

# TRUTH *v.* FICTION,

*re*

## THE CHALMERS' CLAIM.

BY

THE POSTAL REFORMER'S "HOME" SECRETARY  
FOR THIRTY YEARS.

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"There is a large section of the public whom no power on earth could save from falling victims to their own gullibility. . . . [These people accept] every story, however palpably improbable, without troubling themselves to inquire for vouchers."—*Truth*, February 5th, 1891.

". . . still believe that story false which ought not to be true."—SHERIDAN.

"Bear not false witness, slander not, nor lie."—"The Light of Asia."

"Celui qui affirme avec audace a toujours un grand avantage."—DE TOCQUEVILLE (père).

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## Truth *versus* Fiction.



WHEN Mr. Patrick Chalmers lately died, everyone must have hoped that the twelve-years long controversy anent the invention of the adhesive postage-stamp would also die. But the evil the man did lives after him; and the end can scarcely be while partizans continue to assert, with marked absence of argument, that he believed and had succeeded in proving his father to have been the originator of that stamp. The rule of *de mortuis*, etc., may, on occasions happily rare, be more honoured in the breach than the observance, and certainly so in this case where a man wilfully devoted one-sixth of a long life to the fabrication against my father, Rowland Hill, of slanders as worthy of belief (yet none the less by some believed) as the communications of the Cock Lane ghost, the story as told by himself of the Tichborne claimant, and other frauds upon a public too prone to accept the latest sensational story as "gospel truth".

From 1880 until his death, Mr. P. Chalmers published a series of pamphlets whose ostensible object was to claim that invention for his father, and to show that the postal reformer purloined the idea, and passed it off as his own. Violent personal attacks on Rowland Hill form, indeed, the "padding" of these publications, and help to conceal their absolute dearth of reasoning. From the slanderer's point of view this was the correct course to take. When a man has absolutely no case, abuse of the other side is the established rule. And yet Mr. P. Chalmers has complained of hard words on our side; and some of his adherents take it amiss that the postal reformer's family should meet these attacks in other than a meek spirit. It is as

though an assassin were to stab a man in the back, and then, with an air of injured innocence, were to join his friends in saying to the victim's incensed relatives, "No wrong has been done. It is unreasonable of you to be offended. You should discuss the affair in a friendly manner."

To those who read between the pamphleteer's lines—an easy task—yet another object is made visible by repeated allusions to the fact that James Chalmers never received a Government grant.

The only evidence Mr. P. Chalmers could produce in support of his case was (1) sundry letters written by some old people nearly half a century later than the events they professed to describe; and (2) an old *Athenæum* review of Rowland Hill's famous pamphlet on "Post Office Reform". Rather a meagre array of witnesses; but, with rare good luck, whenever Mr. P. Chalmers wanted additional evidence, a "find" was apt to turn up in a fashion as opportune and wonderful as did the late Mr. Pigott's "two mysterious strangers".

The letters of the four old people, though mainly agreeing, are in the most important point, the date of the postage-stamp, either mutually contradictory or vague and uncertain, two only standing out for the impossible year 1834. But were they in absolute accord, all four could not outweigh the testimony of one witness claimed by the other side, James Chalmers himself, who, in more than one document still in existence, has left it on record that the date of his "*first*" (italics his own) postage-stamps is November, 1837, nine months after the publication of "Post Office Reform", wherein the plan of that reform is detailed down to hall-door letter-boxes (p. 30) which were unknown in the days when the postman collected the postage in money ere giving up his letters, and took an hour and a half to deliver less than seventy of them (p. 28). The pamphlet was republished in *fac simile* form the year of the Queen's Jubilee—the jubilee also of the pamphlet. (See "The Post Office of Fifty Years Ago": Cassell and Co.) And as copies of the original issue are likewise in existence at the British Museum and elsewhere, sceptics can easily check my statements. "Post Office Reform" had a wide circulation, and made a great sensation;

and when once the public was educated to accept the novel idea of a uniform rate of postage combined with prepayment by means of stamps—the keynote of the plan—there were probably other enthusiasts besides James Chalmers who set to work as he did. One of these old witnesses comes near to confirming James Chalmers' testimony by telling us that "when it was settled that the Penny Postage system was to be adopted" his employer "set to work to make stamps". For this slip, Mr. Whitelaw's memory and intelligence have been impugned as faulty; but if it is possible for one witness to be mistaken, why not also the other three? The truth is that of the four he is nearest the mark.

