

THE POSTAL HISTORY OF MARION ISLAND

by Dr JR Frank RDPSA FRPSL-Philatelic Society of Johannesburg.

A recent auction catalogue featured a "curiosity" from Marion Island, namely an uncanceled cover bearing several South African stamps handstamped with the words 'Marion Island SA' in three lines. I recalled that some years ago I was shown another "nine-day wonder" from Marion Island by an English dealer. This consisted of a couple of covers sent from the island cancelled at Cape Town. However, a violet cancellation consisting of a star surrounded by a circle had been applied on top of the Cape Town postmark. Both these items were no doubt private creations without postal validity. Information on what is available to collectors is widely scattered and fragmented.

Historical Aspects

Marion Island, the largest island in the Prince Edward Islands group in 'the Roaring Forties', is some 2000 km south-east of Cape Town. It was discovered by the French navigator Marion Du Fresne on 13 January 1772.

A barren island of 298 km², its highest point is the President Swart Peak (1230m). It was uninhabited till annexed by South Africa for meteorological purposes. In March 1925 H. Luhis, writing in "The South African Nation" suggested that weather stations should be established on the islands of the Prince Edward Islands group.

It was realised during World War II that such information would be valuable. With the agreement of the British Government, Prime Minister General Smuts gave instructions for the annexation of Marion and Prince Edward Islands on 17 December 1947.

Four days later 'H.M.S.A.S. *Transvaal*' sailed from Cape Town, on "Operation Snoektown", for the islands. Marion Island was annexed on 29 December 1947 and came to be regarded as part of the Cape Province administratively. Over the next three months, amidst much naval activity, a weather and a radio station were established on the island. The 'H.M.S.A.S. *Natal*', 'S.A. *Gamtoos*' and 'H.M.S.A.S. *Good Hope*' all conveyed equipment and personnel to the new base. Subsequently relief ships called at intervals of several months.

Postal Arrangements

Postal facilities from the outset were limited, mails being made up whenever a supply ship arrived. The acting postmaster was meteorologist Allan B. Crawford, of Tristan da Cunha fame. He was not permitted to

cancel postage stamps on the island, as this had to be done at Cape Town or wherever the mail was landed in South Africa.

Crawford had with him a rectangular cachet, 60 x 15 mm., reading 'Marion Island/South Indian Ocean' (fig. 1) which he had prepared at his own expense. This cachet, in violet or black, together with a separate date stamp was applied to the cover but was not used to cancel the stamp.

The first official mail left the island on 28 January 1948 on the 'H.M.S.A.S. *Natal*' and received a Cape Town Paquebot postmark on 2 February 1948. I question the accuracy of the statement by Robson Lowe, and also by Blum, that only three covers were carried in this mail.

John H Marsh, chronicler of the expedition,



(Fig.1.) 28 January 1948 - Cover from Commanding Officer of 'H.M.S.A.S. *Good Hope*' sent by 'H.M.S.A.S. *Natal*' with Marion Island cachet. Stamp cancelled by Cape Town Paquebot 2 February 1948 strike. First official mail.

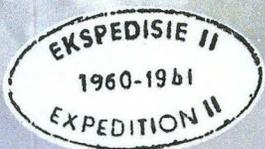
later reported that he had sent some covers to Cape Town by 'H.M.S.A.S. *Transvaal*' on her return trip. These were signed 'A.B. Crawford Acting Postmaster' and placed in the normal mails on 4 February 1948. One is illustrated in R.D.Allen's book.

By October 1949 a new official cachet had been supplied. This was a double oval with 'Departement van Vervoer' at the top, a central date line with 'Marion Island' below it and 'Department of Transport' at the bottom (fig.2). The cachet was applied to the cover on the island, while the stamps were officially cancelled at the Fynnland Naval Base, Durban. This post office was not at the base, but near it!

I believe that one such cover has been seen.



