

Death Through the Letterbox: Early Canadian Mourning Covers

Harbingers of Death
Messengers of Grief

This presentation illustrates early Canadian mourning covers (1859-1909) used to convey a message of loss of a loved one to family and friends.

Background

- Black has always been associated with death. Those in mourning used black-outlined letter paper and envelopes that were edged in black.
- First use of mourning letters documented in 1767; a black-edged letter depicted in painting *The Poor Teacher* in 1844 (Ref. E.A. Mosher, *Mourning Covers: The Cultural and Postal History of Letters Edged in Black*, 2003).
- Popularized in the Victorian Period when sending letters became more available to the masses.
- Mourning covers were popular until the turn of the 19th century, peaking at 1910 and dying out in the 1920s. In all, 217 countries used mourning covers.
- Letter could convey:
 - Announcement of the death
 - Invitation to funeral
 - Reply/follow-up to a letter of condolence.

In addition, black-bordered writing paper with accompanying black-bordered envelopes used as a personalized sympathy note to bereaved. In days of scarcity and expense of paper, left over letter sheets and envelopes were later used for regular mail, even after mourning period.



Pre-Confederation Canadian Mourning Cover, 5¢ Beaver paying domestic rate, ½ oz or less; Daillebout, C.E. AU 6 (18)65; Upper Canada refers to present-day Ontario. right: back of cover reduced.

Anatomy of a Mourning Cover

Besides size, envelope shape, etc. a mourning envelope may consist of up to three characteristics:

1. Black border on front with varying widths (see examples throughout presentation}.
2. A similar black border on reverse of the envelope following flap profile and glued sections; usually same width as the front border (scanned examples below)
3. A small monogram located on flap usually with floral design or monogrammed initials; a monogram is not always present.



Characteristics of Black Border of Typical Mourning Cover

- Width of front border and of the back undulated flaps could vary from narrow to broad.
- Three basic theories about these variations in border width. Width is based on:
 - 1) Relationship of writer to deceased (closer wider);
 - 2) Amount of time that has passed since the death (thinner, longer);
 - 3) Importance of deceased (more important, wider).



Types of Monograms

(scanned from covers in collection)

Floral Designs without Embossing:



Floral Designs with Embossing



Custom Designs (more expensive)



Initials



Floral

A Series of Mourning Covers Related to Same Deceased

This series of mourning covers were purchased from the same lot and give some credence that the width of the black border is related to the time passed since the death. Note the narrow bands as the month of February 1864 goes on.



