IS PHILATELY A BRANCH OF SOCIAL HISTORY?

© Michel Houde FRPSC

INTRODUCTION

As we approach the bicentennial anniversary of the inception of the first postage stamp, the significance of philately has become increasingly prominent within the cultural fabric of numerous nations. Approximately 60 countries boast postal museums, with several countries possessing multiple institutions dedicated to the preservation and celebration of postal history.

Examining the scope of philately and its connection to Social History is a topic that requires some familiarity with the subject matter. This involves learning about philately and its broader implications to the subjects.

Figure 1 – The Penney Black – the first postage stamp issued on 1 May 1840 by Great Britian

Philately is a multifaceted pursuit that extends beyond the accumulation of stamps. Enthusiasts of this hobby, known as philatelists, engage in the search for envelopes (often called covers) and other philatelic materials that align with their individual collecting interests. In addition to collecting, philatelists undertake the organization of their collections, conduct research, present their findings in philatelic exhibitions and philatelic forums, and frequently disseminate their philatelic knowledge through publication in journals and books. Stamp collecting dates back to the emergence of the first stamp in 1840 [Figure 1], and since then, the proliferation of published materials, including newsletters, journals, and books, has led to the establishment of specialized philatelic libraries.

What is the connection between philately and social history? Philately involves the methodical investigation of the human experience and historical events, both contemporary and historical, through the scrutiny of stamps, envelopes, correspondence, archives, and other associated objects. **Postal History**, a component of philately, examines the postal system and how it operates, and studies stamps and letters and related materials that are affected by historical events before and after the introduction of stamps. It includes the study of postmarks, post offices, postal authorities, postal rates and

regulations, and the movement of the mail from sender to recipient, including routes and mode of transport. [1]

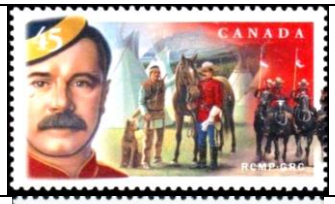
Social History essentially concerns itself with the methods by which history is generated and presented in the public domain. This encompasses conventional sites of institutional history, such as museums and archives, but also extends to various forms of collective memory and the ways in which history is conveyed through film, the internet, and photographic collections. In the case of philately, it is often covers and letters that are at the core of Postal History [2]**.** Given this comprehensive approach to historical inquiry, is it appropriate to classify philately as a branch of Social History?

STAMPS

Let us first look at postage stamps from an historical perspective. Countries issue stamps for more than just paying postage. For example, in Canada, the Stamp Advisory Committee of Canada Post, which decides which subjects to put on Canadian stamps, seeks out subjects that [3]:

- Are primarily related to Canada, of **national significance**, and appeal to broad segments of the Canadian population.
- Evoke **Canadian history**, **traditions**, **accomplishments**, or **natural heritage**.
- Illustrate the social, **cultural**, **political**, **economic**, or **business life** of Canada.
- Commemorate the **birth, work, or an event in the life of an outstanding Canadian.**

Figure 2 shows stamps illustrating various aspect of Canada's history according to these guidelines.

	**National Significance -** Canada's national police service dates to 1873 first as the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) becoming in 1904 the Royal North-West Mounted Police (RNWMP) and finally in 1920 becoming the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and in French know as the Gendarmerie royale du Canada (GRC). [4]
	Canadian history – D-Day/Jour J: On June 6, 1944, 14,000 Canadians landed on Juno Beach. The Royal Canadian Navy supplied 110 ships and 10,000 sailors and the RCAF contributed 15 fighter and fighter-bomber squadrons to the assault. Canadian casualties totalled 1,074 of whom 359 were killed. By the end of the Battle of Normandy, Canadian casualties totalled 18,700 and more than 5,000 Canadian soldiers died. [5]
	Traditions - sugar pie/tarte au sucre - The only form of sugar available to many early Canadiens was derived from the sap of the maple tree. Many French-Canadian desserts still use maple sugar or syrup as the sweetener. The tarte au sucre d'érable made the traditional way uses maple sugar. [6]

