

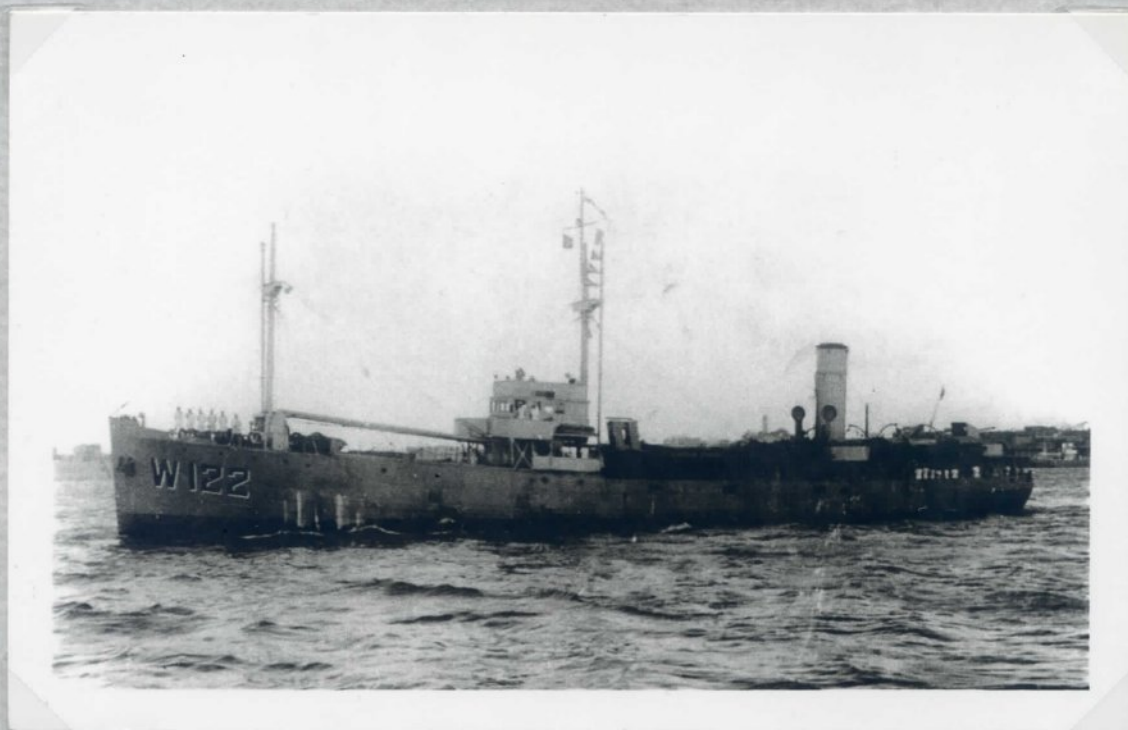
# A Postal History of Marion Island

From 1948 to 1980

The Postal History of Marion Island can be divided into four periods

- a. The Allan Crawford era - 1948
- b. The Geophysical year 1954
- c. The Post Office 1964 to the destructive fire of 1966
- d. The Post Office from 1967 to its closing in November 1980

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The coastal steamer *S.S. Gamtoos* under Captain Wally Finlayson played an important role in the setting up of the weather station at Marion Island in 1948. With a crew of 95 it carried the pre-fab hut sections for building the housing at Marion. My father-in-law, Louis Fourie, was the inspector overseeing the off-loading of the cargo.

## POSTAL HISTORY REQUIREMENTS

The first requirement for a valid postal history of any geographical area would be the recognition of a Postal Authority. The second would be the presence of a Postal Service or Post Office.

The annexation of Marion Island by South Africa in 1947 placed the Island under the postal authority of South Africa.

The need for weather stations in the South Atlantic had been under discussion in England as well as in South Africa. Potential locations were Marion Island, Gough Island and Bouvet Island. The authorities in both South Africa and Great Britain became concerned that these locations could be annexed by another power. To counter any such action Great Britain and South Africa, in 1947, came to an agreement that South Africa would annex the two South Atlantic Islands: Marion and Prince Edward. In a highly secret operation known as Snoektown two ships, *Transvaal* and *Gamtoos*, set off for Marion in December 1947. On December 29, 1947 the official annexation ceremony took place on Marion Island and on January 4, 1948 on Prince Edward Island.

The agreement included the decision to set up a weather station on Marion Island under South African control. A South African team of scientists would operate the station. The team would remain on the Island for a period of six months, later changed to one year. The initial team consisted of 5 scientists (C.O. Hawkins, J.A. Bennetts, J. Fenton, D.C.K. Esterhuize and Daan Triegaardt) under the leadership of Allan Crawford, a scientist attached to the Weather Station in Cape Town.

Allan Crawford had had considerable experience operating in the South Atlantic. He had surveyed Tristan da Cunha Island and had manned the weather station on Tristan. He had excellent contact with the Tristan Islanders. When asked to head the Marion weather station he was asked to bring a few Islanders with him. He chose 6 Tristan Islanders (Edward Green, Arthur Repetto, Arthur Rogers, Gordon Glass, Fred Swaine and John Baptist Lavarello) to assist him in the setting up and running of the Marion weather station for the first six months (in actual fact almost eight months.)

Allan Crawford would be the voluntary first (Assistant) Post Master of Marion Island, establishing the presence of a postal service.



Alan Crawford with his 6 Tristan compatriots (in front) and the 5 fellow scientists (back) at Marion Island

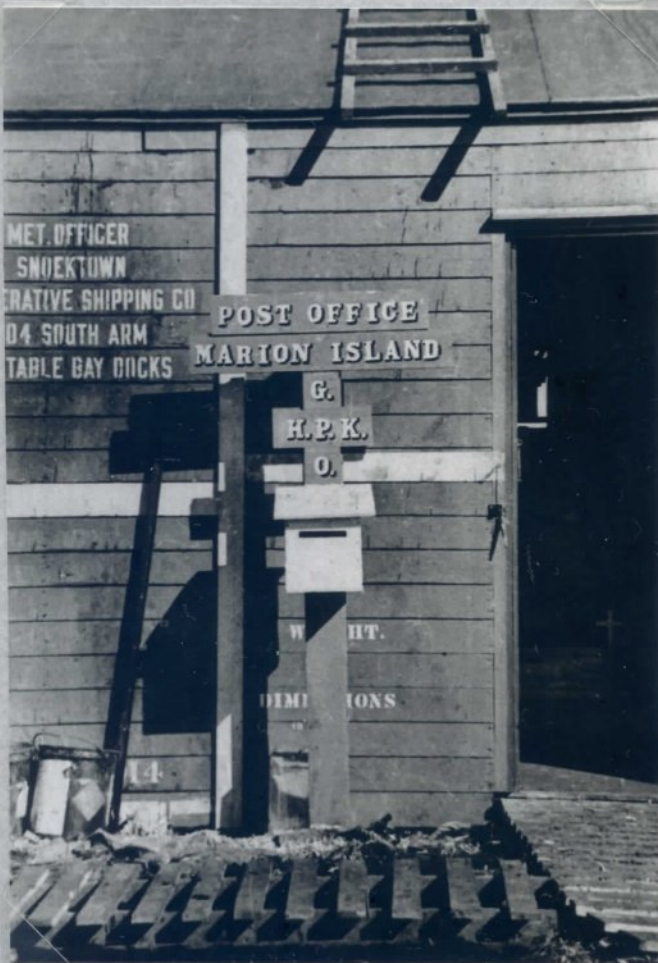
## The Importance of Allan Crawford

Through his friendship with people like Dr Alex Pirie, a fervent stamp collector, and other philatelists and stamp dealers, Allan Crawford developed a lasting interest in philately, although he himself never collected stamps. He would over the coming years create many collectable philatelic items.

During the discussions on the need and location of weather stations, Allan Crawford had the foresight, while in Johannesburg on 7 October 1945, to have had made four caches that could be used on postal mail: a cache for Marion Island, one for Tristan da Cunha, one for Gough Island and one for Bouvet Island, not knowing which would be needed. As it turned out all four were eventually used.



In his discussion with the Postal Authorities in South Africa Allan Crawford received verbal authorisation that he could act as an Assistant Post Master on Marion Island. While he was on Marion Island all island mail would go through his hands and most would receive an imprint of his cache.