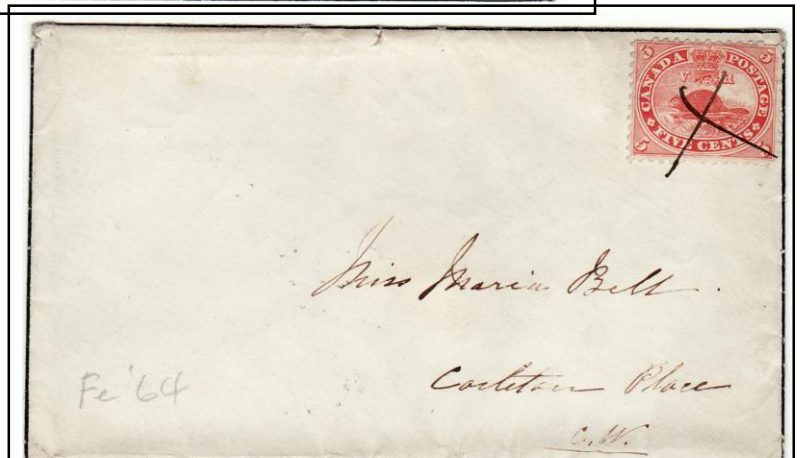
Dated: Feb. 17, 1864



Dated: Feb. 19, 1864



Dated: Feb. 27, 1864



Dated: Feb. 29, 1864

Box of Mourning Stationery*

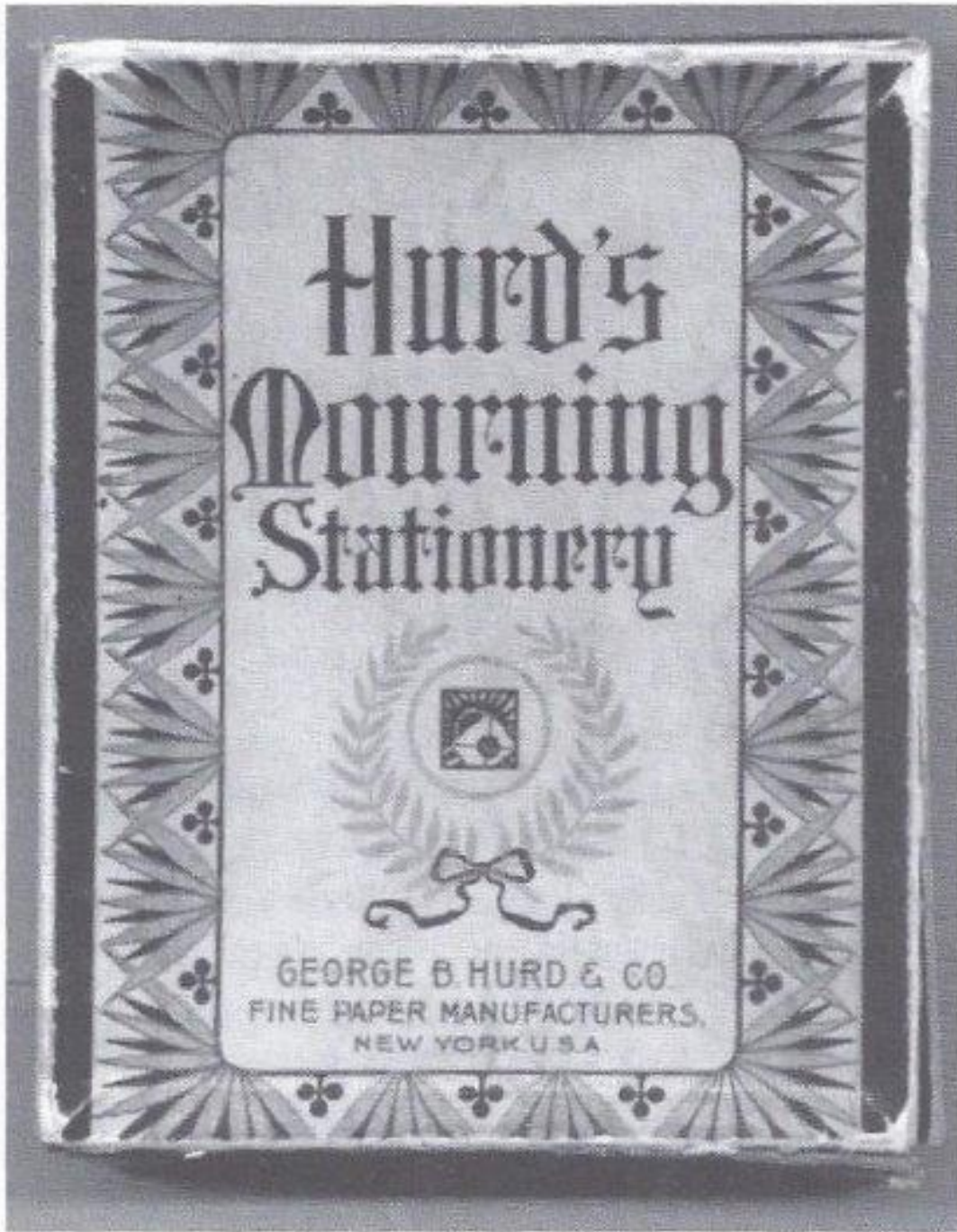


EXHIBIT 9-4. MOURNING STATIONERY BOX, c1900. The envelopes and stationery in this box measure 11.9 x 6.3 cm. All of the black bands on the edges are 4 mm in width. The end of the box notes that it contains "Border 2" and "Octavio", implying that other types were available. A manuscript note "85" may indicate the price. There is no record as to when this box of stationery was manufactured but I would guess it was about 1900.

*Mosher, *Mourning Covers*, 2003

Example of Mourning Covers (Domestic)

Legislative Assembly Shield handstamp, 1862



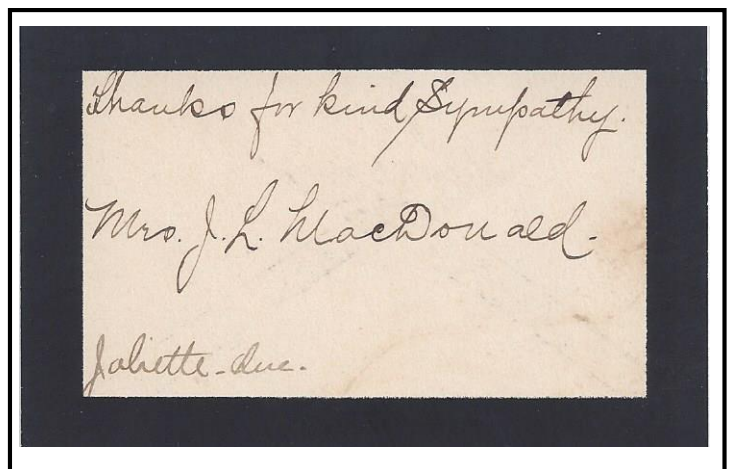
For legislator, personal postage was free when legislation was in session.

