

Synopsis or Synoptic Background

Mail Between, and Via, Canada and Japan, 1873 - 1898

The search for a sea route from Britain to Asia - and to the richest trade in the world - is a reoccurring theme in Canadian history from the 1490s until the Franklin Expedition disaster, 1845-48. For that three & half centuries, seamen hoped to find a North West Passage, but by mid-19th century, Arctic geography was known well enough to eliminate hope of a practical route. The only sea route between Europe and Asia was the long sea route around Africa into the Indian Ocean, and onward and then north along the east coast of Asia to China and Japan.

Yet curiously – perhaps astonishingly – less than a generation later, transportation technology changed everything in just a few years! In 1867, American packets created a trans-Pacific link between San Francisco and east Asia; in 1869, the Suez Canal opened; the same year, the American trans-continental railway was completed; in 1870, the trans-Indian railway opened. Suddenly global transportation and communication quickened– especially between east Asia and Europe via United States. That new trans-Pacific route was much faster than the old long sea route – and as fast or faster than the other new route through the Suez Canal!

Postal communication was more than an immediate beneficiary of these new routes – global postal communication was a motive and a financial supporter of these new routes. But before looking at postal communication, let’s wander into an aside. These changes, and their impact on the European imagination & mood, were captured by Jules Verne in “Around the World in Eighty Days”. It was a series of magazine stories of a trip by all the sudden developments of 1867 – 1870! The story was set in 1872, the year of publication. Indeed, the final climatic day of the story was 21 December 1872, and that episode of the story was published the very same day – 21 December 1872! The magazine articles were published as a novel 30 January 1873, and later that year as an English novel. The novel was a story of its moment! This one frame begins in that moment with a March 1873 Canadian cover via San Francisco to Japan.

The new global network of rail and steamer communication, and the related excitement and confidence, was the same time as the formation of the Universal Postal Union. By the Treaty of Bern, 9 October 1874, 18 European countries, Egypt, Turkey, and the United States of America agreed to form the General Postal Union, which was renamed the Universal Postal Union four years later. Membership was open to all the postal administrations of the world! In the next generation, most of the world joined! This one frame aspires to show that remarkable transformation as it happened on the northern Pacific.

San Francisco was the only route until May/July 1887, when Canadian Pacific Steamship Company began service between Vancouver (together with nearby Victoria) and Yokohama. A year earlier, the Canadian Pacific Railway had linked Vancouver on the Pacific Ocean to Halifax on the Atlantic Ocean. In Canadian national mythology, that Railway is seen as a stand alone national project that linked Canada together. Okay. But the Railway was more – it was financed by British capital to advance their imperial interests - principally to link Britain to the rich trade of east Asia. So after the railway was complete, it quickly added the trans-Pacific link.

Integrated ownership of ships and railway helped make this new “All Red Route” the fastest between Japan & east Asia and North America & Britain. Geography helped. As the route was further north than the San Francisco route, it was shorter. Additionally, Maritime Canada and Halifax are further east and north than US ports and so closer to Britain and Europe. Initially CP Steamships operated with leased ships, but its rapid success justified building its own ships – Empress of Japan, Empress of China, and Empress of India. By 1891, CP’s Empress fleet had begun their fifty years of success.

Here in this one frame, trans-Pacific covers – going each way - on both the San Francisco & Vancouver routes are shown. (Vancouver mail was sometime handled by Victoria, which was on the way between Vancouver and the open Pacific.) Additionally, two other minor routes are shown: via Britain and via Tacoma USA. The British route, operated by P & O, had been extended from China to Japan in August 1865. It was listed in the Canada Postal Guides of 1 January 1867, 1 July 1868, and 1 July 1869, but not listed in the Guide of 1 July 1870. The US route from San Francisco, operated by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, was listed in the Canada Postal Guides beginning 1 July 1869. That route was much quicker for Canada - Japan mail than via Britain, so the Canadian Post Office quickly stopped using the British route. The fourth route, via Tacoma Washington USA (near Vancouver Canada), was started about 1892 and only occasionally offered an earlier sailing date.