	Accomplishments - The St. Lawrence Seaway (French: la Voie Maritime du Saint-Laurent) is a system of locks, canals, and channels in Canada and the United States that permits oceangoing vessels to travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes as far as Duluth, Minnesota, at the western end of Lake Superior a total of 600 km. It is jointly managed by Canada and the United States. Hundreds of commercial vessels from over 50 countries make 3,000 – 4,000 transits per year. [7]
	Natural Heritage Natural Heritage - Canada is the second-largest country in the world covering nearly 10,000,000 km2. It has the fourth largest area of freshwater lakes, the world's longest coastline and the largest intact forest on Earth. Every Province and Territory has at least one park the first one created in 1885. The forty or so national parks and terrestrial natural regions cover an area of approximately 336,343 km2. Pictured here is the Banff National Park in Alberta. [8]
	Cultural – Canada welcomes diversity and is one of the most multicultural countries. This ensures that all citizens keep their identities, take pride in their ancestry, and have a sense of belonging. The Inuit people of the far north are celebrated in these stamps which shown prints and sculptures by Inuit artist. The Shelter stamps depict a summer tent and a winter igloo. The Community stamps depict a print titled "The Dancer" and two soapstone carvings of drummers. [9]
	Political - Canada is a democracy that operates under a parliamentary system within the context of a constitutional monarchy. The monarch appoints a Governor General to represent them in Canada. Each province has a Lieutenant-Governor. The prime minister is the head of government and forms a cabinet. The House of Commons is comprised of elected members. The Senate acts as the chamber of "sober second thought." [10] On the left Governor-General Vanier years of service is commemorated.
	Economic - Imperial Economic Conference held in Ottawa in 1932 - The Ottawa Conference of British colonies and dominions was organized to debate the Great Depression. It was held between 21 July and 20 August 1932 in Ottawa. The conference resulted in the abandonment of the gold standard, establishment of "Empire Free-Trade" and the adoption of Keynesian ideas. [11] Note that this is an overprint on an early Canadian airmail stamp.
	Business Life - Canadian Tire Corporation, Limited originated on October 24, 1922, originally specializing in tires. Today it deals in automotive, sports, leisure, and home products sold in close to 1,700 locations. They employ close to 58,000 people across Canada. The stamp was issued in 1997 to commemorate their 75th anniversary. [12]
	Birth of an outstanding Canadian - Stephen P. H. Butler Leacock (30 Dec 1869 – 28 Mar 1944) was a Canadian teacher, political scientist, writer, and humorist. In the early 1900s he was known as the best-known English-speaking humorist in the world. The stamp was issued in 1969 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth. [13]

Figure 2: Examples of Canadian Commemorative Stamps showcasing aspects of Canadian history.

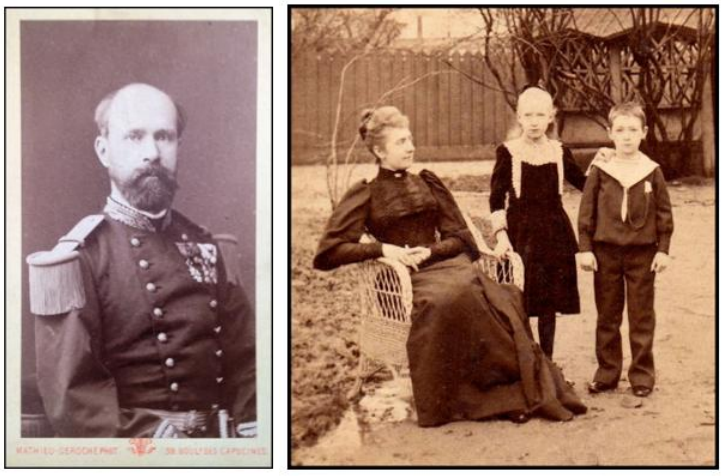
COVERS, LETTERS & RELATED ITEMS

Now let us look at a postal history example from Siam (now called Thailand) that exemplifies the research that goes into understanding and describing covers and letters and how this relates to Social History.

Figure 3: Example of a cover, mailed at Bangkok on 26 July 1883

Collectors seek covers from various sources including postal history dealers, at swap meets, at club meetings, from their mail and at auctions. The cover above I acquired from a dealer. This artifact provides an abundance of information to philatelists and historians.

