NOTES ON OUR AFRICAN COLONIAL STAMPS
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Our African colonies being in postal communication with the rest of the world, have found it necessary to ‘go in’ for postage stamps of their own, and can now show a creditable group. Mauritius, as having been the largest contributor to it, is entitled to the first mention. The number of varieties which have emanated from that island within the last seven years amounts to more than thirty. A commencement was made with a series of three, bearing exactly the same device as the old Trinidad and the Barbadoes (sic) stamps – a device probably suggested to the originator’s fertile brain by the sight of the ‘tail’ of one of the old halfpenny pieces. The value was afterwards handstamped on two of the three primitive individuals in a manner that rather enhanced their appearance than otherwise. But the post-office being at length ‘sold out’ of them before the arrival of a new series from England, native genius was called into operation, and the result was a series of unexceptionally hazy stamps, bearing a caricature of the Queen – the production of wood-blocks with the Britannia design on them being, we presume, above the engraver’s ambition. The inscription on them is somewhat curiously worded, being POSTAGE TWOPENCE at the top and bottom, and POSTPAID, MAURITIUS at the sides. One would have thought that either the word postage or postpaid would have been sufficient to indicate the purpose for which the stamps were to be used. As is usually the case with wood-blocks, there are numerous varieties; the principal differences being in the position of the lines forming the groundwork, but only two values (penny and twopenny), and two colours (red and blue). The last series of the ‘natives’ bore a different pattern, and was much clearer than its predecessors: there was a Greek border at the sides, and the inscription was reduced to the name of the island the value. That series remained in use for local postage after the arrival from England of a new sixpenny blue and shilling red, bearing the full-length portrait of the respectable person with a helmet on, but was ousted by the new and delicate series which commenced its career in 1861 with four stamps – the penny, twopenny, fourpenny, and ninepenny. The colours of the old-fashioned sixpenny and shilling were changed in the following year to purple and green respectively, and in 1863 they too were superseded by the new issue. The design of the latter is graceful, and we think we may safely say unique. The type of the inscription is peculiar, and plain though small. The latest emissions of adhesives are the five-shilling mauve and the threepenny scarlet, both of which have been out a considerable time. Mauritius, however, possesses envelopes; in fact, it is the only African stamp country which does possess them; but they are quite handsome enough to represent the whole continent, and scarcely yield the palm of beauty to the Cingalese. Our readers, however, can judge for themselves of the appearance of the ninepenny envelope with the engraving of it at the head of this article; and we need only say that the sixpenny and shilling, though of commoner shape, are not less beautiful.

The stamps of the Cape of Good Hope have always been better known in England than those of Mauritius, which island it far exceeds in importance. There have also been but few changes in the stamps and no increase in their number (four), although the Standard Catalogue mentions a twopenny blue, which, when a specimen is discovered, will be the fifth. The triangular shape of these stamps has
always made them popular, as only one other – the threepeny Newfoundland – shares the peculiarity with them; but one of the set has been rendered obsolete by the emission of a rectangular shilling stamp (green), of which a representation is appended. The new acquaintance is but a poor successor to the old friend Hope in the old stamps is certainly seated on an anchor, but she seems to have made herself comfortable, and is perhaps hoping for a better seat some day; but in the new stamp the poor lady appears decidedly alarmed for her safety, as she slides down the anchor (who could have been so uncourteous as to raise it?), holding on to the ‘mutton’ with one arm, and trying desperately to retain her equilibrium with the other – a very unsafe Hope indeed. We suppose heraldic etiquette compels her to be perpetually seated on a hard piece of iron; were it otherwise, we might ask, why did not the designer assist her to rise in the new stamp, where she has sufficient space to stand up. We are rather doubtful of the darker shade into which half the view is thrown; if it be, as has been suggested, the Cape mountain, we have good reason to sympathise with Hope, for she must be sliding down, along with the anchor and the sheep. We presume the good lady will repeat her evolutions on the other stamps of the set, when the present stock of triangular is exhausted.

