

A note on "Postal History"

IN the first article of the list of rules for Postal History Collections issued by the International Federation for Philately* a postal history collection is defined as "one on the study and classification of postal and philatelic items which are directly relevant to the methods, routing and conditions of despatch of postal communications . . . or to the organisation to this end of postal services . . .".

In discussing the arrangement and presentation of a postal history collection we must assume that the preliminary study is adequate and emphasise ways of demonstrating its adequacy in the presentation of the material. The first article of the official rules defines very broadly the criteria by which this material should be judged before being allowed into the collection and most collectors would accept this definition. There is much more doubt whether the term "classification" used covers adequately the essential arrangement and writing-up. The article might suggest that any assembly of envelopes constitutes a postal history collection providing that they have passed through the post and so can be said to be relevant to "methods . . . of despatch", etc. Indeed there are people who do accept such an assembly as a postal history collection particularly if the covers date from a period before the introduction of adhesive stamps.

On the other hand those for whom the word "history" has meaning outside any possible, narrower philatelic sense will affirm that, for example, an assembly of souvenirs, a photograph, a page from a diary, a signet ring, all in a display case is in no sense a history or biography of their owner. The writing or displaying of history demands a narration which links the isolated facts or items together in an understandable

and relevant sequence, proper selection of the material so that each element in the narration gets appropriate emphasis, and, usually, explanation and interpretation of the various elements. It is the task of the writing-up to achieve this.

Well-designed stamps may be sufficiently attractive to the eye for their display to generate interest without a word of written explanation. This is very unlikely to be true of postal history material. Here, writing-up is essential to understanding and to be meaningful it often has to be quite extensive. It is a great challenge to the skill of the collector. He must say enough to explain, but not so much that those likely to be interested are discouraged from reading. Obviously some audiences are likely to be more interested than others and more disposed to enjoy a slightly longer text. Before he starts to consider his writing-up the collector has to decide whether the text is largely for his own eyes alone, or for those of fellow specialists, or to excite the general interest of members in his local stamp club. It is generally agreed that it more important to choose the right words and endeavour to master a clear style than simply to be brief. Condensation makes telegrams difficult to read; a very condensed style in writing-up may inhibit rapid comprehension.

Almost everything which has been

said earlier about arrangement and writing-up applies to the presentation of a postal history collection with at least one important addition, "narration". Stamps and postal stationery can always be arranged in date sequence without there being any justification of this arrangement in the text. The historian, however, must try, whenever possible, to emphasise the connection between a particular exhibit and the items which follow it; he must develop a story line explaining not only

"why", but also "why at this particular moment".

Because so much of the material for a postal history collection is likely to be on cover or to consist of items of similar size, e.g. small maps, it will be difficult to introduce variety into the layout of the material and where possible recourse will be had to arranging envelopes in groups, so that they eclipse one another without important postal markings being obscured.

A postal history collection is likely to be even bulkier than one which includes postal stationery so the use of guards to ensure that albums keep their shape will be necessary.

*This is the organisation more generally known as the Federation Internationale de Philatelie (or simply, "F.I.P.").

Note: This article is extracted from a series of articles by "A. Dehn" which appeared in a supplement to the "Philatelic Magazine".