Tristan da Cunha and the Reverend Harold Wilde

by Gary Wayne Loew and Neil Donen

Tristan da Cunha (Tristan) is one of the remotest places on earth. It’s nearest neighbour, the also remote island of St. Helena is some 2,000km (1,240 miles) away (Figures 1 and 2). The 11km (7 mile) wide, 98km² (38 sq. miles) area island lies some 320km (200 miles) south of the Cape Town-Montevideo shipping route. Whilst the Portuguese may have discovered Tristan in 1506, it was the British who finally annexed it in 1816 (They wanted to make sure it could not be used as a staging point to mount a rescue of Napoleon). Some of the military personnel and their families, together with the occasional whaler remained on the island, gradually building a small community and village, aptly named the *Edinburgh Settlement*. Thereafter the British maintained their “presence” primarily via the rare occasional visits of military vessels. By way of comparison, the west coast of Africa was in contact with Britain and Europe monthly as early as the mid-nineteenth century and bi-weekly very soon thereafter.

Military vessel contacts notwithstanding, in reality there were two institutions primarily responsible for maintaining a social connection between the island and Britain. The first was The Church of England – via the missionary Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), who had been actively involved with the island since 1857. One of their prime aims was to provide a priest for a two or three year ‘tour of duty’ to minister to the people of Tristan. The first missionary priest to actually live on Tristan was Charles Dodgson, the brother of the author Lewis Carrol, who arrived there in 1881. The priests took on the role of postmaster and in 1932 they were formally honoured with the title ‘*Honorary Commissioner and Magistrate*.’. The second institution was the Tristan de Cunha Fund (Tristan Fund). The Tristan Fund (primarily funded by the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Empire Society) was created in 1921 as the brainchild of a London attorney, Douglas Gane. Gane was the driving force in raising money and providing critical supplies to support the viability of the islanders. Both organizations played a role in the story to unfold here.

Some time near the end of 1928, Queen Mary decided to send a harmonium as a gift to the church at Tristan. It is not recorded what motivated the Queen in the selection of this particular gift, but a grand instrument it indeed was. For his part, King George, gifted the islanders with a half-ton of wheat flour. These gifts and others from private citizens, channeled through the Tristan Fund, accompanied the newly appointed minister, the Rev. AG Partridge to Tristan which was widely reported throughout the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, neither the Rev. Partridge nor the islanders could play the instrument and it had to await the arrival of the Rev. Harold Wilde, the main character in our story of the philatelic history of Tristan, for its sounds to be heard at Sunday services.

Through his multiple connections and tireless activities, Gane was able to make the subject of Tristan’s isolated inhabitants of interest broadly. Indeed, any shipment to the island’s population was of international interest. As an example, the society

**Figure 1**: Map of the South Atlantic ocean showing the location of Tristan da Cunha and distances to various points.

**Figure 2**: Map of the island of Tristan da Cunha. (Adapted from an on-board memogram issued by the Empress of France in 1928)
The Brooklyn Daily Eagle in 1931 shared an announcement from its correspondent, The London Eagle:

“The 160 inhabitants of Great Britain’s loneliest island, that of Tristan da Cunha, in the South Atlantic will not be gift-less at Christmas. The people there will receive presents of stores and provisions purchased from money supplied by the Tristan de Cunha Fund…. In addition to those gifts the Islanders will receive a supply of oars, presented by King George, and a butter churn, the gift of Queen Mary. The articles and the food supplies will be taken to the island on the cruiser Carlisle, which has just left South Africa for that special purpose”.

From a philatelic perspective, this widespread propagation of information about Tristan may have been an important factor in the upsurge of mail sent to the island by collectors seeking to obtain postmarks from isolated places and spots in the British Empire. In December 1933, owing to the poor health of the Rev. Partridge, the SPG appointed Harold Wilde as chaplain for Tristan.

Born on 28 December 1894 in Church View, Hyde, Cheshire, Harold Wilde was the only child of George and Ada Wilde. Growing up in Denton and Radcliffe, where his father served as a town councilor, Harold attended a private school in Bury. With the outbreak of WWI, he enlisted in the South Lancashire Battalion, initially serving in Egypt. He subsequently was attached to the Somerset Light Infantry, fighting in France and Belgium, rising to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. He was awarded the Military Cross for his actions at Marquain (near Tournai, Belgium) on 21 October 1918. It appears that he was wounded at the time and later he referred to his leg wounds as being a recurring issue.