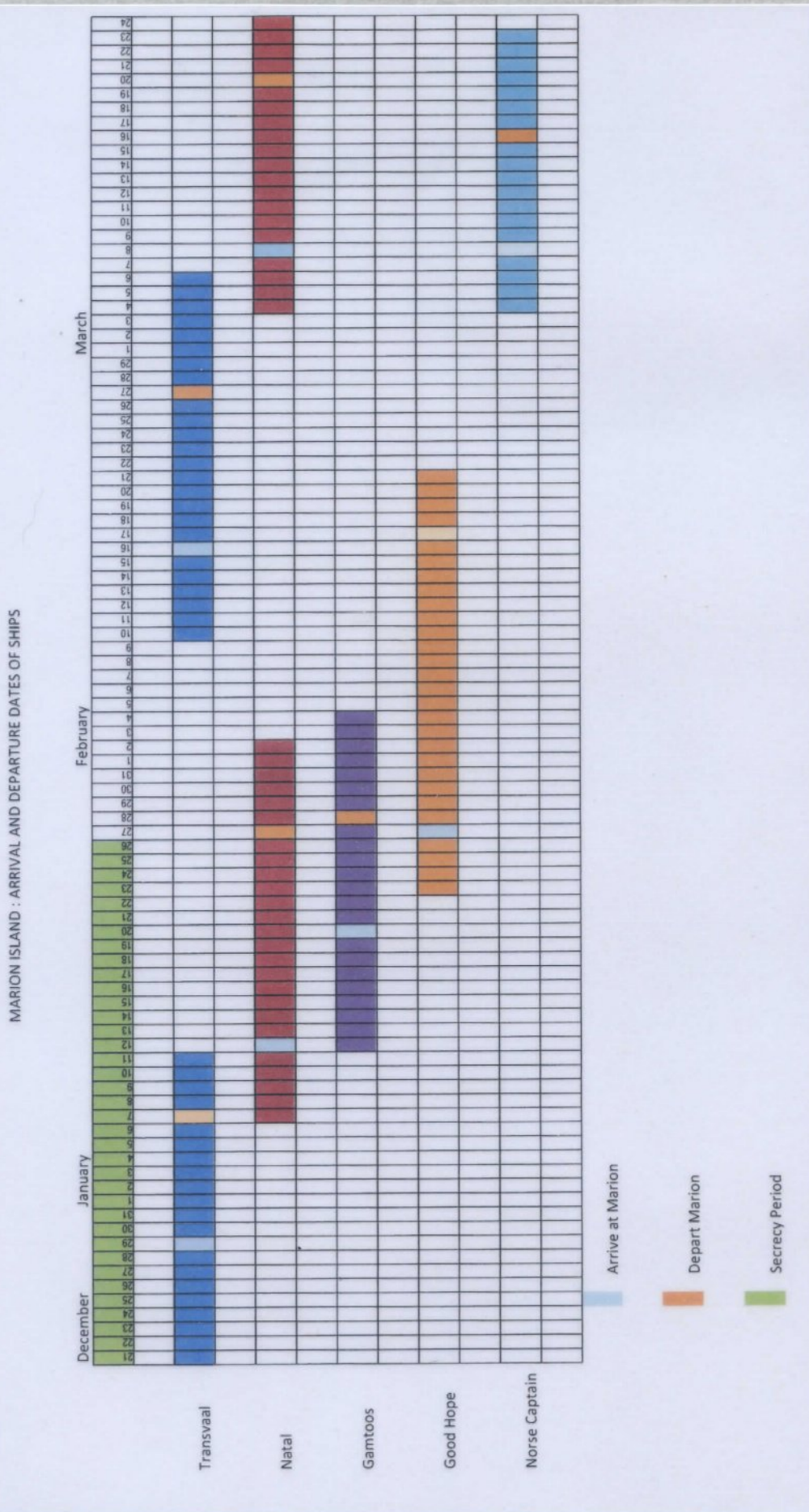
Mr. W. A. PAGE  
138 CHASTILIAN ROAD  
DARTFORD  
KENT  
DA1 3LG

With Compliments 12/4/89.

may like to have this - see Page 328  
last para relating to "First mail"

Photo of first. Photos taken by A. B. Crawford.  
- you may retain this - it is a spare copy.  
Regards Alleyage.

The ships that visited Marion Island determined the flow of mail from and to the Island.  
 A chart of ship arrivals and departures during the early 1948 is shown here.



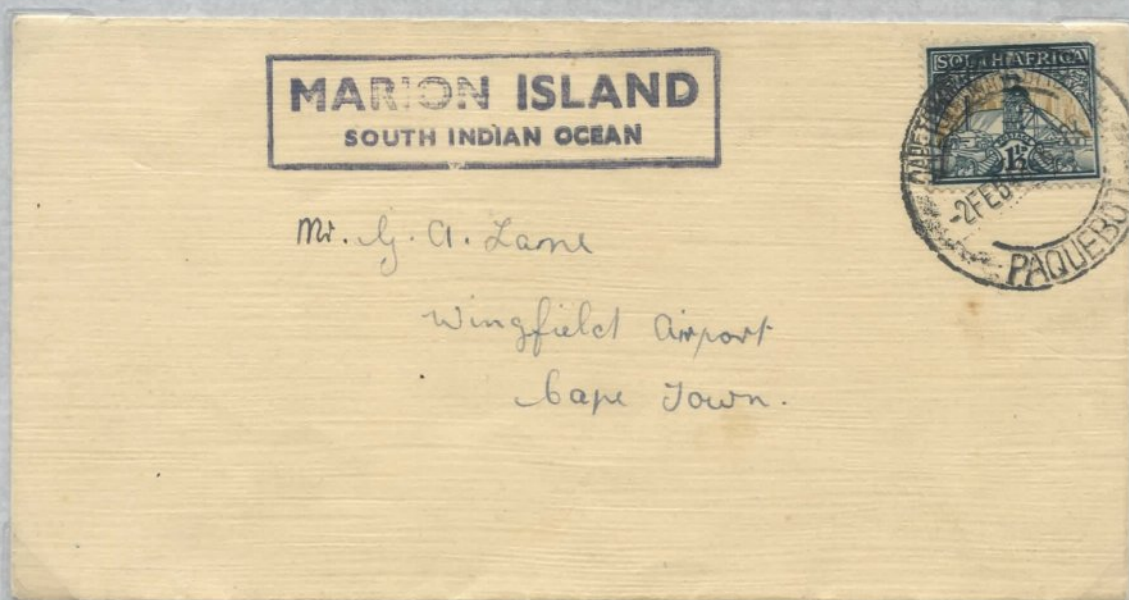
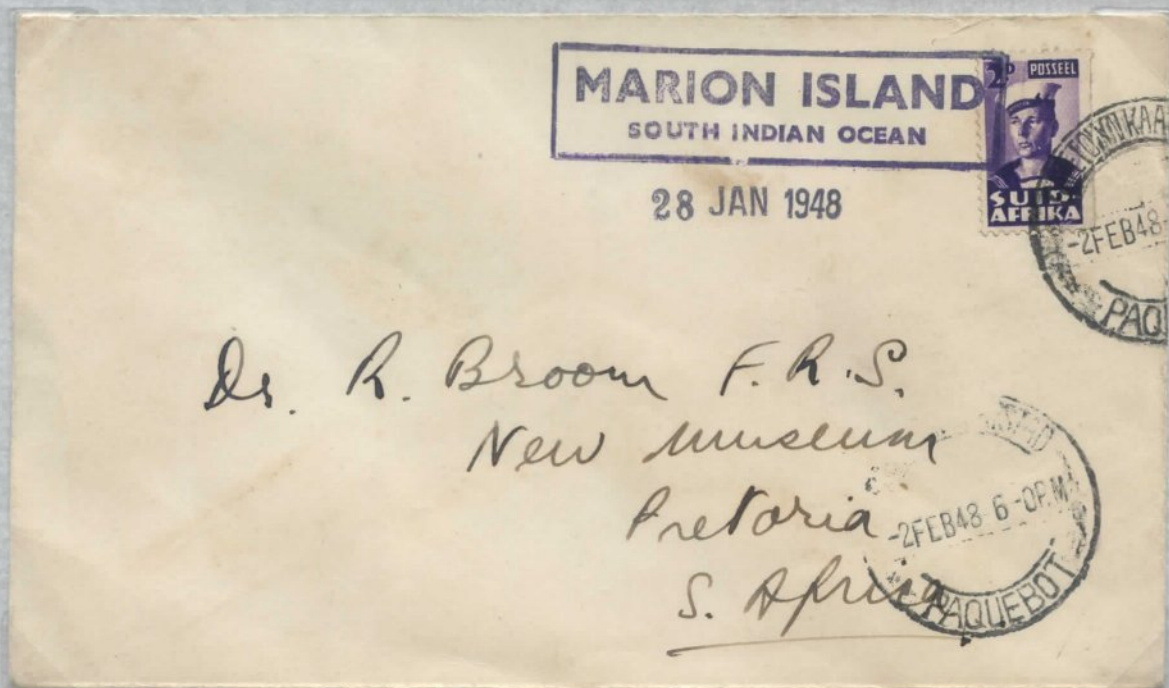
## First Mail from Marion Island

The landing of the first possible mail from Marion Island, authenticated by the Crawford Marion Island cache, was from the ship *Natal* which arrived at Cape Town on 2 February, 1948.

The covers shown on this and the following page were Paquebot cancelled in Cape Town on the 2nd February, 1948. Both covers were franked. Inland postage was 11/2d as on the second cover. The Broom cover stamped with a 2d stamp was more than required. Crawford later claimed "no stamps on Marion" but this cover was duly stamped. Perhaps he ran out of his private stock of stamps.

