Emperor Menelik’s victory at the Battle of Adwa, on 1 March 1896, was a defining event for Ethiopia (Fig. 1). His army of 100,000 spear and gun-wielding soldiers, peasants, and men commanded by Ras Makonnen – father of the future Emperor Haile Selassie – crushed the Italian colonial army that had been expanding Eritrea by occupying regions of Ethiopia. Menelik’s victory established Ethiopia as an independent nation in the horn of Africa surrounded by colonies ruled by Italy, Britain and France. Menelik’s advisor on foreign affairs was Alfred Ilg, a Swiss (Fig. 2). He travelled to Ethiopia in 1878 in response to a request for an engineer to come to Ethiopia to assist the Emperor to modernize his country. In 1893, the Emperor granted Alfred Ilg and Léon Chefneux, a Frenchman, the rights to set up a private postal service and to construct a railway and telegraph line from Djibouti to Addis Ababa.
They travelled to France and engaged the French government to print a set of seven stamps engraved by the famous artist Louis-Eugène Mouchon. The four low values show Emperor Menelik in profile while the three high values depict the heraldic Conquering Lion of Judah (Fig. 4). Arthur Maury, the most prominent stamp dealer in Paris, obtained a commission to sell them to collectors. Printed in 1894, the stamps were brought by Chefneux to Ethiopia in 1895 where they were used for the first time on 29 January 1895 in the ancient, walled city of Harar. In 1892, the French Capuchin Fathers at the Catholic Mission in Harar had established a mail courier between Harar and Obock—a port town opposite the future Djibouti. They were entrusted to sell the Ethiopian stamps and remained in charge of the mail that was carried by camels through the frightful desert between Harar and Djibouti. Several weeks later, after Chefneux had reached Addis Ababa, then called Entotto, a Frenchman was given the task to organize the postal couriers to Harar and to sell the stamps. The first courier left Addis Ababa on 29 May 1895. Only one cover from this inaugural mail dispatch carried by the private Ethiopian Posts exists in private hands (Fig. 5). It was sent by Empress Taitu to Alfred Ilg in Zurich. The Empress was replying to a letter from Ilg. He had written to let her know he was returning to Ethiopia with his Swiss wife, Fanny, nee Gattiker. He beseeched the Empress to accept her, while he promised to continue to support his Ethiopian “wife” and two children.

The Centennial of the Battle of Adwa was commemorated in 1996 with a set of six stamps designed by Ethiopia’s leading stamp designer, Bogale Belatchew (Fig. 3). He designed 75 issues between 1973 and 2019. The victory was also a defining event for Ethiopia’s embryonic postal service, which had to forge its own path and in the process create a unique postal history among European colonies in Africa.

**Background**

The Ethiopian stamps were only valid inside the country and paid for internal transportation since Ethiopia was not admitted to the U.P.U. until 1 November 1908. All mail addressed abroad had to be additionally franked with French colonial stamps when the mail left via Djibouti, or with stamps from India, as used in Aden, when it left via Zalla, a town on the Gulf of Aden coast near Djibouti. Over the years, selected stamps issued for Obock, Djibouti, the French Somali Coast, French Levant and Port-Said were sold and used in Ethiopia. Only recently we have been able to obtain more information about which stamps and which denominations were sold, and when they first were used on mail from Ethiopia. Research by this writer published recently has shed light on this aspect of French colonial philately. Only a handful of Europeans lived in Ethiopia in 1895, while travelers, hunters and explorers seeking adventure were few and far in-between in the immediate years after the Battle of Adwa. The volume of mail was low. Only Europeans and some Indian and Middle Eastern merchants used the postal service. A portion of Ethiopia’s Coptic clergy and some government officials could read and write Amharic, but they did not use the postal service. They traditionally engaged private messengers ("melektegnas") who carried the mail in a cleft stick. Since there were no post offices outside Addis Ababa, Harar and Dire Dawa until the mid-1920s, mail sent to the interior continued to be carried by melektegnas even into the 1930s. Envelopes held in a cleft stick became the symbol of the Ethiopian Posts after World War II—a distinct symbol compared to the post horn many other nations adopted (Fig. 6). A project by the Ethiopian Philatelic Society to record all surviving mail from 1895 to 1909 has so far (May 2019) reached a total of just over 1,250 items of outgoing mail. The total includes 50 items of internal mail. Less than 300 items have been recorded from the first seven years (1895-1901). In addition, less than 80 items of incoming mail from those 14 years have been recorded. They include only one cover from 1895 and one postal card from 1896. It is estimated that 90% of the surviving mail has been recorded in the Ethiopia Cover List.
Mail from Italian Prisoners of War

Approximately 1,900 Italians were taken prisoner at the Battle of Adwa. They were marched to Addis Ababa on their feet and were held as prisoners of war. A peace treaty was signed with Italy in October 1896; it recognized Ethiopia as an independent nation and permitted repatriation of the POWs. Representatives of the Italian Red Cross came to Ethiopia and worked into mid-1897 to repatriate the POWs via Harar and Zaila, where they boarded ships bound for Eritrea and Italy.

When Alfred Ilg returned to Ethiopia with his wife in late 1896, he brought with him postal cards printed in Paris in three denominations with a new depiction of Emperor Menelik turned right and a text that read: “Menelik II, Ethiopiae Imp. Rex” (Fig. 7). The postcards became popular and were used until 1906, when they were sold out. Among the three categories of preserved mail from the pre-U.P.U. period, the postal cards represent 26%, covers 60%, and picture postcards 14%. The Italian POWs used the postal cards to write home. Most of the preserved mail from 1896 and a good portion from 1897 are POW mail. They do include a few covers franked with Indian stamps cancelled in Aden that were used by the Italian Red Cross. Such covers are marked with a hand-stamp reading: “Croce Rossa Italiana – Spedizione per Prigionieri d’Africa” (Figg. 8a and 8b).

