



MARION ISLAND- THE POSTAL HISTORY OF THE FIRST YEAR

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A bonus of philatelic authorship, however tentative its conclusions, is that fellow enthusiasts will draw one's attention to existing literature and the odd potentially useful acquisition.

My earlier Marion Island articles led to finding some, to me, obscure references which have enabled me to appreciate developments in Marion Islands' 'early days' more fully.

A fortunate purchase substantiated these events.

It is my intention to list and illustrate covers carried on the early mailings.

Historical Context

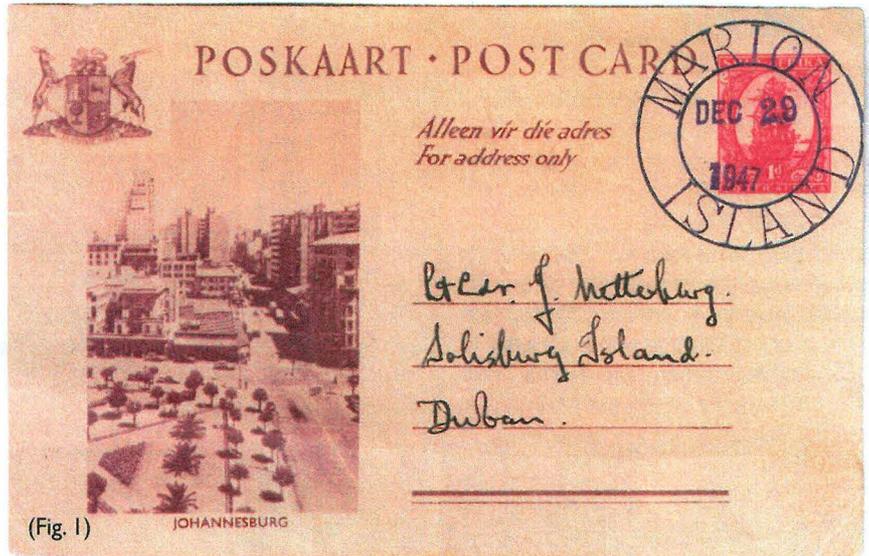
Marion Island was discovered in 1772 by a French expedition under the command of Marc-Joseph Marion Du Fresne. In 1777 Captain Cook rediscovered the two islands and named them the Prince Edward Islands. However, the name Marion Island was retained for the larger one while the other was called Prince Edward Island. The uninhabited islands were annexed by Great Britain in 1908.

On 17 December 1947 the South African Prime Minister, Field-Marshal J.C. Smuts, fearing Russian interest, ordered annexation of the islands to South Africa.

This was with British consent. In 'Operation Snoektown' the frigate HMSAS *Transvaal*, commanded by Lt. Commander Fairburn was dispatched to the islands to effect annexation.

Marion Island was annexed on 29 December 1947 and Prince Edward Island on 4 January 1948. HMSAS *Transvaal* departed for Cape Town on 6 January 1948, to be replaced by HMSAS *Natal* on 12 January 1948.

The supply ship SS *Gamtoos* left Cape Town on 12 January 1948, reaching Marion Island on 20 January 1948 with supplies, technical staff and a Medical Officer.



(Fig. 1)

Meanwhile the HMSAS *Good Hope* was sent to Tristan da Cunha to fetch meteorologist Allan B Crawford, who was also to be 'Acting Postmaster', and six Tristan Islanders to staff the weather station with a complement of eighteen, under the command of Lt. Commander B Grindley.

A letter from Allan Crawford, on Tristan da Cunha at the time, to Dr. Pirie in Johannesburg on 1 January 1948 mentions that he had "been personally requested by the P.M. to lead another couple of expeditions."

The First Mail and its 'Provisional' Cancellor

According to Lt.-Commander Grindley a 'provisional' canceller was produced by the Engineer Officer of HMSAS *Transvaal*, Lt. NJ Rayner, to commemorate the annexation.

It was applied, in deep purple, to a "few covers mustered by the crew."

The day and month of the 36 mm circular

cancellation could be transposed, but 29 Dec. 1947 is the only date recorded.

Items dated Dec. 29 1947 were posted in Cape Town on the HMSAS *Transvaal's* return to port, but the postal authorities declined to accept the covers as the stamps had been cancelled with an unofficial postmark. They "were not eligible for transmission through the post."

