

British Central Africa: The Stamps

Here is one way to think of British Central Africa in contrast to the British South Africa Company: there were differences between them regarding race relations, with Cecil Rhodes and his white crusaders on one side and on the other, Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston and the milder legacy of the fabled missionary explorer David Livingstone (1813-73). He and other Scottish missionaries began visiting the area in 1858, and found the fertile hill country ideal for cultivation — of business as well as souls. They christened it the Shire Highlands, as if it was an extension of Scotland. (What hubris!) The British colonials were officially uncomfortable with the blatant racism practiced by Rhodes, the Boers and other settlers. In the 1880s, British troops in central Africa were still trying to end the Arab slave trade. Johnston was no bleeding heart on the subject, attacking and overwhelming pro-slavery Yao and Swahili tribal leaders without mercy. In the early years of the British-ruled Cape Colony, some Blacks were able to vote under provisions of the “qualified franchise.” Rhodes and his supporters in the Cape Parliament sided with the Boers and argued for “responsible government” — a code phrase meaning autonomy from London and deference to local (white) leaders on most matters, including race. This racial nationalism led British Prime Minister Gladstone to sum up Rhodes as “Rather a pro-Boer MP in South Africa, I fancy.”

British Central Africa was never a royally chartered company like Rhodes’ British South Africa Company. It began as a stepchild of the BSAC — as evidenced by its first set, with “B.C.A.” overprinted on BSAC stamps. (right)

(There was a British Central Africa Company, but it was a private concern and never issued its own stamps.)

To forestall Portuguese expeditions, London declared the Shire Highlands protectorate in 1889. This expanded to become the BCA protectorate in 1893. The first post office opened in Chiromo in 1891. In 1895 the Foreign Office took over postal duties and began issuing its



own stamps for British Central Africa. The two sets in use between 1895 and 1903 displayed a coat of arms. Since I could not find an official heraldic description, here’s mine: Two Black guys wearing

David Livingstone was honored on this Malawi stamp in 1973, the centenary of his death. Malawi used to be Nyasaland, and before that British Central Africa.



1891



1895

white sarongs stand on either side of a shield; one holds a pickaxe, the other a shovel. The shield's design includes a cross, tablets and a central figure of two lions rampant. The shield rests on a carpet in the shape of Africa, its point touching British Central Africa. There is a symbolic plant, top background. The motto at bottom reads: Light in Darkness.

Here is part of a page from my British Africa album. I include it to show off the unusual stamp from 1898, top left, inscribed simply "INTERNAL POSTAGE." It consists of an orange medallion containing the ceremonial tree — a Mukumba tree, I believe — and the inscription in the oval frame: British Central Africa



Protectorate. The stamp was for use in-country only, and they are scarce, commanding a hefty price online (\$125 and up for a used copy, much more for unused ones). It's hard to see the country name. Perhaps that is fitting, because it was no easy feat to carve out and maintain a protectorate under the acquisitive pressures of Rhodes and his cohort.

Alfred Sharpe took over from Johnston in 1896 and

served until 1910. The British ruled with a light hand, appointing administrators but leaving local chiefs alone for the most part. The inscription on the first set of Edward VII definitives in 1903 (above), reaffirmed that the territory now was definitively "protected" from Boers, Arabs, Portuguese and Germans, as well as Rhodes and his BSAC.

By 1908, Edwardian stamps already were bearing the name "Nyasaland" Protectorate. At right is an example from the set featuring George V, who reigned from 1910 to his death in 1935. The elegant design was used in other colonies, and reappeared in





1938

the higher values of the George VI set of 1938 (below). Notice also the bold leopard motif — a rendering of the new badge of the protectorate.

Nyasaland continued to produce stamps for decades. Below is the first set for Queen Elizabeth II, issued in 1953. Isn't it pretty? Beautiful two-color engravings of scenes. There also is a map, and a depiction of the dramatic leopard badge. Enlarged, below, is the 20 shilling stamp — a black-and-scarlet engraving with two ovals, one containing a portrait of QEII, the other displaying the protectorate's badge. Quite a beauty, eh?



1953



1953

That same year, 1953, Nyasaland got swallowed up by the larger territories of Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. The ill-starred federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland lasted for about a

decade. In 1963, the federation dissolved and Nyasaland suddenly became a country again. Postal authorities scrambled to produce stamps to suit the new arrangement, and in November overprinted revenue stamps "postage" to use for mail (right). Around this same time, Britain recognized local self-government, and a new set from "Nyasaland" was issued Jan. 1, 1964 (partial set, below left). In July, after the nation declared its independence, the first definitive set was issued for Malawi (high values, below right).



1963



1964



1964

TO BE CONTINUED