Ethiopia’s borders had not been established at the time of the Battle of Adwa. The area ruled by Menelik consisted primarily of Shoa Province (the highlands around Addis Ababa) and land to the East that incorporated Harar (Fig. 9). Recognizing the importance of Ethiopia, Britain and France sent diplomatic missions to the Emperor, in 1897, to establish formal relations. Several French scientific missions arrived to explore the areas to the West that bordered the White Nile territories, while Menelik sent military expeditions to the South to aggressively expand Ethiopia’s empire. The British diplomatic mission left Zaila in March 1897. When it passed through Harar, some members bought pre-cancelled Ethiopian postal cards. To support the mission, the British had organized a courier service between Zaila and the mission while it was in Ethiopia. Its members used some of the postal cards to send messages and franked them with Indian stamps that were cancelled in Zaila.
Two developments that became important for the struggling Ethiopian Posts occurred in 1897. The French began to supply the Catholic Mission in Harar with stamps from Djibouti that were then sold in Ethiopia. The relationship expanded and the Mission began to supply stamps to Addis Ababa. By 1907, about half of the revenue the French Somali Coast collected from selling stamps came from Ethiopia.

The second important event in 1897 was the start in Djibouti of the construction of the railway linking Djibouti to Addis Ababa. Unfortunately, the construction costs became prohibitive and the link was not completed. The terminus was located on the plains below Harar which became a new town, Dire Dawa, now Ethiopia’s second largest city.

The railway was completed in December 1902, but it had begun to be used as soon as it reached the border to transport mail. Residents in Dire Dawa franked mail with French Somali Coast stamps and gave it to railway staff to post it in Djibouti. It was not until 1 November 1906 that a French post office was opened in Dire Dawa. The construction of the extension of the railway began in 1909 and it reached the outskirts of Addis Ababa in 1917. All mail up until the Italian occupation, in May 1936, was transported by rail to Djibouti since there was no air mail service nor any roads leading out of Ethiopia.

Domestic and Incoming Mail

Fig. 10: Cover addressed by J.A. Michel to England in 1907 franked with Dogmawi stamps and 50c Port-Said stamp that was cancelled at the French post office in Dire Dawa.

Fig. 11: Internal cover from Addis Ababa (Entotto) on June 25, 1897 addressed to Harar.

Fig. 12: July 1897 incoming cover from India addressed to Emperor Menelik.
Alfred Ilg’s Independent Ethiopian Posts

The volume of mail fell sharply in 1898 for two reasons. Fewer foreign missions arrived in Ethiopia while Alfred Ilg informed the French colonial administration in Djibouti that he intended to set up an Independent Ethiopian Posts with offices in Harar and Addis Ababa. The French, intent on increasing their influence in Ethiopia since the port of Djibouti depended on trade with Ethiopia, prohibited the French Capuchin Fathers and the Frenchman in charge at the “Ethiopian Posts” in Addis Ababa from accepting mail from residents in Ethiopia unless they were French. The aim was to make Alfred Ilg’s service financially less viable. The sale of Ethiopian stamps came to a halt and most residents in Addis Ababa went without a mail service for several months. Covers sent with the French couriers now appear without Ethiopian stamps but marked on departure with the same Ethiopian date-stamps as in the past. Alfred Ilg turned to his father-in-law in Zurich to recruit Swiss postal clerks to come to Ethiopia to manage his Independent Ethiopian Posts. Otto Gattiker and three Swiss clerks, Mühle (Fig. 13), Wüllschleger, and Spitzer arrived in 1899. Sadly, Spitzer died while crossing the desert on their way to Harar. The Independent Ethiopian Posts was organized with Wüllschleger as Postmaster in Harar based in its only telephone office (Fig. 14). Henri Mühle was placed in charge in Addis Ababa.

The Independent Ethiopian Posts initiated their service on 12 May 1899 with two couriers per month to Harar’s telephone office (Fig. 15). The mail was carried in bags on the backs of donkeys (Fig. 16). The distance of 310 miles was typically completed in ten days. When the mail arrived at Harar’s telephone office it was postmarked in transit and handed over to the French Capuchin Fathers across town at the Catholic Mission. It became known as the French post office (Fig. 17). It had a semi-autonomous relationship with the postal authority in Djibouti and began to use a canceller that read “Harar Postes Françaises” in October 1899 (Fig. 18). Mail posted at the French post office did not require Ethiopian stamps since it only paid for internal transportation.
The British and French had continued to compete for influence in Ethiopia. It appears the British had convinced Mühle to direct the outgoing mail through Harar to Zaila, rather than Djibouti, since a large portion of the recorded mail from 1900 is franked with Indian stamps (Fig. 19a and 19b). When the newspaper in Djibouti reported on the completion of the railway in Dire Dawa in December 1902, it wrote that the company had contracted with the Posts to transport mail. The reporter opined that there was no longer any need for customers of the Ethiopian Posts to have the mail sent through Zaila since the railway reduced the delivery time by several days. The comment indirectly confirms that the British had succeeded in temporarily thwarting the French in their efforts to profit from selling stamps in Ethiopia. Mail franked with stamps from India now become rare in the record.

Indian Stamps use in Ethiopia

The Independent Ethiopian Posts soon had an obstacle to overcome since its finances were shaky. The volume of mail remained low, although there was income from transporting packages, newspapers from abroad, and gold exported from the gold mines in Wallaga in the western part of the country. In 1900, Ethiopian stamps were sold by Arthur Maury deeply discounted at the Universal Exhibition in Paris. Some of them found their way to Ethiopia where they were used to frank mail. It deprived the Ethiopian Posts of income from selling stamps. The financial situation had become critical in mid-1901. Henri Mühle announced that the Posts would close – a decision he rescinded shortly thereafter. He had found a solution. Mühle hand-overprinted the stamps of 1895 with the word “Ethiopie” in violet (Fig. 20).