Early 20th Century Mourning Cover with enclosure

Postage rate:
2c per ounce,
1909



Enclosure: "Thanks for Kind
Sympathy"

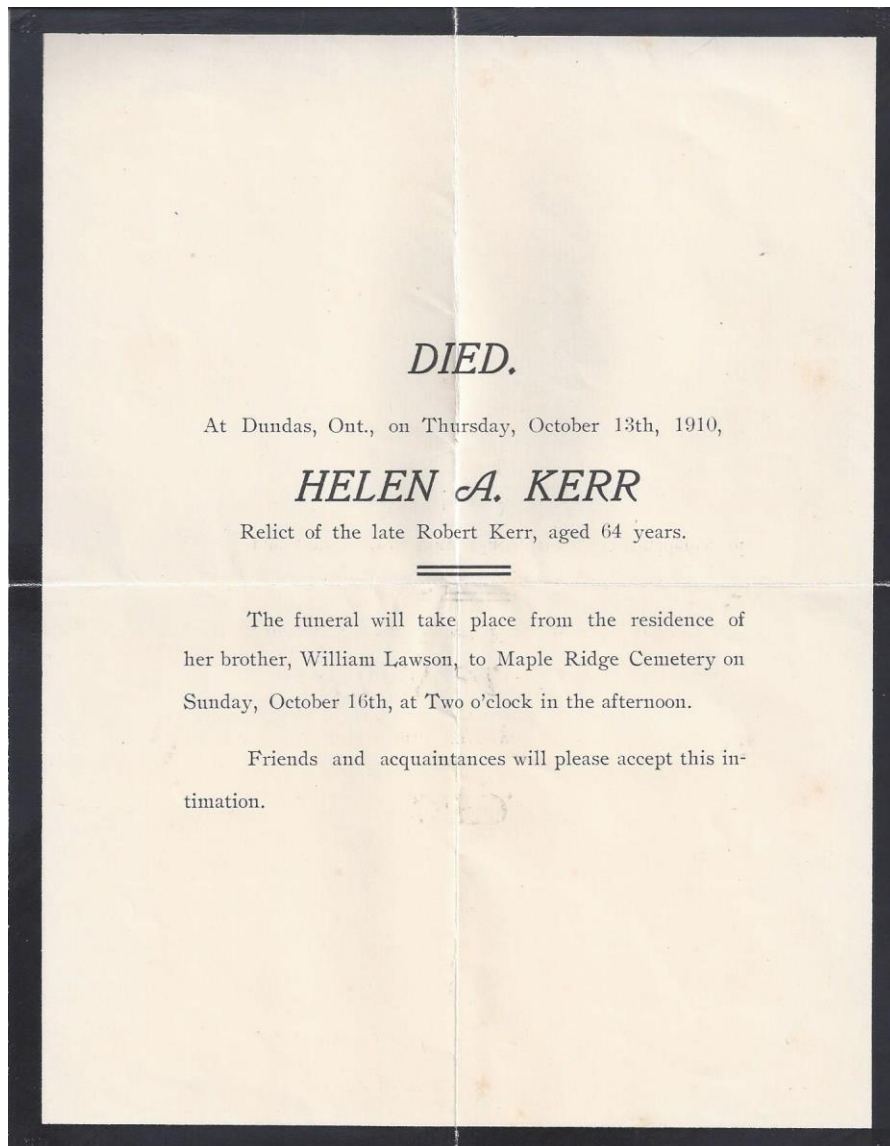


Mourning letters with enclosures are hard
to come by!

Edward VII Franked Mourning Cover with Enclosure



George Suffel, Esq.,
Inkerman, Ontario.



DIED.

At Dundas, Ont., on Thursday, October 13th, 1910,

HELEN A. KERR

Relict of the late Robert Kerr, aged 64 years.