The top cover is addressed in Allan Crawford's handwriting, to Dr. Robert Broom, the palaeontologist famous for Mrs Ples and the Taung Child.

With these covers Marion Island's Postal History begins.



Both covers are Paquebot cancelled in Cape Town on 2 February. The Hobson cover is correctly stamped with 11/2d stamp. Its origin was most likely from one of the scientists on Marion. Aberdeen Road Station served a very small community.

Giovanetti was a well known collector in Pretoria who had supplied Crawford with pre-stamped covers to post back from wherever he, Crawford, may be in the Southern Atlantic, earlier from Tristan da Cunha. These covers were stamped for philatelic purposes not postal usage as this cover, stamped with 3 small war stamps with 3d face value, shows.



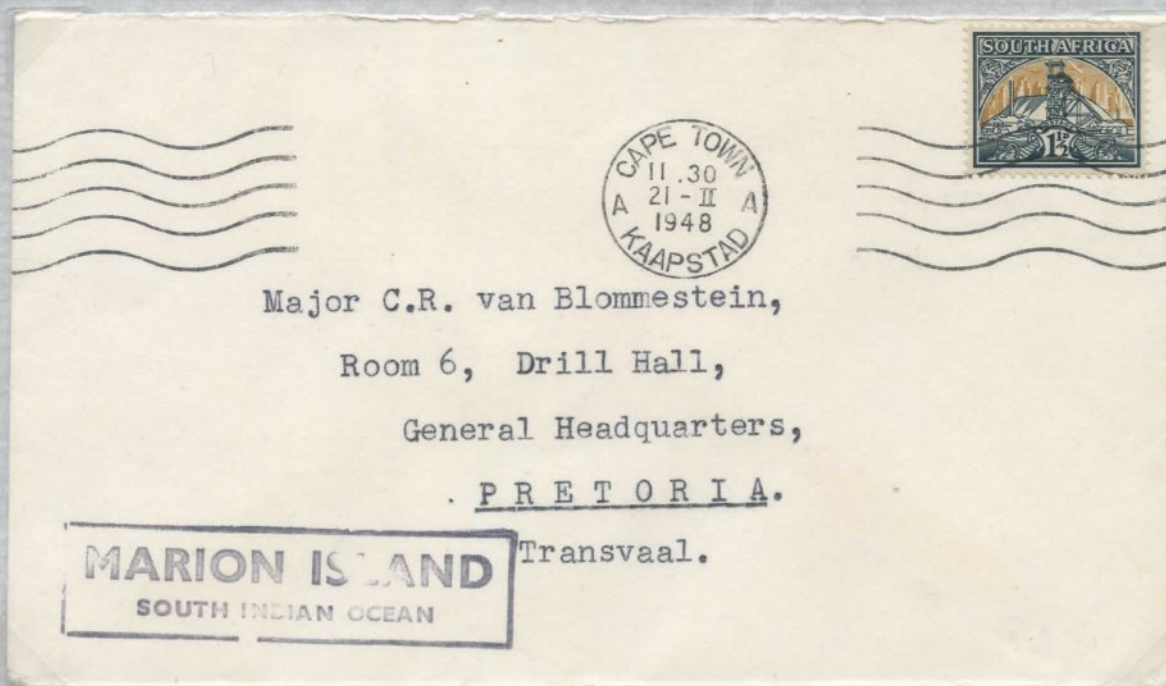
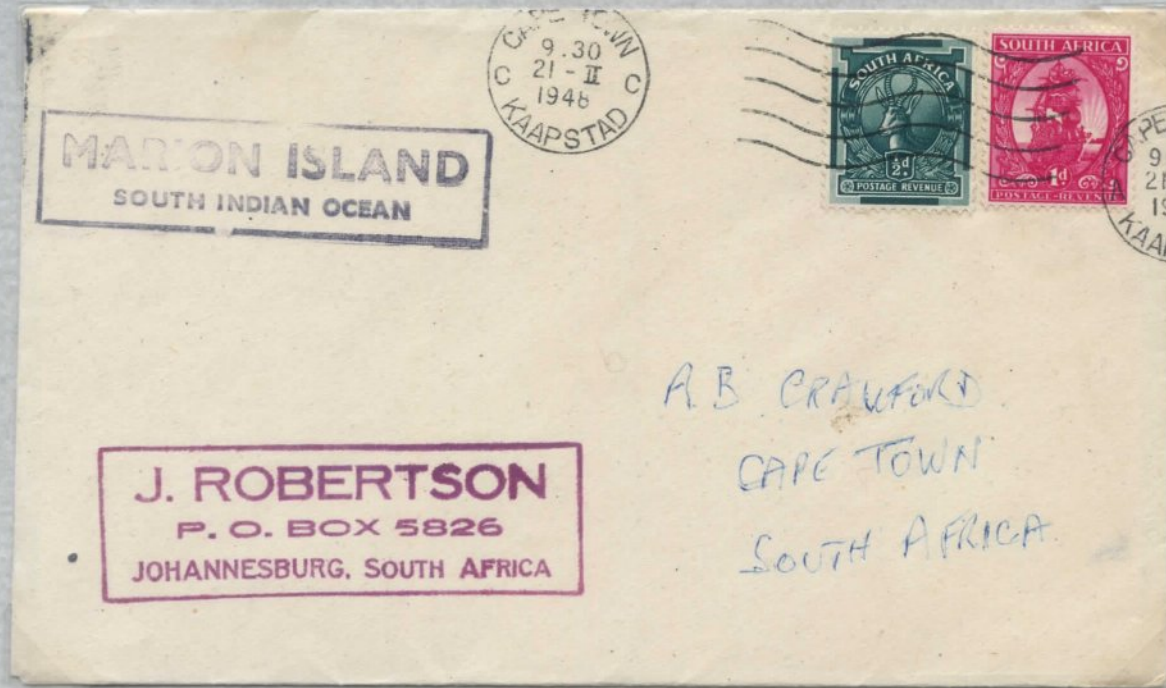
## The Second Mailing from Marion Island

There is no record of any mail carried by the *Gamtoos* when it returned to Cape Town on 4 February. The second batch of mail from Marion arrived in Cape Town on the *Good Hope* on 21 February. It appears that Crawford had received mail from J. Robertson, a prominent stamp dealer in Johannesburg. It probably arrived on the *Good Hope*. If Crawford had these covers with him when he arrived we would expect him to have returned them on the earlier return passage of the *Natal*. The Robertson covers clearly had a philatelic intent as the correct postal franking with 11/2d coil stamps shows. These covers were posted on 21 February in Cape Town. The machine cancelling means that they did not go through the shipping Paquebot system but were posted at the Cape Town Post Office.



Both covers shown on this page are correctly franked with stamps to value of 11/2d, inland postage for South Africa. The Robertson cover is addressed to A.B. Crawford, not in Crawford's hand, probably as a gesture of thanks to him as carrier.