The Annual Overprints

He then circulated a hand-written notice to the 41 regular customers in Addis Ababa announcing that as of 18 July 1901 only stamps with this overprint would be valid for postage. In addition to saving the Posts, it had two important consequences:

1. Since “Ethiopie” was easy to forge, the Posts initiated a policy of annually releasing a new overprint – a process that was maintained into 1908.
2. Collectors could not buy the overprinted stamps from Maury in Paris; dealers and collectors now had to buy them from the Ethiopian Posts. It became financially beneficial since the value of a set was 31 ¾ guerches. The 8 and 16-guerches stamps that were seldom used for postage were now sold in “collections,” mint or CTO, that included all seven values. This added revenue was important since postage for a regular letter was 2 guerches and ½ guerche for a card.

Covers with complete sets begin to appear in the philatelic record in 1901. Today, close to 10% of the recorded mail from 1895–1908 can be classified as philatelic. Since the two highest values were rarely used, covers with complete sets are often the only recorded usage of these high-value stamps.

Fig. 19a and 19b: Postal card franked with Indian stamps sent through Zaila and Aden. Card sent by Carlos Erlanger, a naturalist who described several new species from Ethiopia.

Fig. 20: Cover to Italy franked with strip of Ethipie overprinted stamps in February 1902.
Jean-Adolph Michel arrives in Ethiopia

In 1901 a new development took place resulting in an unexpected monumental impact on the Ethiopian Posts; Wüllschleger, Harar’s Postmaster, committed suicide. To replace him, Alfred Ilg recruited a Swiss, Jean-Adolph Michel (Fig. 21), 21 years old, who arrived in Harar in October 1901, where he sent a postal card to his brother Fritz, an employee of the Swiss telegraph (Fig. 22). Michel was an enterprising person. He understood that philatelists appreciated unusual items as evidenced by his first card. When he passed through Djibouti, he had found that the Djibouti post office had encountered “shortages” of various values and had begun to use vertically divided stamps. Inspired, and on his own initiative, Michel divided stamps diagonally and sent several cards franked with them after he had arrived in Addis Ababa, where he began working under Mühle at the post office in Addis Ababa (Fig. 23). Michel was then transferred to Harar as Postmaster at the Ethiopian post and telephone office as of March 1902. Due to shortages of small values in Djibouti, the colonial administration had decided to release stamps from its stock of Obock stamps it had held after Obock’s post office had been closed. Obock stamps of both the “warrior” and “group-type” were sent to Ethiopia and began to appear on the outgoing mail in 1901. Just before Michel arrived back in Harar, we find the earliest recorded picture postcard mailed in Ethiopia (Figg. 24a and 24b). Written by a Belgian traveler, it was franked with bisected Obock stamps (one of only three items from Ethiopia with these vertically bisected stamps). Fittingly, the picture side shows the train that had begun to transport mail between Djibouti and the rail-head as the construction progressed.

Before Michel left Harar, he had helped create the second hand-overprint consisting of three Amharic letters that read “Bosta” (for Post). It was struck with violet ink and was issued on 1 April 1902. Michel had found an old (and the first) printing-press brought to Ethiopia by the Frenchman, Mondon-Vidhaillet, who was a linguist and who had managed the embryonic Ethiopian Posts in Addis Ababa in 1895–1898. Ever resourceful, Michel was also likely responsible for re-issuing the Ethiopic overprint struck with blue ink, in 1902, to be sold to collectors only—an idea that carried over to “Bosta,” which was re-issued in black.
American Missions to Ethiopia 1903-1904

A third hand-overprint "Melekt" ("message"), struck with black ink utilizing Amharic type-font Michel had found, was issued on 15 April 1903 (Fig. 25). As with Bosta it invalidated the earlier issues. However, in practice both Ethiopia and Bosta were accepted as postage. Mühle, who had become Director of the Ethiopia Posts and had earned the praise of Alfred Ilg for his diligent work, fell ill. He died of smallpox in July 1903 and was buried in Addis Ababa. A Greek telegraphist, Aristide Voultzos, who had worked with Mühle, succeeded him in Addis Ababa. Although, Ilg was unhappy with Michel, he was appointed Director of "Postes et Télégraphes Éthiopiens" in October 1904.

Travelers to Addis Ababa would pass through Harar and most of them met Michel and obtained important information about the route to Addis Ababa. Michel is mentioned in Skinner’s book “Abyssinia of To-day.” It also includes photos taken by Michel.

A treaty was agreed with Menelik and the mission returned to the United States. Skinner’s book “Abyssinia of To-day.” It also includes photos taken by Michel.

Robert P. Skinner, America’s consul in Marseilles, was tasked by the U.S. government to lead a mission to Menelik in 1903 to negotiate a commercial treaty. The mission, which included 30 marines, met Michel and obtained important information about the route to Addis Ababa. Michel is mentioned in Skinner’s book “Abyssinia of To-day.” It also includes photos taken by Michel. A treaty was agreed with Menelik and the mission returned to the United States.

After the treaty had been ratified by Congress, it had to be returned to Menelik.

Michel as Director of the Ethiopian Posts

Appointed Director of the Ethiopian Posts in October 1904, Jean-Adolph Michel went on the offensive. He immediately created a new hand-overprint, but Ilg did not permit him to put it in circulation. A new issue had been planned for 1905. However, it did not stop Michel from selling the stamps to collectors and making more of them in the years that followed. This subordination would have consequences for the future of Ethiopia’s postal history and philately.

Fluctuations in the exchange rate between the French gold franc and the Ethiopian silver thaler had unbalanced the ratio of 25 centimes = 1 guerche. Michel had obtained a printing set meant for children and used it to handstamp the 1895 stamps with new values: 05, 10, 20 up to 3.60 to re-denominate the stamps so that 25 centimes = 20 Ethiopian centimes, or 1 guerche. The stamps were issued 1 January 1905. Michel had imported a bicycle, possibly the first in Ethiopia, and a camera. He went to work producing the first series of picture post cards with scenes from Ethiopia: Harar and its surroundings (Fig. 28, next page). The cards went on sale in January 1905. In subsequent years he produced several other series including one with scenes from Addis Ababa. These cards are now an important visual historical record.

