

Synopsis DRAFT

For a proposed exhibit

The WWII Canadian Government's "Undercover Mail Scheme" handled by Thomas Cook & Son in Toronto

The arrangement to allow people in Canada to be able to exchange letters with friends and family in Germany or German occupied places was a significant piece of Great Britain's effort to try to have such a service not only for the United Kingdom, but for all its Colonies and Dominions. Such a unilateral scheme had been used in WWI on a smaller scale, including such a service for Canada handled by Thomas Cook in Montreal (No surviving Canadian usages are known).

The WWII service was widely announced in the United Kingdom out of London, and was successfully started in January 1940. Likewise, but in a much lower profile way, the Canadian service, official records show, was started about simultaneously in January 1940 out of Toronto.

This exhibit traces these Canadian usages from its beginnings, thereby confirming much of its working in practice, in lieu of much in the way of official records which apparently no longer exist. (In fact there are official Canadian directives from late 1945 ordering the destruction of all such records relating to censorship, and even the destruction of undelivered and held mail between Canada and enemy countries. What has survived in paper form and on microfilm records both in the Canadian and the United States Archives has certainly been helpful, including the surviving Canadian Report on Censorship from 1946, which was classified as "Top Secret" and only declassified in 1986 – only then giving philatelists a look at how the scheme along with Thomas Cook worked. This gave us information about the mail handling and the various censorship aspects.

Another handicap was that philatelists or postal historians apparently didn't save or record information or usages involving this service until years after WWII. The first articles of note publicizing the apparent existence and usage of a "forwarding agent" scheme in WWII Canada were authored by Kenneth Rowe in the late 1960's to early 1970's era in a number of the major Canadian philatelic magazines. (He authored a major study in the book about the history of mail "Forwarding Agents", which is still a good reference book today. The Thomas Cook Canadian scheme was unrecognized at the time.)

This exhibit focuses on the period of its major usage – from early 1940 through December 1941 when the U.S. entered the war, and when the use of Box 252 in NYC could no longer be a Neutral Country forwarding place. Usages were changed to a Canadian Post Office Box in Lisbon (Box 615), and 2 of those recorded usages are included. (Others may exist, but are apparently unknown in the philatelic community.)

Such a unilateral scheme worked amazingly well considering that almost immediately after it began the Germans passed laws threatening possible draconian penalties to anyone using such a service to effectively send letters to an enemy country

Ed Fraser 9-27-2025