
PACIFICA

New Hebrides - Update on Alavoine

by Martin Treadwell

A persistent mystery in New Hebrides philately has been the identity and background to “Alavoine”, the forger responsible for the “16 NOV 11” fake cancel which mimicked PCH Type 5, the first official French cancel for the New Hebrides.

In their 1967 book, *The New Hebrides Postal Stamps and their History*, Hals and Collas described Type 9U (the 16 NOV 11 fake cancel) as having been made by “a certain Sydney jeweller, Alavoine”. Beyond that, there has been little known of the man. Indeed, in the preparatory discussions for the recent PISC book *New Hebrides: Fakes, Forgeries, Imitations, Phantoms and Leaps in the Dark*, I exchanged emails with the authors, Roland Klinger and Jim Crompton, about the possibility that Alavoine was a myth. I had spent some years searching fruitlessly for him in the bounteous archives in Sydney, without any trace of him surfacing. Roland and Jim shared my uncertainty and hinted as much in the book.

Of course, the public expression of a view reached after many years of research is the surest way to have contradictory information comes to hand within a matter of days.

As part of the HGL Fletcher estate, auctioned by Grosvenor in London in June, I was fortunate to acquire a bundle of material relating to the 1903 *Syndicat Francais des Nouvelles Hebrides* locals. As well as such gems as the original artist’s drawings and the famous 31 August 1903 cover, the bundle contained a cover bearing the full 1903 set, cancelled 16 November 1911 - the Type 9U fake cds of course.

The cover is a commercial envelope, for an enterprise called "Office Intermediaire" in Avenue Wagram, Noumea and the name of the printer of the envelope is printed in tiny letters at the foot: M(onsieur). ALAVOINE, NOUMEA.

At first, I was sufficiently excited to have found any concrete reference to Alavoine, let alone one which was so clearly linked to the Type 9U forgery, to think more deeply about the matter. It was enough that the cover, which is illustrated here with the tiny subtext enlarged, established that there had indeed been an Alavoine and that we had been looking for him in the wrong place.



As time passed and I studied the cover more closely, I began to wonder whether the red 25c stamp at lower centre was concealing anything. The fancy border seems to stop short of the stamp on both sides. I contemplated soaking the stamp off but I abhor any interference with old covers and settled on a less invasive course. Opening the cover as much as I dared, I slipped a small digital camera inside and took a few shots with a very strong light on the outside. I then made a mirror image of the result, so that any text could be read. Very clearly, the text printed under the stamp states:

Lucien Alavoine
Director



The 16 NOV 11 cover made by Alavoine
The mirror image of the words under the 25c stamp

So, not only do we have a first name for the man, but it also seems clear that he was the director of the business known as “Office Intermediaire”. That, in turn, means that the small photograph in the middle of the envelope is probably a photograph of Alavoine himself. One cannot be certain, of course, but it would be utterly bizarre to put one’s own name on the envelope as director of the company and then put an image of someone else.

As a last word on this important, if curious, piece of postal history, it is not the first time that it has been mentioned in print. At p.55, Hals and Collas wrote:

“In addition to the references, the collections of ourselves and our “cohorts” were consulted. HGL Fletcher has two of the more peculiar items; a cover struck August 13, 1903 or one day before ‘official’ issue, and another dated 16 NOV 11, both with the full sets, and both with the official Port Vila tampon.”

Unlike the 31 August 1903 cover, Hals and Collas did not illustrate the Alavoine cover. Perhaps Mr Fletcher never provided them with a copy. Certainly, they do not seem to have realised that it was an Alavoine fake - perhaps because they had not made the connection between Alavoine and the 16 NOV 11 date, which almost all of his bogus cancels carry.

Perhaps Alavoine did end up in Sydney as a jeweller. It does not matter. It now seems that he did his forging while he was living in Noumea and working there as a printer and running the “Office Intermediaire”.