The *Athenæum* evidence amounts to this—no more. Mr. Francis, the Editor, while reviewing "Post Office Reform", made no mention of the adhesive postage stamp. Therefore, argued Mr. P. Chalmers, their use "formed no part of the proposals or intentions of Sir Rowland Hill". In other words, if we cannot find some statement of an author in a review of his book, that statement has no existence. It would, of course, be folly to refer to the book itself. Even reviewers at times are careless, as was the case when a "religious" paper claimed Butler's "Fair Haven" as an orthodox work. Probably the impressed stamp described at page 42 of the pamphlet caught Mr. Francis' attention while the adhesive stamp at page 45 escaped it. This witness may surely be dismissed.

When a great public work has achieved signal success, the name of its self-dubbed "originators" is certain to be legion. Sir Charles Sikes, of Huddersfield, had scarcely been laid in his grave when an attempt was made to deprive him of the merit of originating that beneficent measure, the Post Office Savings' Bank scheme. Many men and one woman have in turn claimed the authorship of the plan of postal reform, though they modestly kept in the background while the hard struggle to establish it went on; and though it is obvious that they cannot all be the one real Simon Pure. George IV declared he had commanded at Waterloo; and, on appealing for confirmation of the truth of that boast to the "Iron Duke" himself, met with the delightfully diplomatic answer: "I have often heard

your majesty say so!" Another George (Cruickshank) maintained that he, not Dickens, was the author of "Oliver Twist". But there is no need to add to the list. That there should have been several claimants to the invention of the postage stamp is not surprising, seeing that, so far as actual design was concerned, the question had been referred to the public, and that many competed for the honour and the *honorarium*. Of a few of the more self-asserting, each in his turn enjoyed a brief bubble reputation, died, and was forgotten. Some, no doubt, were sincere in their belief, since as years pass and memory weakens it is not unnatural to confound *device* with *proposal*. The late Dr. Gray, of the British Museum, was a persistent claimant. The elder Chalmers was another claimant, but on his mistake being pointed out he frankly withdrew the pretensions his son chose to revive. On the 1st October, 1839, just after Rowland Hill's appointment to the Treasury was announced, the worthy Dundonian thus writes: "I beg to congratulate you on the successful result of your labours, and on the appointment you have received to superintend the execution of your admirable plan, convinced as I am that it cannot be in better hands, nor in those of one having a higher claim to it." This is hardly the tone of one who had been defrauded of his invention by the man to whom he writes. In his letter James Chalmers refers to a "certificate" signed by over one hundred fellow-citizens of Dundee—merchants, ship-owners, bankers, members of the Chamber of Commerce and others—in which are warmly eulogised his services in "the acceleration of the Mail, and the general improvement of the Post Office Establishment," and mention is made that "since the proposal to establish a Uniform Rate of Postage was announced Mr. Chalmers has devoted much attention to the subject." And further on it commends "his plan of using stamped slips". The date of the certificate is "30th September, 1839," and Mr. P. Chalmers, at page 15 of his pamphlet *re* the "Petition to the Lords of Her Majesty's Treasury", etc., gave from the *Arbroath Herald* of October 11th, 1839, a copy of this document. His usual quotations were made from "old local newspapers" whose existence is problematic; and the fact that in this case he gave

name and date is proof that for once the "find" was genuine. But it is one which injures, not assists, his claim; and of this he was doubtless well aware, for, while quoting the certificate at length, he carefully refrained from pointing out that from beginning to end there is no sort of reference to the mythical 1834 stamp. If really James Chalmers, while working at a thing for which there was absolutely no demand, was generally surrounded by a group of admiring fellow-citizens, how is it that none of these "over one hundred" of them had any recollection of the event? Their memory in 1839 must have been as phenomenal as that of the four old witnesses more than forty years later, only that in the former case it took the shape of phenomenal forgetfulness.