In the first quarter of 1905, large German and Austrian missions passed through Harar and they bought many of Michel’s postcards that they sent to Europe. Their interest in stamps inspired Michel to claim a shortage of small values and added "05" to a few hundred of the retired Ethiopia, Bosta and Melekt stamps. He also bisected the 1-guérchen stamp and added "5 c/m." To ensure these “Harar Provisionals” were accepted by philatelists, Michel wrote to Bolling, a French dealer, explaining the reason for the provisionals.

Fig. 25: Melekt overprinted stamps issued on April 15, 1903.

Fig. 26: William H. Ellis who delivered the first commercial treaty between the United States and Ethiopia in August 1904.

Fig. 27: September 5, 1904. Cover sent by William H. Ellis reporting the delivery of the Treaty, one of 15 recorded covers addressed to the United States in 1895-1908.

A Mr. Loomis in the State Department was picked to lead the second American mission. It included William H. Ellis, who had independently visited Ethiopia in 1903 (Fig. 26). While sailing to England, Loomis fell overboard and drowned. Ellis was asked to head the mission. Ellis was rich, well connected socially and a flamboyant character and a well-known Wall Street financier with offices at 23 Wall Street next to J.P. Morgan’s Bank. What few knew was that Ellis had been born a slave in Texas; he had left the small town in which he lived and set up a business and, because of his light-hued skin, was able to pass himself off as Mexican. Accepted as a white person, he was able to build his fortune.

William H. Ellis had an audience with Menelik on 2 August 1904 as he related in a letter that he sent to Dudley Carter c/o Leslie Carter, America’s most famous actress on Broadway at the time (Fig. 27). Ironically, Menelik was the largest slave-owner in Ethiopia. However, it is fitting that America’s first treaty with Ethiopia was delivered by an African-American. Unfortunately, William H. Ellis fell on hard times. He died penniless in Mexico City, where he was buried.
They were used into 1907. Surviving incoming mail from 1895-1909 is rare. Less than 80 items have been recorded to date. Among them are 40 covers and cards that have one or more of Michel’s postage dues to indicate that the internal postage had been paid. One is the only recorded incoming cover from the United States to Addis Ababa in the pre-U.P.U. period (Fig. 29). Franked with a 5c Lincoln stamp in Chicago, it received a 1-guerche postage due in Harar one month later. To date, only 15 outgoing covers addressed to the United States in 1895-1908 have been recorded. At the end of 1905, Michel’s activities included hunting and collecting wild animals that he kept in his courtyard and likely tried to export to Europe. Actually, Michel sent a cover to the famous German lion-tamer, Mr. Seeth, who performed across Europe with lions Emperor Menelik had given to him in 1898 when he visited Ethiopia! Two new hand-overprinted issues were released in 1906. The first was created with the “Numerals” of 1905 hand-overprinted “Menelik” in Amharic. Since few Numerals remained, these stamps were sold out in mid-1906 when a second issue with a different hand-overprint that also reads “Menelik” in Amharic was released. Michel’s management of the Imperial Ethiopian Posts deteriorated in 1907. In mid-1907, the French decided they would allow their consular couriers to carry mail from the public. A handful of covers have been preserved from late 1907 and early 1908 franked with French colony stamps that were cancelled with a mute Maltese Cross canceller (Fig. 30) or a circular Consular Addis Ababa postmark without a date. Cut off from most of the modern world the residents in Addis Ababa (and Michel) were able to see the first automobile arrive in December 1907 driven from Djibouti by an Englishman and his engineer. Interested in all things modern, it took only a few days before the Emperor drove the car! The first airplane did not arrive until 1929.
The Reorganization by the French

The French convinced the Emperor to let them re-organize his Posts and prepare it for entry into the U.P.U. The Postmaster in Djibouti, Roque, was brought to Addis Ababa in 1908. In February he received Michel’s stock of stamps; 65,567 in total. Since it was difficult for collectors to obtain stamps from mail that had been sent from Ethiopia, and it was difficult to buy them from Ethiopia, forgers went to work. One of them was Michel. In late 1905, he re-produced the Ethiopie overprint with a different handstamp and sold them to dealers. They quickly saw the difference and alerted Alfred Ilg. He demanded Michel stop selling them, but he did not. Fournier also produced excellent “facsimiles” to which he added his own overprints imitating those of all issues released in 1901-1908. Many other forgeries were produced in Europe, and in the 1970s in Addis Ababa a Greek stamp-dealer went to work making fakes. Roque was practical and effective in his approach. He ordered a new set of stamps to be printed in Paris. After it arrived it was issued on 29 January 1909 following Ethiopia’s admission to the U.P.U. (Universal Postal Union) on 1 November 1908. He also recruited six French postal clerks. They arrived in Ethiopia in May and began their tasks on 1 June 1908 in Addis Ababa, and in Harar, where the French post office had been closed. The Dire Dawa post office became an Ethiopian post office.

A new General Post Office was opened in Addis Ababa, inaugurated by the Emperor in August 1908, shortly after a second post office had been opened in Addis Ababa’s central market. There were now four post office in Ethiopia. It remained that way into the mid-1920s when...

Ras Tafari, future Emperor Haile Selassie, embarked on an expansion of the postal system which resulted in post offices being opened in small towns across Ethiopia. Surviving mail from most of those post offices is rare; only 2 or 3 covers have been recorded from some of them.