My first Id postal stationery postcard, addressed to Salisbury Island (Naval headquarters in Durban) bears the message: "This was the first stamp that was actually made on the SAS *Transvaal* just after the annexation. Later another rubber stamp like the one on this letter was made". (Fig. 1)

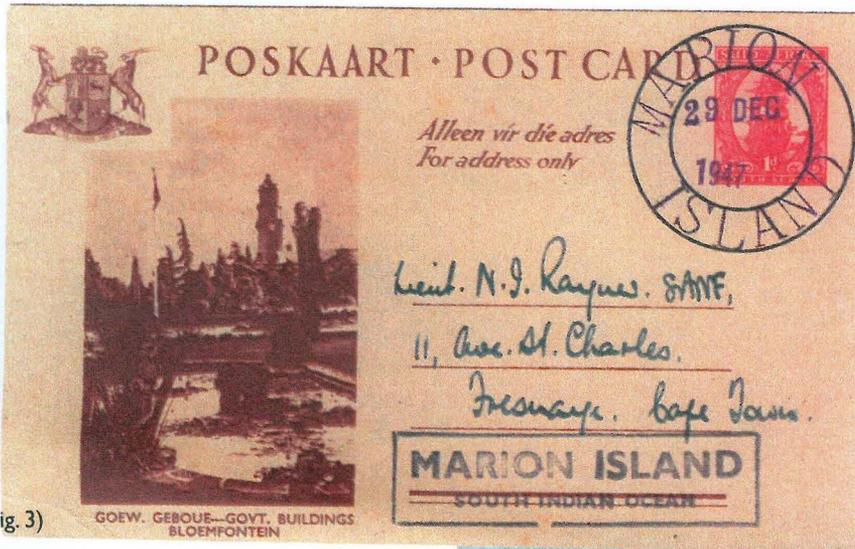
Mail dated 29 Dec. 1947 must have been left behind as my other two examples received Allan Crawford's oblong boxed cachet four weeks later.

Crawford arrives with the 'Marion Island' cachet.

As has already been mentioned Acting Postmaster AB Crawford arrived on HMSAS *Good Hope* on 28 January 1948. He brought with him a 36 x 15 mm boxed cachet, which he had made in Johannesburg at his own expense in 1945. It reads "Marion Island/South Indian Ocean" and was applied in purple or black ink, generally accompanied by a separate dated handstamp. This cachet was to indicate to the South African postal authorities that the item of mail had originated on the island. All mail had to be cancelled (i.e. postmarked) in South Africa. It is difficult to understand why the Acting Postmaster was not permitted to cancel the stamps on the island, as it had been annexed and was legally part of the Cape Province.



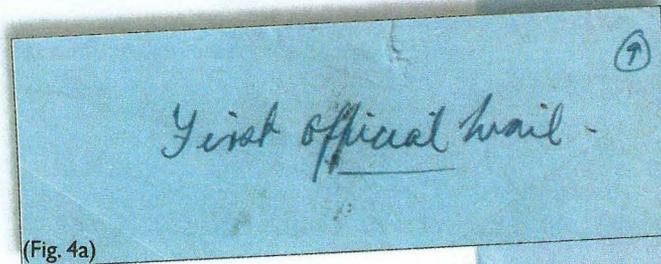
(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)

Second Mail (First Official Mail)

The cachet was put into use immediately, as is borne out by a cover bearing it in the same colour as the 'Commanding/Officer HMSAS Good Hope' cachet.



(Fig. 4a)

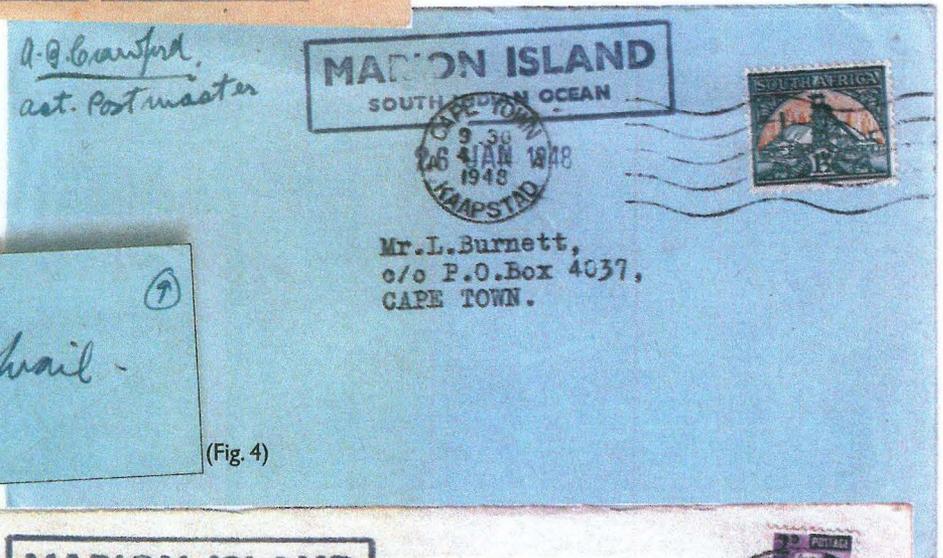
It also bears the Cape Town Paquebot arrival cancel of 2 Feb. 1948 (Fig. 2) and was part of the mail which left Marion Island on HMSAS *Natal* on 29 January 1948.