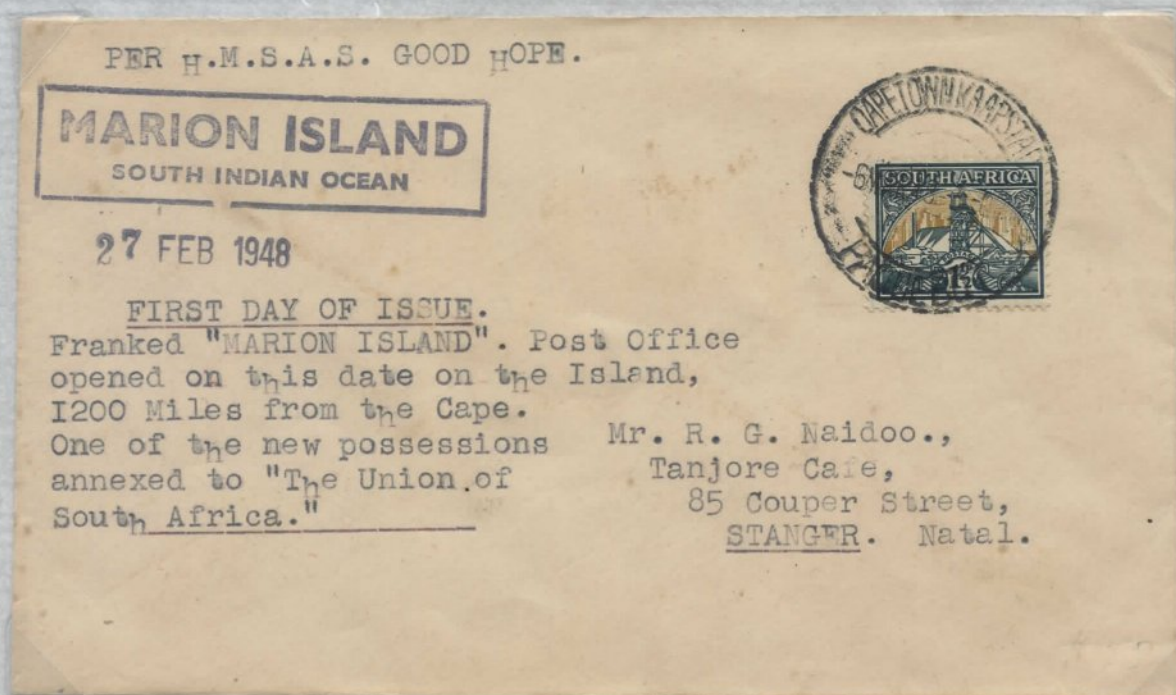
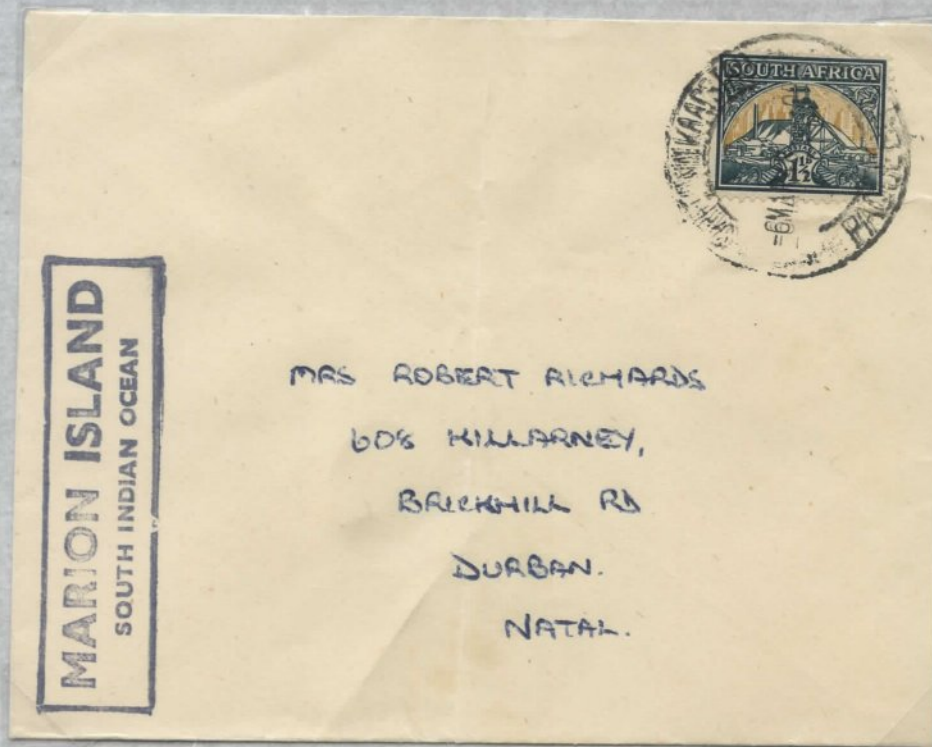
The second cover shown is addressed to Major C.R. van Blommenstein in Pretoria. The letter could possibly have been from a military scientist on Marion. The medical orderly, Sergeant W.M. "Tiny" Strydom, was one such scientist from the military.



### Third Mailing from Marion Island

The third batch of mail from Marion arrived in Cape Town on 6 March on the *Transvaal*. This was the return of the *Transvaal* after its second visit to Marion. Both covers are correctly stamped for inland postage. The covers were processed through the shipping postal channel and therefore Paquebot cancelled.

The Naidoo cover has an annotation "PER H.M.S.A.S. GOOD HOPE", clearly expressing the expectation of the sender. However, the letter missed the *Good Hope* departure and was returned on the *Transvaal*.



Two further covers returned on the *Transvaal* on 6 March are shown. These two covers were processed through the shipping postal channel and received Paquebot cancellations. Neither cover was franked. Both covers are addressed in Crawford's handwriting and one is endorsed "no stamps available".

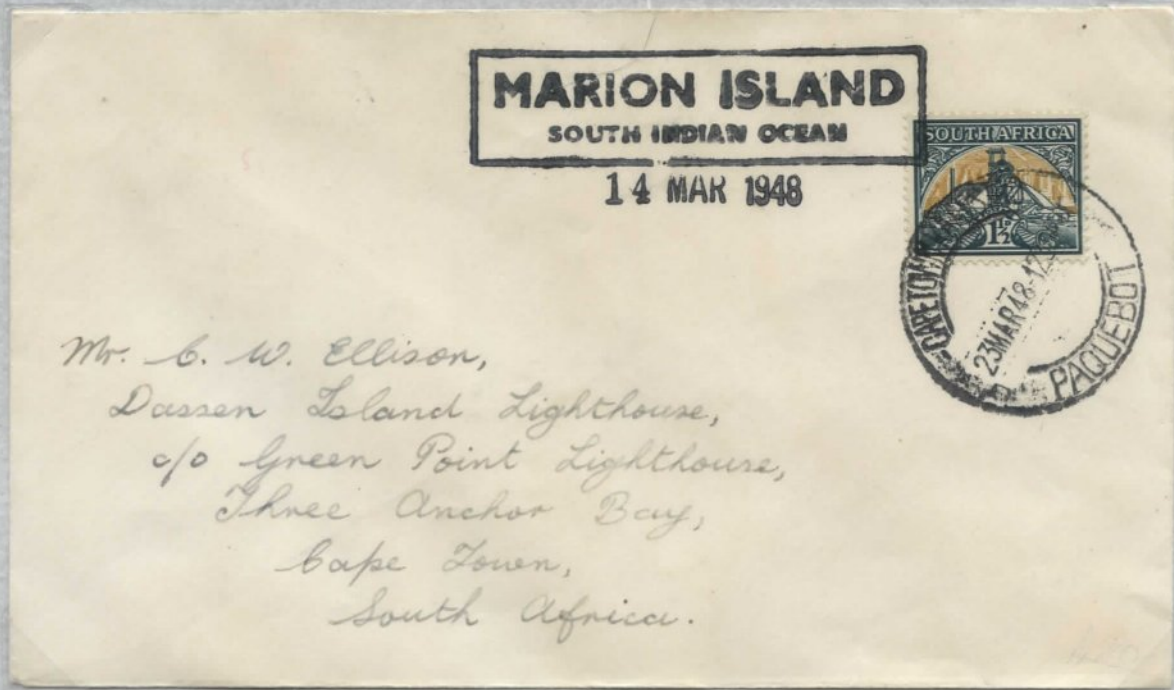
The Post Office had to decide how to handle the unfranked Marion Island covers. The *Ice Cap News* reported that the Postal Authorities decided to treat them as "FREE" military mail. (Vol 27 page 134). It did not cite any source for this information. The fact is that no covers without stamps were taxed.



## The Fourth Mailing from Marion Island

Fourth Mailing reached Port Elizabeth on 23 March from the *Norse Captain*, a Norwegian ship. The *Norse Captain* had been retained to bring the rest of the pre-fab hut sections to Marion Island. It brought back a small amount of mail to South Africa. The cover addressed to Mr C.W. Ellison was among that mail. It went through the shipping channel and receive a Paquebot cancellation. It was correctly stamped with a 11/2d stamp for inland postage.

The *Natal* returned from Marion on 24 March but there is no record of it having carried mail.

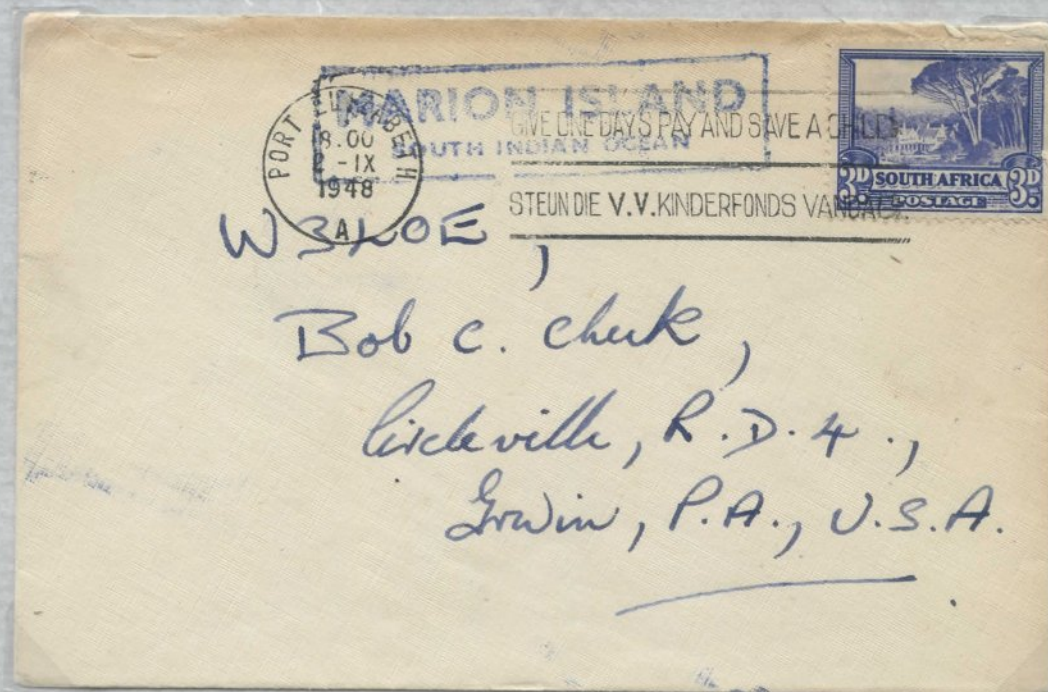


The cover above, machine cancelled on 5 May 1948 was correctly franked for inland mail. It is unknown on which ship it was returned.

