Commercial Advertising on Postage Stamps: The Curious Case of Dr Francis Macbean Stewart’s Miracle Cure

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In the late 19th century, several postal administrations experimented with commercial advertising on the back of postage stamps. The British Postmaster General briefly allowed the logo “Pears’ Soap” to be added to the reverse of sheets of the United Kingdom’s 1881 1d. (Scott 89) and 1887 Jubilee ½ d. (Scott 111) stamps issued in 1889, but the experiment was soon discontinued, in part because the contracted printer found it difficult to produce the text consistently. Despite the failure of the British test, the New Zealand post office tried a similar approach 4 years later. Stamps with advertisements on the reverse are sometimes called “underprints” or “backprints,” in contrast to the much more common “overprints,” on which postal administrations have added words or designs to the visible front side of existing stamps.

When New Zealand backprinted stamps debuted in February 1893, advertised products included: Beecham’s pills (a laxative developed in England in the 1840s); Beechem’s toothpaste; Wertheim sewing machines; Sunlight laundry soap; Cadbury’s cocoa, Fry’s cocoa powder; Lattey, Livermore & Company’s imported Ceylon tea; Kaitangata coal; Poneke beef extract; and Bonnington’s Irish Moss cough syrup. Like the British backprints, the New Zealand philatelic advertising experiment was short-lived, but many more examples of the New Zealand stamps were printed, and a large number survive today. A 1998 Health and Hygiene article related one potential reason for the New Zealand postal advertising failure: “Rival advertising agencies promoted a rumor that the dye of the advertisement when licked was injurious to health.”

The most controversial underprint advertisement in the New Zealand series was for “Macbean Stewart’s New Cure for Asthma, Diphtheria, and Croup” (Figure 1). Newspaper advertisements for this alleged respiratory panacea, which was “prepared from the mountain and forest plants of New Zealand,” and manufactured by the Sharland & Company chemists in Auckland, had already been appearing for several years when the stamp debuted. Print advertisements for Dr Macbean Stewart’s “cure” often included testimonials from a police sergeant, a local political leader, and a gardener (Figure 2). Some of the newspaper advertisements also began with a Maori language quotation, perhaps to suggest that the product’s plant mixture was influenced by traditional Polynesian medicinal lore, though the specific ingredients were never disclosed.

Contemporary physicians had a strongly negative reaction to these advertisements, due to both the secrecy about the ingredients and the manufacturer’s false promise of a “cure” for such a wide variety of respiratory diseases with differing etiology. An editorial in the Australasian Medical Gazette in July 1889 compared Dr Macbean Stewart’s medicine to the Chamberlain family’s infamous century-long failure to disclose their invention of obstetrical forceps, despite the potential benefit of disclosure to humanity: “We feel that, in quoting the Chamberlains in juxtaposition to Francis MacBean Stewart … we are bestowing unmerited distinction on the latter, who, much to our surprise, we find is on the staff of the Christchurch Hospital.” The Royal College of Surgeons wrote to Dr Macbean Stewart in 1890,
demanding an explanation for his overpromising advertisements. Similarly, several physicians sent letters to the *British Medical Journal* in 1892, complaining about the Macbean Stewart newsprint advertisements.

In response to this criticism, Dr Macbean Stewart promised to stop selling his asthma cure. But the 1893 underprinted postage stamps and newspaper advertisements that continued to appear until the late 1890s demonstrated that he did not keep his promise.

Francis Macbean Stewart (Figure 3) was born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1838, and spent much of his childhood living with an uncle near Loch Ness. He enrolled at Edinburgh University to study medicine in 1855. While still a student, he sailed to the Arctic several times between 1859 and 1863 on the whaling and sealing ship *Narwhal*, acting as the ship’s surgeon. On his final expedition, his legs were severely damaged by frostbite. During testimony 3 decades later to a board of inquiry concerning the asthma “cure,” Macbean Stewart stated that his previously injured legs were worsening with time, and he worried he would eventually be unable to work, so he allowed his name to be put on the patent medicine to provide his wife and family some financial security.

In 1864, he finished his training and was licensed by the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. Dr Macbean Stewart began a surgical practice in Inverness, where he was the surgical consultant to a dispensary, served as the local health inspector of shipping, and was appointed as a military surgeon to the Cameron Highlanders regiment. For two years in the early 1870s, he was the ship surgeon on the *S.S. Carpenteria*, a mail boat running between Glasgow and New York.

Dr Macbean Stewart moved to New Zealand in 1873, initially settling in the South Island gold prospecting town of Milton, where he married Annie Stevens Farr.
(1852-1926), the daughter of a prominent Christchurch architect who had introduced the bumblebee to New Zealand. In 1876, the young couple moved to the South Island village of Ashburton, where Dr Macbean Stewart became a leader in the local Presbyterian Church and the Caledonian Society for Scottish immigrants. He was also a member of the Ancient Order of Druids. Their first child of an eventual six died in infancy; their second child, Douglas, born in 1877, was later killed in the World War I battle of Gallipoli in 1915.

In 1881, Dr Macbean Stewart and his family moved to Christchurch, where he served as an honorary consulting surgeon at Christchurch Hospital for 12 years. The hospital was quite small at that time and had only 2 consulting surgeons. The other surgeon, Irish immigrant Dr Courtney Nedwell, appears to have been a rival. In 1884, Dr Nedwell criticized Macbean Stewart's operating practices following an unsuccessful hernia repair during which the patient died of peritonitis. This resulted in a formal inquiry, in which Dr Macbean Stewart was exonerated and ultimately allowed to resume practice.

During his career, Dr Macbean Stewart was known for advocating inspection of slaughterhouses and dairies, and he also favored women's suffrage. In 1893, New Zealand became the first self-governing country in the world to give women the right to vote in national elections. He died in 1906, following an operation to remove a tumor on his eye, and was given a Highland-style funeral by the local Caledonian Society.
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