

MAIL IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

# Post Office stamping out collecting

Gunnar Skagestad

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A COUPLE of months ago – on November 4, 2010, 100 years had passed since South Africa's first postage stamp was issued: the 2 ½d deep blue, displaying the portrait of King George V (SACC 1 in the SA Colour Catalogue).

The very first South African stamp? Of course not, postage stamps had by then been in use for more than half a century in South Africa. It all actually started in 1853 with the Cape of Good Hope so-called "triangulars". During the subsequent decades, postage stamps were issued by the postal authorities in Natal, the Orange Free State, the ZAR/Transvaal, not forgetting the proliferation of more or less temporal regional and local issuing authorities in the course of colonisation and consecutive wars.

But, in 1910, South Africa appeared on the world map as a single unified country for the first time. Only from then on did the country exist in the capacity of a stamp nation in its own right. So, when discussing the development of South Africa as a stamp issuing entity, it is appropriate to start with the 2 ½d King George V – a stamp which, equally appropriately, was issued on the occasion of the opening of the Union Parliament.

This is an anniversary which (one would have presumed) would have called for a healthy measure of self-gratulatory retrospective indulgence as well as some level-headed analyses of the developments which have taken place during these 100 years – and also some reflections on current developments and possible future perspectives.

A striking feature of this 100-year-span has been the ever-increasing volume of new issues. During the past 100 years the SA Postal authorities (whether Union or Republic) have issued a grand total of 1 986 postage stamps (counting the main catalogue items listed in the SA Colour Catalogue 2010/11, 30th Edition). Thus, the first 20 years (1910-29) saw a total of 37 issues – an average of 1.9 per annum.

During the next 20 years (1930-49) an additional number of 82 stamps were issued, bringing the average up to the level of 4.1 new stamps each year. The following 20-year period (1950-69) brought an increase of 166

new items, which entailed an average of 8.3 per year.

A further 430 new stamps were issued during the 20-year period 1970-89, skyrocketing the annual average to the hefty figure of 21.5.

And during the past 20 years (1990-2009) we have seen the well-nigh unbelievable figure of 1 272, giving an average of 63.6 new stamp items each year.

Why this enormous increase in the number of new stamps? Could it be an ever-increasing demand by the market for new stamps to affix to their letters and parcels?

Or is this spectacular growth in volume due to other factors, like changes with regard to the stamps' functions?

The postal functions of stamps have remained basically unchanged since the One Penny Black came into existence in the UK in 1840. The demand of the market for a practical receipt for a uniform, pre-paid postal transaction is still with us.

But already from the outset, the stamp has been on the defensive vis-à-vis challenges in the market-place, by the emergence of newer technological solutions and alternative methods of communication.

The telegraph had already been invented when the stamps entered the arena, soon to be supplemented by the telephone. The use of stamps would eventually face competition from cancelling machines, later on from the telex, and a number of years thence, from the fax.

By the end of the 20th century, the e-mail and SMSing had universally become everyday means of communication, subsequently to be extended by Facebook and Twitter. So where has this left our traditional and much-beloved stamps?

The electronic means of communications have not made the postage stamp completely superfluous, redundant or obsolete.

One would, however, be very hard pressed to discern any increased postal demand which would necessitate or justify the ever more frequent new stamp issues.

This leaves only the second possibility – that postage stamps have assumed or been assigned functions which cause stamps to be issued for completely different reasons than the original postal ones.

One such reason may be temptation (on the part of the Post Office)

## Even the most meaningless motive is given for a new stamp

to capitalise on an inflated stamp collection market (so-called "cream-skimming"). This is a motive which used to be considered not too respectable, and would place the issuing country in disreputable company – along with so-called "banana republics" (a common definition of a "banana republic" used

to be a place notorious for its "Mickey Mouse currency" and "wallpaper stamps").

But the simple greed motive, the covetous lust for fleecing the naive collectors – those pitiful victims of their own compulsion to acquire all the new stamps that are issued – is certainly not the whole story.

A probably more important driving force is the conscious policy of the SA Post Office (as is also the case of postal authorities in other countries, including my own home country of Norway) to use the issuing of new stamps as a means to promote the country (domestically, but above all to the international audience).

These small bits of paper represent, among other things, the jurisdictional authority of the issuing state. They are, in effect, a state's most prominent "visiting card".

Thus, what we see is an expression of what is called "public diplomacy", which includes projecting a favourable image of one's own country in the minds of the outside world.

This is an exercise which most countries indulge in nowadays, and the postage stamp is an object which is uniquely well equipped for performing this particular function.

Nevertheless, what we see (in South Africa as well as elsewhere) is also a galloping inflation with regard to motives with which the issuing authorities deem fit to adorn their stamps.

Gone are the days when you would expect a stamp to show an official-looking symbol such as the portrait of the head of state, the national coat-of-arms, or commemorating some particularly important event in the history of that country.

The threshold for displaying new motives has been consistently lowered. Today any thinkable kind of motives – from the most spectacularly eccentric to the most insignificant and meaningless ones – are now used as pretext for producing new stamp issues.

One may well wonder what will be the outcome if this development

continues. This is, however, a big "if". The postage stamp – such as we hitherto have known it – may eventually be history. Various factors are at play, that may contribute in this respect. One factor is the general (global) trend towards partial privatisation of a service that previously, from the outset, was seen as a governmental monopoly (and as such, even a signature mark of the state authorities). This is increasingly not the case any more.

Even more importantly, the very identity or distinctive character of postage stamps – the qualities that make them into attractive collector items as well as credible symbols of the state – are in the process of being obliterated as a result of the inflationary issuing policies.

When a new stamp issue is about as interesting as a bit of wallpaper, the commitment of collectors will dry up. In its turn, such a development may also eventually cause the wantonly expansionist issuing policies to come to a halt.

Dear South African fellow stamp collectors: I am not writing this article in order to predict or prophesy the death – imminent or further ahead – of our wonderful hobby I do, however, against the backdrop of the 100-year anniversary of SA stamps, think it is highly pertinent to take a hard look at the developments which we have already observed for what is becoming an increasingly long period of time. Where are these developments leading us?

Are we comfortable with letting this wildly inflationary situation continue, letting our hobby be reduced to randomly collecting insignificant pieces of paper – and, if not, what can be done about it?

These questions should be subjected to a serious debate, and the situation should be addressed by the stamp-collecting community in close dialogue with the issuing authorities (the SA Post Office).

Having said this much, I'd also like to congratulate you all on the proud history of South African postage stamps, and extend my best wishes to the future of South African stamp collecting!

● *Skagestad is deputy director-general of the Norwegian Foreign Affairs Department and from 1984 to 1987 was the Consul in the Norwegian Consulate General in Cape Town.*