(Fig.3)



(Fig.5)



(Fig.7)



(Fig.4)



(Fig.8)

The earliest recorded date is 16-10-1949. I illustrate a cover dated 5 July 1960, which was postmarked at George one year later. A manuscript Marion Island endorsement on a cover with a partial undated Fynntland strike has been recorded by Allen.

A special pictorial post-mark was produced in March 1958, to indicate South Africa's participation in the International Geophysical Year.

Two small panels below the central date show the initials 'TG.J.' and 'I.G.Y.' (Fig.3).

A temporary post office was established at the base to deal with philatelic mail in 1958, but this has remained operational.

A French marking of 'Marion Dufresne/ Compagnie Des Messageries Maritimes' probably applied to a ship (Fig.4)

Reisener reported a small oval cancel inscribed bilingually 'Expedition II 1960-1961' (Fig. 5), which is obviously of South African origin.

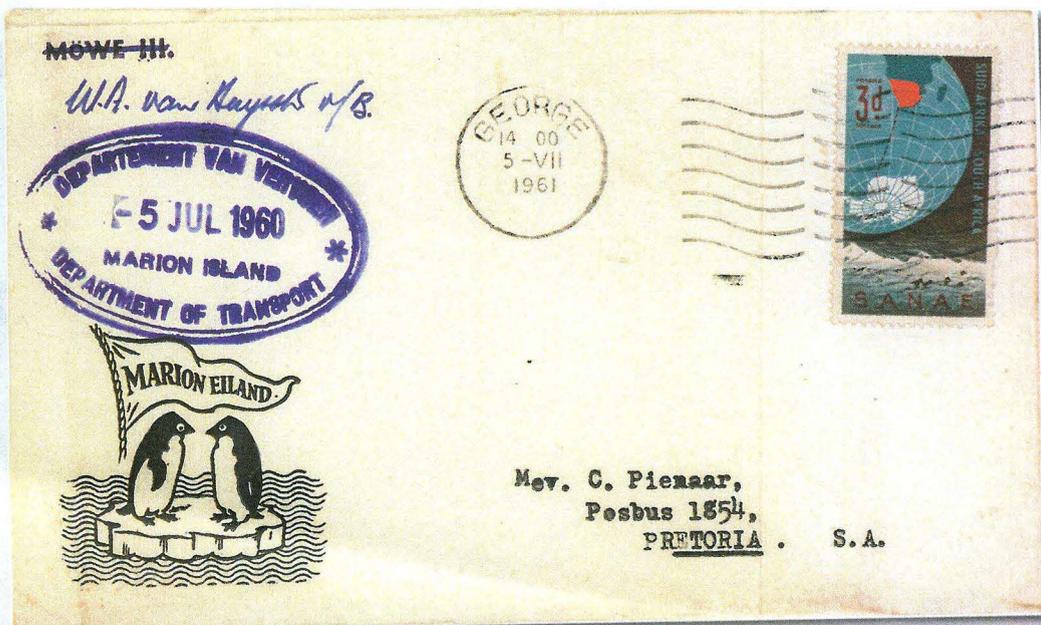
A permanent circular pictorial cancellation, inscribed 'Marion Island-RSA-Marioneiland' was provided on 31 March 1962. It remained in use till damaged in a fire at the base on the night of 25 June 1966, after which a new one with 'slightly heavier' letters (Reisener) replaced it. (Fig.6). Strikes of the damaged cancel, i.e. with missing date, on mail items have been recorded.

