five-month return-journey.

I expect that, in Adelaide, the flap was unsealed and the sender’s details obtained. The cover was resealed and was probably then forwarded in an OHMS ‘RETURNED LETTER’ envelope, which would explain why there is no readdressing on the face.

This is not one of the prettiest covers in my collection, nor one of the most valuable, but the story behind it is fascinating, and it has a certain charm. I am pleased to have the opportunity to share it with you because, despite its quality issues, it is one of My Favourite Things.

References

- [1] Edward Proud, *The Postal History of the Falkland Islands and Dependencies*, Heathfield (E. Sussex): Proud-Bailey Co Ltd, 2006.
- [2] Stefan Heijtz, *Specialised Stamp Catalogue of the Falkland Islands and Dependencies...* (Fifth Edition), Stockholm: The Author, 2006.