

## Context Philately: An Introduction

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The name *Context Philately* is a new philatelic term coined just recently (January 2023) for a trend or activity which has been developing within the subject in the last few years.

Philately is a subject that is just what you want it to be. It can be relatively simple in collecting stamps or more complex in the study of stamps and aspects of postal (not to mention revenue/taxation) history. It can be seen as a hobby or, an academic study and interest, and all stages between. *Context Philately* aims to extend the understanding of the aspect of philately that you have decided upon, to collect or study, by setting it in a wider context. This wider context may be broad or as focused as you please; examples might be to see your subject as an aspect of historical development in political, economic, social, geographical, human, or cultural terms, etc and thereby gain a better understanding of its significance and ability to describe it fully. You might examine or collect historical documents, books, newspapers, maps, legislation, photographs, posters and even three-dimensional objects or artifacts: post boxes, medals, badges, handstamps, flags, etc. Key is the educational benefit from a broader understanding.

The trend within philately to this expansion of interest has been growing for some years. Some feel that *Context Philately* needs to be promoted to those who may wish to engage with philately, as collectors or students, but who want to see it within a wider historical context. The challenge to the philatelic establishment is to embrace this opportunity to develop the subject, especially in the form of public exhibitions and the many facets of the media.

The concept of *Context Philately* might be applied in any aspect of philately, including postal history, be it to a particular subject, a competitive exhibition class, a collection, an exhibit, an article, a book (printed or digital), or website, etc. I give five examples to illustrate what *Context Philately* can be.

### **Example 1. Aden Postmarks (wider context explained)**

A philatelic society meeting I attended a few years ago, sometime after the year 2000, was a presentation about the postmarks of the Aden. It was excellent in illustrating the postal markings and a little of the associated postal history but lacked the essential background information giving the subject depth and meaning, that is the context. The presentation would have been so much more interesting and of educational value if additional

data had been included. For example: the location of Aden, how, why, and when it became a separate (Indian administrated) territory, and then a British Colony and when it ceased to be. What were the political, economic, population, currency, geographical, and other historical factors etc? These would have set a background and need not have been extensive.

### **Example 2. Liberation**

In 2001 The Imperial War Museum, in London put its Stamp Collection on long-term loan to the British Library Philatelic Collections. As part of the publicity for the transfer and to make it more easily available, a press release was issued by the British Library. In order to make the most of this release, the realisation that Thomas Edward Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia (1888-1935) was involved in the design and manufacture of the first postage stamps of Hejaz in 1916 was featured. This resulted in much publicity and the question in my mind about what I knew about Lawrence and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. This led me to a lot of reading over many years to understand the context.

### **Example 3. Persecution**

As a Trustee of the Stuart Rossiter Trust, I came to meet William Robert Eleazar Israel Kaczynski (1936-2019) who had fled Berlin for Britain with his parents Martin (1896-1966) and Edith (1896-1975) and brother Edward in 1939 to escape Nazi Jewish repression. William's father Martin had previously spent time in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. William had collected the papers, letters, covers, post cards, propaganda etc associated with his family's departure and wanted to present these and their background in a book marking the events in context. The Stuart Rossiter Trust helped fund the work and with fellow author, Charmian Brinson Professor of German Studies at Imperial College, London, The History Press published *Fleeing From the Führer A Postal History of Refugees from the Nazis* in 2011, a paperback edition was to follow in 2015, a Danish language edition in 2016 and an expanded edition in the German language in 2017.

The two authors work is based on the historical facts illustrated by the various documents, included those of a philatelic nature, to tell a wider story of the departure of Jews from Germany, together with the persecution of homosexuals, gypsies and of political opponents of the Nazi party. The William Kaczynski Collection is now housed at the Wiener Holocaust Library, London, where it is on permanent loan, to mark the context of these events beyond but including philately.

