

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Nineteen: A South Seas Disaster

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Nauru is a remote and diminutive speck of only 21 square kilometres perched right on the equator in the middle of nowhere [1]. Its claim to fame was the presence of prodigious quantities of bird droppings, or guano. Over time, the guano solidified into phosphate rock, from which fertilizer could be made. If not for the avian dung, Nauru is unlikely to have a more distinguished history than any number of non-phosphate-endowed outcrops in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

The first European occupation was by Germany which, in 1888, annexed Nauru to their colony of the Marshall Islands [2]. Phosphate was not on their radar but expansion of their overseas empire certainly was. The magically transformed bird poop deposits were discovered in 1900. They were found to cover more than 80% of Nauru's landmass. Six years later, the German authorities granted a mining concession to the Pacific Phosphate Company [3].

When World War I erupted in August 1914. Britain was allied with Japan, whose navy made a beeline for Germany's Pacific territories, occupying the Caroline, Mariana and Marshall Islands – with one exception. Despite being stationed almost 1700km WSW of Nauru, an Australian force from occupied German New Guinea got to Nauru first, where they claimed the island for Great Britain. Nauru was so far removed from the other Marshall Islands that Japan was apparently unfussed about the situation, and probably already at the practical limits of its ability to occupy additional territory [4].

Immediately after the war ended on 11 November 1918, the victorious allies set to divvying-up Germany's territories. The Aussies stayed on Nauru and, in 1923, were granted a League of Nations mandate over the island. Nauru effectively became

an external territory of Australia in 1947, then blundered towards independence in 1968, becoming the world's smallest independent nation.

The British Phosphate Commission (BPC) was created in 1919 by the Mother Country, New Zealand and Australia to exploit Nauru. Almost beyond belief is the fact that the new company paid more than £3,500,000 for the assets of the Pacific Phosphate Company! Not beyond belief is that the traditional owners of the land were paid a handsome royalty of ½d per ton [5].



View of the devastated Nauruan landscape caused by phosphate mining. Image courtesy of Philip Malsale, Climatologist, SPREP

The serious pillaging of Nauru began in earnest in 1921. Mining rock phosphate is an interesting activity. In short, the fossilised bird excrement is extracted from crevices in the coral that forms the host-island's foundations. What remains is an utterly useless and entirely uninhabitable landscape, such as might have been created in the frenetic mind of Arthur C Clarke or Isaac Asimov.



Enlargement of 10/- stamp



The SS Triona

The raiders' operations around Nauru were the most successful of the war. The Germans departed with 675 prisoners, allocated between *Orion* (265), *Komata* (153) and *Kulmerland* (257, including 52 women and six children). Steaming north, they made a brief stop at the almost unpronounceable Ailinglaplap [9] in the Marshalls. All three ships then headed for the remote New Guinean island of Emirau in the Bismarck Archipelago, arriving on 21 December.

A total of 514 of the 675 captives were disembarked at Emirau. 171 of them were islanders or of Chinese descent. The Germans left food for the 500+ people abandoned on Emirau. White planters on the island assisted them and got a message to Kavieng, 138km to the south-east. On 29 December, the castaways were all taken aboard the British passenger ship *Nellore*, and landed at Townsville on New Year's Day 1941.

However, the captain of *Orion* refused to release the European officers and crew in his charge, to prevent them from joining the Allied war effort. All of them, including 15 from *Triaster*, 11 from *Triadic* and 10 from *Triona*, ended up in Germany, where they remained as POWs for the duration of the war.

There are several readily available accounts of these events. What the standard historical texts do not mention is that some mail from the destroyed ships survived. One or more mailbags (I expect only one) from *Triona* had been transferred with the crew and passengers in mid-ocean. *Triona* was then despatched by a German torpedo. When *Orion* disgorged its human cargo at Emirau, the mailbag went with them.



The modest little cover shown here was posted at Melbourne in late-November 1940: the day is unclear. It is addressed to "Ocean Island/Central Pacific", east of Nauru, to which *Triona* was scheduled to head next. The addressee, John M Ross, was probably either an employee of the BPC, or the postmaster at Ocean Island. His name appears on many covers from the 1930s, and he was the closest thing the Gilbert & Ellice Islands had to a stamp dealer. The present item appears to be entirely non-philatelic, likely from a family member sending Christmas greetings.

