It is probable safe to claim that as far back as anyone alive today can remember, the general public and many stamp collectors have been fascinated by small and remote populated islands.

Both aspects — remoteness and small size — pertain with the island of Tristan da Cunha, situated in the mid-South Atlantic roughly between Cape Town, South Africa and Montevideo, Uruguay [Figure 1].

Yes, that translates into about 2,100 miles from the South American coastline and about 1,500 miles from South Africa (about the same distance as the crow flies between Minneapolis, Minnesota and Key West, Florida, but with no land in between). Isolated indeed!

At the time of its first recorded sighting, the then-uninhabited island was first encountered by a Portuguese navigator, and he named the island after himself. The island, or more properly the group of several islands, lie within a circumferential zone of about 18 miles (30 kilometers), with an additional outlier. About 250 miles (400 km) farther southeast is Gough Island. They all are part of the mid-Atlantic Ridge, a volcanically rich oceanic region.

The island [Figure 2], with a tiny population today of about 280, comprises the exposed portion of a volcano, which rises about 1.2 miles into the air, with another nearly 2 miles submerged. Annual temperatures range between 36 and 77 degrees Fahrenheit; during the southern winter, snow caps
the top of the volcano.

A jump forward in time to the early 19th century and we come to the era when Napoleon [Figure 3] was imprisoned on similarly remote St. Helena, an island 1,500 miles north of Tristan da Cunha. To help eliminate the possibility that the French might mount a rescue operation for their erstwhile general and return him to power in France, in 1816 the British garrisoned the Trista da Cunha island group, and so formally took possession. However, the soldiers stationed there were ordered to leave soon thereafter, once it became evident to the British admiralty that such a rescue mission was unrealistic, given the vast inter-island distance involved.

Until 1952, when the post office first officially opened, about 15 different handstamps were, or had been, in use. Often, several of these were employed contemporaneously [Figure 4].

At times, no handstamp was available due to an accident or because a clergyman had left the island with it. Only occasionally did mail carry affixed postage stamps, and mostly this was done using United Kingdom stamps, but sometimes those from other countries were employed. In such cases, stamps were sent to islanders by enterprising philatelic dealers who requested certain befriended islanders to put them on provided envelopes and to post them by mail via the next outbound vessel.

Most pre-1952 covers, however, were stampless and some were transported and delivered to the addressees without their being taxed; others were paid for, allowing us today to date the item.

In 1922, the Quest, Ernest Shackleton’s research ship, visited the island on its way back from his Antarctic voyage (Shackleton died on South Georgia during that expedition). They used a datestamp with the inscription “S-R-Antarctic Expedition 1921,” and some outgoing mail from Tristan da Cunha was canceled with that postal cancellation during the six-day expedition visit [Figure 5].

In 1937, a Norwegian scientific expedition came to
Figure 6. A cover (above) produced onboard the HMS Carlisle when visiting Tristan da Cunha, 1937.

Figure 7. World War II brought communications changes across the world, even to tiny, isolated Tristan da Cunha. The island’s true identity was shielded, as it became known as Job 9 or HMS Atlantic Isle. Also, island mail was subject to censorship. Examples include a 1940 ship-censored cover during the visit of the HMS Queen of Bermuda (above); a 1943 cover censored by Commander Dr. Woolley (left); and an incoming cover addressed to “Atlantic Isle” (upper left).
Tristan da Cunha aboard the HMS Carlisle [Figure 6]. One member of that party was an Englishman, Allan B. Crawford, and with his visit a lifelong friendship with the Tristanians began. “ABC,” as called by his friends, returned several times and even lived a few years on the island. Of special importance, much of his time there was during World War II, when all Tristan da Cunha handstamps were banned from use due to wartime security concerns. Instead, Tristan da Cunha was provided a pseudonym, “Job 9,” and later, “HMS Atlantic Isle.” In accordance with that name, outgoing mail was censored with a British ship censor marking [Figure 7].

During WWII, the first newspaper, Tristan Times, was produced by ABC, and canceled with his private handstamp [Figure 8]. As seen on the newspaper’s cover, ABC also drew a highly accurate map following a professional survey of the island.

In 1946, Crawford designed the famous “potato stamps” of Tristan da Cunha [Figure 9], including a common value showing a rockhopper penguin. Because of the lack of a currency, stamps and other goods had to be paid for with potatoes, the real “monetary” equivalent for the islanders.

In correspondence with British postal authorities [Figure 10], citizens “sincerely hoped” that the red stamp be utilized...
The background is our home and the Rockhopper Penguin is so common that it is almost our national emblem,” they wrote. Despite Crawford’s early efforts, the introduction of a regular postal service with a real post office and proper stamps was refused by the British postmaster general for several years.

In 1938, the islands of the Tristan group became dependencies of St. Helena.

After WWII, the acting clergyman had what may have been one of his best ideas, one from which islanders still benefit: to fish for crayfish and erect a canning factory for the catch. Many islanders today earn their livings thanks to revenue earned from that idea. The covers produced for the Tristan Venture, the Tristan da Cunha Fishing Industry Scientific Survey Expedition 1948, are among the rarest of Tristan postal history [Figure 11].

The first colonial administrator began his service in 1950. When the Tristan post office opened on January 1, 1952, the first stamps issued were overprints of 12 then-current St. Helena definitives [Figure 12] and official datestamps also were introduced. From then on, the island was part of the worldwide postal system.