First, we see that the letter was addressed to Countess de Kergaradec, 10 rue des Filles Dieu, Angers, Maine et Loire, France. The cover came with an enclosed letter, written by her husband the Count de Kergaradec. Letters serve not only as a means of communication between the sender and recipient, but also as a testament to the unfolding of historical events. Genealogical and historical research resulted in finding the images shown in Figure 4 and the following information which is only a summary:



Count de Kergaradec Countess de Kergaradec and her children

Figure 4: Images of the Count and Countess de Kergaradec

Count de Kergaradec (1841-1894) was a French naval officer and diplomate in Cochinchina, Siam, and Russia. He was a French naval officer and diplomat in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) (1869-1883), Bangkok (1883-1891), and Moscow (1891-1894). He married **Henriette de Place** (1858-1943) on 1 October 1878 at Angers, France.

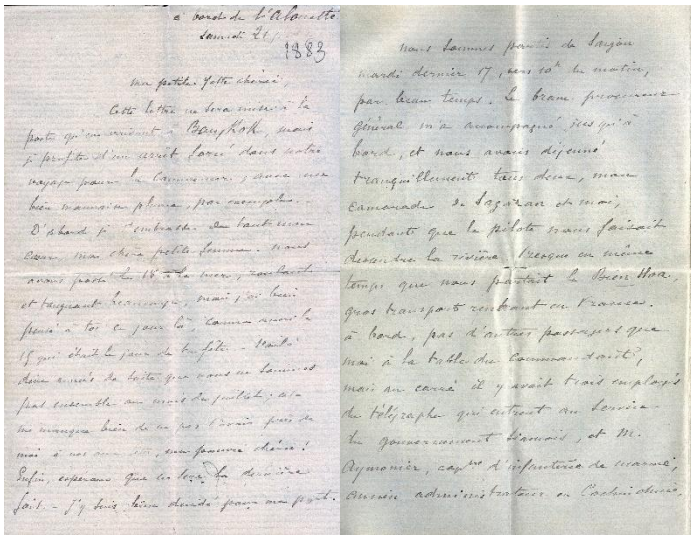


Figure 5: The first two pages of the Count's 12-page letter.

The letter, shown in Figure 5, is written in French and fortunately, I am fluent in French. If I were not, I could get help from a translator or use translation software found on the Internet.

I have 202 pages of letters from the Count to his wife written over the span of eleven months from 1883 to 1884. These are historic documents detailing what he experienced and how he felt.

The Count is en route from France to assume the position of French Consul in Bangkok, having previously served as the French Council in Saigon. In Bangkok, he provides a detailed account of the country, its people, and the Siamese Royalty, as well as the officials with whom he interacts. He gives his personal views on the foreign consuls and their families. The Count expresses concern regarding the political climate in his former post in Cochinchina. Additionally, he is endeavoring to secure leave to return to France, as his wife is expecting their first child and he feels isolated. He maintains correspondence with his uncle, who possesses connections within the French government that may facilitate his transfer to a more desirable post.

Now the Count and the Countess are more than just names. As a result of comprehensive investigations into genealogical, archival, and historical records, I found substantial information regarding their identities and actions.

Within the 202 pages I have observed a total of about 100 geographical locations, in addition to over 175 individuals and 50 family members, all of whom require investigation.

How did people in Bangkok send letters in 1883-1884? To answer this question, I consulted historical documents such as newspapers, maritime mail records, post office records and the like.

Note, that the postage on the cover sample (Figure 3) is paid by an 8¢ Straits Settlement stamp. Research shows that Siam did not yet have a Post Office to handle foreign mail. The mail was handled by the British Consulate that operated a sub-Post Office of the Singapore Post Office. Singapore at the time was the capital of the Straits Settlements. The rate was 8¢ per half oz.

Next, how did the cover make its way to its destination in France? The cover, our artifact, has seven 'postal markings' and one manuscript marking that can be interpreted to follow the cover on its journey.

First the manuscript number '15' in blue shows that the count numbered his letter so that his wife would know if any letter was delayed or missing.

