

# Three short stories of Canada's North

CHARLES J.G. VERGE

Here is the short history of three covers — one commercial and two philatelic — that spent a good part of the winter and spring months, many years ago, traveling through the Great White North, from Labrador to Nome, Alaska. These three stories are important as they tell how the mail was carried in the first half of the 20th century in an often-inhospitable land. Let's start with the oldest and the westernmost.

Mailed at Johannesburg, South Africa, on June 9, 1913, the cover in Figure 1 is franked with the 1-penny carmine, Transvaal Scott 282 of 1905. It is addressed to William L. McKinlay of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, in care of the Navy Yard in Esquimalt, British Columbia.

Arriving there on July 14, it was redirected to the S.S. *Karluk* at Nome, Alaska, where it

was received on July 31, as evidenced by the backstamp shown in Figure 2. From Nome it was further redirected, with a handwritten notation on the front, to Point Barrow, Alaska.

Rudolph Martin Anderson was chief of the Southern Party of the Canadian Expedition of 1913-16. He wrote in a 1917 issue of *The Geographical Review* that his party included a meteorologist and magnetician, William Laird McKinlay of Glasgow University.

In 1976, McKinlay, at age 88, published a book titled, *Karluk: The Great Untold Story* (Figure 3). He reports that the *Karluk* left Esquimalt on June 17, 1913, and arrived at Nome on July 7, leaving there July 13, more than two weeks before his letter arrived.

The *Karluk's* destination was Point Barrow on the north Alaskan coast and then Herschel Island, an island east of the Alaska-Canada border and west of Mackenzie Bay.

The ship did not get to its final destination. Heavy ice conditions some 225 miles east of Point Barrow were such that by Aug. 13, the *Karluk* was frozen in "almost an integral part of the ice itself" (Figure 4).

By late September the ship, driven by storms and currents, was steadily drifting westward. On Jan. 11, 1914, ice punctured its hull, and the ship sank about 60 miles northeast of Wrangel Island off the Siberian Coast. Although all 25 persons on board survived, eight were to die crossing the ice to Wrangel Island and three more died on the island itself.

The 14 survivors, including McKinlay, reached Nome on Sept. 13 after being rescued Sept. 7. The photo in Figure 5 shows the youngest survivor of the group, a little girl named Mukpik. McKinlay was the only survivor among the six scientists on board, and he later served as a British officer in World War I, where he was seriously wounded. After the war he returned to a teaching career, and died in 1983 at age 95.

Did McKinlay ever receive the letter shown in Figure 1? The answer is yes, as he kept the envelope until a few years before his death. Where was it turned over to him? There are a number of possibilities. It could have been in Nome upon his rescue in

September 1914, or — if it had been returned to Esquimalt — late in October when some of the survivors were there. He may have obtained it on his way back to Scotland when he passed through Ottawa, where some of the mail to expedition members had been stored.

The second cover took almost as long to get to its addressee. This philatelic cover was postmarked at Fort Ross, Northwest Territories, on Sept. 15, 1941. It bears two dif-

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Figure 1. From southern Africa to the northern reaches of Canada and beyond: this 1913 cover is addressed to William L. McKinlay, a scientist with the Canadian Arctic Expedition aboard the ill-fated S.S. *Karluk*.

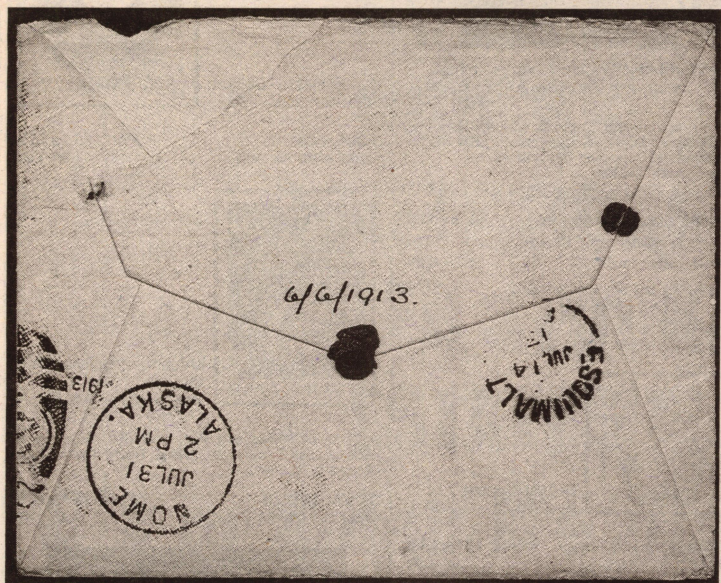


Figure 2. The cover to McKinlay passed through Nome, Alaska, and was then forwarded to Point Barrow, Alaska.