James Chalmers survived the establishment of Penny Postage thirteen years, yet never claimed to be its part-inventor. The ridiculous story that he saved the plan from collapse by suggesting the adhesive stamp, had no foundation save in his son's abnormally fertile imagination. Is it likely that our ever busy Parliament would seriously discuss and triumphantly pass an immature measure, the impossibility of practically working which caused universal "dismay"? One of Mr. P. Chalmers' reasons for the alleged "dismay" was the perplexity felt by the Government as to the best way of securing the stamped covers against forgery. This difficulty, he said, was solved by his father's invention of the adhesive stamp. This is absurd as well as untrue. It is obviously easier to forge an adhesive label than one which is part and parcel of a Government envelope, as in the latter case both stamp and envelope must be forged. One reason, indeed, why James Chalmers' stamps were rejected (whereof more anon) was on account of the ease with which, being type-set, they could have been forged. I may add that he disapproved of adhesive stamps on the ground of the then supposed difficulty of gumming large sheets of paper. The "slips" above alluded to were what he proposed. On one, the loose, end of these the stamp was to be printed; the other end being held fast by a flap, seal, or wafer. In their passage through the post, stamp and letter would probably have parted company: another fatal objection.

In Mr. P. Chalmers' repeated declaration that Rowland Hill insisted that "a stamped cover was absolutely to be used in all cases" there is not a vestige of truth. Indeed it would be difficult to pick out many (if any) passages from the Chalmers' literature which are not the sorriest fiction. One of the clumsiest fables is that which represents Rowland Hill as suppressing James Chalmers' scheme in order to have the merit of originating it himself. (1) How can a scheme be suppressed, and at the same time be widely known? (2) How was it that James Chalmers, having made acquaintance with that scheme which we are invited to believe was stolen from him, actively worked to promote its adoption as Rowland Hill's scheme? (3) If the Dundee printer was author of a suppressed scheme, it must have existed somewhere in manuscript or print; and if so, why did his "tardy son" never produce it; and where is it?

Mr. P. Chalmers evidently made as much as he could of the papers bearing on his father's plan which the late Sir Henry Cole bequeathed to the South Kensington Museum; but the experienced "finder" took care not to be too explicit concerning their contents. Not even he was seemingly able to discover among them mention of the mythical 1834 stamp.

In his absurd story of the "dismay" above mentioned, there is just the tiniest *modicum* of truth; but even here he not only confounded issues, but put the cart before the horse. For the postal reform was inaugurated on the 10th of January, 1840; and the trouble followed, not preceded, the publication of the stamps on the 6th of May ensuing. It rose out of the startling success with which the experimentalising portion of the public removed the obliterating mark after a letter had passed through the post, and used the stamp over again. For some few months the officials, aided by some of the leading chemists, were engaged in counter-experiments; and finally won the day by resorting to the simple expedient of printing the stamps with an ink more easily effaced than that used to obliterate them. Forgery of the adhesive stamps was made impossible, not by James Chalmers, but by Mr. Bacon, of the firm of Perkins, Bacon and Petch, who, although not mentioned by the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, were for forty years the sole printers of our rd.



—*for a long time our only stamps.*  
 and 2d. labels. He devised an ingenious contrivance for reproducing exact facsimiles of the Queen's head.

Why do not the Chalmersites study history instead of fable?