The second South African Id postal stationery card (Fig. 3) also awaited Crawford's arrival.

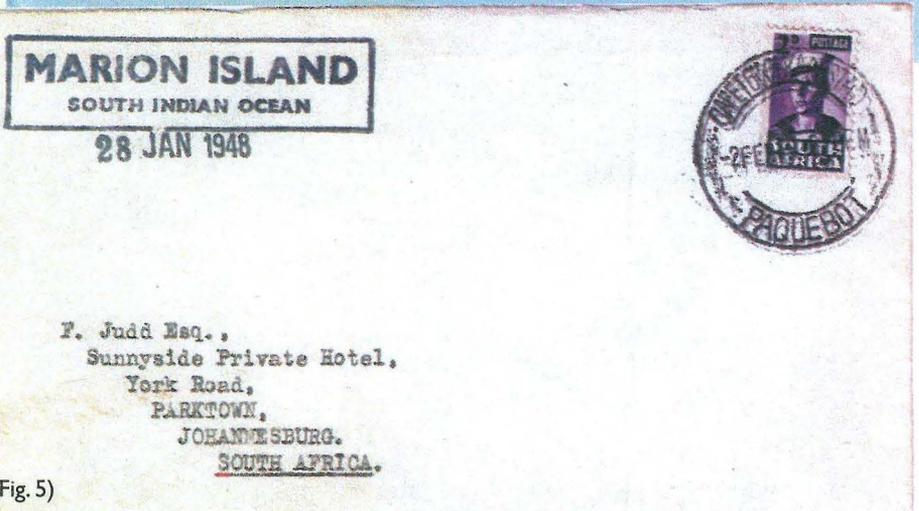
The post card bears the purple Marion Island cancellation of 29 Dec. 1947 and Crawford's undated oblong cachet in black. This souvenir card does not carry a message and is addressed to Lt. Rayner!

Rosenthal and Blum relate in their book that when Allan Crawford arrived on Marion Island, John L Marsh, a Cape Town journalist attached to the expedition, gave him 'a handful of letters' to dispatch. Crawford endorsed these in manuscript 'A.B. Crawford/Act. Postmaster' and wrote 'First Official Mail' with a number on the reverse. (Figs. 4 and 4a) These were conveyed by HMSAS *Natal*, reaching Cape Town on 2 February 1948. The cover illustrated bears a date stamp of 26 January 1948 - soon corrected to 28 January 1948.

A correctly endorsed, dated and postmarked cover to Johannesburg from this mailing is shown in Fig. 5.



(Fig. 4)



(Fig. 5)

Uncertainty about postal regulations is apparent in the case of the cover illustrated in Fig. 6. With its Marion Island cachet and handstamped 28 Jan. 48 date it undoubtedly was carried in the first official mail, but was not postmarked on arrival at Cape Town.

An interesting and rare usage is shown in Fig. 7 handstamped 29 Jan. 1948. The Crawford cachet had been used as a cancellation. The Cape Town Paquebot marking of 2 Feb. 1948 proves that it was brought in by HMSAS *Natal*. The crest of HMSAS *Good Hope* is shown on the flap (Fig. 7a)

A reference in *The South African Philatelist* (1948-p.32) refers to two covers endorsed 'posted on board S.S. *Gamtoos* while at Marion Island 29 January 1948'. As these were postmarked 2 Feb. 1948 it is certain that these were conveyed by HMSAS *Natal*. The S.S. *Gamtoos* returned to Cape Town on 7 Feb. 1948.