A cachet with a penguin as its central feature and 'Marion' at its base first appeared on mail dated 25 July 1973 (Fig. 7). This and a rectangular boxed geographic 'Marion Island' cachet, 34 x 15 mm., appear to be aimed at philatelists rather than serving a postal need. (Fig. 8)

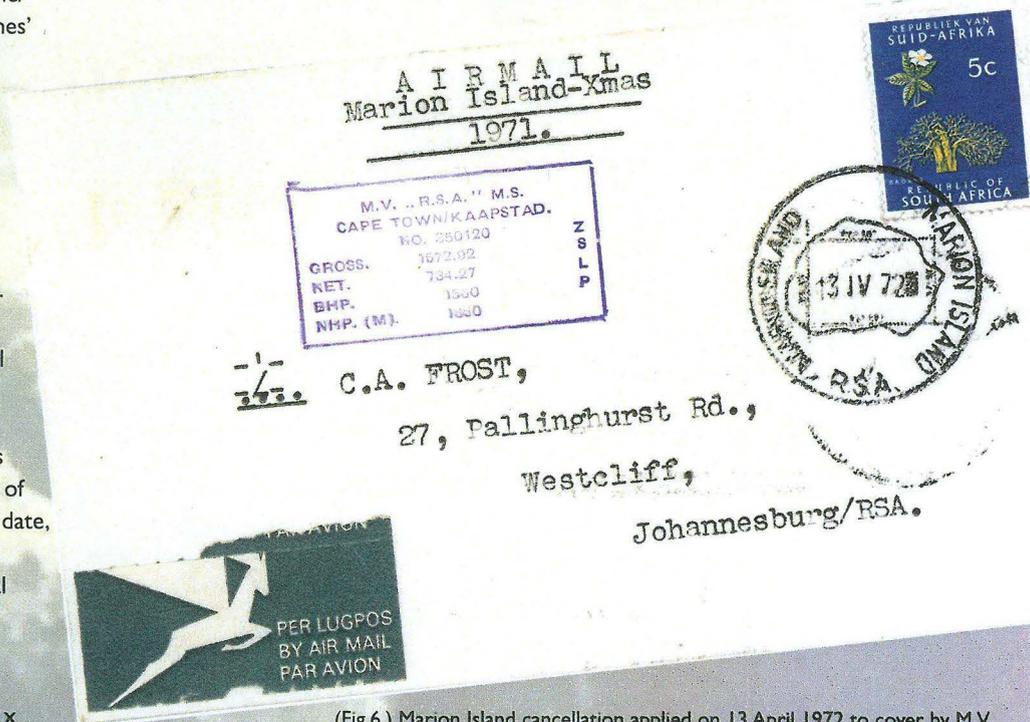
A number of type-written and handstamped cachets have been applied to mail by actual, or purported scientific expeditions. A comprehensive listing of these fundraising exercises has been provided by Allen. They did not serve any postal function.

References:

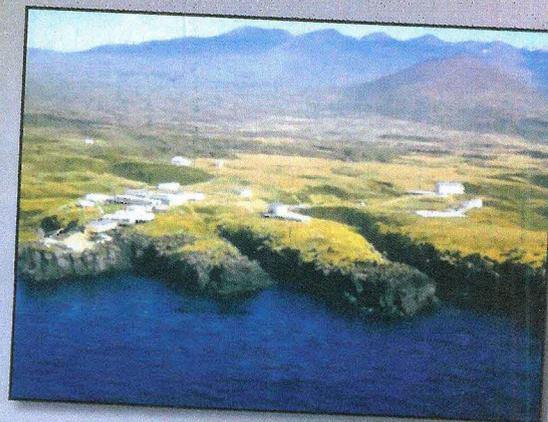
- R.D.Allen *The Maritime Marks of South Africa (1970)*
 Dr.J.H.H. Pirie *Antarctic Posts and Stamps (1975)*
 H.O. Reisener *The Special Postmarks and Covers of South Africa (1975)*
 E. Rosenthal & E. Blum *Runner & Mail Coach-Postal History and Stamps of Southern Africa (1969)*



(Fig.2.) Department of Transport cachet of 5 July 1960 applied at Marion Island Stamp cancelled at George on 5 July 1961.



(Fig.6.) Marion Island cancellation applied on 13 April 1972 to cover by M.V. "R.S.A." to Cape Town for onward transmission by air.



Marion Island in Spring