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* COLLECTING AND EVALUATING POSTMARKS *
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by Dr. S. F. CONTRACTOR

I have been asked many times how I set about evaluating the price to pay for a postmark or cover. This question is reasonably easy to answer in relationship to a stamp, as there are published guidelines in the form of catalogues which, by and large, give some indication of the price one can expect to pay. Again, by comparing the price lists of various dealers, one can come to a good estimate as to what seems a fair market price for a desired item. In the case of the more difficult question, the answer is of necessity very subjective, but I will try and analyse how I evaluate the price of a postmark and, if that is helpful, then this article was worth writing. It would be even more so if it encouraged some of you to collect postmarks.

One important facet which immediately distinguishes the postmark collector from the stamp collector is that the former is a student, whilst the latter does not have to be. Experience therefore becomes an initial factor in judging prices. The best way of collecting a postmark is to have it on a cover. Failing this, a piece with the full postmark is the next best thing, but there is no great merit in paying more for a piece if the full postmark is on the stamp. As many of you know, I try and collect on cover only, and I get my greatest 'buzz' from a cover when I see a desirable postmark on a pretty cover, complete with the whole story told in the accompanying postmarks. The price of such a cover is maximal, especially when the important postmarks are on the obverse. One cannot pay too much for such items, as like a stamp in superb condition; such a cover can cost several times more than an identical one where the postmarks are not so clear, some are on the reverse, the cover is tatty etc. So what of the cover itself? If every aspect of the full postmark stands out clearly, then it is a superb item and deserves a premium. A clear postmark comes next and the best test for this is to see if your wife, or someone else who detests stamp collecting (or collectors) can read it without prompting from you. He, or she, must get it right first time. Now comes the problem. Do I collect faint, incomplete postmarks on damaged stamps etc? The answer is yes, simply because, being a student, I want to know if that particular stamp was issued to the place where it was cancelled. This goes into the realms of research and elevates me from the status of postmark collector to that of postal historian, whose main interest lies in researching the material he collects. How do I know what to pay? If the lowest category happens to tell a story and fill a gap, I shall pay for it knowing full well that it has helped my research and, on subsequent resale, I do not have a hope of realising my outlay.

What should one pay for a postmark having taken heed of the quality consideration I have mentioned? Rarity obviously comes into it. For example, if you pay £20 for a clear 'DTHALI' on a stamp, you should be prepared to pay £40 for an 'Exptl. B-84' and at least £100 for an 'Exptl. B-48', though the relative scarcity of these postmarks from DTHALI is 20:5:1. This applies to a rare postmark on a common stamp of the period, e.g. 1a. red of KEVII. What if it occurs on, say, a QV O.H.M.S. 4as.? It is probably unique and, unless you are trying to complete a set with this postmark on (IMPOSSIBLE!!) you should pay more than on a one anna, but nothing in comparison to its relative scarcity. Postmark collecting is an even stranger phenomenon than stamp collecting, but ever so much more exciting. Again, if you were missing one value from a set of KGV airmail stamps with a superb 'Rangoon' postmark, you would pay quite a lot more for it than, say, for the same stamp if it were just an example of 'Rangoon'

on a stamp. One of the aspects of postmark collecting is to try and acquire the different types that were used for different purposes over different periods of time. Using these aspects, some exciting stories could be unfolded from the research. One would have to find out the extant rates, and what stamps could have been issued to the place for meeting these rates. This type of research would soon give you the experience needed to evaluate a unified scarcity factor and therefore a price you would find fair to pay. A look through a dealer's stock soon gives you an idea of his knowledge, and I for one prefer to deal with one who has this knowledge, rather than with one who has not, covering it up by asking outlandish prices.

I think that today's collector has to be content with obtaining examples of postmarks on stamps or pieces, as the availability of covers is getting lower and lower. I am sure that as much fun can be derived by telling a story using postmarks on stamps as on cover, but, as in most cases, collect with a theme in mind for maximum pleasure. For example, collecting village postmarks from various States (not necessarily Native or Convention) could be great fun, especially if you can get out the appropriate Gazetteer from a library and find out about the village and its place and working in the scheme of the country. Who knows where this type of study can lead you? This type of collecting need not be expensive, as it could be done on stamps. If you find a postmark from a Post Office whose population was, say, 500 in 1860 and has grown to 10,000 today, and show the different types of postmarks used over that period, why surely that constitutes a story worth telling, and indeed, if you can find out a bit more about the village and its people and their way of life, you could one day wish to go there and see it for yourself. Who says that philately is a static hobby?

Finally, it is worth remembering that fine postmarks on the pre-KGVI issues are getting rarer, and the days of a 'find' looking through a dealer's stock are virtually gone.

One of our members (1), has tried to analyse scarcity factors, and there is a lot of good sense in that chapter. Inevitably there are many generalisations, as an accurate system cannot be evolved, and if it was, it would take away the fun of guessing based on one's own study and experience. That is why postmark collecting, and its elder brother postal history collecting, is so fascinating and gaining in popularity.

(1) 'BURMA, POSTAL HISTORY', by Gerald Davis and Denys Martin (1971), p.181; published by Robson Lowe.