After Michel had handed over his stock of stamps, the old issues were declared valid for postage. Ethiopia and the issues that followed therefore began to appear on the mail that continued to be carried by donkeys to the train at Dire Dawa. However, it appears that a shortage of low values developed or was about to be felt. A reported 7500 of the ½-guerche stamps were released from the government stock and hand-stamped “1 Piastre” with a scroll below. Issued on 15 August 1908, they had been sold out or withdrawn by early October since they are no longer found on later mail. The enterprising Michel, no longer employed by the Posts, created an imitation that he began to sell. Its overprint was blue rather than greenish-blue. It became clear that the new stamps would not arrive from Paris in time for Ethiopia’s admission to the U.P.U. Stamps of all seven values were released from the government stock and overprinted with a printing press in values from ¼ piastre up to 16 piastres matching the underlying values in guerches. The stamps were issued on 1 November 1908, the day Ethiopia became a member of the U.P.U. The sale of French colony stamps ceased; Ethiopian stamps were now valid for postage to all U.P.U. member countries. The use of this issue was short-lived since the new stamps were issued on 29 January 1909 (Fig. 31 and 32). The Ethiopian Posts prospered in the decades that followed, managed by French clerks and a growing staff of Ethiopians.
American Legation Mail

The British and Italian legations had continued to use their joint couriers. When an American Legation was established in Addis Ababa, in 1908, it set up its own couriers to Djibouti, where the mail was transferred to the Binger, a small boat that took the mail to Aden whence it entered the U.P.U. mail-stream franked with Indian stamps (Fig. 33). In 1911, the American Vice-Consul, Guy Love, wrote to his mother in Coshocton, Ohio, that the consular service would cease on 13 October 1911. All his mail thereafter was franked with Ethiopian stamps and was handled by the Ethiopian Posts. Guy Love suddenly died in 1913 just after he had sent a letter to his mother saying he would return home.

Royal Italian Commercial Agency Mail

The Italians continued to be interested in Ethiopia and had received permission to set up Royal Italian Commercial Agencies in a few towns across Ethiopia. Their purpose was to explore commercial possibilities that could advance Eritrea’s interests. Activated in 1908 in Adwa, Macalle, Dessie and a few other locations, the Italian staff made arrangements for their own mail couriers to Eritrea. Their mail was franked with Colonia Eritrea stamps that were cancelled in Adi Ugri or Adi Caie, in Eritrea, on the border to Ethiopia. The agencies were supplied with date-stamps that included the town name and “Etiopia” in Italian. A few items have been recorded from Dessie and Macalle postmarked with these cancellers (Fig. 34). They were seldom used to avoid the political complications of Italians operating a mail service in independent Ethiopia with Italian cancellers that read “Etiopia” just as Ethiopia was joining the U.P.U.!

The Dire Daoua Provisionals

The last use of the 1895 stamps occurred in October 1911 when the French Postmaster in Dire Dawa, Joseph Guillet, decided to issue provisionals falsely claiming that a delivery of 1909 stamps from Addis Ababa had been delayed and that he had run out of stamps. The seven values of the 1895 issue were hand-overprinted “AFF. EXCEP. FAUTE TIMB” (Exceptional Franking – Lacking Stamps), mimicking similar issues that had appeared in Madagascar where Guillet had previously worked as a Postmaster. Guillet prepared covers with complete sets addressed locally or to Harar. The stamps were cancelled with a date-stamp that was not in use at the time. Covers addressed to Harar were stamped with a Harar canceller he had taken with him when he was transferred from Harar to Dire Dawa in 1909.

To ensure he could sell these untraveled “Dire Daoua Provisionals” to dealers in Europe, Guillet had a friend send registered letters franked with the 4-guerches value to dealers explaining the situation. The stamps were listed in catalogues; as a result Guillet’s sales took off. These stamps have long been considered rare, but research by this writer has recorded around 100 sets and 100 sets on covers. However, only two of the covers to Europe that traveled in the mails have been recorded.
The Animals & Rulers Stamps

Michel returned to Europe in 1909, where he married. Emperor Menelik became increasingly frail and died in December 1913. He was succeeded by his 16-year-old grandson, Lij Iyasu. There were no changes in the postal system nor were any stamps issued to mark the change in power. Alfred Ilg lived in Zurich and died in 1916. Michel returned to Ethiopia with his wife in 1912 and began working for a rubber plantation. He became friends with Lij Iyasu and named one of his children after him. Lij Iyasu appointed Michel as an Advisor to the State shortly before Ras Tafari and Zauditu, Menelik’s daughter, deposed him in October 1916. Ras Tafari was made Regent in 1917 and Zauditu crowned Empress – an event that was commemorated with three different overprinted issues using the 1909 stamps. Ras Tafari had been educated by the French Capuchin Fathers in Harar and knew Michel. When Ras Tafari became Regent in 1912 he commissioned Michel, or Michel convinced Ras Tafari, to issue a new set of stamps. The process began in early 1917. The French in charge of the post thought they would be printed in Paris. However, Michel, working with his brother Fritz in Bern, and an Ethiopian friend, Zamanuel, who was appointed as Minister of the Posts, secretly arranged to have the stamps printed in Switzerland. They were based on rough sketches by Michel depicting animals and on photos of Ras Tafari and Empress Zauditu taken at the coronation.

Due to unknown complications, Michel had to front the payment for the stamps. To ensure repayment, he arranged a contract with Zamanuel that gave him 10% of the new stamps for Michel to sell in Europe and the right to reprint them after ten years. He also received six of the old cancellers and the hand-stamps he had used when he was Director of the Ethiopian Posts. With World War I over, Michel returned to Europe in 1919 and settled in Nice. The new stamps, dubbed the “Animals & Rulers” were issued in June 1919. They were used with various surcharges into 1928 when Ethiopia’s fourth set of stamps was issued, now printed in France.

The 1 and 2-guérche values of the “Animals & Rulers” depict Ras Tafari, who was crowned King in 1928 and Emperor in 1930 when he took the name Haile Selassie (Fig. 35). Haile Selassie returned to Ethiopia in 1941 after the British, with forces from Kenya and South Africa had liberated the country from the occupying Italians. Haile Selassie was included on most stamps of the 1940s onwards to the 1970s and appeared on a large definitive set in 1973 before he was overthrown by a military junta in 1974. He also appeared on numerous stamps issued by many other countries.