Following demobilisation, Wilde attended Durham University where he obtained his Theology degree. He was ordained in late 1920. From 1921 to 1926 he served at St. Saviour’s Church in Suez, Egypt. This was his first contact and work under the auspices of the SPG. Over the subsequent seven years he served in a variety of parishes through the United Kingdom (1926 Upper Clapton in Dingwall; 1927-31 Vicar of St. Anne at Alderney on the Channel Islands (he resigned from this post on medical advice); and 1931-33 as Curate at St. Martin’s Church, Lincoln). On 1 December 1933, on the recommendation of the Archbishop’s Board of Examiners and, having met all the volunteer requirements, he was appointed as Chaplain for Tristan for a three-year period.

Wilde’s appointment and departure on the cruise ship SS Atlantis, from Southampton were widely reported. Below is an extract of the letter sent by Gane to the Times of London. Gane also noted that the Tristan Fund had expended some £151 to send supplies to the local population. Of note is the inclusion of rat poison, to deal with the rat infestation on the island.

“The purchases consist entirely of necessaries, and include flour, and baking powder, sugar, tea, jam, salt, and soap, paint and tools, and a parcel of print calico and sundries for the women and children. The ship is also taking two tons of timber, a generous gift which the Royal Mail Company has received from Mr. H. S. Venables, the timber importer … and the two lifeboats which the Cunard SS Carinthia took to the island in April last but could not land.”

Arriving on Tristan on 19 February 1934 Wilde functioned as chaplain, administrator and postmaster for the island community. He carried with him the Tristan Type V cachet which had been returned to the SPG by the Rev. Partridge. His time on Tristan was not without subsequent controversy as he was noted to be very domineering and authoritarian in his dealings with the islanders. Accusations, in many cases supported, included the
opening of Tristan islanders mail, both incoming and outgoing, and accompanying the islanders to any vessels that stopped at Tristan (Both felt to be a form of censorship). He also oversaw the building of a storeroom attached to his cottage to hold both food and other supplies, dispersing them in both size and frequency as he saw fit. His comment in this regard to the visiting Norwegian Scientific expedition in 1937 was ‘the way to rule Tristan is to have your storehouse full and keep the key’. Despite this he seems to have had the well-being of the community as his prime motivation, building a number of structures such as a small “hospital” as part of his dwelling, a granary for storing grain for leaner times and a primitive lighthouse. He is also credited with started a regular system of schooling for the children, teaching them to read and write. Among his philatelic contributions was the request for tie-on labels for mail bags. The observations by visitors summed up his relationship with the Islanders as one where ‘they respected but did not love’ him.

In 1937 Wilde returned to England, departing Tristan on 26 February 1937 via HMS Carlisle which had been sent specifically from Cape Town for this purpose. During his time in England in 1937 Wilde was awarded the MBE (Civil Division) on the occasion of King George VI’s coronation. He also spent some time travelling, as witnessed by his visit to Blarney Castle in Ireland. Wilde also signed on for another three-year tour of duty on Tristan and by all accounts was very keen to return to the island. Prior to his departure from England he arranged to have the unofficial Tristan da Cunha overprints made which were applied to the Great Britain 1935 Silver Jubilee stamps (This is discussed in detail in part 3 of this series of articles) Flying to Cape Town he sailed with Norwegian Scientific expedition bound for Tristan on the SS Anatolia arriving at Tristan on 12 December 1937.

With the outbreak of WWII and concerns regarding his health (this seemed to revolve around the prolonged isolation which was felt by the SPGs medical advisors likely ‘to affect his health and judgement’), the SPG arranged for him to return to England. On 24 August 1940 Wilde left Tristan for the last time on the Armed Merchant Cruiser, the Queen of Bermuda. and subsequently served as chaplain at HMS Royal Arthur, a naval shore base established near Skegness in Lincolnshire, England. He took with him the Type V cachet. It was during this period that he gave the overprints to selected friends as gifts.

There is a very interesting and tantalising piece of correspondence during WWII where Wilde mentions his wife. We have been unable to verify either the name of his wife or the date of his marriage. Research to date suggests this occurred sometime in 1941. After the war Wilde served in India, subsequently returning to Britain in 1950 to take up the position of Curate in Kidderminster, Worcestershire. Following his retirement, he settled in Sheffield where in died in 1967.

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References
2. “Christmas of Britain’s Loneliest Islanders”. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 20 December 1931. Pg. 28

Figure 4: Cruise ship Queen of Bermuda. In WWII it was converted into an Armed Cruising Vessel.