The funeral will take place from the residence of her brother, William Lawson, to Maple Ridge Cemetery on Sunday, October 16th, at Two o'clock in the afternoon.

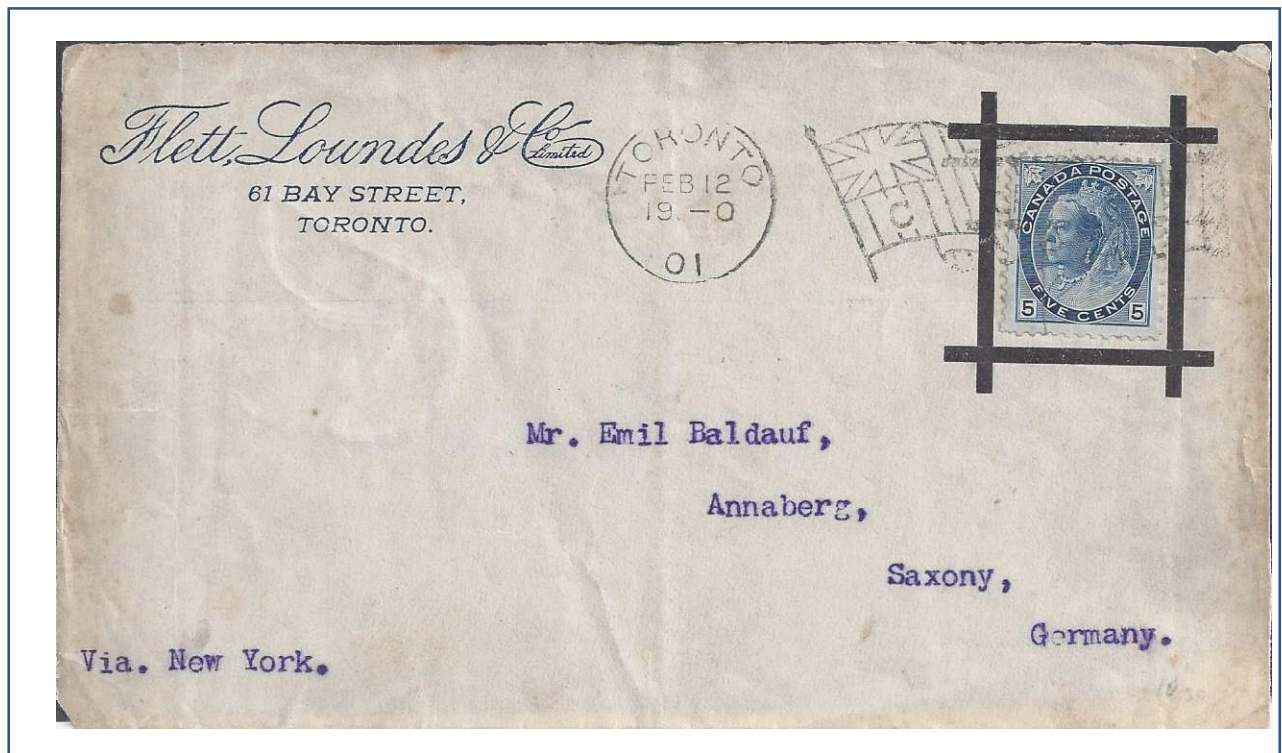
Friends and acquaintances will please accept this intimation.

Canada Mourns Her Beloved Queen

Queen Victoria died January 22, 1901



Above both envelope and outline of stamp position are in black borders



Above, only the stamp position has a black border

Examples of Mourning Covers (Domestic Usage)

