

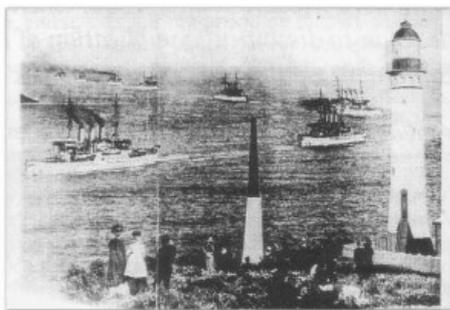
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American "Great White Fleet" Postcards of 1908

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The American fleet arrives at the head of Port Phillip Bay on its Melbourne leg in 1908.

The eight postcards issued in 1908 to commemorate the visit of America's "Great White Fleet" have a special fascination for collectors. These cards feature attractive multicolour designs which contrast markedly to the normal plain postcards provided at that time by the Post Office for everyday use. The visit of the American Fleet generated extraordinary enthusiasm amongst Australians and the postcards are the historical evidence of this.

The Great White Fleet

The American President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to showcase America's naval power and to this end, he ordered the American Fleet to undertake a lengthy cruise around the world. It was called the "Great White Fleet" because all the warships' hulls and superstructures were painted white instead of the usual "battleship grey".

The Fleet sailed from San Francisco on May 27 1908, and travelling via Hawaii and Samoa, and it reached New Zealand 2½ months later. The Fleet's itinerary during its stay in Australasian waters was as follows:

- Auckland 10-14 August 1908
- Sydney 20-27 August
- Melbourne 29 August – 5 September
- Albany, WA 11-17 September

From Australia, the Fleet sailed on to the Philippines and Japan. The presence of 12,000 "Jackies" (as the American sailors and marines were called) from 12 warships was an event never before seen in this country and it caused scenes of much excitement. Australia obviously appealed to the Americans too, since over 300 of them stayed behind after their ship had sailed and two-thirds of them were never traced!

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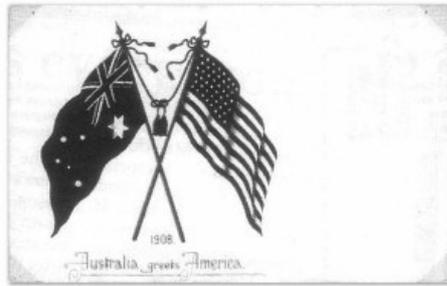
The "Omnibus" Postcard Issue

The Fleet's visit was the impetus for an "omnibus" issue of postcards from each state. At this time, separate stamps and postal stationery were provided for each state. Even though the American Fleet postcards share common designs, each state's card was impressed with stamps of the state concerned. This was the first time in Australia that an omnibus issue of postcards was produced, although during 1909 a similar group of postcards was issued for artists' handpainting.

There are two clear types of Fleet postcards. The first is the design used by Victoria only for 1d and 1½d postcards. The second is a common design used by New South Wales for 1d and 1½d postcards, as well as by each of the other states for 1d postcards. The 1d postcards could be used within Australia and to nearly all British Empire countries. The 1½d postcards were for use to foreign countries and no doubt were provided with the United States in mind.

Victoria's Postcards

The distinctive design of Victoria's Fleet postcards depicts a photograph of the Melbourne GPO and an elaborate scroll heading, all in black, on the front side. The reverse side features a full-colour depiction of crossed Australian and American flags and the inscription below "1908 – Australia greets America". The design is the work of Basil F. Magnus, a private artist of the innersuburb of Fitzroy in Melbourne. His design was submitted to the Post Office on May 28 1908. It is interesting to note that the front of the Victorian card bears the admonition "The Address only to be written on this side". The requirement that no correspondence could appear on the front of postcards had been dropped in 1905, but since the GPO illustration occupied the left-hand side on the card's front, it was not possible to write in this space.

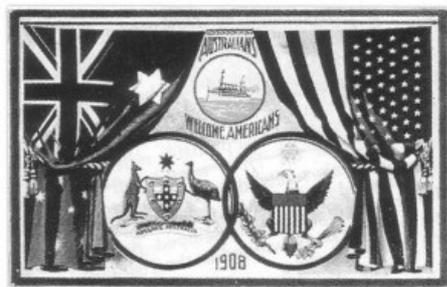


Reverse side of Victoria's postcard

The Post Office authorised the Victorian Stamp Printing Office to produce 20,000 1d postcards and 30,000 1½d postcards, both sides of which would be on a white gloss type card. The quantities actually printed and delivered to the Post Office were 19,008 1d cards and 29,004 1½d cards. A further 2,000 cards were printed but left unstamped and delivered to the Post Office in this form. The two Victorian stamp electros impressed on the cards are the 1d stamp in carmine and the 1½d stamp in red-brown, these being the normal adhesive types. The two postcards were issued on August 29 1908.

New South Wales' Postcards

The design of the New South Wales Fleet postcards comprises a full-colour illustration that covers the entire reverse side. This features draped Australian and American flags at the sides and three circular frames that contain the Australian and American coats-of-arms and a warship. The design is completed with the inscription, "AUSTRALIANS WELCOME AMERICANS". The front features the standard heading and Royal coat-of-arms, and it is divided through the centre for correspondence to be placed on the left-hand side and the address to be written in the right-hand side. The NSW design was apparently prepared by the Stamp Printing Office in Sydney.



