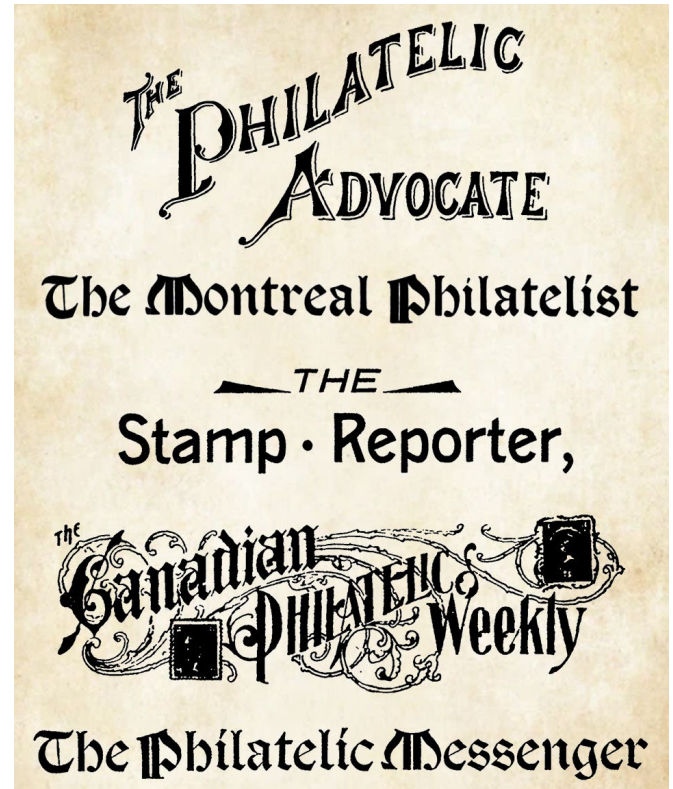


The Map Stamp in the Contemporary Philatelic Press

By Yves Drolet

The Canadian Imperial Penny Postage stamp (the Map stamp) issued in December 1898 was definitely not meant to go unnoticed. Innovative in design and making with its three-colour world map, it has attracted the attention of philatelists ever since, and remains a favourite of collectors. Few stamps have called forth such a vast literature, with many books and countless articles detailing its plating, colour varieties, or the location of every speck of the British Empire on the miniature map. One aspect of this highly original stamp that has not yet been studied is how contemporary philatelists viewed its issuance and gradually found out about the wealth of printing varieties. Such a study is now possible thanks to the availability of digitized copies of old philatelic journals.

Five philatelic journals were published in Canada in the late 1898 to early 1899 period: *The Philatelic Advocate* edited by the Starnaman brothers in Berlin (present-day Kitchener), *The Stamp Reporter* edited by George Bradley in St. Catharines, *The Canadian Philatelic Weekly* edited in Toronto, *The Montreal Philatelist* edited by Rudolph Cornelius Bach, and *The Philatelic Messenger* edited by Matthew Knight in Oak Hill NB.



Initial Reactions

Upon its issuance, the Map stamp elicited a variety of reactions among the editors of these journals. The *Weekly* was the most enthusiastic, calling it “a beautiful stamp, superior (Canadians think) to any stamp heretofore issued” and “the prettiest and cheapest map of the world ever published.” The journal specified that Postmaster General Mulock also intended to issue a card bearing the impress of the stamp with a table of figures “indicating the important elements in Canada’s claim to greatness” that would be distributed in Canada and Great Britain. This promotional aspect of the stamp was noticed on the other side of the Atlantic, with *The London Philatelist* explaining that through a stamp showing the extent of British possessions with Canada positioned front and centre, Mulock wanted to impress upon the British public both the vastness and solidarity of the Empire, and the value of the Dominion as an integral part of it.

The *Weekly* erroneously ascribed the motto *WE HOLD A VASTER EMPIRE THAN HAS BEEN* to a Canadian poet, a mistake also made by the *Advocate*, that more soberly described the stamp as “a neatly executed map of the world in miniature” and described Mulock’s personal involvement in its design. The *Reporter* gave a cursory review of the issue, while the *Messenger* entirely ignored it.

The *Montreal Philatelist* dissented from the common opinion and expressed a negative view of the stamp, although it correctly ascribed the motto to British poet Lewis Morris. The journal reprinted a highly critical letter published in the *London Daily Graphic* by British Admiral Algernon de Horsey, who called the inscription *WE HOLD A VASTER EMPIRE THAN HAS BEEN* silly braggadocio that would only incite the dislike and ridicule of other nations, and suggested that the stamps bearing this vainglorious motto be withdrawn from circulation and sold to collectors, “who would quickly buy them up as monuments of bad taste.” A testament to the Admiral’s fears, the inscription was not well received in France, where the celebrated philatelic pioneer Arthur Maury called it devoid of all modesty in his journal *Le Collectionneur de timbres-poste*.

The *Montreal Philatelist* also derided the stamp by describing it as “too large for a postage stamp and too small for a wall map” and posting the following fictitious dialogue between a post office clerk and a client:

Party (at the Post Office) - A 2 cent stamp, please.

(Clerk hands out a 2¢ Imperial).