Third Mail

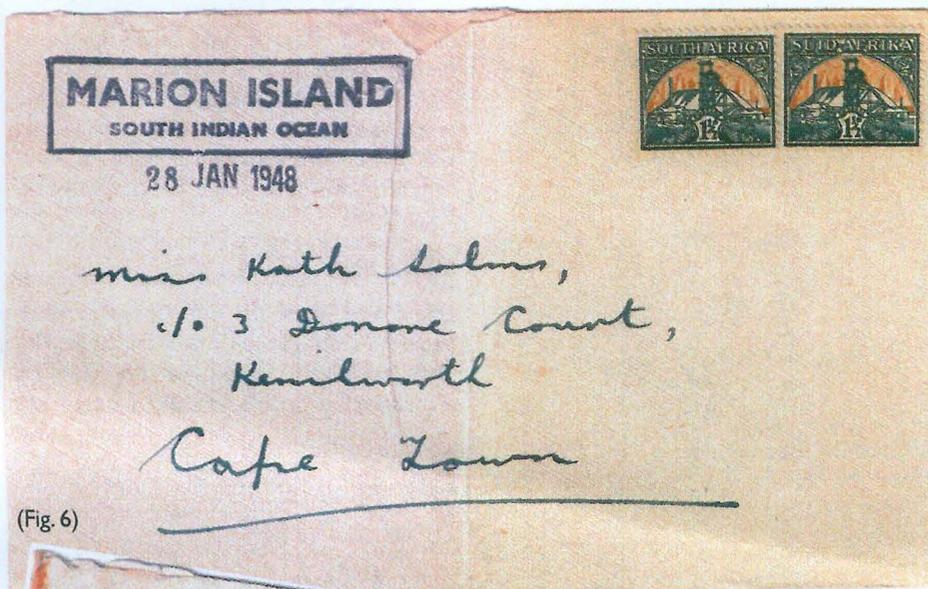
Crew mail from the S.S. *Gamtoos*, which departed from Marion Island on 20 January 1948, has been recorded. Hal Vogel reported a cover to Dr. Pirie. (S.A.P. 1982, p.131)

Fourth Mail

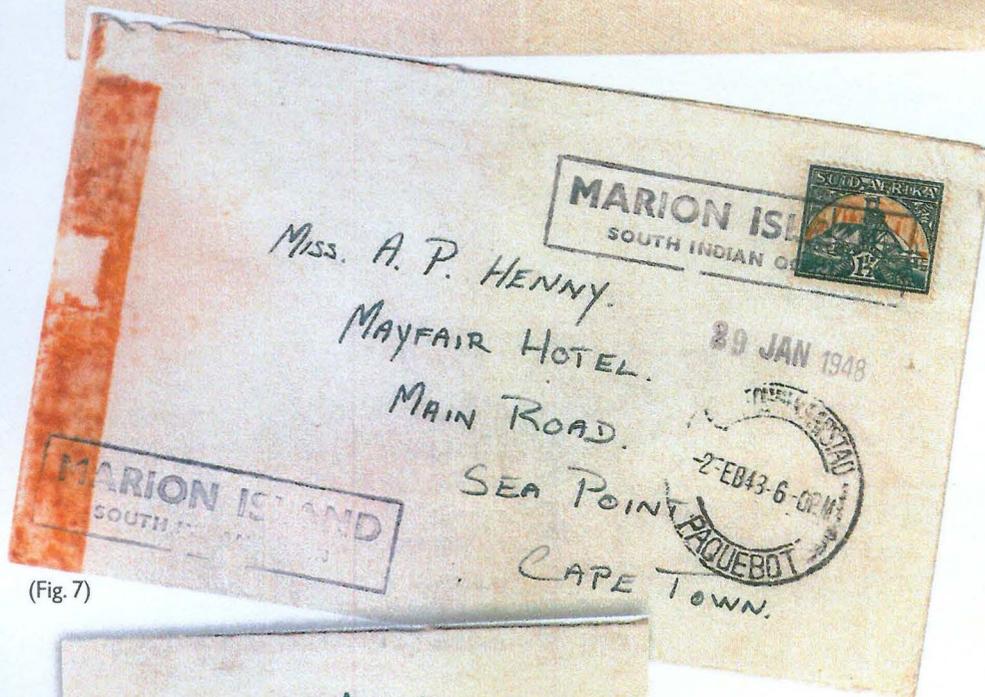
While the cover addressed to Adv. I. Isaacs, a leading philatelist at the time, shows an undated Marion Island cachet, its arrival date stamp of 21.2.1948 assigns it to the fourth mailing. This was by HMSAS *Good Hope* which left the island on 16 February 1948. (Fig. 8)

Fifth Mail

My third example of the first Marion Island canceller once again has the 'Dec. 29 1947' date configuration and must have been left over on the island to await mailing (Fig. 9.)