Reverse side of the other states' postcard



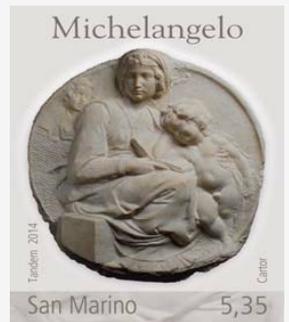
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| | | | |
|---------|--------|-------|-------|
| 177,042 | 10,687 | 5,205 | 3,708 |
| 55,909 | 10,433 | 4,241 | 3,617 |
| 45,267 | 6,970 | 4,060 | 3,561 |
| 30,220 | 6,721 | 3,767 | 3,520 |
| 12,002 | 5,814 | 3,728 | 3,477 |

The quantities authorised by the Post Office were 75,000 postcards of which 50,000 were to be impressed with New South Wales stamps (20,000 with a 1d stamp and 30,000 with a 1½d stamp) and the remaining 25,000 to be unstamped. All these postcards are the same white gloss type as the Victorian cards. The two New South Wales stamp electros impressed on the cards are the 1d stamp in carmine and a 1½d stamp in blue. New South Wales did not have a 1½d adhesive stamp and the electro employed is a stationery type adapted from the 1d Centennial stamp design. The two postcards were probably issued at the end of August 1908.

Postcards of the Other States

Of the 25,000 unstamped postcards printed in Sydney, a total of 23,000 were used to produce 1d cards for use in Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. The exact distribution of these unstamped cards was as follows:

- 6,000 to Brisbane to be impressed with a 1d Queensland stamp;
- 12,500 to Melbourne to be impressed with a 1d Western Australian stamp (10,000) and with a 1d Tasmanian stamp (2,500);
- 4,500 to Adelaide to be impressed with a 1d South Australian stamp.

The larger number of postcards for Western Australia probably reflected the fact that the Fleet would call there. Tasmania received only 2,000 postcards instead of the planned 2,500 cards. The remaining 2,000 unstamped postcards were to be forwarded to the Post Office in Melbourne.

The distribution of the unstamped cards reflected the current arrangements for stamp printing. Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide printed the stamps of their respective states and in Melbourne stamps for Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania were printed. It was usual for Tasmania's postcards to be produced in Hobart by the Government Printing Office, but on this occasion all of the Tasmanian Fleet cards were printed in Melbourne. The 1d stamp electros which were employed were those in normal use for postcards issued by the four states.

In Tasmania's case this stamp was a distinctive 1d Edward VII electro, which clearly must have been borrowed from Hobart to print the Fleet cards in Melbourne.

An unusual feature of the printing of the four smaller states' 1908 Fleet postcards is that their stamps were printed over a printed red square contains the word "STAMP" in the top right corner. For some reason the Stamp Printing Office in Sydney produced the 25,000 unstamped cards with this "stamp square" image. It has sometimes been suggested that this was an error on the part of the Sydney printer who failed to realise that the cards would be printed with stamps of the other states. However, it is recorded that the Post Office recommended a distribution of the unstamped cards to the interstate printers on August 10. This was a late stage in the production and seems to suggest that the decision to issue postcards for the four smaller states was made at this stage. If this was the case, then it would have been too late to prevent the "stamp square" being printed. In any event, the unstamped New South Wales postcard was fully approved in proof format with this inscription. The issue of the four states' Fleet postcards would have occurred in late August or early September 1908.

Usage of the Postcards

As at February 17 1909, the sales of Fleet postcards were as follows:

| | Number Sold | Number on Hand |
|----------------------|-------------|----------------|
| 1d New South Wales | 9,560 | 10,440 |
| 1½d New South Wales | 2,320 | 27,680 |
| 1d Victoria | 19,008 | nil |
| 1½d Victoria | 7,404 | 21,560 |
| 1d Queensland | 5,760 | 240 |
| 1d South Australia | 4,500 | nil |
| 1d Western Australia | 9,249 | 751 |
| 1d Tasmania | 2,000 | nil |

The sales of the cards in the smaller states was fairly successful, but for some reason the sale of postcards in New South Wales was not. Perhaps this was because the issue of its cards took place after the Fleet had left Sydney. Also, sales of the 1½d cards was not successful. It should be understood that the Fleet postcards did not appeal to serious philatelists at the time. The collecting of postal stationery

nosedived after 1900, when Stanley Gibbons made a decision to discontinue publication of its specialised Postal Stationery catalogue and not to stock stationery as part of its new issue service. Remarkably, the issue of the white Fleet postcards went unannounced in the new issue columns of *The Australian Philatelist* (the issue of new postal stationery was generally ignored by this publication). The Fleet cards were probably bought by postcard collectors of the day. Sales of the Fleet postcards continued until approval was given for the destruction of unsold remainders on April 1 1911.

The Fleet postcards are not common today, although these can be acquired without too much difficulty as mint items. More difficult is the acquisition of used cards, especially those postally used at the time and at the right As might be guessed, the usage of the two 1½d cards to foreign countries is particularly hard to find. Nevertheless, it would be a major challenge to put together a collection of the eight mint postcards.

Unstamped Postcards

The unstamped postcards which the Post Office arranged to have delivered to its Central office in Melbourne present an interesting question. There were 4,316 of these comprising 2,016 of the Victorian and 2,300 of the New South Wales cards. It might have been the intention to distribute these to Fleet visitors. The presentation of "accountable" items by the Post Office staff involved special approvals being made. Possibly the unstamped Fleet postcards were meant to obviate these difficulties as the cards officially had "no value".

As of February 1909, there were 1,729 unstamped Victorian cards remaining and about 200 of these were impressed with a 1d stamp, as this card had sold out completely. Whatever their purpose, the unstamped postcards are rare items. Just one example of the Victorian, and it is thought only two examples of the New South Wales Fleet card, have been recorded.

External Links

<http://www.history.navy.mil/index.html>

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