Party (indignantly) - Here, I say! I asked for a postage stamp, I don't want an atlas.

Additionally, Bach criticized the poor printing quality of the red part of the design, exclaiming “no wonder we hold a vaster Empire than has been, on some stamps we have annexed about half of the United States.” This was echoed south of the border by *The Virginia Philatelist*, otherwise complimentary of the stamp, with the following friendly warning: “of all our laws, there’s one we enforce most rigidly: Keep Off the Grass.” This contrasted with the favourable opinion of the *Weekly*, that mentioned that while a copy was found where the red was printed out of place, careful research among several thousand other copies had not revealed another similar misprint.

Varieties

The first hints of varieties came out within weeks of the stamp issuance, when the colour of the sea area apparently went from lavender to blue. The *Reporter* announced this change in its chronicle of new stamps, implying that there were now two differently issued Imperial stamps. The *Montreal Philatelist* more aptly spoke of distinct shades (lavender, gray, white light blue, Prussian blue) that could in some cases be found all on one sheet, and advised that getting two or three hundred copies of the stamp would keep a minor varieties collector busy for a year. In the summer of 1899, James Wurtele, a leading Montreal stamp dealer, showed Bach a stamp with the sea area in an entirely new colour, a mixture between sea and olive green, cancelled Brockville & Westport M.C. May 27th, '99, specifying that this was the first one he saw after handling over 200,000 Imperial stamps.

In April 1899, the *Reporter* published a lengthy article on Canadian varieties by Amy Swift, an American philatelist who was one of the few women who wrote in stamp journals. On the Map stamp, Swift noted that the first lavender printing had been speedily followed by light bluish green, a much paler bluish green and a deep striking shade of blue, pointing out that these tints were not due to fading as they were found on unused stamps. She judged severely the red printing:

The red part of the design was put on so carelessly that hardly any two stamps have it exactly in the same (or in the correct) places; if these varieties were counted as differences, there would be almost as many varieties as there are stamps, but they are wholly unworthy of attention and it is not likely that even the most devout of devout specialists will consider it necessary to make a collection of them, for which let us be thankful.

Another critic of the red printing was Herbert L'Estrange Ewen, a British stamp dealer and philatelist. In the March 17, 1900 issue of his *Ewen's Weekly Stamp News*, he wrote that “whoever designed the stamp did so very carelessly, as the various islands appear to be dotted down haphazardly.” However, far from considering the topic unworthy of attention, he devoted four columns of his journal (roughly equivalent to 6 pages of the current *Xmas 1898 Map Stamp Report*) to the minute varieties of the Imperial stamp. Every student of the Map stamp should have a look at this remarkably detailed article that can be downloaded for free from the site of the Royal Philatelic Society, London:

https://www.rpsl.org.uk/gplstatic/BL_CrawfordDocs/016676789/016676789_EwensWSN_1900.pdf

Editor's Note: This PDF is a compilation of many issues of Ewen's Weekly Stamp News. It is 330 pages long and more than 57MB. The specific article mentioned here begins on page 88.

The Map Stamp Trade

As most philatelic journals were edited by stamp dealers and devoted much of their space to advertisements, they provide a lot of useful information on the trade activity surrounding the Map stamp during the first months following its issuance. Thus, we learn from the *Canadian Philatelic Weekly* that when the stamp was put up for sale in Toronto on December 7, the demand was not great as no one knew of the stamp's early appearance, but it was expected that the stamp would be

comparatively scarce. One Toronto dealer who bet on this expected scarcity was John Hulme Lowe, who was first in line at the post office to buy an entire sheet. The Map stamp was indeed a hit with collectors, prompting two Montreal dealers to include a cutting of it in their ads in the *Montreal Philatelist*: Peter Eastman Lunn, who offered a free Imperial stamp to anyone asking for his approval sheets, and William Willson.

As soon as varieties emerged, dealers started pricing them differently, with the rarer lavender commanding a premium. For example, in January 1899, F. R. Nicolle from Kingston was selling a lavender used for 5¢ compared to 4¢ for a light blue unused. Scarcer varieties fetched higher prices, with the gray termed “rare” sold 15¢ unused by A. R. Magill from Montreal in May and the greenish sold 10¢ unused by Wurtele in December.

In April, the *Montreal Philatelist* reported the issuance of Plates 3 and 4 in light lavender. This decision of the Post Office Department to re-issue the stamp was criticized by Bach, who felt that this would devalue the holdings of dealers. Back in January, Bach had also been critical of the decision announced in *The London Philatelist* that unused copies of the Imperial stamp would be sold at the London offices of the Canadian High Commissioner almost as early as in Canada, claiming that such practice would deprive Canadian stamp dealers of orders from Britain.

Conclusion

Postage stamps are often studied scientifically as objects. However, contrary to a rock or a piece of wood, a stamp is a man-made artefact designed, manufactured, used, traded and collected by people. All these activities must be investigated to gain a full understanding of a stamp. This brief survey of the first months in the life of the Imperial Map stamp will hopefully serve this purpose.

References

- *The Canadian Philatelic Weekly*, December 10, 1898
- *The Philatelic Advocate*, December 1898
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