The recovered mailbag would have been sent by rail from Townsville to Sydney, where the endorsement "Raider mail" was applied in red-pencil to explain the delay in delivering the cover. There is a Sydney backstamp of 23JA41. The cover was then re-sent to Ocean Island, where it received a partial arrival datestamp of 11MAR41, also on the reverse. John Ross was probably quite bemused. Because of wartime security measures, news of the Germans' successes at Nauru would have been kept under wraps, and arrival of the mail, three and a half months after the original despatch, may have been the first the islanders knew of the troubles.

The overall soiling and apparent water-stain at the base might be seen as detractors. However, they are an integral part of the story, providing physical evidence of the difficult circumstances that befell *Triona's* mail. At some point, the mailbag suffered at least partial immersion. This could have happened when *Triona* was attacked; during transfer to *Orion*; while unloading at Emirau; or during the eight days the former passengers were stranded on that island. It is improbable that it occurred after *Nellore* arrived at Emirau.



Our second cover, from a Sydney CBD post office, also bears witness to the same situation. It is more extensively soiled and more obviously affected by immersion in water. Although the 2d stamp for the Empire letter-rate postage remains affixed, the 3d stamp for the registration fee has been lost. Also missing is the Queen Victoria Buildings (QVB) registration label. Interestingly, the registration number of the article, "No 3565", is written where the label had been affixed. This information may have been recovered from Post Office records in Sydney. More likely is that the label was hanging by the proverbial thread and was discarded after the number was written on the envelope.

On this cover, the disruption endorsement reads "Sunk by raider/& recovered". Also in red pencil, it is however in a very different hand. This is attributable to the cover being processed through the Registration Section at the Sydney GPO, as proven by the datestamps inscribed 'RS' on the reverse.



The second GPO cds, of 23JA41, the same as on the ordinary cover, is problematic. It was probably applied when the mail from Townsville was received. However, it may indicate the date (possibly the same day?) that the covers were processed for re-sending to the Gilberts. Again, there is an Ocean Island arrival backstamp, of 12MAR41, or one day later than the unregistered cover. They were almost certainly in the same mail, the discrepancy again being due to the fact that the registered cover received special attention, its arrival needing to be officially recorded.

The two featured items are a complementary pair. Each confirms the travails of the other. The registered cover also provides almost conclusive evidence that it was re-forwarded in another article, in the nature of a Postmaster-General's Department "ambulance envelope". This would account for the lack of an endorsement regarding the missing stamp and the apparent short-payment.

We have no direct evidence as to who sent either cover. As noted above, the normal cover probably contained a Christmas epistle from a family member. As for the registered envelope, the 'QUEEN VICTORIA BUILDINGS' cds, and it being addressed "Postmaster", certainly suggest that one of Sydney's then numerous stamp dealers was the originator.



Serendipitously, this cover contains an enclosure, not the anticipated dealer's order for stamps, but a roneo'd receipt for a money order in the sum of £4 and advice that the requested stamps were accompanied by the receipt. It is almost certain that the ex-*Triona* cover was returned at the same time.

Not surprisingly, the philatelic trader is identified as "K Baker Esq/12 Royal Arcade/Sydney", which was located just across George Street from the QVB. The late Ken Baker was, for decades, the doyen of the Sydney stamp trade. In 1940, he was a relatively callow 28 years of age. He would go on to forge successful partnerships with Bernie Moloney, Leo Rose, and Kevin Duffy AO.

Famously, Ken also acted as agent for renowned collector, John Augustus Charles ('Jack') Kilfoyle, a wealthy pastoralist with major property interests in Western Australia [10]. Perhaps Ken's most audacious transaction occurred in 1948, when he acquired Thomas Field's wonderful collection of Australian essays, proofs and issued stamps intact. The collection had been consigned to Harmers of London. As soon as the Field catalogue arrived, Ken showed it to Jack Kilfoyle, who expressed the desire to buy the whole auction. Ken promptly despatched a telegram with an offer of £7,500 [11] which Cyril Harmer found irresistible [12].

Having myself been in the trade since 1979, I knew Ken Baker quite well and always enjoyed my interactions with him. I often engaged him as my agent for Sydney auctions. One day, Ken phoned to say, ruefully, that he had made a mistake with one of my bids and felt he could no longer provide good service. He was in his 90s. Ken continued trading until shortly before his death in 2016, at the age of 104.