The wood-blocks of the Cape are really well done, and are admirable copies of their types. Two values only, the penny and the fourpenny, were made, but it has been generally supposed that each of these values was printed in two colours, rose and blue. However, a correspondent in a recent number of this magazine has started the theory that the so-called blue penny Cape is really nothing but a red with a bluish tinge, produced by the gum ‘acting upon or with the size of the paper or the oil of the ink.’ Without entering upon the discussion of this theory, we will only remark that the existence of the fourpenny in two colours creates a presumption in favour of the existence of the penny in the same. [The writer of the above labours under an erroneous impression. The blue block penny of the Cape has never been called in question as un genuine. It is one of the rarest of our colonials, very few impressions being known to exist. It was the tribe of individuals printed, or supposed to be printed, on bluish paper, such as our own red penny, that of the Cape, and others, which a late correspondent proposed to eliminate from postage-stamp collections. – ED.]

It now only remains for us to mention the doubtful fourpenny black, with the belief in whose genuineness we are impressed. The colour does not appear to be the effect of any innocent chemical experiments, being of a uniform depth and without any suspicious blue tinge.

Natal, the youngest Anglo-African colony, and little known in this country until its name was coupled with that of a celebrated bishop, hailed the arrival of the first mail steamer on its shores in 1853, and in 1857 commenced issuing stamps. In England, there was a great deal of tedious riding to and fro with post-bags for some centuries, before Stephenson started his locomotive; and even then there was some delay before its aid was accepted by the postal authorities, and more before stamps could be actually introduced to assist still further the speedy delivery of letters; but our new colonies reap the benefit of the reforms adopted here, and start with a capital of institutions, laws, and good sense, which have been eight centuries in accumulating.

Much is left to the imagination in the first issue of Natal. The design is embossed on coloured paper: there is nothing to distinguish it from its surroundings, except its being in relief, and, in the used specimens, it is never seen distinctly. There were of this issue five stamps, in four of which a crown, the
word NATAL, and the letters V.R. formed the principal part of the pattern; and these four are of a large size, though, unfortunately, seldom met with perfect. The fifth is much smaller, and is not impressed with the letters V.R.; it was used to prepay the postage of newspapers. These ‘native Natal’ were superseded by the well-known present series, which is, however, printed in brighter colours now than when first issued. They are of the same class with the impressions of Queensland, Grenada, and the fourpenny and sixpenny Bahamas, and, we should say, by the same artist, as the expression of the face in each of those stamps is much the same as in that of Natal. In all there is the same large crown, and the same delicate filigree back-ground.

There are few more admired stamps than the St. Helena, although their beauty is somewhat marred by the introduction of the provisional value. Their bright colours and elegant designs make them welcome in every album. The medallion portrait of the Queen is remarkable for its beauty, and the stamps themselves are not without some of the significance which attaches to things connected with places of historical interest. The words ‘St. Helena’ call back a great many events into the mind; perhaps they may recall the picture of a great man fretting out the residue of his life under the petty tortures and insults of an unprincipled governor; and awake the conviction that, great as were Napoleon’s faults, England would have acted more worthily had she made his captivity less irksome. It is gratifying to think that in the present day, with the means of communication with home so much increased, no repetition of the treatment to which the imprisoned general was subject is possible.

It seems a great pity that our Western Australian colonies should be irritated upon the transportation subject, whilst there is such an eligible country as Sierra Leone for the settlement of gentlemen addicted to garrotting and other murderous assaults. Certes, if the country is destined o be ‘the white man’s grave,’ do not let us make up our quota of death-doomed inhabitants from amongst honest men, but rather let a few of our knaves and scoundrels be shipped off. As for the single stamp in use there, we can only say that it is well engraved, and neat – the work, doubtless, as are most if not all the other Anglo-African stamps, of English firms. We believe it is used only for postage to England. With it the list of our African colonial stamps is closed.