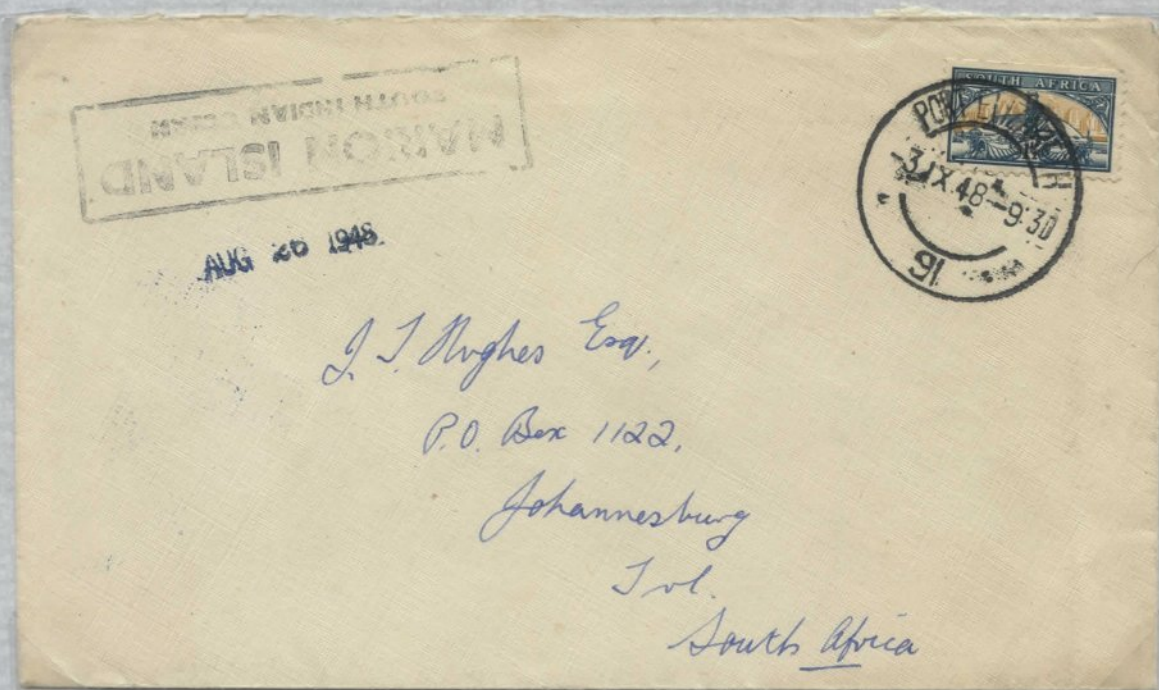
## Last recorded mail of the first season on Marion Island

These two covers were posted at the Port Elizabeth Post Office on 2 September. They originated from the telegraph unit on Marion Island and acknowledged radio contacts thus the call signs KH6Mi and W3LOE as part of the address. These covers were machine cancelled.

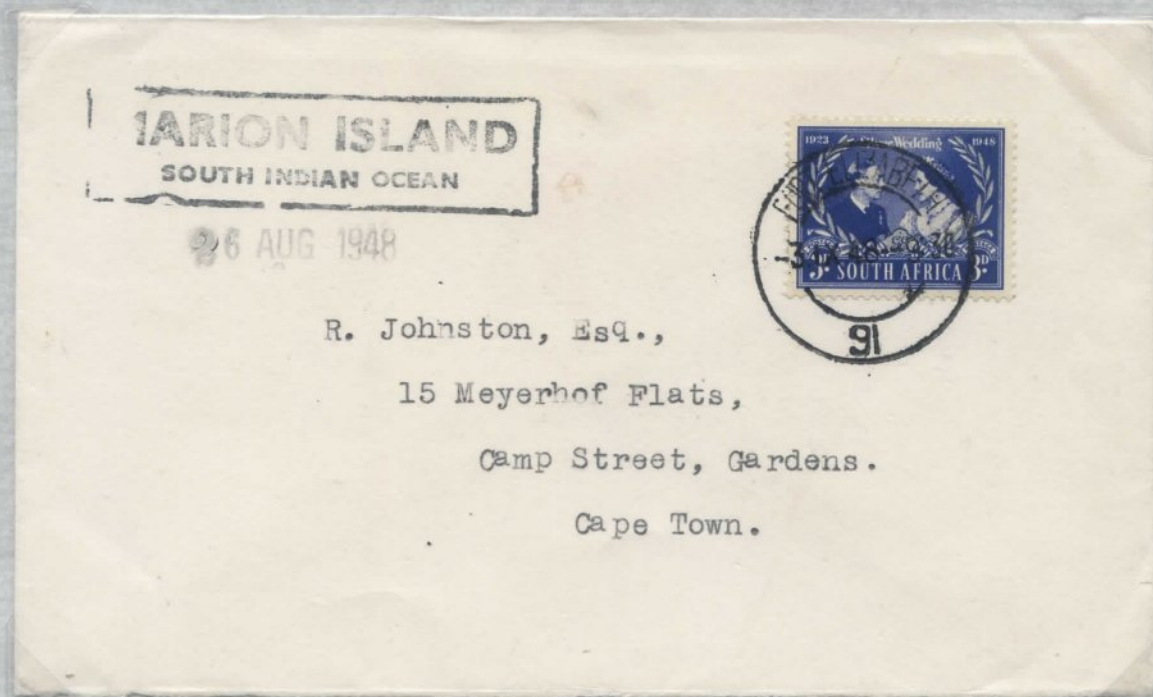
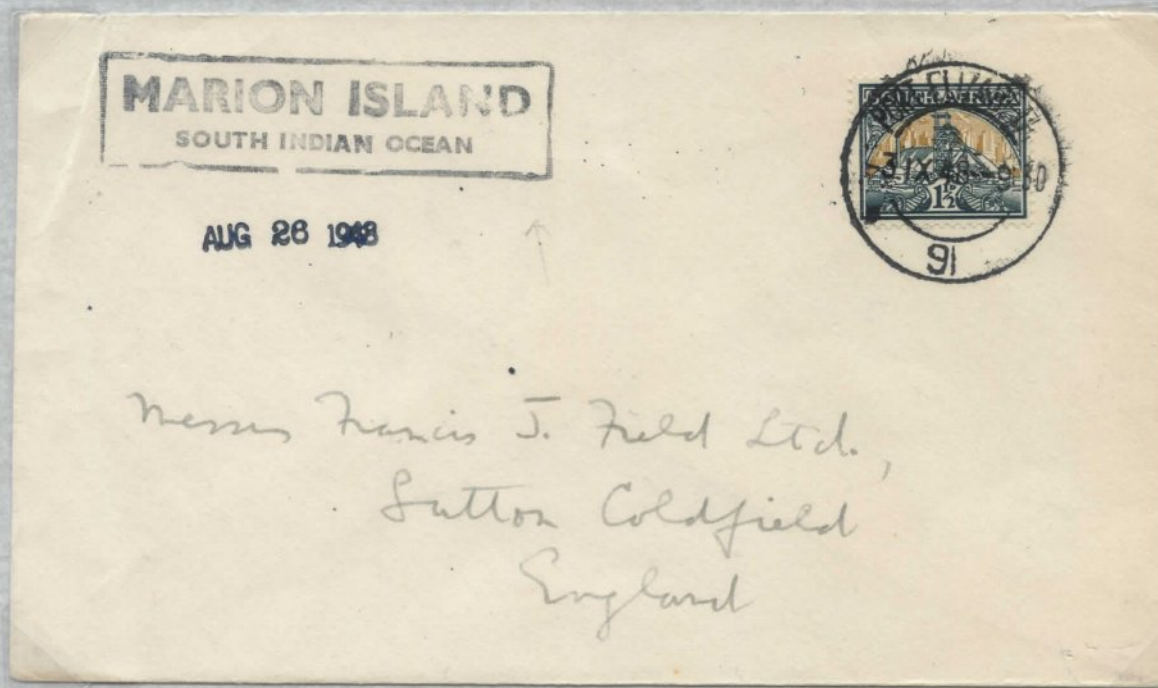
These two letters could only have arrived on the *Bloemfontein*. Another batch of covers (pages 13, 14 and 15) were counter hand cancelled at the Port Elizabeth Post Office on 3 September. The two different dates are resolved by assuming that the *Bloemfontein* called at Port Elizabeth on 2 September on its way to Cape Town. The letters were delivered for posting. Some letters were processed on 2 September (machine cancelled) and others on 3 September (counter hand cancelled).