Michel arranged to re-print the “Animals & Rulers” in 1931 and sold them as genuine through Bela Sekula. The stamps were difficult to distinguish as reprints since they had been printed using the same type of paper and inks. Michel was contacted by a Swedish philatelist, Ivan Adler, in the 1950s. Adler compiled the first specialized handbook of Ethiopia’s early stamps. Unfortunately, he relied on Michel, who made up facts as he went along. Michel also produced many faked covers using the cancellers and hand-stamps he had obtained in 1918. He became the chief faker of Ethiopian postal history. Jean-Adolph Michel died in 1967, outlived by Emperor Haile Selassie. It was only in the early 1980s that the extent of Michel’s production was revealed. Fortunately, he was sloppy and his fake covers are easy to detect. Menelik’s historic victory at Adwa, in 1896, laid the foundation for Ethiopia’s postal history to forge its own unique path. As mentioned earlier, postal progress was energized by a small group of individuals in which Jean-Adolph Michel, the young 21-year old from Switzerland, emerged as the key player.
However, it must be pointed out that the credit of the first prepaid postal stationery should in truth be given to Italy because some twenty-one years earlier (1819) the Kingdom of Sardinia issued, for the first time in man’s history, watermarked letter sheets - “stamped letter paper” as it was called then, later on called “cavallini” (little horses) by collectors. On the outer part of the letter sheets was printed in blue ink a device designed by mint engraver Amedeo Lavy featuring a cherub riding a horse and blowing a posthorn; below this charming allegory was the tariff in centesimi which varied depending on the destination’s distance from the point of departure (15, 25 and 50c). This was a provisional issue, while the embossing punches with similar designs and tariffs were prepared for the 1820 issue. Even though technically the “Cavallini” are not the same as adhesive postage stamps and Mulready envelopes the reasoning for their creation is basically the same because it would seem that the British had understood the practical aspects of the “Cavallini” and had improved and fine-tuned the concept. Beyond their affinities, “Cavallini” and Mulready envelopes have something else in common: a good portion of the public did not quite understand their purpose and therefore they were short-lived. Nevertheless, during the course of time, both innovations enjoyed a tremendous success, even though they were far ahead of their times. Let us take one step at a time.

1 Non angli sed angeli, 573 AD, legendary motto of the future Pope Gregory, it referred to the English slaves at the Roman forum. It is the first documented mention of the presence of English in Rome.

Fig. 1 and 2: Coelebs in search of a Mulready Envelope, 1865. George Louis Palmella-Busson Du Maurier (British, 1834-1896).
The Mulready envelope is a veritable jewel of world philately. The very inventors of the first-ever postage stamp created the Mulready envelope because they had many doubts about the general public acceptance of adhesive postage stamps and therefore provided an alternative choice. They thought that a prepaid postage envelope was a stroke of genius as far as postal communications was concerned. Yet, they were wrong: from the very beginning the postage stamp won the public’s favour bringing the Mulready to a standstill. As a result, in due course, the postal authorities decided to discontinue the sale of the prepaid Mulready envelopes. It is difficult for us to understand why such a visually attractive item which offered undeniable practicality proved unconvincing to its contemporaries, in spite of the fact that the illustrations of the address side had been created by William Mulready – one of the most important artists of the time. Even the father of the 1840 postal reform Rowland Hill wrote in his diary: “I fear we shall have to substitute some other stamp for that design by Mulready ... the public have shown their disregard and even distaste for beauty.”

The Mulready postal stationery envelopes were available in two formats: unfolded letter-sheets and unfolded envelopes; and in two denominations 1d (printed in black) for domestic use throughout the United Kingdom (maximum weight: ½ ounce) and 2d (printed in blue; maximum weight: 1 ounce). These splendid predecessors of what is usually described as “postal stationery” were meant for domestic use, although 2d letter-sheets vertical margins provided succinct information on posting Mulready letter-sheets and envelopes bound for colonial or foreign destinations, in which case they required additional franking using properly positioned (at the top) adhesive postage stamps.

As mentioned earlier, the Mulready stationery generated hesitation on the part of the public and very few individuals ventured to use such envelopes and letter-sheets for correspondence to foreign destinations; when you add these considerations to their short life you can appreciate that Mulready postal stationery to destinations other than the United Kingdom is pretty scarce and highly sought after².

Try to figure out what effect a Mulready envelope would have had on an addressee outside the United Kingdom! It looked like an actual ambassador of Great Britain. Since the Mulready postal stationery was introduced as an alternative to adhesive postage stamps its use was mostly limited to domestic correspondence. The idea of using it for correspondence to foreign countries, which in many instances required the use of additional postage stamps, must have looked unattractive and somewhat complicated. It is easy to speculate that anyone who sent a letter to a foreign country utilizing a Mulready envelope must have had a very good reason, such as surprising the addressee with an unusual wrapping of the letter-sheet. This seems a reasonable conjecture to which we will return later.

One penny Mulready envelopes sent to foreign destinations are decidedly uncommon, and only five sent to Italy have been so far recorded³:

1. 1d Mulready mailed on its first day of use (6 May 1840) to an addressee in Rome from where it was re-routed to Florence;
2. 1d Mulready mailed on 22 May 1840 to an addressee in Florence⁴;
3. 1d Mulready mailed on 1 June 1840 (ex Wills collection and ex Pitlochry collection⁵) featured in this article;
4. 1d Mulready mailed on 25 June 1840 (address side only), to an addressee in Naples;
5. 1d Mulready mailed on 20 June 1840 to an addressee in Chiavenna⁶ (folded inside).

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³ My thanks go to Karl Louis, AIEP expert for Great Britain, who has kindly provided this information from his archive.
⁵ Huggins/Holyoake, The Mulready Postal Stationery, cit., p. 115.
Let’s return to the number 3 Mulready which is an envelope (Stereo on reverse A 142): posted in London (backstamped in green ink by Portugal Street post office). From there it goes to the General Post Office where it is struck by a B/PAID/1 JUNE/1840 date-stamp. This Mulready is pre-paid to the Franco-Tuscan border as witnessed by the family hand-written “P 1/7” at top center left, meaning Pai(aid) 1 shilling 7 pence.