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Remarkably, in an interview for the online forum Stampboards [13], Ken Baker specifically mentioned “his” *Triona* cover, saying: “Rod Perry recently showed me an envelope with my handwriting I posted to the post office in the Gilbert & Ellice Islands ordering £4 of current stamps...”! [14]

This connection between the subject of this column and one of the most important figures in Australian philately is, for me, a thick layer of icing on an already compelling cake. It only adds to why these two distressed items of “disaster mail” are among My Favourite Things.

References & notes

[1] Technically, Nauru is 40km south of the equator. An online article offers this hyperbole: “Nauru is as far from any place on earth”. See thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/dark-history-nauru. Google places Nauru as 13,887km (8,629 miles) from London. By contrast, Pitcairn Island is almost 500 miles more distant, coming in at 14,707km (9,139 miles) from London. You would not want to row to either place.

[2] Wikipedia says Nauru was annexed to German New Guinea. This is clearly wrong. The only stamps used on the island were inscribed ‘MARSHALL INSELN’ and the German-pattern datestamp was inscribed ‘NAURU/(MARSHALL-/INSELN)’.

[3] The Pacific Phosphate Company was formed in 1902 by a merger of South Pacific Co Ltd and the German entity Jaluit-Gesellschaft (= Jaluit Company).

[4] Nauru is 780km SSW of Jaluit, the principal atoll in the Marshalls Group. By contrast, it is “only” 305km west of Ocean Island (now known as Banaba), part of Kiribati (pronounced “kir-in-bahss”), formerly the Gilbert Islands.

[5] To understand the significance of this number, see my previous article in *Philately from Australia* of March 2024. To be fair, the royalty payment was soon tripled to 1½d per ton, but only after strong protestations from the island’s twelve chiefs. In 1927, it soared to 7½d per ton, still a pathetic pittance.

[6] The stamp illustration in Stanley Gibbons’ catalogue is titled “*Century (freighter)*”. This is highly improbable. *SS Century* was a collier, owned by Howard Smith Ltd. The ship on the stamp has the unusual and distinctive bow of the BPC vessels. The influential ‘The Ships List’ website lists two Howard Smith ships named *Century*, neither of which can have been the subject for the stamp. The first was built in 1906 and sold in 1926 to Greek interests. The second was built only in 1956.

[7] *Triaster*, *Triadic* and *Triona* were all operated by the BPC. *Vinni* was a Norwegian ship. *Komata* was Scottish-built but operated by Japan’s Miyachi Kisen KK.

[8] In 1726, Davy Jones first appeared in English literature in *The Four Years Voyages of Captain George Roberts* by Daniel Defoe. Davy Jones was the nemesis of seafarers. His “locker” was a metaphor for the abyss, to which drowned sailors and wrecked ships were consigned.

[9] My best effort at a phonetic rendering is “Ai-loonn-lap-lap”.

[10] Kilfoyle is one of very few philatelists to have an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, which reveals he was once convicted of theft of cattle and sentenced to two years in jail. On another occasion, he was sued for the quaint offence of “breach of promise”; he settled for £850.

[11] According to the Reserve Bank’s online calculator, £7,500 (\$15,000) would have been worth some \$519,000 in 2022 dollars (the latest data available online). Great good fortune for Kilfoyle; at best, a mediocre result for the family of Thomas Field.

[12] It may surprise you, dear reader, to know that such questionable behaviour on the part of the auction house was not a one-off occurrence. In Australia, the culturally important sporting collections of Olympian Shirley Strickland and Australian Football Hall of Fame Legend, Ron Barassi, were sold intact, even though the auction catalogues had been printed and distributed. I have no problem with people making opportunistic offers but I have a professional disdain for those who accept them.

[13] See stampboards.com/viewtopic.php?t=34641

[14] Ken went on to say “...a few pieces of sodden mail were recovered...” In *Australasian Wreck Mail* (2013) by our esteemed member Brian Peace, it is stated at page 303: “At least ten items have been recorded...three...are from the USA”. Five of them are then listed individually. Number 1 – which is illustrated – is the Ken Baker cover, and the only registered item recorded. Number 2 is the John Ross cover (which is illustrated in *Maritime Disaster Mail* (2003) by Norman Hoggarth & Robin Gwynn. Two other covers from Australia and one from London are listed. Incorporating Brian’s reference to three unlisted items from America – one of which was an overtly philatelic cover in Tony Eastgate’s collection – the census stands at only eight items: four from Australia; one from England; and three from the United States. Examples are therefore as scarce as the more highly-rated Matunga covers from World War I.