### **Example 4. Social Development during the First Industrial Revolution**

Alan Druce FRPSL had been studying Great Britain line-engraved postage stamps for many years and had researched the Perkins, Bacon Archive (held at The Royal Philatelic Society London) to reassess printing and production procedures and printing numbers of the postage stamps. His work included aspects of the management by the Office of Stamps and Taxes and of

Perkins, Bacon the printers. The product of Alan's research work was to be published as a printed book. I was asked to read the manuscript and soon realised that by extending its scope it could become of greater value by giving more context information. Further archival records were examined at The National Archives [London], the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum, The British Library, and the Postal Museum [London] and these greatly added to the scholarship of the work. Alan's book *Perkins Bacon Great Britain Line-Engraved Postage Stamp Printing 1840-1846* was published in 2018 to much critical acclaim.

### **Example 5. Conflict in the Colonial Era**

The exhibition *Clash of Empires the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War* was held during July 2023 at The Royal Philatelic Society London. As an example of *Context Philately*, it may be described as an extreme example, but no less relevant, where the philatelic objects are in a minority to other exhibits. It is an excellent example of philately and of philatelic objects being seen as a part of history; they have been used to illustrate the historical story as written records which are often important key evidence.

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These five examples of presentations, books and exhibitions show that by adding the essential background information and context the subjects are more informative and rounded, as a result they are more interesting and educational, helping to engage with other groups and wider interests.

Some may say that added context information is nothing new and they would be right. Others may point out that forms such as social philately and open philately already exist; while *Context Philately* may be applied to all philatelic endeavours and not just to competitive philately or to one exhibiting class.

The emerging open philately class of competitive philately opens up possibilities for telling a story using a wide variety of material. One must guard against open philately, in its competitive form, becoming one where merit is gained by items that are impressive by monetary value or provenience, used to gain marks but which may be tenuous with little or no link to the subject. Such material may be described as "beyond context" or irrelevant which may increase the possibility of losing exhibition marks.

Many realise that stamp collecting and philately has a poor reputation in the non-philatelic world where it is often seen as being a small-minded hobby undertaken by eccentrics. Those who know stamp collecting and philately do understand that this is sometimes true, but these same people also understand its serious and worthwhile nature. Thus, philately has an image problem. By seeing a philatelic subject in a wider context, as part of history, it is hoped that this image problem may be improved over time. This may lead to the encouragement of people to become philatelists.

Apart from those who may become interested, as individuals, philately in a wider context has a further prime audience - the academic world. Here the contribution philately and postal history can make to research in a variety of non-postal areas could, and has been in a few instances so far, been of much value. Philatelic research in non-postal areas is growing and as an example Patents of inventions have much to offer the understanding of paper manufacture, printing methods and production factors, postal mechanisation, etc. Research in general in many areas has been much enhanced in recent years by the realisation that a cross discipline approach has distinct advantages. Philately may have much to gain by such a collaboration. This will undoubtedly take time and depend on the quality of written work to high standards.

This article may be taken as a preliminary view with much discussion to follow.

### **End Notes**

Select bibliography of the five examples

#### **Example 1** Aden postmarks

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Rossiter, Stuart, and John Flower, *The Stamp Atlas*, London and Sydney: Macdonald & Co (Publishers) Limited, 1986, pages 223-225

#### **Example 2** T E Lawrence and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.

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Rogan, Eugene, *The Fall of the Ottomans The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920*, Basic Books, 2015

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### **Example 3.** Fleeing from the Führer

Brinson, Charmian and William Kaczynski, *Fleeing from the Führer A Postal History of Refugees from the Nazis*, Stroud: The History Press, 2011. Hardback Edition.

### **Example 4.** Perkins, Bacon printing

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Druce, Alan G, *Perkins Bacon Great Britain Line-Engraved Postage Stamp Printing 1840-1846, Volume 2*, London: The Royal Philatelic Society London, 2018

### **Example 5.** 1879 Anglo-Zulu War

*Clash of Empires the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War Exhibition. A Special Exhibition at the Royal Philatelic Society London 1-31 July 2023*, London: The Royal Philatelic Society London, 2023 [Exhibition catalogue]

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