The British courier handed it over to the French counterparts at Calais as confirmed by the red French entry circle date-stamp at lower right ANGL./2/CALAS/2 - 3 JUN 40. From there it goes to Lyon and in due course to the Franco-Italian border where it was stamped with the Kingdom of Sardinia entry hand-stamp VIA Di/ PT BEAUVOISIN at top right hand-side.

Then, it proceeds to Chambery and descends the Alps transiting in Turin from where it heads south to Genoa. The Rome-bound Mulready is placed in Tuscany’s mailbag which is opened at destination in Florence, the Mulready is then hand-stamped CORRISP.(ordenza)A EST(era) DA GENOVA (Foreign Mail from Genoa).

The 13-day journey is completed as the envelope reaches the Papal States capital where it is back-stamped with the circle date-stamp (CBS) ROMA / ARRIVI 13/GIU/1840. The addressee pays the handsome amount of 50 bajocchi, which is to say more than 2.50 Italian Lire.

Our Mulready’s addressee is Nicholas Wiseman, at the time Rector of the English College: The future Cardinal was born in 1802 in Seville from parents of Irish descent who had recently moved to Spain; after the death of his father in 1805 he was brought to his parents’ home in Waterford, Ireland. In 1810, he was sent to Ushaw College, near Durham, where he received his education until he was sixteen. It was then decided to send him to the Venerable English College in Rome which had re-opened in 1816 after twenty years of closure caused by the Napoleonic occupation of the Italian peninsula. In 1824, Wiseman completed his formative education in Rome earning a doctorate in theology with distinction and the following year he was ordained to the priesthood. He had acquired great fluency in the Italian language and had a keen interest in Oriental languages which in due course would earn him the post of professor of Oriental languages in the Roman University. In 1828, when he was only 26 years of age, Wiseman was appointed Rector of the Venerable English College. His tenure as Rector has been described as “the golden age of the College”, in fact they stand out for the restructuring, both architecturally and theologically of the institution during the post-Napoleonic years. On 4 June 1840, he was elevated to Bishop of Melipotamus, and held his last visit to Rome took place in 1862; he departed this life on 16 February 1865.

Our interest for this fascinating document does not end here. As luck would have it this Mulready envelope was sent to an important personage: “The Most Reverend and Honourable Doctor Wiseman, Rector of the English College in Rome”. Needless to say my curiosity about this – until then unknown to me – luminary and his institution had been surpassingly stimulated. The other attention getter is the “Venerable English College” in Rome, the oldest English institution abroad, founded in 1362, it becomes known as the “Hospice” for English pilgrims visiting the Eternal City: In 1579 it becomes a seminary preparing English and Welsh men for the Catholic priesthood; since then it became the Venerable English College; it is located at 45 di Monserrato Street in the vicinity of the Farnese Palace and Piazza Navona in the heart of Rome. During its 700 years of existence, its rich history is particularly interesting. In addition to the church (which in today’s version dates back to 1888) and to the Martyrs’ Chapel, mention must be made of the Refectory and its ceiling showing a splendid fresco of St. George. The garden is also noteworthy in that it has remained mostly unchanged since the 1600s and contains interesting remnants of the medieval church. Lastly, the big Stairway and the Cardinals’ Corridor are very impressive.

Wiseman was appointed pro-vicar Apostolic of the London District; in 1850, after Pius IX re-established the Catholic hierarchy in England, Wiseman was elevated to the cardinalate, on 7 October; in a pastoral to English Catholics he announced that he had been appointed by the Pope the newly-created Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. Wiseman was a prolific writer with a number of important books and treatises to his credit; his most famous book is the 1854 romance of “Fabiola or the Church of the Catacombs” which met with a phenomenal success and was subsequently translated into many languages. In Rome he had excellent rapports with scholars and historians such as Angelo Mai and Gaetano Moroni. His health, however, had been gradually deteriorating, but he managed to remain active and his last visit to Rome took place in 1862; he departed this life on 16 February 1865.
This research generated more interest for other aspects of the English presence in Rome which could be gleaned from old correspondence and mail⁹. On an 1850 envelope posted in England I found a most beautiful print of the “Hotel d’Angleterre” in Rome. Just a stone’s throw from the legendary Spanish Steps and from the hustle and bustle of the haute couture shopping streets such as Via Condotti, Via Borgognona and Via Frattina you will find a very impressive palace which is now a luxurious hotel. The fame of the Hotel d’Inghilterra is due to its illustrious guests including those from the international aristocracy who sojourned there.

The mid-XVIIth century building was transformed into a hotel in 1845; it originally served as guest quarters for the friends of the Torlonia Princes (major bankers and prominent mail forwarders) whose Palace is situated on the opposite side of the street. The Hotel d’Inghilterra owes its name to the celebrated English poet Keats who, together with his romantic colleagues – Lord Byron and Shelly, made it their favourite place of residence in the Eternal City. The Hotel’s logo takes inspiration from the English royal family coat of arms and testifies to the deep, centuries-old bond with England and the crown of the Windsors. Since its inception the Hotel has attracted aristocrats and internationally famous figures such as Franz Liszt, Hans Christian Andersen, Henry James, Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway and in modern times movie stars such as Liz Taylor and Gregory Peck¹⁰.

Mention has been made of the Torlonia bankers and their role as mail forwarding agents who facilitated postal communications to and from foreign countries. The Torlonias assisted their clients who needed to send mail abroad; however their familiarity with the modus operandi of foreign postal administrations explains their important role as intermediaries of mail from foreign countries to Italy¹¹. The English community in Rome exchanged most of their pounds into scudi with the time-honoured assistance of the Torlonias. Popes Pius V and Pius VI had bestowed on them several titles and on these and other occasions the Torlonias held fabulous receptions for their friends and clients – six out of ten invitees were English. Even on the postal front the Torlonias were the quintessential touchstone for the English community in Rome. This aspect is confirmed by a letter dated 16 February 1833, sent from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Rome to a “John Walde Esq. Care of Messrs Torlonia & Co.” Two shillings and nine pence postage had been paid at posting point which was sufficient to pay delivery to the French border; the letter was routed via France: Calais, Paris, Lyon, Pont de Beauvoisin; from there it entered the Kingdom of Sardinia and reached its capital, Turin, from whence it went on to Florence. At destination the Torlonias paid the Papal Post for their client 33 bajocchi.