Resolved at all hazards to rob the postal reformer of the credit of originating his own scheme, Mr. P. Chalmers put absolutely no check upon his powers of invention. Perhaps he thought that if only he threw mud enough, some at least was bound to stick. He accused Rowland Hill of stealing the plan, not only from James Chalmers, but also from a "concealed" copy of the Fifth Report of the Commissioners of Post Office Inquiry; and to prove his case, deliberately misquoted passages from that Report. Of all his bad shots this was probably the worst—at any rate the most ludicrous. (1) How could a public document be concealed? (2) As the Report contains no such plan, how could anyone steal it? (3) The Commissioners issued that Report in April, 1836; examined the reformer the following February; heard him unfold his plan in detail, and *entirely failed to recognise it as their own.*

Later, Mr. P. Chalmers discovered that the plan lurked between the pages of certain Blue Books procured by Mr. Wallace. M.P., in order that Rowland Hill might study official statistics, etc., a necessary preliminary to the issue of the pamphlet containing the matured scheme. For the Post Office refused all information to the "visionary," or even admission within its doors; and he never set foot within the hostile stronghold till he entered it as an official. Mr. P. Chalmers must have affected to think the plan as ubiquitous as Sir Boyle Roche's famous bird. It is doubtful whether the slanderer ever saw those books; but to a man of genius discovery in an unread work of a Donnelly cryptogramme is not difficult, even though, during a previous half-century, actual readers have failed either to suspect or to decipher it.

I have alluded just above to Mr. Wallace. Of him my father ever spoke with gratitude, and with the reverence that good men speak to-day of Gladstone. No Scotchman should forget Robert Wallace of Kellie, first member for Greenock. From the time he entered Parliament he laboured to reform the postal service; and, among other minor improvements, we owe

to him the registration of letters. A detailed plan of wholesale reform he never had, and no more dreamed of charge by weight or of postage-stamps and prepayment than he did of uniformity of rate. He was an older man than Rowland Hill, and of higher social standing, yet, so incapable of jealousy or other petty meanness was he, that when the younger reformer made known his scheme, Mr. Wallace, throwing aside all others, took up the only practical one, and worked for it as if it had been his own. To Mr. Wallace every would-be postal reformer turned as to their best friend; and thus he was familiar with the plans of James Chalmers and others besides that of Rowland Hill. Had the Dundee printer therefore suggested the postage-stamp, Mr. Wallace must have known of it. Yet, in a speech delivered at Aberdeen, and duly reported in the local *Herald* of 2nd October, 1841, the member for Greenock says: "And here let me say once for all that to Mr. Hill alone is the country indebted for that scheme, for he is the real inventor, and its only discoverer." It is a pity that those who waste sentiment over James Chalmers' imaginary wrongs should not rather keep in sight the fact that the greatest helper of all was the powerful influence ungrudgingly given of Greenock's famous first member.

A still later false accusation represents Rowland Hill as fraudulently removing from the Treasury some 2,600 letters, which, if still extant, would have proved James Chalmers' claim. This is yet another bad shot. By this time the question of the use of stamps had passed from the stage of mere proposal to that of adoption, and the letters were from many writers in response to the Treasury advertisement of August, 1839, inviting the public to furnish designs. I will briefly relate the history of these designs. Those of nineteen of the forty-nine competitors were thought worthy of reconsideration. Those of the remaining thirty were rejected outright; and of the thirty James Chalmers was one. According to the late Sir Henry Cole (see "Fifty Years of Public Life"), the successful competitors were himself, and Messrs. Cheverton and C. Whiting. Mr. W. Wyon. R.A., was commissioned to produce a head of the Queen as a medallion to

be embossed on paper; and we still use it on our ready stamped envelopes. Mulready, the author of the unjustly derided cover, was not one of the forty-nine. He spent but a couple of days over the design, and apparently had not time to give one of the four winged messengers a second leg.

Removal of the correspondence above mentioned could not have concealed James Chalmers' proposals because these were printed a year and a half previously, and had been widely circulated. Only those who never knew Rowland Hill need assuring that he did not remove the letters. When they had served their purpose, they were, in accordance with not unusual custom, probably destroyed as papers not valuable enough to be preserved. Philatelists to-day—there were none fifty-three years ago—would put a higher value on them. My father was a man of strict integrity, and punctilious about placing upon record the names and suggestions of actual helpers. He always attributed the first idea of the impressed stamp to the late Charles Knight, publisher, Shakespearean scholar, and implacable assailant of the odious old "taxes on knowledge"; and had the postal reformer owed the adhesive stamp to James Chalmers or anyone else, the debt would have been duly chronicled.