(Fig. 6)

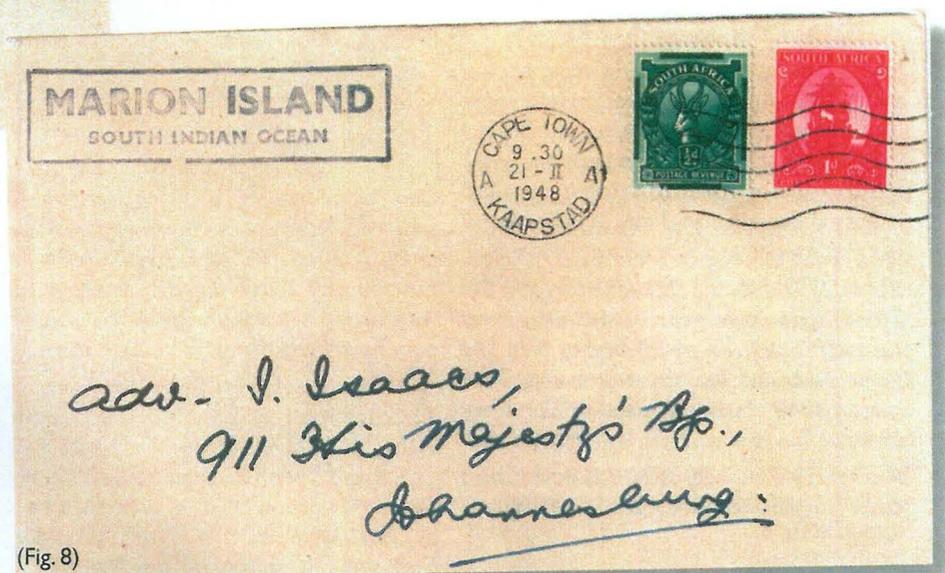


(Fig. 7)



(Fig. 7a)

The provisional canceller is struck in violet on this rare genuinely used cover, which also has an undated oblong Marion Island cachet as well as a Cape Town Paquebot handstamp of 8 March 1948. The latter indicates that it was conveyed by HMSAS *Transvaal*, which left Marion Island on 27 Feb. 1948 and had its mail serviced on 8 March 1948. The mail carried by HMSAS *Transvaal* was otherwise handstamped 18 Feb 1948 or 27 Feb 1948. A nice example, addressed to Grindley, is shown on the cover of *African Stamps* (March 1958 - No.6).



(Fig. 8)

Unfranked mail is known from this voyage. Jurisich reported that Cape Town postal officials treated it as ('free') Military mail, applying the Paquebot handstamp and not raising postage due charges.

Sixth Mail

Although this mail has been reported handstamped 8 Mar. 1948, 14 Mar. 1948 or (?) 18 Mar. 1948, my undated example (Fig.10) is undoubtedly a genuine usage.

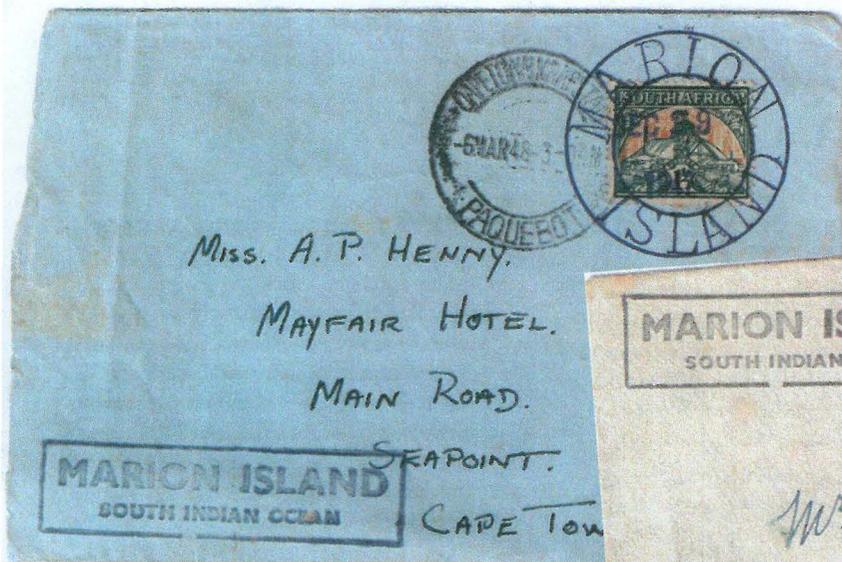
The M.S. *Norse Captain* effected this mailing, departing the island on 17 March 1948. The Cape Town postmark was that of 23 March 1948. I question whether the 18 March 1948 is correct, as it appears to relate to the next crossing.