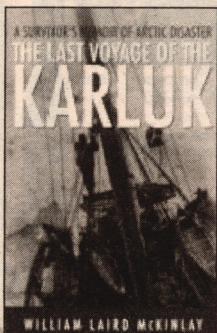


Figure 3. Cover of *Karluk: The Great Untold Story*, by William Laird McKinlay, to whom the cover in Figure 1 is addressed.

Continued on page 63

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Continued from page 47

ferent King George VI stamps issued in 1937 and a 1¢ Sir John A. Macdonald stamp of the 1927 60th Anniversary of Confederation issue.

It is addressed to a Toronto philatelist and picked up a "COPPERMINE, N.W.T." postmark at upper left on Sept. 3 or 13, 1942. As shown in Figure 6, the address includes the notation, "Via Fort Ross and The North West Passage."

Fort Ross was established as a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) post in 1937 on the

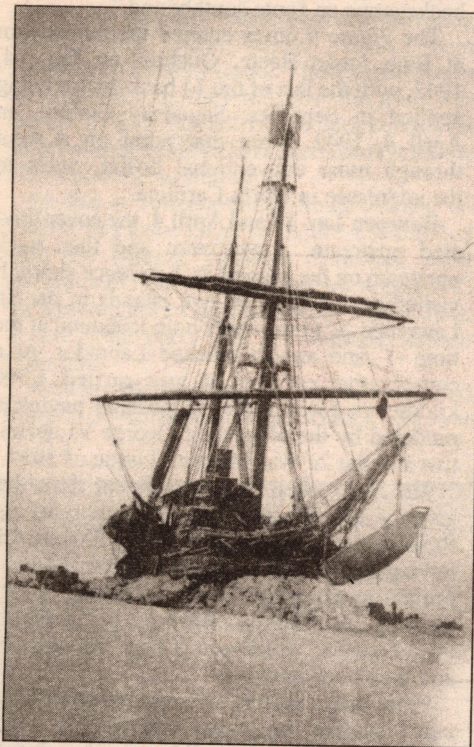


Figure 4. The *Karluk*, trapped in arctic ice, shortly before it was crushed and sank. Image ©2001 The Trustees of Dartmouth College.



Figure 5. Mukpi, an Eskimo girl, the youngest survivor of the S.S. *Karluk*.

southern part of Somerset Island at the entrance to the Bellot Strait, which separates the island from the Boothia Peninsula in the northernmost reaches of the North American mainland.

The post office at Fort Ross was open from Sept. 12, 1940, to March 6, 1943, and again from Sept. 2, 1944, to March 15, 1948.

With more than 1,000 kilometers by sea separating the two places, how did the cover get from one post office to the other? Although the HBC's supply ship R.M.S. *Nascopie* (Figure 7) was at Fort Ross on Sept. 15, 1941, it never, in all of its years of operation, ventured as far west as Coppermine. However, it did carry the cover from its departure point, Montreal, to Fort Ross.

There is no positive proof of how the cover got to Coppermine. There are two previous instances that can be used as possible solutions. The first happened in 1937. After the *Nascopie* brought the mail to Fort Ross that year, it was transferred to the schooner *Aklavik*, which carried the mail to Gjoa Haven on King William Island, thus technically completing the passage through the Northwest