Mr. P. Chalmers was evidently of opinion that constant repetition of his untruths would, sooner or later, convert the world to belief in his case. To some extent he succeeded, not because he was able to produce proofs, for proofs there were none to produce, but because most people are too busy or too indifferent to examine evidence, however false, and are therefore willing to receive information at second-hand. But had he converted the entire world—which he was very far from doing—such conversion would not have proved his case. The claimant had many adherents; but all their faith could not make of him the real Roger Tichborne. Naundorff succeeded in making a number of people accept him as Louis XVII; but all their credulity could not bring back to life the unhappy child who died a prisoner in the Temple.

Here is another specimen of manufactured evidence. The story is told at length by Major Evans in the *Stamp Advertiser* of

May 14th, 1890. I will quote a small portion only. "Herr Friedl [of Vienna] bought an essay of which he knew nothing. He possesses no document to show when the stamp was printed, but he and other experts accept the date as 1834, merely because the essay corresponds with the description of one which Mr. P. Chalmers *says* was issued in that year." The fact that Herr Friedl possesses this stamp, and that Mr. P. Chalmers vouches for its age, is held to constitute proof that it *is* that age. The logic (?) is strange, but not stranger than the fact that there are people willing to accept it.

The 1834 stamp is, I have said, mythical. The reasons why are three. (1) Postage-stamps, which are mere tokens of prepayment, could hardly have existed when letters were not prepaid, any more than railway tickets, likewise tokens of prepayment, existed when railways were not in use. Gunpowder in Hamlet's time is a not much more grotesque anachronism. (2) The words "General Postage", which indicate uniformity of rate, are printed on these essays, as are also the rates of postage, which are not rates used or even proposed in 1834, but are identical with those advocated by Rowland Hill, both in his pamphlet of February, 1837, and in his evidence before the Commissioners of Post Office Inquiry the same month and year. (3) James Chalmers himself, as we have seen, repeatedly declared in 1839, when therefore recollection of his own work was fresh, that the date of his first stamps was November, 1837.

Another of Mr. P. Chalmers' reckless assertions is that up to July, 1839, the adhesive stamp formed no part of Rowland Hill's plan. The slanderer played as recklessly with dates as with the ninth commandment. When first that stamp was suggested we have seen. And in *June*, 1839 (so near was penny postage to its adoption) the reformer drew up for the convenience of the Government a printed paper "On the Collection of Postage by means of Stamps", in which he again recommended their use, and descending to details, proposed that the penny labels should be printed on sheets, each containing 240 in twenty rows of twelve; even as they are issued to the public to this day.

Mr. Pearson Hill frequently, but always in vain, challenged Patrick Chalmers to submit his so-called proofs for examination

to some impartial person of unblemished reputation, such as the late Mr. Samuel Morley, or to high legal authority. Rowland Hill's family, confident in the justice of their cause, have all along courted investigation, and court it still. My brother publicly charged the slanderer with giving false dates, false quotations, garbled correspondence, and forged evidence, and repeatedly dared him to bring an action for libel. Such action would not only have disproved my brother's accusations had they been false, but would have afforded Mr. P. Chalmers the finest possible opportunity of establishing his father's claim had claim there been to establish. But perhaps remembering how the London Philatelic Society had already carefully sifted his case, and dismissed it as "unsubstantiated", and not wishing to be twice caught, Mr. P. Chalmers let the invitations pass unheeded, remarking, wisely perhaps, that "we will not trouble the lawyers". Meanwhile, protected by our infamous law of libel which allows the dead to be slandered with impunity, he went on reiterating his attacks on our father's memory, though, so far as the living were concerned, he carefully kept himself within legally safe limits. Nor did he hesitate more than once to declare that the above-mentioned Society, Sir James Whitehead, and others who had declined to have anything more to do with him, had "now acknowledged" his claim. He even had the effrontery, after the publication of one of my brother's pamphlets demolishing the case, to issue a letter assuring the public that "the compiler does not now claim the invention of the adhesive stamp for Sir Rowland Hill". He also asserted that, owing to his representations, the Mansion House Memorial Committee had admitted the justice of his claim, and altered the inscription on Mr. Onslow Ford's statue of Rowland Hill—a statement utterly at variance with the truth. It would almost seem as if Mr. P. Chalmers made these random assertions in the belief that no one would take the trouble to verify them.