- **BANGKOK Circular Date Stamp (CDS) of 26 July 1883** was when the letter was processed at the British Consulate's Post Office.
- Once it arrived in Singapore the stamp was cancelled by what is called the **SINGAPORE dateless obliterator** in black ink.
- The red circular marking on the back - **SINGAPORE / A / PAID / AU 1 83** – was applied by the Singapore Post Office to indicate when the letter was received.

But how did the letter get from Bangkok to Singapore? The answer was found by consulting newspapers published in Bangkok and Singapore. These reveal that Captain Haffenden commanded the steamer *Bangkok* (336 tons) which departed Bangkok on 26 July 1883 and arrived at Singapore on 1 August. The 1,600 km trip took seven days.

- Next, how did the letter make its way from Singapore to France? The black hexagonal marking on the front of the cover - **POSS. ANGLE. / 5 / AOUT / 83 / PAQ. FR.** - was applied when the letter was handed over to a French Mail steamer on 5 August 1883. Research shows that this was the Messageries Maritimes steamer *Iraouaddy* (2,558 tons) under the command of Captain Delpech which left Singapore for Marseille on 5 August 1883.
- On the front of the cover the red - **MODANE A PARIS 2 / SEPT. 83** – is when it arrived in Paris.
- On the reverse there is an indistinct black town marking - **2 / SEPT. 83 / SARTHE** – which is that of a town the cover passed through.
- It final arrived at its destination witnessed by the black - **ANGERS / 4 SEPT 83 / MAINE-ET-LOIRE** - on the reverse.

The trip from Singapore to Angers in France took 41 days.

Not all covers come with content; however, all have postal markings and the addresses of the recipient and often that of the sender that can assist a researcher.

RESOURCES

As more and more stamps appeared collectors started to specialize in a country, topic or even a single stamp as well as in postal history. Many philatelists have been studying their area of specialization for decades. Let us look at some of the resources we use in our research.
Auctions: Have been in existence since the 1800s, providing philatelists with an avenue to expand their collections. With the advent of the Internet, online bidding is replacing in-person attendance at auctions.

Catalogues: The primary catalogues of stamps available globally cover the entire world. The well-known Scott Catalogue, available in six volumes printed on glossy paper with colorful images deals with the stamps of about 450 countries, both current and past. It showcases the initial stamp issued by each country until the most current release. For example, for Great Britain, it starts from the very first stamp released on 1 May 1840, which is called the penny black [Figure 1]. While reading through the pages, one can gain insight into the cultural and historical evolution of the United Kingdom over the years.

Other well know catalogues are Stanley Gibbons (British, since 1865), Scott (American, since 1868), Yvert et Tellier (French, since 1895), Zumstein (Swiss since 1909), Michel (German, since 1910), just to name a few.

Dealers: Although the number of dealers with stores has decreased, they are now most often visited at stamp shows popular around the world. Many dealers have stores on the Internet. They often send electronic listings to those on their mailing lists.

Internet: Today we are fortunate in having the Internet at our fingertips. It offers philatelists the ability to do research from home in quick time. One can also consult specialized websites for genealogy, historical archives, newspapers, books, journals, etc.

Libraries

- **Local**: Especially for those starting out in the hobby their local library will often have a recent addition of a stamp catalogue. Even the advanced collector will often find reference material that will aid in their research. Libraries will often offer to bring in material using inter-library loan.
- **Philatelic**: There are over two dozen specialized libraries worldwide. Two of the largest are the library of the RPSL and the APRL. The library of the RPSL was founded in 1881. It catalogues some 23,000 books, over 3,700 journals, some dating back to the 1860s, over 28,000 auction catalogues from auction houses from around the world dating back to the 1870s. The APRL was established in 1968. There are nearly four miles (6.4 km) of shelving containing more than 23,000 book titles and 5,700 journal titles. In Toronto there is the Harry Sutherland Philatelic Library at the VGGPRF (Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation).

Organizations:

From early beginnings, clubs have evolved into places to share knowledge with those with similar interests via presentations and newsletters.