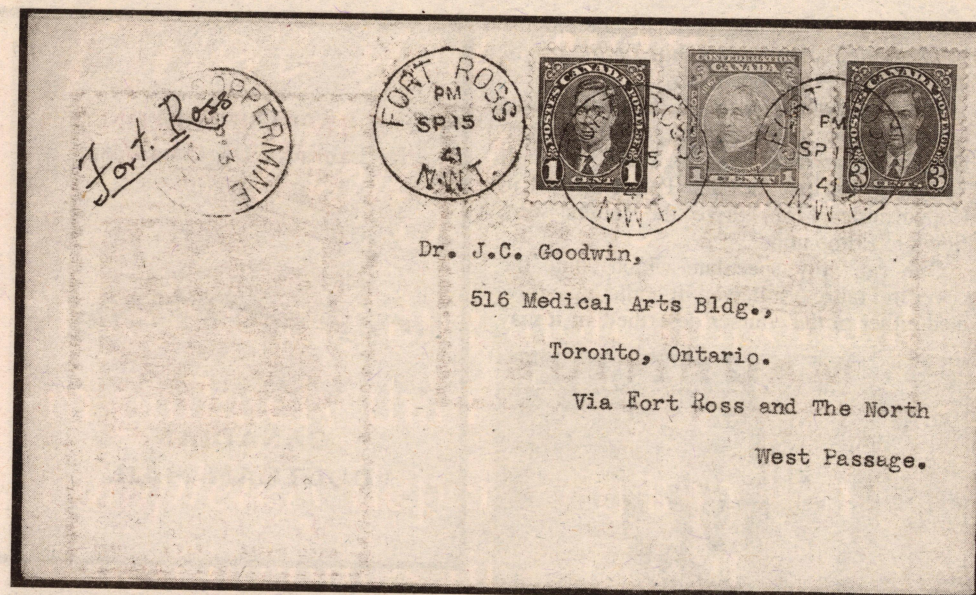


Figure 6. A philatelic cover mailed in 1941 to Toronto, "Via Fort Ross and the North West Passage." The Coppermine postmark at upper left raises the question of how the cover traveled.

Passage.

From Gjoa Haven the mail was carried to Coppermine by dog team during the winter season of 1937-38, or by boat in the summer of 1938. From Coppermine it was flown or sent to Waterways and from there by rail to Edmonton.

Another possible route was the same as the treatment given to the mail the *Nascopie* carried up north in 1938. Because of severe ice conditions, the

*Aklavik* was unable to reach Fort Ross to pick up the mail. The mail was held there until March 1939 and taken by dog team to King

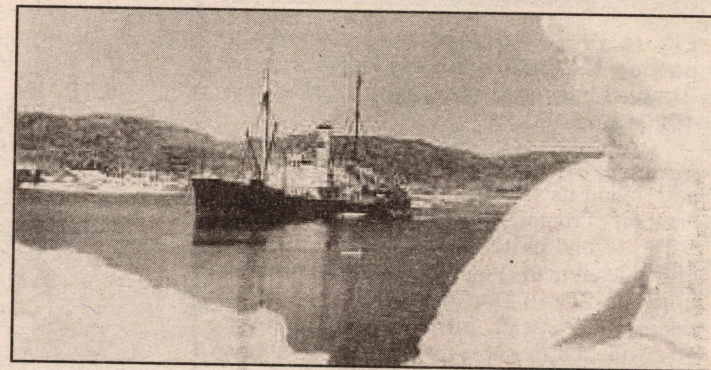


Figure 7. The Hudson's Bay Company's supply ship, R.M.S. *Nascopie*, at Port Burwell in 1934. Courtesy of the HBC Archives 1987/363-N-7/51.

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William Island, leaving there in late August 1939 on the Eskimo motorship *Tudlik*, reaching Perry River in September.

There it waited through freeze-up time before leaving for Cambridge Bay by RCMP Dog Patrol, arriving Nov. 24. It was not until Jan. 8, 1940, that the Dog Patrol arrived in Coppermine. From there the letters were flown to Edmonton.

One can only speculate which route the cover in Figure 6 followed. It could have traveled either of the courses described, or it may



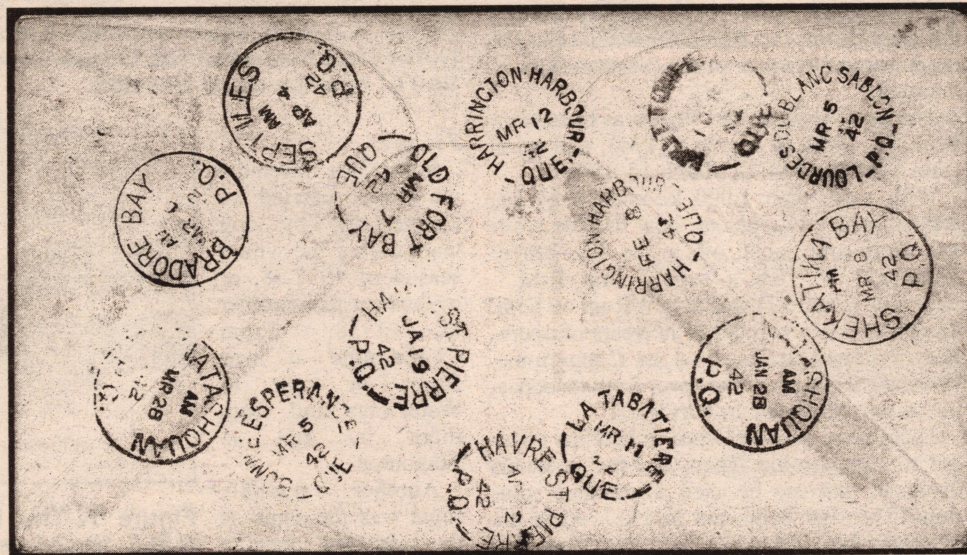
**Figure 8.** Ed Whitehouse's dog team carried the mail between Dawson and Stewart Island in the Yukon during the 1920s and 1930s.

