

Murdered stamp dealer's claim to fame was finding Canada's imperf IPP sheets

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Milton Leroy Ritter (Figure 1), a long-time Toronto stamp dealer, was murdered March 22, 1971, in his home at 124 Isabella Street in Toronto, Ontario (Figure 2). A 48-year old man, Douglas Michael Gorman, was arrested and charged with non-capital murder.

Ritter was born near Woodstock, Ontario, in 1903 but lived all his adult life in Toronto. He started dealing in stamps and coins as early as the late 1910s from his house at 117 Wellesley Crescent (now Wellesley Street East, as shown in the corner card on the cover pictured in Figure 3) and continued in the business until his death.

His major claim to fame in the philatelic world was his find of the imperforate sheets of the Canada 1898 2¢ Imperial Penny Post (IPP) stamp (Figure 4) belonging to Sir William Mulock (1844-1944; postmaster general of Canada, 1896-1905). The stamp shows the map of the British Empire on Mercator projection.

In 1897, Sir William proposed to the Imperial postmaster general, Charles Howard, the Duke of Norfolk (15th Duke; PMG, 1895-1900), that a penny post rate be established among the countries of the British Empire. In 1898, at an Imperial Conference, Sir

William's idea was approved by one vote. On his return from London, he enlisted four artists to create essays for 2¢ and 3¢ stamps to commemorate the introduction of the IPP. The American Bank Note Company printed the stamps that were issued December 7, 1898, with the IPP rate going into effect Christmas Day. The stamp, which shows the inscription "XMAS 1898," is the world's first Christmas stamp.

Sir William can be seen on a 45¢ stamp issued by Canada Post in 1998 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the IPP (Scott 1722, Figure 5).

Sir William is known to have been keenly interested in stamps and their designs. He was not shy in appropriating for himself essays, die proofs and imperforate stamps that he distributed to friends and select philatelists or kept for himself. The multicolored stamp required many passes through the press, and trial proof imperforate sheets were produced in all colors. Some of these were framed and found their way to Sir William's Toronto home (Figure 6) when he retired from his position as postmaster general.

Sir William died October 1, 1944, with his grandson, the then Postmaster General Col. William Mulock (PMG, 1940-1945), at his side. It is believed

that Col. Mulock was not aware of the treasure trove of stamps in his grandfather's house. If he had been, he likely would have claimed ownership of them for himself or for the Canada Post Office Department.

Richard M. Lamb in "Imperforate 2¢ Map Stamps" (*The Canadian Philatelist*, July-August 2004) stated, "After 100 years, title to any imperforate map stamps is technically in doubt. They are probably actually the property of the government which is not planning any action now or ever."

In 1945, Sir William's house at 518 Jarvis Street was sold to the Salvation Army and renovated into a home for young women. In the process of settling the estate and renovation, much was thrown into the trash. Ritter, who at the time was living at 124 Isabella Street, around the corner, passed by one day and saw the imperforate IPP sheets sticking out of the garbage container.

Ritter said the sheets were originally framed for display purposes. An apocryphal story says that Sir William used them to decorate a screen. If that was the case, Col. Mulock would certainly have known about them.

Ritter retrieved the imperf sheets, and although he never indicated how



Figure 1. Milton Ritter (1902-1971), a long-time Toronto stamp dealer, was murdered.

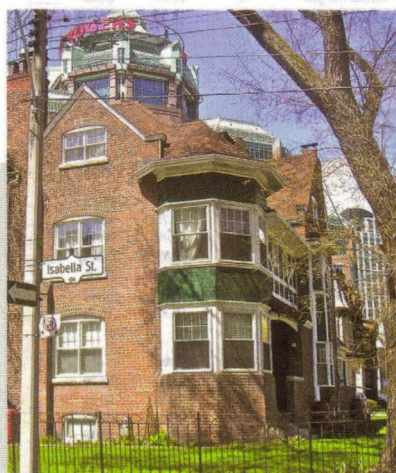


Figure 2. Ritter was murdered in this house at 124 Isabella Street in Toronto.

Photo by Nevil Pike



Figure 3. Milton Ritter corner cards with the 117 Wellesley Crescent, Toronto, Ontario, address are featured on these two covers, one postmarked January 20, 1920, and the other April 22, 1920. Today, the street is Wellesley Street East.

many, the stamp trade believed, at the time, that he obtained between eight and 16 full sheets of 100 imperforate proofs. We will see later that this was a low estimate.