The speed of the CP route through Vancouver soon made it a major link between east Asia and Europe. Additionally, the Vancouver route connected other parts of the Atlantic world in the Americas and in Africa to east Asia. This one frame concludes with eight covers (a 9th is on page six) carried on this north Pacific route to or from more distant countries. Via Vancouver had become of wide - perhaps “universal” - value in the 1890s global postal system! We can not conclude from a mere one frame of covers that the Universal Postal Union’s aspiration to universality was fulfilled by this route, but we may claim that the success of the route was in harmony with that aspiration.

Additionally, we can point to the easy acceptance of the iconography of Japan (and presumable all countries) on mail as part of universality. Perhaps the route was a realization – in a different age and in a different ideology - of the long sought for North West Passage!

Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Around_the_World_in_Eighty_Days

<https://www.gbps.org.uk/information/sources/treaties/upu-conventions.php>

Arfken, George, B., Canada’s Small Queen Era: Postal Usage during the Small Queen Era, 1870 – 1897, Toronto, nd.

Canada Postal Guides, 1863, 1867 – 1870, various Rate Tables (titles vary).

Frajola, Richard C., Michael O. Perlman, Lee C. Scamp, The United States Post Offices in China and Japan 1867 to 1874, New York (The Collectors Club), 2006.

Scrimgeour, Gray, Brian Murphy, Alec Unwin, “Trans-Pacific Mail to Canada during a Shipping Rate War”, PHSC Journal, #119 Sept 2004, 54 – 56.

Unwin, Alec, Via Vancouver: Canada's Transpacific Maritime Mails, BNAPS Exhibits Series #17, Sept 1999.

Whiteley, David H., Steam on the North Pacific: British Columbia to the Orient. 1887 - 1941, Winnipeg, 1999.

Research

A. Sailing dates. Many were published in David Whiteley, "Canadian Pacific Steamship Schedule Between Vancouver & Hong Kong, 1887- 1913" ,Steam on the North Pacific, 14 page appendix. This data was enlarged by Gray Scrimgeour, https://www.postalhistorycanada.net/php/Library/Research/ShipTables/int_pacific.php . For this collection, contemporary Shipping News in original Vancouver newspapers was consulted for specific details of some sailings to understand individual covers. See pp 6, 12, & 15. See also similar details on p 11.

B. Rarity of routes and covers: data from Auction Catalogues or Provenance. For this collection, many auction catalogues were reviewed, but only sales or provenance of covers in the frame are listed here.

Arfken, George B., "Canadian Overseas Letter Rates Pre-UPU", Firby Auctions, 15 May 1997

Ayre, John F., "Small Queen Issue 1870 – 93 Collection", Maresch, sale 138, 4 February 1982.

Cantor, Daniel, "Collection of Canada Small Queens", Sparks, 24 November 2015.

de Vlopi, Charles P., "Canada to Foreign", Sissons, sale 242, 26 January 1966, lots 24 – 117, and sale 246, 13 April 1966, lots 11 – 33.

Hahn, Paul, ms note on the back of the cover.

Jarrett, Fred, Sissons, 1961.

Lussey, Harry, Small Queen "Foreign Rates and Destinations", Maresch, sale 161, 26 October 1983, lots 329 - 392.

McGuire, C R (Ron), private trade.

Menich, S. J., "Canadian Postal History of the Victorian Era", Firby Auctions, 22 June 2000.

Robertson, John L., US sale, April 2004.

Schacter?, ?, & others? "Small Queen", 23 February 2013, lots 427 – 506; "Small Queen Issue Postal History", 26 October 2013, lots 1044 – 1201; "Small Queen Postal History", 14 February 2014, lots 411 – 527; and "Postal History of the 1870 – 1897 Small Queen Issue", lots 1194 – 1300; Eastern Auctions Ltd, all sales un-numbered.

Unwin, Alec, "Canada's Transpacific Maritime Mails" Christoph Gärtner sale 1, 28 June 2006, lots 1243 – 1299.