BSAC: The Stamps

ISSUES OF 1890-91

Starting in 1890, the British South Africa Company issued one set of definitive stamps after another, with values from 1/2d up to 10 pounds. I have been able to collect theses definitive sets complete, though the condition of some examples varies, and high values are mostly the so-called "revenue cancellations" that considerably reduce their value. Many of these old stamps are not pricey, especially used copies. I thought at first this suggested bustling commerce. Then I learned that in 1909, when BSAC became Rhodesia, the post office offered "remainders" of cancelled-to-order stock to dealers at fire-sale prices. Nevertheless, the sets have retained some value. Mine should sell for at least a couple hundred dollars. (I sure hope so, considering what I paid for them!)

Let's take a closer look at the BSAC coat of arms (left). Here is the Heraldic description:

1890

Gules, the chief semee of besants, the base semee of ears of wheat Or, a fesse wavy argent between two bulls passant in chief and an elephant passant in base all proper; the fesse charged with three galleys sable, for the crest, a lion guardant passant Or, supporting with its dexter fore paw an ivory tusk erect proper. The supporters (added 25 May 1909) are two springbok.

This coat of arms was the only design used on all BSAC stamps from 1890 on — with the exception of a short set issued in 1896 with Cape Colony stamps overprinted "British South Africa Company." There is something mesmerizing about the orderly rows of stamps, glowing in their varying colors of muted or bolder hues; some are bi-colored. As you examine the sets, notice the differing frames and ornamentation. The bi-color set of 1897 is a masterpiece of the engraver's art. Etched with authority and imperial elegance, the stamps are authentic, convincing.

These stamps may be appealing emblems, but of what? Contemplating these orderly rows, marching across the page of the album, there comes a startling disconnect between these authoritative labels and what they stand for. The BSAC's imperial project, after all, was not always orderly and authentic. It was a coercive system, imposed with bloodshed on the subject populations of Matabeleland and Shonaland, for purposes of extraction and profit … and after that, perhaps conversion and "civilizing." By most measures, that project was a failure. Colonial rule collapsed under the weight of its inherent illogic and immorality. In the case of the BSAC, its top-heavy administration was unable to produce the anticipated riches, and spent most of its money building railroads. By the time the BSAC gave up its administrative duties in 1923, it had not paid its shareholders a single dividend. As for the mission of "converting the natives," the missionaries and reformers had long since been sidelined by Cecil Rhodes and his fellow imperial adventurers.

1898

And yet, it is impossible to think of Africa today — of Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia, which occupy the BSAC's realm — without acknowledging the impact of those colonial agents. The business of extracting southern Africa's rich resources — gold, copper, diamonds and the rest — was booming before the end of the colonial era. Today, the world depends more than ever on Africa's precious minerals to

1897

1909

run its cars, computers, chips and clouds. When the imperialists departed in the 1960s, they left a vacuum of leadership and experience that quickly drew in another kind of corrupt culture. In much of modern Africa, "big men" still fill the seats of the imperialists. They enrich themselves and their coteries, siphoning wealth from the same outside interests that continue to do the extractive work. The interests of the people, now as before, come last.

It is a sobering exercise to compare the era represented by those BSAC stamps — their heraldic splendor masking a sordid, racist reality — and Zimbabwe, where democracy was strangled in its kraal in the early days of independence. Black Zimbabweans, it turns out, have traded one oppression for another.

TO BE CONTINUED