Lamb said Ritter told him "the sheets were glued to a card mat $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch in thickness by an adhesive which defied all efforts to remove it." Stamp dealer Jim Sissons was consulted and conducted experiments with Ritter that damaged or destroyed many stamps. It was another dealer, Bill Maresch, who came up with the solution of soaking the sheets in boiling water. Examples of blocks likely from the Ritter sheets are shown in Figure 7.

Following Ritter's murder, the press ran wild with estimating the value of his stamp and coin stock. Rumored estimates valued the stock at upwards of \$5 million, fueling fear that should it reach the market, it would depress the Canadian philatelic and numismatic values for years to come. Albert Rosen, a Toronto stamp and coin dealer, is quoted in *The Ottawa Citizen* (March 29, 1971) to the effect that dealers around the world have been "shak-

ing in their boots" since Ritter's death. The results of the sale of his stamps and coins belie this fact.

In the same article, *The Ottawa Citizen* describes Ritter as a recluse, which he certainly was, and an "austere and shabbily dressed bachelor" living with his cats in his three-story house. He had opened a shop in the old Toronto Arcade and then moved to the Dineen Building on the corner of Temperance and Yonge streets (2 Temperance) when his office in the Arcade was burned out in 1953.

The postal card pictured in Figure 8 shows that he ran his business in 1935 from his home at 105 Gloucester Street (Figure 8). In 1960, shortly after his mother died (she acted as his secretary for many years), he retired from street-level selling but continued dealing from his home on Isabella Street.

Well-known Canadian philatelist Fred Jarrett wrote in his memoir, *Stampin' Around or The Life of a Stamp Collector*, "I liked Ritter, but to deal with him one had to watch one's step." Another dealer, Stan Lum, who called Ritter "Tex," said, "He [Ritter] was one of the keenest dealers I have met. He was

tough in his pricing, and an opportunist who never failed to take advantage of a situation. He treated me fairly well, ... he knew every 'hold in the book,' and every contest was a Texas death match! No doubt he won more contests than he lost, but in the final analysis he will be remembered as 'a lover of stamps.'" (*Canadian Plate Block Stamp Journal*, Vol. 4, No.3, March-April 1971).

Others who dealt with him have a different view. Many felt that he was a lone wolf, difficult to deal with and miserly. Harry Martin Jr., owner of Empire Stamps, thought that he was more of a collector-accumulator than a stamp dealer. Martin, in one of his advertisements in *The Canadian Philatelist* (inside front cover, Vol. 24, No. 3, May-June 1973), describes Ritter as a "young inexperienced, wet behind the ears, stamp nut." Martin claimed that even at that young age, he could recognize that "the collections had all been skimmed, the goodies all gone, and spaces filled with crappies." To prove his point that Ritter was no more

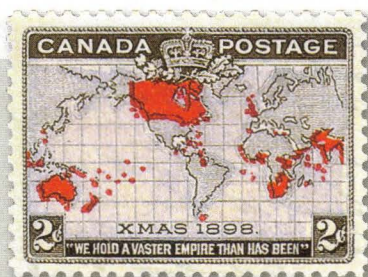


Figure 4. Canada's 2¢ Imperial Penny Postage stamps (Scott 85 and 86) were issued December 7, 1898. The stamps feature the map of the British Empire on Mercator projection. They are the world's first Christmas stamps.

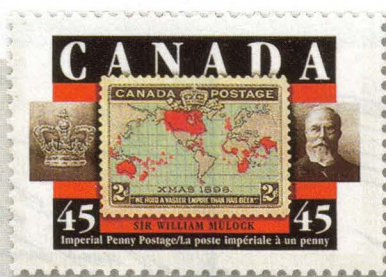


Figure 5. Sir William Mulock was postmaster general of Canada from 1896 to 1905. He proposed the establishment of the Imperial Penny Post in 1898, and is shown here on a 45¢ stamp (Scott 1722) issued by Canada Post in 1998 to commemorate the centenary of the IPP.



Figure 6. Sir William's house at 518 Jarvis Street was sold to the Salvation Army and renovated into a home for young women. In the process of renovation, imperforate sheets of the 2¢ IPP stamp were thrown into the trash and retrieved by Ritter.