have found its way through some other combination of routes.

The second philatelic cover is an example of dog team mail (Figure 8), which is distinct from the RCMP Dog Patrol mail just mentioned. A dog team carried this 1942 cover along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. With 14 backstamps from 11 different post offices it is a little dog-eared (Figure 9).

The *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* for Jan. 3, 1942 had a short article on the subject of dog team mail.

"Due to the fact that the airplane is taking



**Figure 9.** Fourteen backstamps chronicle the journey of this 1942 dog-team mail cover from Baie Johan Beetz, Quebec, through 11 post offices, en route to North Carolina.

over the carriage of mail to remote points, the dog-team post routes are passing out of existence," the report states. It goes on to say that only a few routes remain in Alaska, Labrador and Upper Quebec.

The article further advises the reader to "Use 3¢ Canadian stamps on your covers from the 'Canuck country' and no routing is necessary as all covers come in a southerly direction from these towns: Natashquan, Sept-Îles, Havre St. Pierre, Baie Johan Beetz, Magpie, Godbout, Bai Comeau, Rivière Pentecôte, Aquanish, Bonne Esperance, Mingan or Kegaska. Covers from the northern towns get backstamps en-route southbound."

The Figure 9 cover entered the mailstream at Baie Johan Beetz, Quebec, on Jan. 14, 1942, with the last of the 14 backstamps being applied in Sept-Îles, Saguenay County, on April 4, 1942. From that point on it went through more conventional postal routes to the addressee in North Carolina.

Between Jan. 14 and April 4, the cover traveled upstream, downstream and then back upstream on the rugged St. Lawrence shore. It visited post offices on two islands in the St. Lawrence — presumably both icebound at the time — and almost reached Labrador. At a conservative estimate it was carried 1,300 kilometers for a mere 3¢ postage payment, rendered by the affixed 1¢ George VI definitive and the 2¢ War Memorial issue of 1939.

The route taken is very different from that given in the *Weekly Philatelic Gossip* article. Reading the backstamps in Figure 9 while following a map will show you how convoluted a philatelic route it took, including going through Harrington Harbor, an offshore island, twice, while going first downstream and then back upstream.

From the comfort of our armchairs, we can visualize the drama and trials of mail delivery in Canada's northern reaches during the early 20th century. The mails did get through, thanks to ship captains, RCMP officers, airplane pilots, dog teams and their drivers.

SSM



Architecture in Slovakia and China — A930

No. 3239: a, Bojnice Castle, Slovakia (2-1). b, Handan Congtai Pavilion, China (2-2).

Photo. & Engr.

2002, Oct. 12 3239 A930 80f Horiz. pair, #a-b

Perf. 11½x11 40 40



Dong Yong and Lady — A931

No. 3240: a, Dong Yong's filial love moves immortals (5-1). b, Dong Yong marries seventh immortal maiden (5-2). c, Immortal maiden weaving brocade (5-3). d, Dong Yong returns home (5-4). e, Everlasting love (5-5).

2002, Oct. 26 3240 Horiz. strip of 5

Perf. 13½x13 1.25 1.25

a-d, A931 80f Any single 20 20

e, A931 82 multi 45 45

Nos. 3240a-3240e exist in booklet panes of one that made up a booklet that had limited distribution to people with standing order accounts.