Yet there are those who, while admitting that the man had no case, contend that he honestly believed he had. I cannot agree with them. The man whose belief is honest will fight honestly for that belief. The man whose belief is a sham stoops to misquotations, suppressions, interpolations, forgery,

and slander. And that is precisely what Patrick Chalmers did.

His trump card was the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. This indeed is hardly surprising, seeing that it was in great measure from the Chalmers' pamphlets that the author of the article on "Postage Stamps" drew inspiration. If an historian about to write, say of the Stuart period, declines to consult State papers, etc., and prefers to base his work on such material as is furnished by the late Mr. Wills' play of "Charles I", Scott's "Woodstock", James Smith's "Brambletye House", etc., we make up our minds to read fiction, not fact, and lay in a sufficiency of grains of salt to digest it withal. Some of the "astounding errors" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica's* article Mr. Pearson Hill has exposed in "The Origin of Postage Stamps" (published by Morrison and Sons and Mallett). I may add that my brother's pamphlets deal exhaustively with this claim; and perusal thereof will provide anyone inclined to the Chalmers heresy with a wholesome antidote.

Had Mr. P. Chalmers predeceased his own and my father this impudent claim would never have been heard of. The honest Scotchman would not have countenanced the fraud; the honest Englishman could have punished its author. That as well as being heard of it has also been believed is, to those familiar with the real history of the postal reform, nothing short of amazing. While trying to rob a great public benefactor of character and scheme, James Chalmers' unworthy son makes comparatively little of the good work his father actually accomplished. The old postal system was utterly bad, was doomed, and we know that many besides the Dundee printer, Mr. Wallace, and Rowland Hill were seeking to alter it. In our own day how many are not trying to solve other weighty national problems, such, for example, as the agricultural question and the cure for Ireland's distress?

In grateful acknowledgment of James Chalmers' services, his fellow-townsmen presented him with a handsome testimonial; and few similar gifts have been more fitly bestowed. It is not surprising that when one old friend had claimed for him the invention of the postage stamp, other old friends,

with equally hazy recollection of the events of nearly half a century before, should have fallen into the same error. There is no need to suspect the old witnesses' sincerity; the mistake is one of judgment. James Chalmers was not the inventor of the postage-stamp, adhesive or non-adhesive. That when the forty-nine competed for its design, he should have failed to win the prize, I am sorry. Such success would have fitly crowned a long and useful career, and his name would then have come down to our day pleasantly linked with that of the postal reformer instead of being placed in a position of hostility which during the lifetime of the two men had absolutely no existence.

Apparently some at least of the Dundee printer's descendants resembled him, for it is significant that not one of Patrick Chalmers' near relations, of whom one, a sister, died only a short time before him, came forward to countenance his imposture.

*Did* Mr. P. Chalmers succeed in proving his father to have been the inventor of the postage stamp? It does not look much like it.

Long ago Professor Freeman, when disposing of a silly story told against William the Conqueror, advised his readers to distrust historical anecdotes whose origin cannot be traced back to the period to which they profess to belong. It is the misfortune of history as it ages to get overlaid with fiction. The history of the postal reform has not escaped the common lot. A man's contemporaries are more likely to form a just opinion of him than later generations which knew him not. One great contemporary still survives who, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, worked occasionally, and always harmoniously, with Rowland Hill. *Apropos* of this case and of the postal reformer, that great man has said:—"His reputation is founded on a rock like that of Mr. Cobden, and he stands in the first rank of benefactors to the public."—(W. E. Gladstone.)

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