

Parcel cards from and to Canada

Synopsis

Despite formidable problems (lack of material and dearth of information), this exhibit deals with parcel cards from and to Canada. *Parcel cards* (UPU term, *bulletins d'expédition*), properly known in English-speaking countries as “despatch notes”, are forms attached (together with customs forms) to parcels (obviously sent by parcel post) with details of preferred routing, weight, postage paid (and to be collected), and addresses of sender and recipient. The recipient is supposed to sign the form, which is then returned to the exchange office of the country of origin. There it rots for a period, and finally it is disposed of.

In many European countries, disposal means selling to stamp dealers. However, for Canada, disposal means destruction. Thus we expect that not many Canadian parcel cards will be around, and in fact this is the case. The few that are known (fewer than thirty that I know of) probably survived by not being sent to the exchange office, or possibly not even being removed from the package on delivery. (Similarly, if the parcel were returned to sender, its parcel card would probably remain attached.)

Aside from being difficult to find, Canadian parcel cards are quite distinct from those of almost all other entities. First, they are made of ordinary paper, whereas all other jurisdictions' parcel cards that I have seen are card stock. Second, there should never be Canadian stamps on Canadian (or incoming, for that matter) parcel cards, in contrast to most other countries'. (Foreign stamps may be applied to Canadian despatch notes, paying various fees, such as customs, *poste restante*, extra delivery fees, etc.) Third, Canada did not allow registration of international parcels (from 1914), nor was indemnity (*valeur déclarée*) allowed (with a few minor exceptions), nor was COD applicable.

Moreover, post office information on the use of despatch notes is remarkably thin. Canada Postal Guides prior to and including 1938–39 do not mention them, but the 1944–45 edition does. The 1940 edition of [I] (the standard reference for *postmasters* in larger offices) makes no mention of despatch notes, while the 1948 edition does discuss them. Among other things, we find [I, par 168] that despatch notes are *not* required on parcels to the US, UK, Ireland, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, and a few places in the British Empire. This probably extrapolates back—in any event, I have never seen a Canadian, UK, or US parcel card for a parcel to any of the other two countries.

The literature is similarly slim. I have only been able to locate four articles dealing with Canadian parcel cards—and I wrote three of them! [H02, H03, H07, M].

I know of fewer than 25 Canadian parcel cards pre-1960. The earliest is a damaged 1916 example, and the next earliest was used in 1922 (print-order date 8–17), described in an article by Michael Madesker [M]. Michael commented that very few postal historians (of Canada) have ever seen a Canadian parcel card, and fewer had ever heard the expression *despatch note*.

In the other direction, that is, concerning parcels from abroad, foreign parcel cards addressed to Canada are slightly easier to find, particularly after World War II. The rules concerning registration, insurance, COD, etc, applied as well to incoming parcels, and foreign exchange offices were supposed to know that Canada did not accept these additional services on parcel post. (The odd one got through, however.)

As evidenced by the examples in the second half of the exhibit, foreign parcel cards usually (but not always) have stamps of the country of origin on them, paying the parcel post fee. It became a challenge to find the foreign parcel rates for the thirteen postal entities represented here, since these rates are among the most obscure, and are usually not given in lists of rates.

Organization The first half of the exhibit deals with Canadian despatch notes, arranged chronologically by print-order data (whose ordering corresponds with date of use). All prior to ca 1970 are form 16B. The earlier forms had no printing on the reverse, but all the post-War examples show instructions given by the sender, with spaces for signatures of the sender and of the recipient. The dimensions shrunk, sometime in the period 1962–67. All of the Canadian parcel cards shown (and all that I have seen) still have the counterfoil, intended for the addressee. Perhaps the unusual nature (ordinary paper) of Canadian parcel cards confused the destination postal clerks.

The second half deals with parcel cards addressed to Canada. Here we see the substantial differences, not only between themselves, but particularly with those of Canada. Almost all of them have stamps applied paying for parcel post, they are all of card thickness, there are etiquettes for both recording the item and for the route, and most interestingly, there are no Canadian postmarks, although occasionally we see a customs handstamp. Of particular interest is that all but one of the thirteen were not signed by the recipient, and correspondingly still have the counterfoil (*coupon*). This suggests rather casual handling of foreign despatch notes in Canada.

There are five levels of headings (excluding the exhibit title)

Title

Subtitle

Subsubtitle

Subsubsubtitle (in-line) Practically all pages have a subsubtitle, and all descriptions of covers have a sub-subsubtitle.

Research & References There is a heavy research component in this exhibit. The only articles I could find dealing with Canadian parcel cards are the first four listed below.

[H02] D Handelman, *Canada parcel cards—where are they?*, BNA Topics 59 (2002) 27–35.

[H03] D Handelman, *Update to “Canada parcel cards—where are they?”*, BNA Topics 60 (2003) 51–54.

[H07] D Handelman, *More Canadian parcel cards*, J Postal History Society of Canada (2007).

[M] M Madesker, *Canadian parcel despatch note*, BNA Topics 43 (1986) 44–45.

[I] General information for postmasters in charge of post offices on the revenue basis, Ottawa 1940 & 1948

Various Canada Postal Guides.