¹⁰ https://www.starhotelscollezione.com/it/i-nostri-hotel/hotel-d-inghilterra-roma

Another English link to Rome comes from a letter posted in Rome to an addressee in London; it is dated 11 December 1848 and is backstamped with a most beautiful hand-stamp inscribed THE BRITISH CLUB ROME. Unfortunately I have been unable to get any information about this Club; what is sure is that it existed and must have had some notability.

Earlier, speaking about the Hotel d’Angleterre I mentioned the famous poet John Keats who died and was buried in Rome where he spent his last 100 days. At the right foot of the Spanish Steps at No. 26 you will find the Keats-Shelley House, a very impressive museum honouring the poets John Keats and Percy B. Shelley, as well as Lord Byron, the iconic protagonists of Romanticism and true giants of British literature. At the museum you will see the letters sent to the two poets, part of their correspondence with England and the rest of the world.

The Spanish Steps area was (and is) traditionally home to foreign visitors, especially English and American ones; facing the Keats-Shelley House in Piazza di Spagna there is another English establishment: the Babington’s Tea Rooms. It can be safely assumed that Babington’s was also a place foreigners used as an address for their incoming mail. It was created and elegantly furnished by two Englishwomen in 1893; it undoubtedly is redolent of the Grand Tour era and exudes an unmistakable British ambience that continues the grand tradition of prestigious tea rooms.

The letter was written by Charlotte Anne Mc Queen and addressed to the Secretary of India House in London, headquarters of the East India Company, the world famous British trading enterprise. It is rather probable that Ms. Mc Queen’s letter was handed over to the British Club of Rome for conveyance to destination. The letter shows in a different handwriting “Via di mare 28 12/48” which might have been added by a clerk of the Club and suggests that the letter was carried by a ship for the first leg of its route. The postmark is that of Rome dated 28 December. The French entry cds in red 2/E./PONT/2 MARSEILLE means that the letter was sent to Civitavecchia where it was handed over to the French postal steamship “Mentor” for conveyance to Marseille.

The letter was back-stamped at its final destination by two London postmarks; the handwritten “2467” was either a ledger reference of the Club or written at destination (India House). Lastly we notice a faintly struck hand-stamp “5” in red ink which confirms the pre-payment of 5 bajocchi, the exact tariff for letters bound to foreign destinations. The tariff for the rest of the route was paid by the addressee in the sum of one shilling and three pence (“1/3”) due for the French transit and English postage.

Fig. 12: Letter from Rome to London 1848 (address side and reverse + detail of “THE BRITISH CLUB” handstamp).

Fig. 13: Drawing of the Keats-Shelley House (from the Museum catalogue).

Fig. 14: Some letters on display at the Keats-Shelley House.

Fig. 15: Library of the Keats-Shelley House.

Fig. 16: Babington’s Tea Rooms at Piazza di Spagna (2019).
Assuredly the English were the first to divulge in pontifical Rome through their mail from England the news of adhesive postage stamps newly created and introduced in their mother country. This is duly confirmed by an interesting letter from London to Rome posted on 12 November 1843 when adhesive postage stamps had made their presence felt for two and a half years. This piece of mail presents some peculiarities: the sender instead of pre-paying the required postage up to the French border affixed on the letter a One penny brownish-red stamp which was barely sufficient to pay the “late fee” that allowed the letter to belatedly enter the mail stream, although the post office had already processed and bundled the mail scheduled for departure. The initial obstacle had been ‘stamped out’ but the required franking was missing; this meant that the addressee had to pay it. The British post handed over the letter to the French counterpart as witnessed by the French entry cds 2/ANGL./2/BOULOGNE. The Parisian postal administration decided to skip the overland route leading to Pont de Beauvoisin and instead send the letter to Marseille where it was entrusted to a Messageries Impériales steamship that would land it at Civitavecchia. This is confirmed by the red hand-stamp VIA DI MARE. In due course the letter reached Rome on 25 November as per arrival circle date stamp of Rome’s General Post Office. The addressee – a viscount residing in via Ripetta at the Cappone Palace – paid 50 bajocchi, which included the British, French and Papal tariffs. Civitavecchia has just been mentioned; a British vice consul by the name John T. Lowe was stationed there from 1846, he was promoted to consul sometime in the 1860s and was still based in Civitavecchia. During three decades of service in the diplomatic corps he and his brother offered their services to the travelers and Papal States businesses and residents as postal forwarding agents. Both were direct ancestors of the legendary philatelist and postal historian Robson Lowe.

Fig. 17: 1850 etching of Rome.
Still regarding British citizens’ connections with Papal Rome, I found a very nice letter from Letham, Scotland, posted at the Cupar Fife post office on 6 January 1853; the addressee is one of the biggest aristocrats of the Papal State, Prince Vittorio Emanuele Camillo Massimo (1803 – 1873) residing at his own Palace. Unfortunately the letter sheet is missing, nevertheless the addressee is Prince Camillo IX, the Superintendent General of the Papal Posts from 1840 to 1870; given his position at the pinnacle of the posts he was exempted from paying postage on his incoming and outgoing mail, both domestic and foreign. This is a rare instance of a letter from a foreign country, Great Britain, sent to the Papal States via France, Kingdom of Sardinia and Grand Duchy of Tuscany, as confirmed by the postmarks VIA DI / PONT DE BEAUVOSIN (Sardinian entry mark), CORRISP.(sendera) EST(era) DA GENOVA (Tuscany entry mark). There is no sign of a postmark on arrival and no taxation (even though it had been mailed from Scotland with no postage paid).

I conclude this overview of the English visitors and residents in Papal Rome with a postal relic that I acquired from an antiquarian in...Rome a few years ago: a brass button from a uniform of an English Postmaster, dated ca. 1840.