

# **THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH POST OFFICE**

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The history of the British post office by J. C. Hemmeon

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BY

J. C. HEMMEON, PH.D.

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## PREFACE

In justice to those principles which influenced the policy of the Post Office before the introduction of penny postage, it is perhaps unnecessary to call attention to the fact that no opinion as to their desirability or otherwise is justifiable which does not take into consideration the conditions and prejudices which then prevailed. Some of the earlier writers on the Post Office have made the mistake of condemning everything which has not satisfied the measure of their own particular rule. If there is anything that the historical treatment of a subject teaches the investigator it is an appreciation of the fact that different conditions call for different methods of treatment. For example, the introduction of cheap postage was possibly delayed too long. But during the era of high postal rates a large net revenue was of primary importance, nor were those conditions present which would have made low rates a success.

The consideration of such debatable subjects as the telegraph system of the Postal Department and the department's attitude toward the telephone companies, as well as the intention of the Post Office to acquire the business of the latter, must necessarily give rise to controversy. Thanks to the magnificent net revenue obtained from letters in the United Kingdom the department has been able to lose a good deal of money by the extension of its activities into the realm of affairs not purely postal. Possibly a *democratic* type of government should, from the financial point of view, interfere least in the direct management of economic institutions, on account of the pressure which can easily be brought to bear upon it for the extension of such institutions on other than economic grounds. If non-economic principles are to be substituted in justifying the initiation or increase of government ownership, a popular form of government seems the least suitable for the presentation of such as shall be fair to all concerned, not to mention the difficult problem of dealing with those members of the civil service who do

not hesitate to make use of their political power to enforce their demands upon the government.

In the treatment of a subject so complex as the history of the British Post Office it is not easy to decide how far its presentation should be strictly chronological or how far it should be mounted in "longitudinal sections," exposing its most salient features. Both methods have their advantages and their disadvantages. In order to obtain what is useful in both, I have described chronologically in the first four chapters the progress of the Post Office, while in the remaining chapters I have examined separately some of the more important aspects of postal development. But I am aware that by this compromise I have not entirely escaped the dangers of abrupt transitions from subject to subject and of the accumulation of dry details. I can only plead in extenuation, in the first place the nature of my subject, an institution with a long and varied history, characterized by the steady extension of its field of activity, and in the second place my desire to make my study as thorough as possible, even at the risk of some sacrifice of unity and interest of treatment.

The material for this sketch has been obtained from the Harvard University Library, the Boston Public Library, and the Canadian Parliamentary Library. Work was also done in the Library of the British Museum. I wish to acknowledge the help I have received from the advice and criticism of Professor Gay, under whose supervision the larger part of this history was prepared.

J. C. HEMMEON.