The first season on Marion ended on 28 August. Allan Crawford and his Tristan helpers returned to Cape Town on the *Bloemfontein*. The *Bloemfontein* brought the last Marion Island mail of the first season. The letters below were posted at the Port Elizabeth Post Office on September 3. Both were franked, one correctly, the other at 4d over franked.



Two letters, the last mailing of the first season. Both were posted at the Post Elizabeth Post Office and hand cancelled. Both are franked, the one correctly the other with a 3d stamp whereas only 1 1/2d was required for inland post. Both were stamped with Crawford's cache.



Two letters, the last mailing of the first season. Both were posted at the Post Elizabeth Post Office and hand cancelled. Both are franked correctly with 11/2d stamps for inland post. It appears that J. Robertson, having received covers by previous mailings, now required even more. These would be the last he would receive stamped with Crawford's cache.



## Sir Francis Reginald Wingate - 1st Baronet GCB GCVO GBE KCMG DSO TD

Allan Crawford sent Sir Reginald this philatelic cover endorsed "No stamps on Marion Island" and signed it "A.B.Crawford Acting Postmaster". The cover accompanied Allan Crawford on the *Bloemfontein* when he returned to South Africa after his 8 months on Marion Island. The letter was posted in Port Elizabeth on 3 September 1948. It arrived at Eden Bridge, England on 29 September 1948. It was not taxed for not being franked.



Allan Crawford had connections with those in high places. Sir Reginald Wingate had been a British General and administrator in Egypt. He was largely responsible for the escape of Father Ohrwalder and two nuns from Omdurman in 1891. He also made arrangements for the escape of Slatin Pasha in 1895 from confinement in the Sudan. In December 1899, on Lord Kitchener being summoned to South Africa, Sir Reginald succeeded him as Governor-General of the Sudan and Sirdar of the Egyptian army.



**A letter addressed to Allan Crawford on Marion Island is never received.**

L.W. Cook writes Allan Crawford a letter asking for a Marion Island cover. His letter is posted in Southampton on 26 July 1948. It is addressed to Mr A. B. Crawford, First Postmaster, Marion Island, South Indian Ocean. The letter reaches Durban, South Africa on 8 September 1948. It is redirected to the S.N.O. (Services Navy Office) in Durban and then to The Secretary of Transport in Cape Town. The letter never reaches Crawford and ends up in the Returned Letter Office. Somewhat strange.

84 Gainsford Road  
Southampton  
26/7/48.

Mr A. B. Crawford,  
Asst. Postmaster,  
Marion Island,  
South Indian Ocean.

Dear Sir,

It is with great interest that I noticed the enclosed cutting in the British "Daily Telegraph" of today's date, especially in view of the fact that I am a collector of island covers.

I do not suppose that I am the first applicant, or will I be the last for a cover from you. I have covers from most parts of the world, and I am

TO MARION ISLAND (S.M.C.C.)

55

SOUTHAMPTON  
10<sup>00</sup>AM  
27 JULY  
1948

DURBAN

POSTAGE REVENUE  
25

CONFIRM WITH

DO NOT REMOVE  
NO ADDRESS  
VERTROKKE. GELIJKES

Mr. A. B. Crawford,  
Asst. Postmaster,  
Marion Island,  
South Indian Ocean

% Secretary for Transport  
Manteka Buildings,  
Cape Town

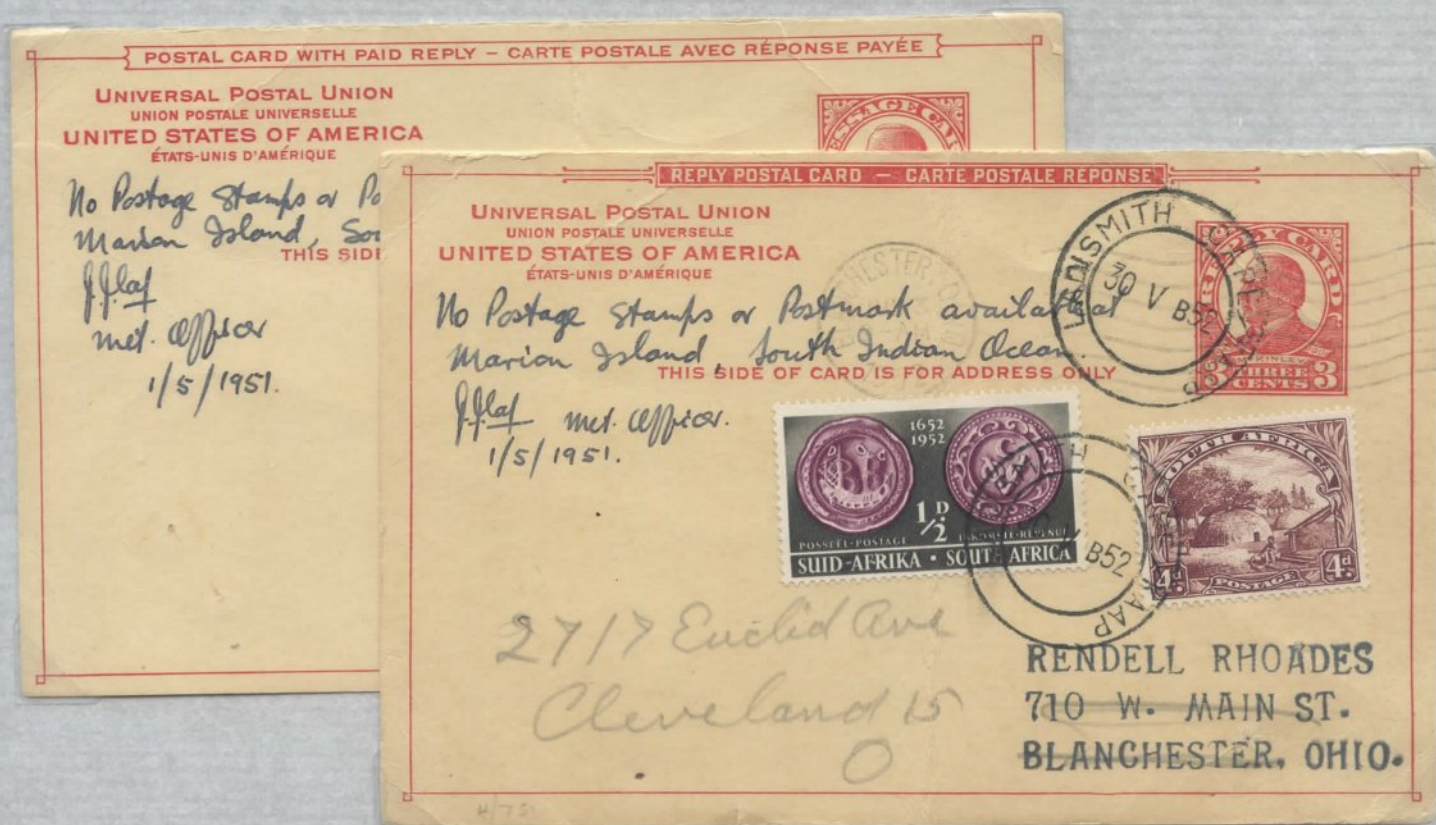
~~% L.H.O.~~

via South Africa *WAM* Box 1005

## The No Stamps tradition

The first card is part of the batch delivered to the Port Elizabeth Post Office on 2 September and processed on 3 September. The card is a Great Britain postal stationery card with a 2d stamp. It was accepted by the Post Office.

The other two cards are American stationery cards. J.J. la Grange, the Met Officer on Marion, perhaps with tongue in cheek, in Crawford style, endorsed them "No postage stamps or Postmark available". La Grange dated the cards, 1/5/51. They clearly stayed with the sender until his return to South Africa. The sender then stamped the card and posted it on 30 May 1952 from Ladismith, Cape.



