

THE KHARTOUM RELIEF EXPEDITION, 1884-5: THE CANADIAN VOYAGEURS PARTICIPATION

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One of the little-known segments of Canadian military history took place in the 1880s. It was important because it was the first time that Canadians participated in an overseas war. In 1884, the British government finally decided to undertake a mission to crush the Mahdi of Sudan, who had been in open rebellion against the Egyptian authorities since 1881. The British leader of this military expedition, Major-General “Chinese” Gordon, and the government of Prime Minister Gladstone felt that this was the only way for the British to avoid getting embroiled even further in Egypt. The Mahdi proved to be wiler than Gordon, successfully capturing key towns, encircling Gordon and cutting him off. The British decided to relieve General Gordon at Khartoum and sent Adjutant-General Garnet Joseph Wolseley (later to become a Baron, a British Field Marshall and Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, 1895–99) to lead the relief team. (Wolseley was Gilbert and Sullivan’s model for the role of the “modern major-general” in their *The Pirates of Penzance*).



Fig. 1. In 1970 Canada issued a stamp to honour Louis Riel (1844–1885).

Wolseley had a fair amount of colonial military expedition experience, having served in many

parts of the Empire. In 1870, he was involved in the Red River Expedition in Manitoba at the time of Louis Riel’s first rebellion. He had commanded an expedition that marched 1200 miles to the Red River Settlement to put down the rebellion (Fig. 2). It was there that he first encountered the voyageurs, men who had much experience on the river because of their involvement in the lumber trade, and some of the older ones in the fur trade. Wolseley sent for these men when it became evident that he was losing too many supplies on the River Nile due to poor boatmanship.



Fig. 2. An essay supposedly prepared by one of Riel’s ministers. The rebellion was defeated before the postal system was introduced.

The 380 Voyageurs recruited – some authors refer to 376, others to 399 – were a mixed bag of nationalities, with a preponderance of French Canadians (93), native Indians (77) and Scots and English (36). The men retained their civilian status although under the command of Canadian military officers. They were paid \$40 a month and all their expenses were picked up by the British Government. They sailed from Montreal on the *SS Ocean King* on September 14, 1884, and arrived in Egypt on October 17. Their first months

in Africa were uneventful – they learned how to use the boats made in England and Scotland. On the way to Khartoum most of the boats were carried by rail or floated down the Nile.

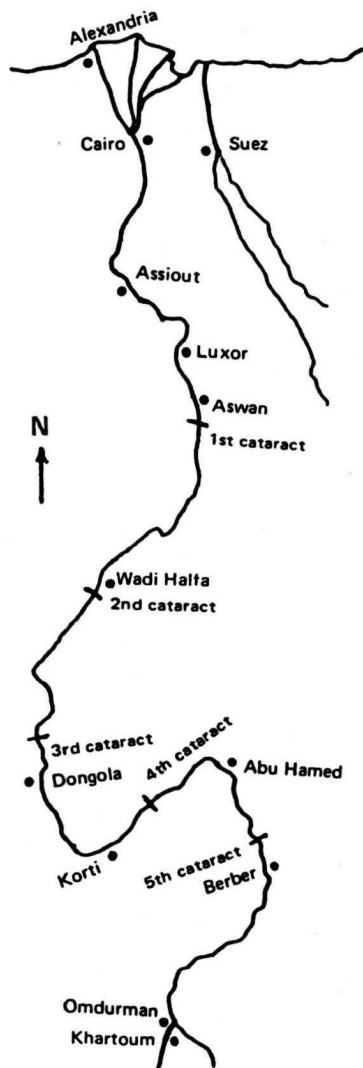


Fig. 3. A map of the Nile River showing the principal towns from which the Canadian Voyageurs plied their boats. Many of Surgeon-Major Neilson's letters were addressed to Wadi Halfa.

By January 1885, the Voyageurs' six-month contract ran out and most of them returned home. Volunteers were sought, and eventually 89 men decided to stay. With the rest of the troops they reached Khartoum too late – Khartoum had been taken and Gordon killed – but they were present at the defeat of the Mahdi's troops. It is in retreat, after the battle, that their most important role was performed. Their great skills were needed to run the rapids (Fig. 3). They were very successful in the task and they received many tokens of appreciation from the pleased British government. Sixteen Voyageurs perished in the expedition and the remaining men made their return home via England.

