

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Fifteen: Into Deepest, Darkest, Africa

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In my never-ending pursuit of mail from Australia to unusual destinations, I have found that the most challenging regions are Central Asia and the non-British Colonies in Africa. For my period – from Federation to Decimal Currency, a span of 6½ decades – I still have nothing to Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia or any of the areas north of the Himalayas that were part of the Russian Empire, later the USSR.

My 'missing' African destinations comprise a distressingly long list including Burundi, Basutoland, Chad, Mauritania, Spanish Morocco, Fernando Po, Angola, Ubangi-Shari, on and on. (You may be surprised that Gabon is excluded: that is because it was the acquisition of a 1922 2d-rate postcard to Gabon, that none of my clients appreciated or wanted, that got me started on this sometimes-tortuous but always exhilarating global journey of discovery.)

Fortunately, very occasionally, I have the opportunity to cross a destination off my list. And I do not care if it is a standard 2½d rate envelope or a 1½d rate postcard, or even a 1960s surface-mail cover. If it is to a destination on my hit list, I will pursue it. In such situations, I might even compromise on quality, knowing that the opportunity to upgrade the piece may never come along.

Of course, the ideal acquisition is a cover that is in superb condition; that has a non-standard franking; that is registered and/or taxed; that bears evidence of the route traversed; and that is to an exotic destination. The featured item on this occasion ticks all but the first of those boxes, which is not to say that it is obviously defective but only that a previous owner did open it out for display.



This is a cover that causes the senses to reel! It is a visual feast of colour, combining stamps of two countries with registration

and postage due elements, and the destination could hardly be more remote: a town in the hinterland of one of the lesser-known French colonies in the heart of Africa.

The sender clearly was not a French-speaker. He uses "Sr" (the Spanish Señor) instead of the French "M" (Monsieur), and renders "Moyen" (Middle) as "Moyan". As for "Batéhis Al...", neither my Collins 'French Dictionary & Grammar', nor the best efforts of Google and Wikipedia, could provide a translation of this or the several alternative spellings with which I experimented.

What can be deduced is that the letter was sent to Mr FA Clémentz (an unlikely, but legitimate, French surname), who was Commissioner(?) of the Civil Administration at Gamboma, in the Middle Congo, which was part of French Equatorial Africa. This is the region that, upon attaining independence, became the Republic of the Congo, not to be confused with the much larger former Belgian Congo, today known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Despite the unfortunate Mobutu connotations, why did they not stick with Zaire?)



Reproduced from *The World-Wide Atlas of Modern Geography, Eighth Edition*, W. & A.K. Johnston Ltd., Edinburgh & London, 1916. (Extract from Plate No 80, Central Africa (West)). [Note: Bolobo is a little downstream from Makotimpoko (not shown on this map).]

In 1880, the French established a protectorate on the northern banks of the Congo River. Two years later, the territory was officially proclaimed as the French Congo. By 1891, its borders included Gabon, Chad and Ubangi-Chari. In 1904, the four territories became separate colonies. Only six years later, they were reunited into French Equatorial Africa. In 1958, the FEA confederation was dissolved and the four constituent territories became autonomous republics within the French Community, Ubangi-Shari being renamed the Central African Republic. [1]

If that has got your head spinning, consider the implications for me the collector. I have this great cover, but it represents only one of those geo-political comings and goings. Can I hope to ever cross off all the possible permutations? Enough of the self-pity. Onwards and upwards.

Obviously, it was not all plain-sailing for the envelope. It started off at Ballarat (by pure coincidence the town of my birth), where the King George V 2d orange and 4d violet (a scarce stamp on cover) were affixed and tied by the #2 datestamp of 14NO21. The early red/white registration label was affixed but the counter-clerk failed to recognise the underpayment of one penny. Or did he? [2]

In his invaluable series in *The Australian Philatelist*, Richard Breckon gave 1 October 1920 as the date on which the foreign letter rate was raised to 4d for the first ounce + 2d for each successive ounce [3]. On that basis, this item is clearly underpaid, the registration fee throughout being 3d.

However, subsequent research, also by Richard Breckon, has required a revision of this information. In fact, on 1 October 1920, the foreign rate moved from 2½d plus ½d War Tax, to 3d per half-ounce. The 4d rate, for an *ounce*, came into effect only on 1 January 1922. [4] Thus, on 14 November 1921, the postage paid at Ballarat was correct, 3d plus 3d registration. However, by the time the cover arrived at its destination, the rate had increased to 4d plus 3d.

This should not have mattered. However, the French colonial postmaster, having probably just absorbed the latest rate intricacies from the Universal Postal Union and being desperate to impress his superiors, perhaps in the hope of a promotion to some great African metropolis such as Ouagadougou or Nouakchott, determined that the cover was short-paid 1d. What a guy!

That penny would normally have converted to 20c postage due. However, the 1920 UPU Convention of Madrid that permitted the higher postage rate from Australia also introduced a *minimum amount of postage due of 15 centimes*. The postmaster assessed the deficiency at a notional 1½d = 15c (not the actual 1d = 10c), which he then doubled to arrive at the figure of 30c due. [4]

Thus, Middle Congo's finest endorsed the face of the envelope "Taxe" in green and "0.30" in red pencil; affixed two imperforate 15c Postage Due stamps; and cancelled them with both his 'T'-in-inverted-triangle tax handstamp and the 'GAMBOMA' cds of 9/FEVR/22 (which you will note still bears the inscription 'MOYEN CONGO' at the base).