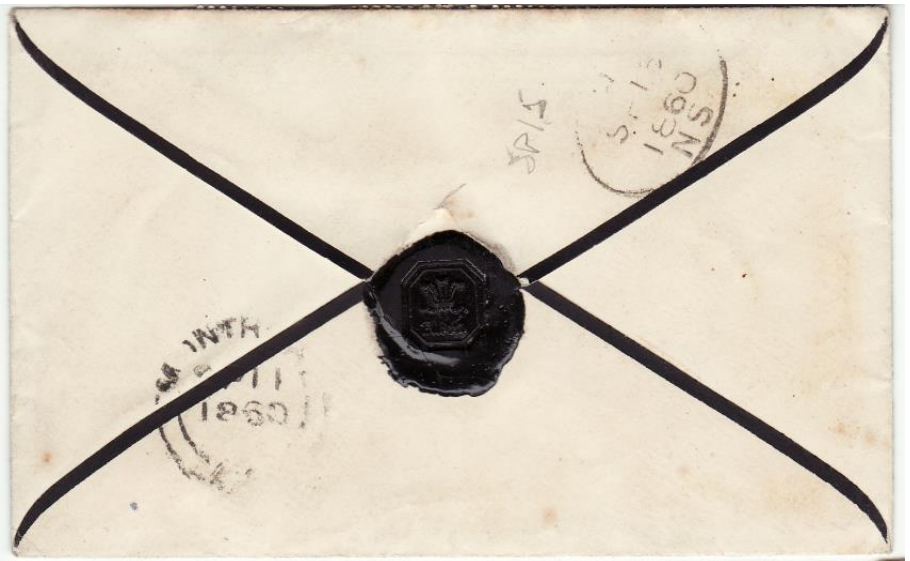


These covers are all showing a wide black border indicating that death of loved one was very recent. The 5 cent Beaver stamp is used for letter rate with a weight of $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce or less.

Interprovincial Mail to Martimes: An Historic Royalty Mourning Letter from Prince of Wales (POW), 1860



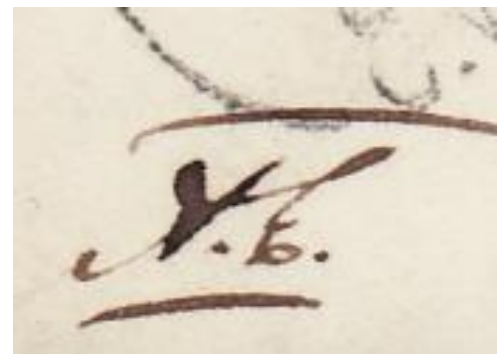
While Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, was on the first Royal Tour of British No. America, Admiral Milne's young son died. Date of CDS corresponds to POW's stay in Toronto. Milne's ship the *Nile* was docked in Halifax harbor. Envelope written in Prince's own handwriting; Royal Seal and Initials ("AE") verified by Argyll and Etkin's Royalty Memorabilia Dept. in London, England;. 5 X 1 cent stamps show letter rate to Nova Scotia (½ oz or less).



Reduced scan of back of cover



Royal Seal
(enlarged scan)



Prince's Initials
(enlarged scan)

Interprovincial Mail to Martimes



This mourning cover traveled a special route via Boston. Sometimes, especially during winter when St. Lawrence River was frozen, a preferred mail route to Halifax was by railway to Boston then Cunard steamer to Halifax and on to England. The regular rate to Maritimes was 5 cents but this special route via Boston was more costly, 12 ½ cents. Posted in Quebec, Canada and sent to Halifax, N.S. cover bears a Canada 12½ yellow green tied by "Quebec, OC 20 66" cds, countersigned at lower left "Monck" (Viscount Monck, Governor General of British North America equivalent nowadays to a Prime Minister) and addressed to Sir Williams of Kars, Governor of Nova Scotia, endorsed "By Cunard Mail via Boston" at top, carried by Cunard Line *Asia* from Boston to Halifax.

Provincial Mail from Maritimes

Nova Scotia



The 5 Cent Letter Rate (1/2 ounce or less) within Nova Scotia.

New Brunswick



Cross-Border 20 Cent Double Letter Rate (1 ounce) to New York.

Cross-Border Mail to United States



A mourning cover to Texas posted in 1867 after the U.S. Civil War. The cross-border letter rate was 10 cents per ½ ounce.



Dr. J.B. Hunter was a Canadian doctor who served with the Union Army as an assistant surgeon in the 60th Indiana Volunteers. I have uncovered several covers sent to him while in New Orleans, Alabama, Kentucky, Indianapolis. He retired in NYC where this cover was sent.



This mourning cover was sent to New Hampshire. Postage was paid with two 5c Beaver stamps that covered the 10 cent letter rate from Montreal to the U.S.

Cross-Border Mail to the United States



Posted from Guelph, Canada West to Erie, PA; 10 cent Consort stamp pays the cross-border rate to U.S.



Montreal to Greenfield, MA



A 3 cent Small Queen on a mourning cover sent from Parry Sound, Ontario to Toronto paying domestic rate for ½ oz. letter. The Toronto address was crossed out and letter was forwarded to New York City without any indication of a forwarding fee—a bargain to the sender.