In 1958, remote Tristan da Cunha unwittingly entered into the global play of the Cold War between the United States and the USSR. Somewhere between Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island, a U.S. nuclear warhead exploded at high altitude (124 miles above earth) during the Defense Nuclear Agency’s Operation Argus to test physical phenomena, according to various defense records released many years later. The test was secret and the islanders heard about it only several years later.

In the early 1950s, the first stamps created especially for the island were put into use, the first being a 1953 coronation issue for the queen (Scott 13), followed by a set of 14 stamps depicting important island icons [Figure 13].

In April 1961, new definitives were issued, the currency appearing on the stamps in South African cents and rands, instead of British pounds. Because of the revenue of the canning factory (run by a South African Company) it seemed at the time to be the best way to introduce money on the island, where the inhabitants were not accustomed to using actual currency. Because of several incidents (described below),
these definitives and the South African currency had a very short life; consequently they derive a high catalog value today [Figure 14].

Suddenly in August 1961, in the only island settlement of Tristan da Cunha, Edinburgh-on-the-Seven-Seas, the ground started to tremble, windows rattled and rocks fell from a nearby side of the mountain. By October 10, the rising ground had become a new volcanic cone and threatened the nearby settlement, so a decision was taken to evacuate the island. All inhabitants were ordered off the island and an evacuation via South Africa and from there to England was organized. Postal equipment and the stock of stamps were thrown into the South Atlantic by the administrator to avoid any possibility of misuse. A few days later, the governor of St. Helena, and therefore of Tristan da Cunha, had the laudable idea to overprint four Tristan da Cunha stamps kept in stock in the Jamestown Post Office, with “St. Helena / Tristan Relief,” including an overprint charge. Some of these overprints were sold and used before instructions from London arrived just a week later, informing the governor that all stock must be taken off sale and destroyed. This ended an honorable project having only good intentions, but today, such stamps/covers are one of the highlights of St. Helena philately.

A Royal Society expedition in early 1962 studied the new volcanic cone and assessed its likely impact on the Tristanians [Figure 15]. After much negotiation and heated debate on the topic, in 1963 many islanders returned. Quite a few
had become ill from life in drafty living conditions and from the wet and cold of England, and these folks wanted to return to their homes and their old ways of life on the island. Expedition mail and covers of this “Resettlement Period” are collected as a specialty topic of the postal history in connection with the island’s social history.

This so-called “Volcanic Period,” involving evacuation and resettlement [Figure 16], is important because it is often what draws people to the philately of Tristan da Cunha, being the only thing many have heard about the region and its history. Furthermore, collecting items of that period is comparatively affordable. Since the establishment of a fishing industry, several fishing vessels have been providing the island with goods, passengers, and the transport of mail to and from South Africa. Because of the lack of an island airport all transport must be done by ship. At first, this was managed by the occasional whaling ship that passed by more or less randomly; later, mail was handled by British ships of war.

At present, some fishery ships and the South African research ship MV *Agulhas*, are tasked with the job of providing Tristan da Cunha annually with all necessary goods according to an agreement with England. On the other hand, South Africa has taken on the lease from the meteorological station on nearby Gough Island. Since 1955, Gough has been manned by scientists [Figure 17]. Beginning from that date, an expedition began the exploration of Gough during the course of which a sub-post office was set up. A datestamp specially made for Gough came in use and was employed for about two years.

Despite the scheduled visits of ships between Tristan and South Africa, the island remains very difficult to visit as space is scarce for passengers on those commercial vessels. All additional ship visits are used to transport outgoing mail. Today, modern Tristan da Cunha has a public hall, a hospital, two churches, a schoolhouse, the canning factory, a very

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**Figure 16.** A resettlement cover from 1963, posted on Tristan da Cunha via Buenos Aires to the United Kingdom.

**Figure 17.** An airmail letter (upper left) posted on Tristan da Cunha and transported by RMS *St. Helena* in 1996. A registered cover (lower left) from the 1955 Gough Island Survey addressed to Sir Winston Churchill.
small harbor, and even a policeman, firefighters and a sea rescue vessel; and, of course, a post office with Internet connection to the whole world.

Islanders and those connected to it have acknowledged its history through philately. Due philatelic honors were paid to Crawford in 2008 with a special issue commemorating his Tristan connection. In 2015, Tristan da Cunha issued a souvenir sheet of 10 showing Crawford’s original stamp designs [Figure 18].

Sadly, even such a remote group of islands is not free of modern life disasters. In March 2011, a Greek freighter on its way from Brazil to Singapore, struck land on Nightingale Island, partially sank, and was responsible for an environmental disaster. The island and the nearby smaller Inaccessible Island, populated with hundreds of thousands of penguins and seabirds, was heavily oiled, leading to the death of tens of thousands of penguins.

If you still cannot imagine what makes Tristan da Cunha postal history so collectible, I can put it directly into words. It is the knowledge that such a small community exists in such a remote region of the world — and this makes many pieces of postal history very exciting — and because we can know about all the individual families on the island. As well, we can discover for ourselves details of all the resident clergy-men who have lived there, all the teachers, every ship and many visitors of the remote island of Tristan da Cunha. Being connected to the history of Tristan da Cunha means to live with the islanders, and feel their social history. Nothing in philately could be more exciting!

The Authors
Klaus D. Hahn, Germany, secretary and webmaster of the St. Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha Philatelic Society (SHATPS), is a keen philatelist collecting the postal history of Tristan da Cunha and other small British islands.

Dr. T. Philip Hicks, Canada, the vice president of SHATPS visited the island in 2006. Hahn has researched and written more than 50 articles for South Atlantic publications, most on philatelic subject matter.

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