However, as is often the case with those of an officious bent, he got it wrong. The new regulation advised of a minimum amount payable for postage due of 15c. It did not stipulate that 15c was the minimum amount to be *doubled*. The correct approach was to take the imagined deficiency of 1d = 10c, *double that amount*, and arrive at the charge due of 20c which, of course, is more than the minimum 15c.

[As an aside, the superb 'C' handstamp is also almost certainly a French marking, probably an abbreviation for 'CHARGÉ' (= to be taxed).]

We now know what happened at the outset, and at the end of the journey. But how the cover got from Australia to Deepest, Darkest Africa is quite a saga in itself.



In this period, there were two principal west-bound shipping routes from Australia. The standard route was via Ceylon and Aden, through the Suez Canal, and onwards to Europe and England (with most mail for the Old Country off-loaded at Marseilles and railed across France).

The other route was across the Indian Ocean to Durban in South Africa, onwards to Cape Town and then around West Africa to England. As a registered article, it is very surprising that no transit mark was applied in South Africa. However, I am confident that the cover was offloaded at Cape Town, from where it was sent north by a coastal steamer. The nationality of that ship is unknown but it definitely stopped in Angola, which might suggest it was of Portuguese origin.

Apart from an amazing postcard to the Cabinda Enclave [6], I do not have any mail addressed to Angola. For the time being, this cover will need to do double-duty! The 'PROVINCIA DE ANGOLA/LOANDA' datestamp is very unusual in having the datewheels 21JAN1922 superimposed across a large 'R' for registration or, in Portuguese, "registrado". This reveals a transit time, just to this intermediate point, of 68 days, or more than 11 weeks. Apparently, one could obtain passage on a slow boat to destinations other than China! [7]

From Luanda, it is likely that another coastal steamer took the letter north to the Congo River and upstream to 'MATADI', in Belgian territory, where it was backstamped on 30.1.22. Presumably, this was an established route because otherwise we might have expected the ship to offload mail for the French Congo at their own port at Pointe-Noire, about 150km further north from the mouth of the Congo River.

In fact, the next port of call was ‘MAKOTIMPOKO/MOYEN-CONGO’, where the cover was backstamped on 6/FEVR/22. This suggests that from Matadi, a river boat was used. However, while the river is navigable for some 1,700km from Kinshasa to Kisangani, deep in the country’s interior, the lower reaches, including 32 cataracts and the impressive Inga Falls, are impassable by boat. What this means is that the cover must have gone by land from Matadi at least to Kinshasa and only from there by boat to Makotimpoko, from where it is only 50km WNW to Gamboma. However, it still took three days to travel that last 50km.

Modern maps show that Gamboma is on Highway 2 that runs from the capital Brazzaville (across the Congo River from Kinshasa) north to Ouesso on the border with Cameroun. Back in 1922, if there was a road at all, it was likely of poor quality. The 50km from the river to Gamboma was probably a jungle trek but still less fraught with danger and disruption than the overland route.

What is clear is that Gamboma was a difficult place to reach in the years after World War I. The total time in transit for our subject cover was 87 days, just shy of three months. That is how long it took a sailing ship to travel from Australia to England in the 1840s. By the 1920s, that journey by steamship had been reduced to about one month. So, in the time it took our cover to arrive in the heart of Africa, a ship’s passenger could have gone from Melbourne to England, returned home, and travelled once more to Blighty.

I am grateful that the cover was registered, otherwise it would probably have had no transit or arrival markings unless, of course, it had also been underpaid.

I do hope you have enjoyed coming on this epic journey with me. There are obviously some known unknowns and perhaps some unknown unknowns that would contribute to the story. If you can fill-in any of the gaps in the narrative, I would welcome you contacting me by email to gary@abacusauctions.com.au

Early Registration Labels in Australia: - Western Australia: Part 3

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The first two articles on Western Australian labels covered the Experimental Labels, which appeared up to and around 1915. From that year, give or take a year or so, labels appear to have been printed in sheets of 25 as the preferred format, and the code “R.6.” was added above the top frame line¹. It was a very complex period up to the appearance of Commonwealth labels in 1925 and, in fact, a little beyond, as the last labels appeared in 1927, but these would seem to have been an emergency issue. Exact dates of appearance are difficult to establish because of the scarcity of covers.

To make this article reasonably easy to follow, I will set out descriptions of the following groups:

Group 1: **R.6.** and **Index 867** above top frame line
– **W12, W13** and **W14**.

Group 2: **R.6.** and **Index 866** above top frame line
– **W15, W16** to **W19**.

Group 3: Same as 2. Different design features
– **W20** to **W22**.

Groups 4, 5 & 6, and 7, 8 & 9, will be described in later issues of *PfA*. I have used the terminology “groups” rather than “plates” as described by Pope⁴. This is an arrangement of mine only in an effort to fit known facts. It is quite certain some “groups” will have more than one “plate”. One unbroken sheet does exist, but it is only one of the many printing arrangements. Earliest Recorded Dates (ERD) and cover dates are by no means indicative of the real dates of appearance.

The First Group to appear were **W12, W13** and **W14**. They were the first to feature the “**R.6.**” code and were also inscribed “**Index 867**”, related to the Post Offices Stores filing number of labels before distribution to individual post offices. ERD was 15 January 1919, but they probably first appeared some years before.



14 April 1919: W12a on domestic cover. The addressee Mr George Arthur of North Fremantle was obviously hard to find. Registered on despatch and re-registered on return to the Perth Office of Titles. Also interesting – the envelope was manufactured using scrapped Pay Office records, visible inside, being a wartime savings measure.

Label type **W12** had two subtypes depending on numeral fonts. **W13** was from Perth only minus the line under the post office name, and **W14** is illustrated nearby.