A good proportion of the men in the expedition might have been illiterate, and therefore little correspondence has been found going to or originating from the Voyageurs Contingent. What little there is would most likely have followed the mail routes of the time – from Canada to England by packet ship and then on to Egypt by ship. Once there, it likely was handled by forwarding agents in Alexandria or Cairo and passed on to the Voyageurs, the mail travelling on the same route as the rations. The Voyageurs, because of their Nile River boats, may have carried the mail themselves at one point; however, there is no record of this being so.

A record of the surviving covers and postcards sent to and from the Voyageurs Contingent was prepared by J. H. E. Gilbert for a paper he read before the Royal Philatelic Society, London, on April 12, 1962. This was subsequently published as a two-part article [1]. In it Gilbert indicates that twelve covers have been identified and recorded (Fig. 4). Four of these were mailed by members of the expedition to Canada and eight from Canada to Egypt. Subsequent to Gilbert's report, five more covers have been found.

All the recorded covers to Egypt were sent to one man, Surgeon-Major John Louis Hubert Neilson. Four of the twelve letters were sent to him by his wife, who then lived in Quebec City. Neilson, a Red River veteran, was at the time a member of "B" Battery of the Canadian Artillery and was appointed medical officer of the Contingent. He was the Gordon Relief Expedition's correspondent

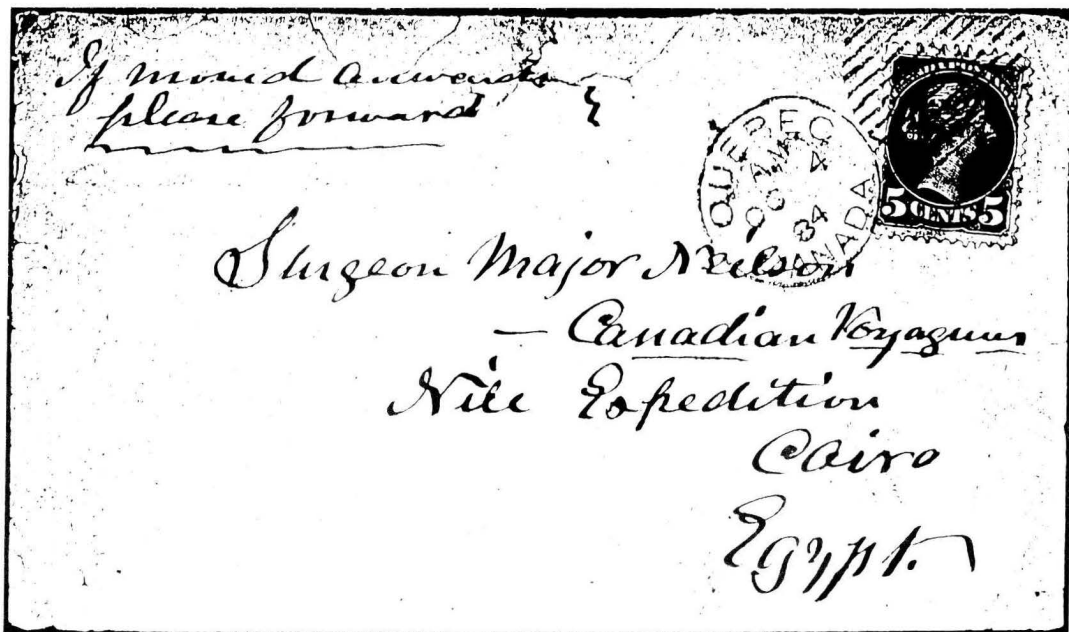


Fig. 4. The earliest known cover to a member of the Canadian Voyageurs Contingent, mailed by Surgeon-Major Neilson's wife in Quebec City on October 4, 1884. Courtesy of the Brigham collection.

for the *Toronto Star* and the *Nouvelliste* of Trois-Rivières. In 1898, he was appointed the first Director of the Canadian militia's medical services. Of the five covers not listed by Gilbert, two were from Neilsonville, Quebec (November 21 & 27, 1884), one from Saint John, New Brunswick (December 2, 1884) and two from Kingston, Ontario (December 11, 1884 and the other with an indistinct date). Only one cover to Neilson was underpaid, bearing a 3¢ Small Queen rather than the 5¢ which paid the UPU rate for letters overseas weighing less than 2 ounces (Fig. 5).