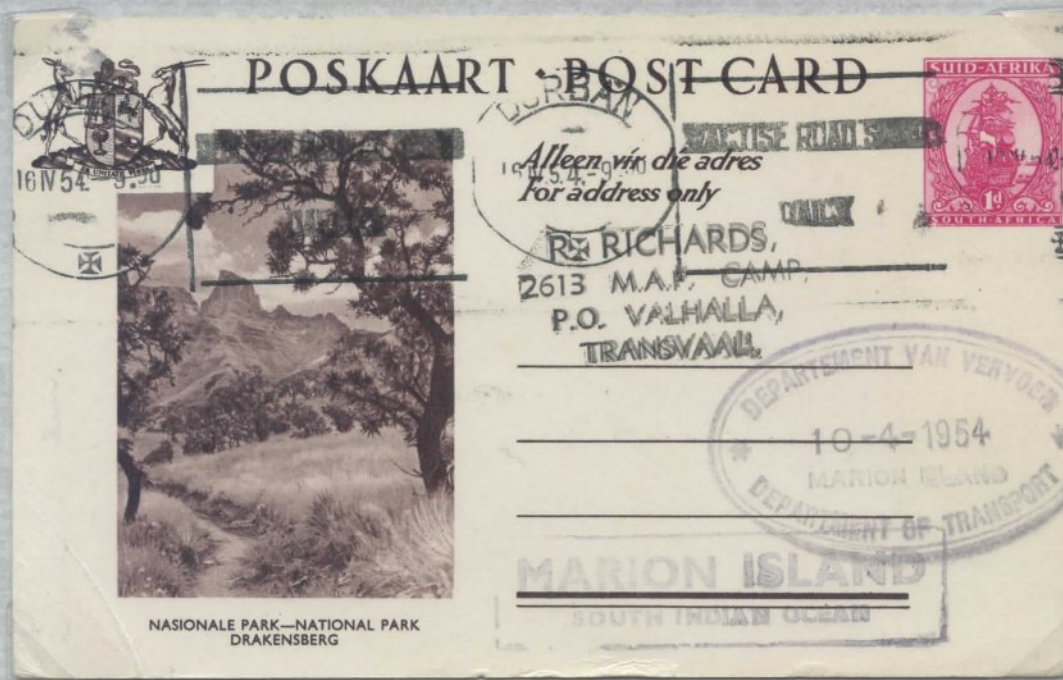
## Allan Crawford's Last visit to Marion Island

Allan Crawford made his last visit to Marion Island in April 1954. From this visit comes a batch of very scarce postcards all addressed to the same person in Valhalla. The postcard is shown below.

Crawford also posted an enormous size cover to Minister Tom Naude. The cover measures 14cm x 34cm, too large to fit on this A4 page. It is in my possession and I show a reduced scan.

Tom Naude was Minister of Post-and-Telegraphs of the Union of South Africa. He would later become President of South Africa. It is clearly a philatelic item. It appears to be a cover that was prepared and given to Crawford to take with him to Marion Island. The stamps were Union of SA Official stamps, quite valid for general postal usage but not stamps that were readily available.

Crawford endorsed the cover "No official cancellation stamp on Marion Island". There was a Department of Transport cache as seen on the Valhalla postcard, but that was not used for cancelling stamps. The cover had two Marion Island caches applied, one upside down.



## Toler Cover

This cover addressed to Mr T.I.J. Toler in England appears suspicious when looking at the date and the quality of the Marion Island cache. On making an inquiry to Allan's son, Martin, he reports as follows:

*This cover is genuine. Dad's cachet was still in his possession in the 1970s and we applied it to a very few covers we sent for posting at Marion. I think one sent them then to philatelic services who put them on the ship. The addressee Mr Toler was a personal friend of my father's. You can see that the cachet was very worn by that stage.*

Martin also confirmed that he had a similar cover. We probably have here the last use of Allan Crawford's Marion Island cache on a Marion Island cover, and a very personal one it is.

South Africa had changed its monetary system from sterling to decimal and issued its first decimal stamps on 14 February 1961. On 31 May 1961 South Africa became a Republic and its stamps would now be marked RSA as in the stamps on this cover.

The cover is cancelled with the official Marion Island Post Office canceller, about which more later.



## The International Geophysical Year - 24 March 1958

The International Geophysical Year (IGY) was an international scientific project that lasted from July 1, 1957 to December 31, 1958. The IGY was modelled on the International Polar Years of 1882-1883 and 1932-1933. It was intended to allow scientists from around the world to take part in a series of coordinated observations of various physical phenomena. 46 countries originally agreed to participate. By the close of the activity 67 countries had become involved. South Africa was one of the participants with the focus on Marion Island. There can be little doubt that the prominence that Allan Crawford gave Marion Island contributed to its place as the IGY site. A special date stamp, the first official one for Marion Island, was designed. It had a fixed date, 24 March 1958. Officially the Post Office was open only for that one day.

There was a huge philatelic interest in IGY and although South Africa issued no commemorating stamp, stamp collectors from all over the world requested Marion Island covers. A selection of covers of various designs, duly stamped, is shown on the pages following.



**IGY Covers addressed to recipients in England**

International Geophysical Year

**MARION ISLAND**

ONE OF THE LONELIEST  
OUTPOSTS OF THE COMMONWEALTH  
1000 MILES SOUTH EAST  
OF CAPE TOWN. DISCOVERED  
IN 1772 BY MARION DE FRESNE.  
POPULATION NOW CONSISTS  
OF SOUTH AFRICAN WEATHER  
BUREAU STAFF, WHO ARE MAKING  
OBSERVATIONS IN CONNECTION  
WITH THE INTERNATIONAL  
GEOPHYSICAL YEAR

\* \* \*



**S. C. F. LTD.,**  
43 WOOL EXCHANGE  
COLEMAN STREET  
LONDON, E.C.2  
ENGLAND

**First Day Cover**

From the temporary  
Postal Agency on

**MARION ISLAND  
MARIONEILAND**

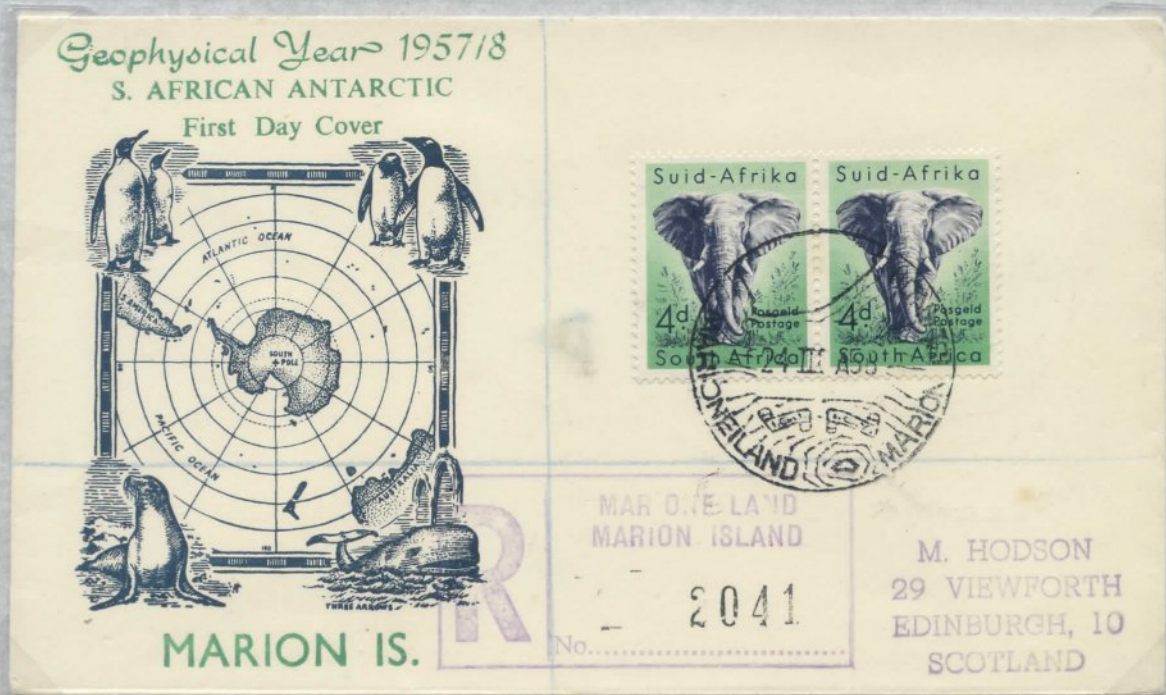
Meteorological outpost  
in the  
**INTERNATIONAL  
GEOPHYSICAL  
YEAR 1957/8**



HARRY ALLEN,  
6 Florence Road,  
London, W.5.,  
England.

South Africa Suid-Afrika  
**EERSTEDAGKOEVERT  
FIRST DAY COVER**

Registered IGY Covers addressed to recipients in England and Scotland



IGY Covers addressed to recipients in Australia and the USA



POST BOX set up by A.B.Crawford in 1948, but it has taken 10 years to become a real POST OFFICE.