Seventh Mail

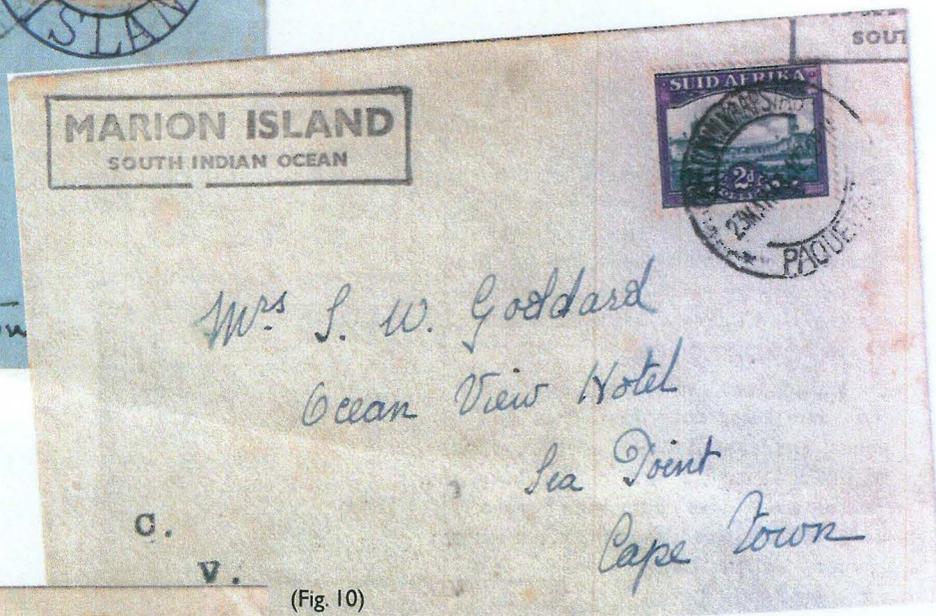
On 20 March 1948 HMSAS *Natal* was the last vessel to leave Marion Island before the onset of the Southern winter, reaching Cape Town on 25 March 1948. Mail handstamped 18 March 1948 was carried on this voyage.

Eighth Mail

Allan Crawford and his party left the island on 28 August 1948 on the minesweeper HMSAS *Bloemfontein*. The members of the expedition and the mail, dated 3 Sept. 1948 on arrival, were taken to Port Elizabeth. The handstamp date on the cover I illustrate (Fig.11) is one used by the Meteorological office on Marion Island. It differs from Crawford's in that the type of the date is significantly smaller and the month comes before the day.



(Fig. 9)



(Fig. 10)



(Fig. 11)

I would like to thank Danie van Zyl for his assistance in providing some important references

Conclusion

This concludes an overview of the postal activities during the initial annexation period of Marion Island, whose only inhabitants are scientists and support personnel. Hal Vogel surmised that some two hundred covers were processed during this period. It has been established that Crawford took the 'Marion Island/South Indian Ocean' cachet with him when he left the island in 1948. A letter from Crawford to Dr. Pirie mentioning this was in the 'Wordie' collection. Subsequently, Department of Transport handstamps were used to denote the origin of Marion Island mail, commencing in April 1949.

REFERENCES:

- RD Allan - *The Maritime Marks of South Africa*
- M Jurisich - *Monograph 2 of the Postal History Society of Australia* (Dec. 1996)
- Lt-Comm. B Grindley - 'Marion Island' in *'African Stamps'* (March 1958)
- E Rosenthal & E Blum - *Runner and Mail Coach* (1969)
- H Vogel - *The South African Philatelist* (Various Reports)
- H Vogel - 'B.U.T'- *Ice Cap News*. Volume 27 No. 153 (1982)

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