No new covers addressed from Egypt have been discovered since 1962. This is quite remarkable, since many of the boatmen and officers must have written home. The Egyptian postal card illustrated in Fig. 6 was used by the sender, Fred C. Denison, as a Christmas card. Lt. Col. Frederick C. Denison was placed in command of the Contingent. A veteran of the Riel Rebellion, he was a

member of the Governor General's Body Guard and a Toronto alderman and barrister. Only one boatman's letter has survived. It was from a C. Nofallum and was sent to a Winnipeg lawyer, Henry Nason. Based on handwriting samples, this boatman's letter was written for him by Neilson. Was he illiterate or had he injured his hand? Illiteracy was definitely a factor in the small amount of correspondence from Egypt found, but this is certainly an area of Canadian postal history still open for more discoveries, since some of the boatmen were very literate. Richardson mentions the names of two boatmen who were far from illiterate: Alexander McLaurin, a boatmen foreman, was the *Ottawa Free Press* correspondent, and William Robinson, a wheelman who operated the steamers pulling the whalers, later became a prominent businessman and banker in Winnipeg [2].

Good searching, and let me know if you find any more Nile Expedition covers.



Fig. 5. The only underfranked letter to the Canadian Voyageurs Contingent. It was posted in Montreal on October 31, 1884 and received Egyptian 10 and 20 para postage due stamps in both Cairo and Wadi Halfa.

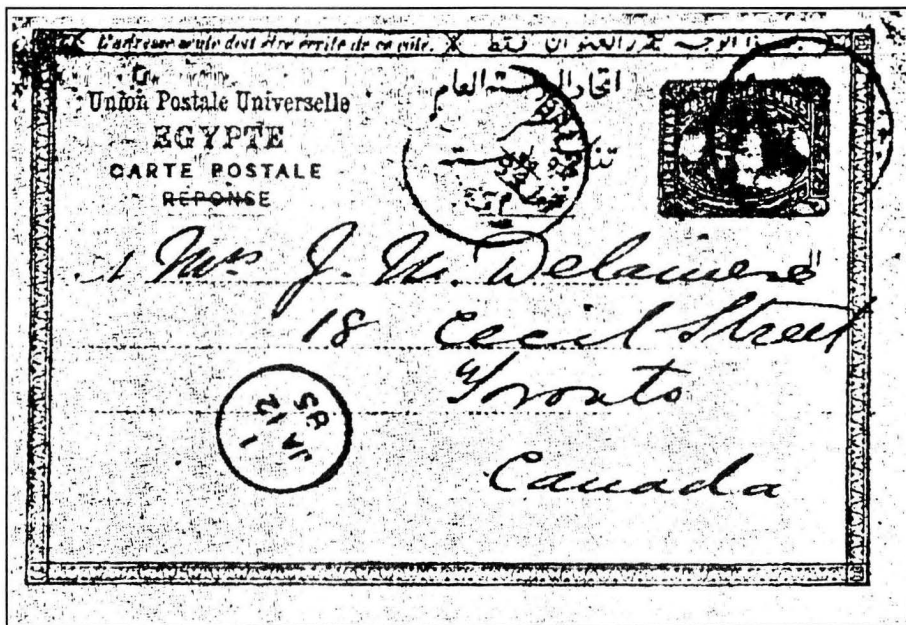
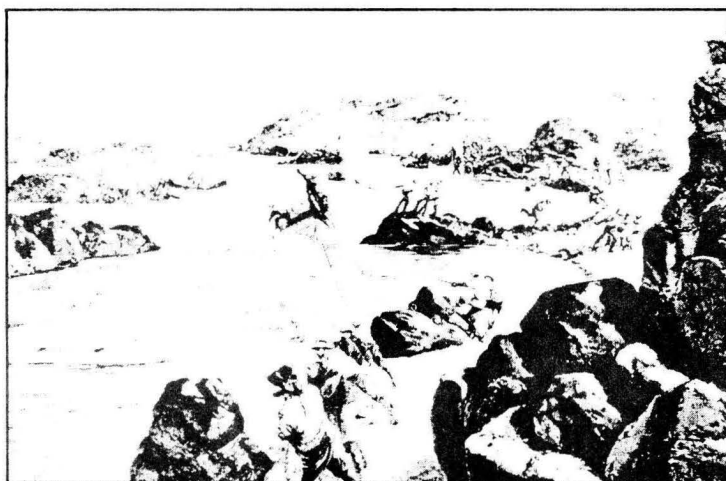


Fig. 6. One of four covers and postcards addressed to Canada from the Expedition.

References

- [1] Gilbert, J. H. E., *The London Philatelist*, vol. 71, Oct. 1962, pp. 159-63 and Nov. 1962, pp. 186-90.
- [2] Richardson, E. A., "Canada's Voyageur Contingent on the Nile - 1884-1885," *BNA Topics*, March-April 1983, pp. 40-46.



Working the whalers with troops up the Second Cataract on the Nile.