**IGY Covers addressed to recipients in Northern Rhodesia and my own suburb Rietondale**



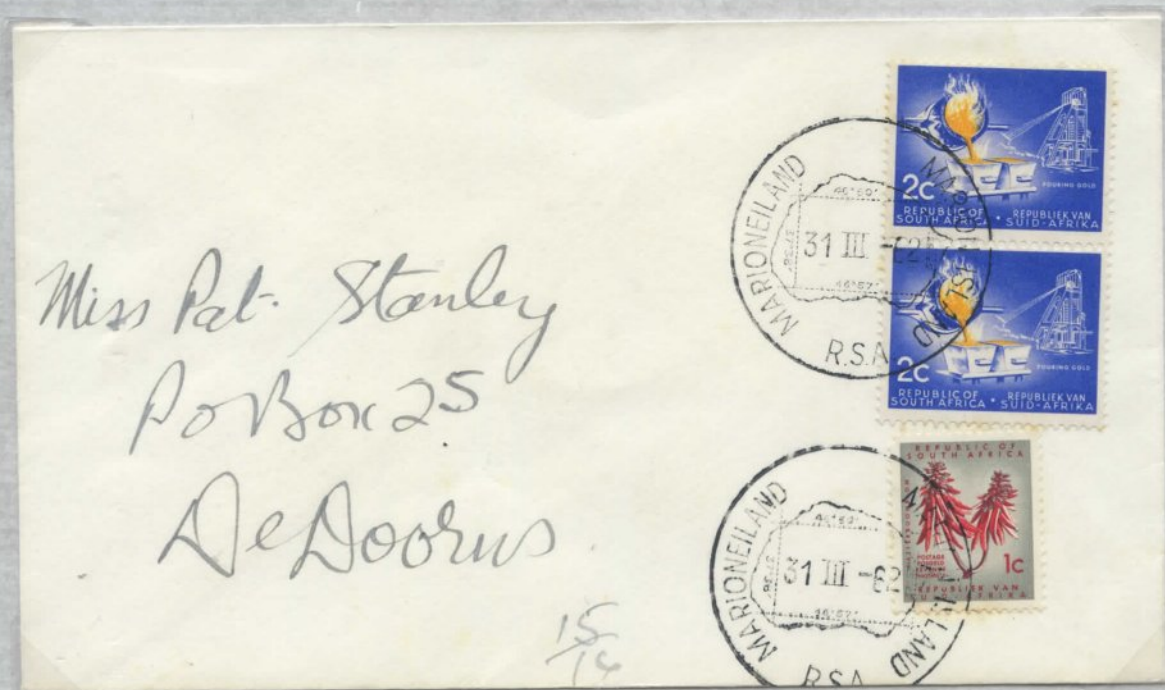
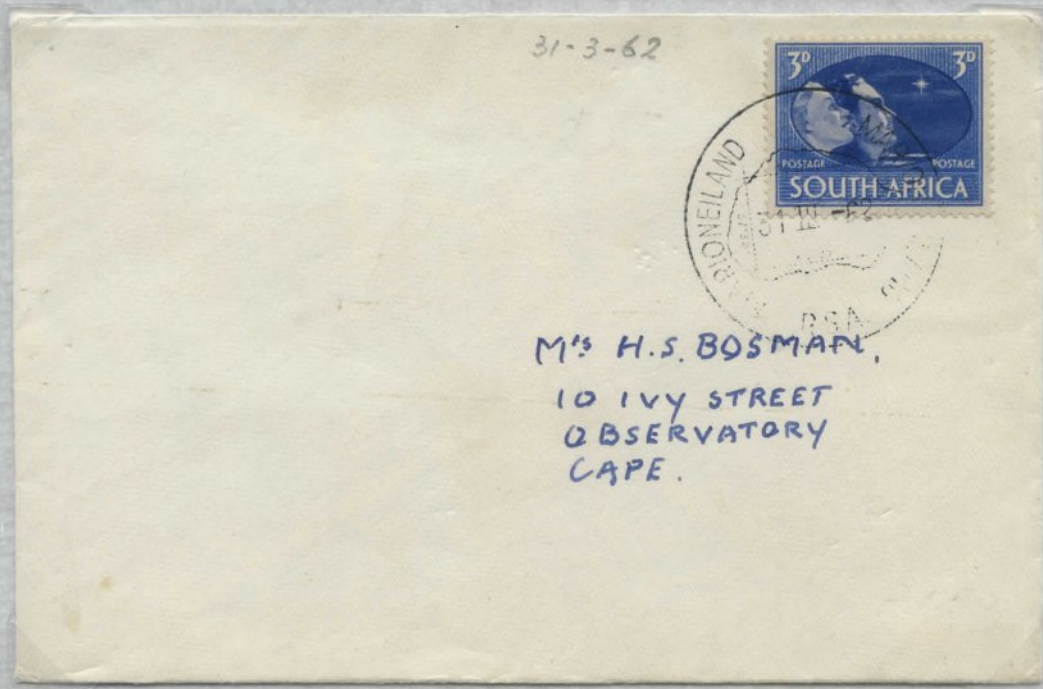
Registered IGY Covers addressed to recipients in Johannesburg  
and Port Elizabeth



## In 1962 Marion gets a permanent Post Office and an appropriate Cancellor

The South African Postal Authority decided that Marion Island could have a permanent Post Office, perhaps influenced by the world wide interest shown in Marion Island during the International Geophysical Year in 1958. The Post Office was officially opened on 31 March 1962.

Two covers, cancelled on the first day, are shown. Both are addressed to places in the Cape, the first to Observatory and the other to De Doorns. It is noteworthy that one cover is stamped with the older sterling stamp (3d) while the other is stamped with the later decimal stamps (2c and 1c).



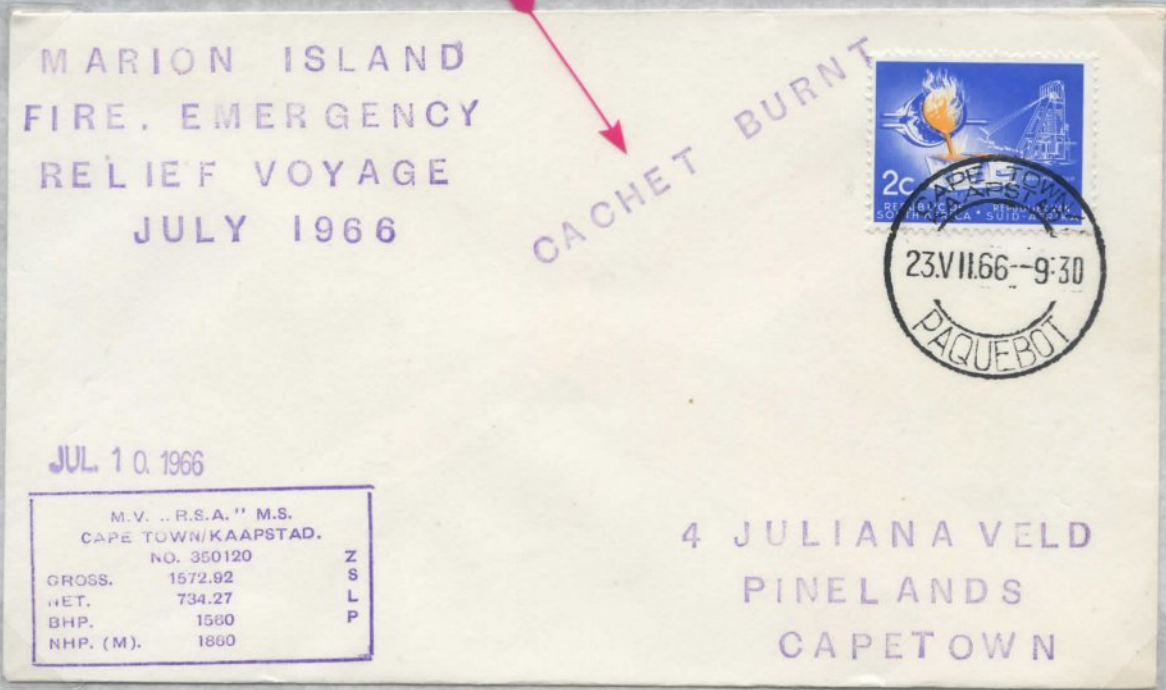
The first cover is addressed to W.A. Page, a prolific collector of stamps and covers as well as a commentator on South Atlantic philately.

On the night of 25/26 July a fire broke out in the drying room on Marion Island. The fire destroyed the post office including the canceller. The last use of the canceller before the winter isolation was on mail leaving Marion in March, the 27th March 1966. The cover below is such a cover dated 27 III 66.



With the post office burnt out and the canceller destroyed, mail from Marion Island now received a cache imprint stating "CACHET BURNT". Marion mail now went through the shipping mail process and were Paquebot cancelled at the incoming port.

Two covers with the imprint are shown.



The destroyed canceller was replaced with another one similar except for the tiniest details. The first day of use was on the 19th March 1967. Such usage is shown on the top cover below.

A later impression of the replaced canceller dated 10 v 71, in mauve, is shown on the lower cover.



In March 1968 the the changable date module of the replaced canceller broke. Some covers were cancelled but then recancelled with the canceller date repaired. A cover is shown.

An alternative canceller appeared with the arrival of the S.A. Agulhas. The first use was on an Agulhas commemorative cover dated 5 April 1978. The date was in the new format of year - month - day, in this case 78 IV -5. A cover signed by the Agulhas Captain is shown.



# The South African Postal Authority closes the Marion Post Office on 20 May 1980

The Postal History of Marion Island that started with the Assistant Postmaster, Allan Crawford, in 1948 finally comes to an end with the closure of the second official post office on Marion Island on the 20th May 1980. A cover with the last cancellation is shown below.



## Bibliography

- No Pathway Here* by John H. Marsh; Howard B Timmins, 1948
- Tristan da Cunha and the Roaring Forties* by Allan B. Crawford, David Philip, Cape Town, 1982
- The Ice Cap News
- The S A Philatelist*
- Wikipedia
- Louis Fourie family archive