## CZECH REPUBLIC



No. 3164 Overprinted in Blue

2002, Mar. 8 3168 A1204 12k multi

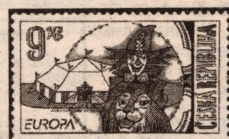
Perf. 11½ 90 45



Divan, by Vlaho Bukovac (1855-1922) — A1208

2002, Apr. 23 3169 A1208 17k multi

Litho. & Engr. Perf. 11½ 1.25 65



Europa A1209

Photo. & Engr.

2002, May 7 3170 A1209 9k multi

Perf. 11½x11½ 70 35

Souvenir Sheet



Czech Culture and France — A1210

No. 3171: a, 23k, Klávěsy Piana-Jezero, by František Kupka. b, 31k, Man with Broken Nose, sculpture by Auguste Rodin.

Perf. 11½x11½

2002, May 7 3171 A1210 Sheet of 2, #a-b

Litho. & Engr. 4.25 2.10



Intl. Children's Day — A1211

Photo. & Engr.

2002, May 29 3172 A1211 5.40k multi

Perf. 11½x11½ 40 20



Margaritifera Margaritifera — A1212

2002, June 6 3173 A1212 9k multi

.70 35



Jan Hus (1372-1415), Religious Leader — A1213

2002, June 19 3174 A1213 9k multi + label

.70 35

Souvenir Sheet



Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) — A1214

Butterflies: a, 5.40k, Maculinea nausithous. b, 5.40k, Maculinea alcon. c, 9k, Maculinea teiellus. d, 9k, Maculinea arion.

2002, June 19 3175 A1214 Sheet of 4, #a-d + 4 labels

Perf. 11½ 2.25 1.10

## DENMARK



Danish House Architecture A432

Designs: 4k, Dianas Have, Horsholm, by Vandkunst Design Studio, 1992. 4.25k, Blangstedgard, Odense, by Poul Ingemann, 1988. 5.50k, Dansk Folkeferie, Karrebakskminde, by Stephan Kappel, 1979. 6.50k, Fredensborg Terraces, Fredensborg, by Jørn Utzon, 1963. 9k, Soholm, Klampenborg, by Arne Jacobsen, 1950.

2002, Nov. 8 1239 A432 4k multi

Litho. & Engr. Perf. 12½ 1.10 55

Booklet, 10 #1239 11.00

1240 A432 4.25k multi 1.25 60

1241 A432 5.50k multi 1.50 75

1242 A432 6.50k multi 1.75 90

1243 A432 9k multi 2.40 1.25

Nos. 1239-1243 (5) 8.00 4.05

## DOMINICA



20th World Scout Jamboree, Thailand — A401

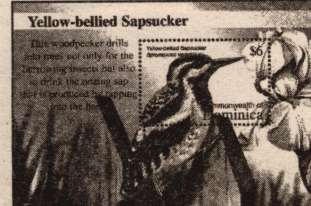
No. 2376: a, Lord Robert Baden-Powell (facing forward). b, Lady Olave Baden-Powell. c, Maceo Johnson. \$6, Lord Baden-Powell (profile).

2002, July 15 2376 A401 \$3 Sheet of 3, #a-c

Litho. Perf. 14½x14 6.75 6.75

Souvenir Sheet

2377 A401 \$6 multi 4.50 4.50



Birds, Insects, Moths and Whales — A402

No. 2378, \$1.50, vert. - Birds: a, Brown trembler. b, Snowy ctinga. c, Bananaquit. d, Painted bunting. e, Belted kingfisher. f, Ruby-throated hummingbird.

No. 2379, \$1.50, vert. - Insects: a, Field cricket. b, Migratory grasshopper. c, Honey bee. d, Hercules beetle. e, Black ant. f, Cicada.

No. 2380, \$1.50, vert. - Moths: a, Carolina sphinx. b, White-lined sphinx. c, Orizaba silkworm. d, Hieroglyphic moth. e, Hickory tussock moth. f, Diva moth.

No. 2381, \$1.50, vert. - Whales: a, Sei. b, Killer. c, Blue. d, White. e, Pygmy. f, Sperm.

No. 2382, \$6, Yellow-bellied sapsucker. No. 2383, \$6, Bumble bee. No. 2384, \$6, Ornate moth. No. 2385, \$6, Gray whale.

2002, July 29 2378-2381 A402 Set of 4

Perf. 14 27.50 27.50

Souvenir Sheets

2382-2385 A402 Set of 4

18.00 18.00



A403

Lighthouses of Holland



A404