- **Local -** For example, in the Toronto area there is the Greater Toronto Area Philatelic Alliance (GTAPA) which currently groups 19 local clubs. By the way the oldest still operating stamp club in Canada is the Ottawa Philatelic Society (OPS) which was founded on 25 November 1891.
- **National** - RPSC (Royal Philatelic Society of Canada) was founded in 1887. The RPSL (The Royal Philatelic Society - London) was formed in 1869 and is the oldest of its kind, the APS (American Philatelic Society) traces its origins to 1886, to mention a few.
- **International** - Fédération Internationale de Philatélie (FIP) was founded in 1926 in Zürich, Switzerland to promote philately and exhibitions.

Periodicals: In Canada, the Canadian Stamp News was established in 1976. Specialized newsletters, journals, magazines, and websites service collectors, for example Hong Kong Study Circle Journal (founded in 1951), the Journal of Chinese Philately (traces its origins back to 1956), The Canadian Aerophilatelist (started in July 1985) to name but a few. This publication from the Royal Philatelic Society London - The London Philatelist - has appeared without a break since January 1892.

Tools: Philatelists use a variety of tools to do their research, organize their collections and publish their findings from the simple to advanced scientific tools. On the simple side there are tongs (tweezers), watermark fluids, magnifiers, perforation gauges, UV-lights, etc. On the scientific side there are computers and a myriad of software packages. There is even the Video Spectral Comparator (VSC) [Figure 6] made by Foster Freeman which is a forensic tool to check the validity of documents which philatelists have adapted for their needs. Philatelists are quick to apply the tools they use in their professions to the study of their stamps such as those used for Laser and Spectroscopy Analysis, etc.

Figure 6 - Video Spectral Comparator (VSC)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I propose that this brief journey through what we philatelists do and how we do it shows that our 'hobby' now belongs in the realm of Social History for these reasons:

Historical significance:

- Stamps and postal history offer valuable insights into the political, social, and economic climate of a particular time and place.
- The study of philatelic artifacts can provide a deeper understanding of the past and the ways in which society has changed over time.
- The convergence of Public History and Postal History serves the dual purpose of enhancing knowledge and providing enjoyment.

Cultural importance:

- Stamps often feature iconic images and symbols that are representative of a particular time, culture or nation and its history.
- The study of philatelic artifacts can offer insights into the art, literature, and traditions of different societies.

Research opportunities:

- Philately offers many opportunities for research, particularly in areas of postal history, stamp design, and the evolution of postal services.
- This research can contribute to a greater understanding of how these systems have developed and evolved over time.

Undoubtedly, philately can be an academic pursuit that provides ample opportunities for learning and research across various disciplines, such as history, cultural anthropology [14], art, and design. Its significance lies in the fact that it offers valuable insights into the ways people have communicated and connected with each other throughout history. Therefore, it is an indispensable area of study for anyone with an interest in public history.

I would like to thank Ingo Nessel, Dr. David K. Foot, and Dr. Gregg Redner for their help and encouragement in preparing this article.

FOOTNOTES:

1 - Postal History - https://academic-accelerator.com/encyclopedia/postal-history
2 - Carlton University - M.A. in Public History - https://carleton.ca/history/graduate/ma-in-public-history-program/
3 - The Canada Post stamp program - https://www.canadapost-postescanada.ca/cpc/en/support/articles/philatelic-products/stamp-program.page
4 - Royal Canadian Mounted Police - https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/corporate-organisation/history-histoire/rcmp-origin-story-histoire-origine-grc-eng.htm
5 - D-Day and the Battle of Normandy - https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/normandy-invasion
6 - Tarte au sucre - https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/tarte-au-sucre
7 - St. Lawrence Seaway – https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/st-lawrence-seaway
8 - National parks - https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np
9 - Canadian Philatelist - Canada Post News, Vol 30, #5, Whole #174 (Sep-Oct 1979), page 300
10 - Canada - https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/federal-government
11 - British Empire Economic Conference – http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0%2C9171%2C744015%2C00.html
12 - Canadian Tire - https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-tire-corporation-limited
13 - Stephen Leacock - https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/stephen-leacock
14 - What Is Cultural Anthropology? https://www.sapiens.org/culture/what-is-cultural-anthropology/

July 2024