Figure 7. Blocks of four of the imperforate 2c IPP stamp include stamps printed in black; black and carmine; black, blue and carmine; and a block of four with the cross guideline. Ritter's collection was sold by H.R. Harmer Inc. in 1973. Courtesy of the Ron Brigham Collection

than an accumulator, Martin goes on to detail *ad nauseam* the large accumulation of lots he acquired as the largest purchaser in the sale of Ritter's stock. The IPP stamps were to elude him at that sale. Kasimir Bileski, the legendary Winnipeg, Manitoba, stamp dealer, purchased them all.

It seems that as Ritter aged, the shy, unmarried, cigar-smoking debonaire man in the 1950s photo in Figure 1, wore more shabby and outlandish

clothes and had no other business acumen, reputedly because of his shyness, than to pull out a roll of thousands of dollars when trying to make a stamp deal.

On orders from Canada Permanent Trust, his stamp stock was consigned to H.R. Harmer Inc. of New York. At the time, it was the second largest Canadian collection, after the Dr. Lewis Reford collection, to be sold outside Canada. Harmer divided the stock

and accumulations into a 1,491-lot, three-day auction held March 6-8, 1973.

Some 245 imperforate IPP stamps were offered in the auction, including two imprint sheets of 100 and blocks from three other sheets. The sheet of Scott 85a sold for \$4,000 (Lot 426), while the sheet of Scott 85b fetched \$4,800 (Lot 431).

After the sale, Bileski purchased another 11 sheets. With this pur-



Figure 8. This 1896 postal card addressed to H.C. Fink in Hamilton, Ontario, was used by Ritter in September 1935. The card shows that at the time the card was mailed, he was operating his business from his home at 105 Gloucester Street in Toronto.

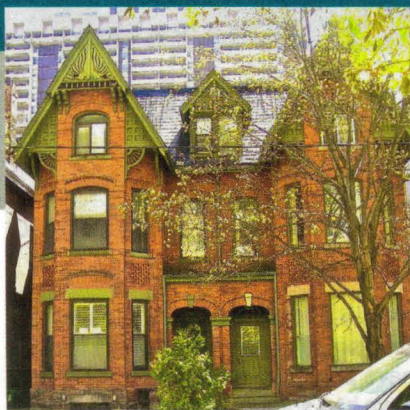


Figure 9. The door at the left is the entrance to 105 Gloucester Street, where Ritter resided and operated his business from in the 1930s.

Photo by Nevil Pike

chase, Bileski took over from Ritter the control of the distribution of these stamps. Because Ritter had flooded the market, it must have taken Bileski many years to dispose of this hoard, notwithstanding his legendary marketing skills. In the sale, there also were 200 mint IPP stamps and 6,100 used examples, all picked over for cancellations.

Because Ritter left no immediate family and no will, his estate was divided, with half going to an elderly aunt, Beatrice Davis, and the other half going to cousins who were sons of his uncle, William J. Craddock. The

total value of the estate was \$438,723 Canadian, of which \$204,723 came from his stamp stock. His coin collection was sold through Mayflower Coin Auctions May 23, 1973 (1,722 lots), and realized about \$100,000 Canadian. His house was appraised at \$66,000, and he left \$68,000 in cash, bonds and debentures.

Gorman and his friend Grant (Jiggy) Quigg, age 42, who committed suicide when the police were closing in on him, were accused of non-capital murder. Gorman, who had prior convictions, pleaded not guilty. In 1959, Gorman and Patrick Gaddie (alias Ray Carson) had been charged with conspiracy to commit robbery and possession of an offensive weapon.

On November 13, 1971, Gorman was found guilty of beating Ritter to death with a revolver and battering him with a bowling pin or a cudgel,

depending on the press report you read, and sentenced to life imprisonment. In court, the prosecution said that Gorman and Quigg knew that Ritter had stamps and coins. Quigg apparently had broken into the house a month earlier. As in the previous break-in, they were looking for cash to buy drugs. Ritter suffered a fractured skull but actually choked to death when he vomited while unconscious, hence the non-capital murder charge.

Gorman was awarded a new trial by the Ontario Court of Appeals September 20, 1972, because the original trial judge gave incorrect instructions to the jury. As a result of the second trial, Gorman was convicted December 20, 1971, of the lesser charge of manslaughter. He was sentenced January 19, 1973, to a 12-year prison sentence. ■

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