Mourning Letters to United Kingdom



Letter paying Canadian packet rate to England. Letter mailed from Toronto to Picadilly, London but letter was mis-sorted upon arrival in London. The circular handstamp in red at the upper right is magnified. It is divided into four segments and lettered. The 'M' at the top signified "Missent", district initials to the left and right below. If only one letter, 'D' for district was added on right and a code letter at the foot identifies the delivery office within the district.



Letter was posted in William Henry, Lower Canada post office an underlying handstamp indicated that only 5 cents postage was paid; unfortunately postage required was 12 ½ cents; likely letter was returned to sender and a 12 ½ cent Queen Victoria was affixed. The letter was then posted to England on next Canadian packet steamship.

Mourning Letters to United Kingdom

Scotland



The Canadian packet rate (12 ½ cents) to Scotland.

England



The above two mourning covers pay the British packet rate to England (sometimes referred to as the Cunard rate, steamship company that had British contract during 1860s); this rate of 17 cents was more expensive than Canadian packet rate of 12 ½ cents per half ounce. Paid with the blue Jacques Cartier stamp.

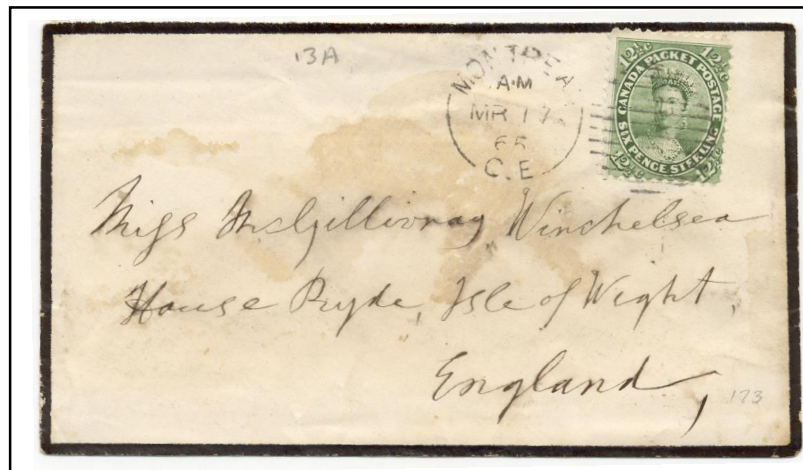
Mourning Letters to United Kingdom

Ireland



This combination of two 5c, one 2c and one 1c stamps (13 cents total) on this mourning cover to Dublin, Ireland overpays Canadian rate by ½ cent. Sometimes postmaster would sell normal 12 ½ cent stamp to patrons for 12 cents.

Isle of Wight



This mourning cover pays 12 ½ cent rate to Isle of Wight off coast of Great Britain. This destination is very seldom seen in mail to United Kingdom in the 1860s.

Mourning Covers to Overseas Destinations



Mourning cover from London (duplexes tying stamps, dated "DE 22 64") to Gibraltar; traveled on Allan SS *Hibernian* that left Portland on Dec. 24, 1864 and arrived in Liverpool Jan. 4, 1865; rail to London; London PAID transit "JA 4 65" in red; steamer P. & O. Line to Gibraltar, major military fortress; no receiver date; payment by 2 X 12 ½ Queen Victoria represented an overpayment of 2 cents by convenience; other covers in correspondence are franked similarly. The Crutchley family was well known in London. C.W.



(reduced scan of back of piece)

Small torn mourning cover (piece) that was sent at Cunard rate from ?? (undecipherable circle dated stamp) to London, person wasn't there so letter was forwarded to France; back of piece shows London transit in red dated AU 17 67; apparently, the person was not in France either and therefore a 40 centime Orange Napoleon III French stamp was added, canceled and a handstamp Boulogne-s-Mer dated "23 August 67" applied; the cover was returned to England since a second receiver on back of the piece dated "AU 25 67"; an interesting (but damaged) forwarded cover to France.

Mourning Covers to Overseas Destinations

France



A late usage of a 17 cent Cartier stamp to France; Montreal CDS was not used during the decimal period (1859-1868) and, if fact, dates into the 1870's. Canadian stamps have never been demonetized so use of older stamps is still valid. The 17c Cartier overpays rate in Small Queen era of 1870's where rate for same cover would have been 5 cents.

Denmark



Epilogue

Mourning covers were routinely used in Canada up to World War I. Occasionally these covers can still be encountered into 1930-1940s. With the widespread usage of telegraphy, telephones, improved transportation and other 20th century "social media", there were more efficient and heartfelt ways of expressing one's sympathy.