

NICARAGUA – THE OVERPRINTS OF BLUEFIELDS AND CABO

by BERNARD DAVIES

IN THE FIRST DECADE of this century, the Atlantic Coast department of Nicaragua, known at that time as Departamento Zelaya in succession to its previous label of the Mosquito Coast Reservation, was by far the richest area of the country. This was mainly due to the mining operations in the department, and it resulted in the use in Zelaya of a silver peso worth double the paper peso employed in the rest of the country, a situation which continued until, late in 1912, gold currency (100 centavos de cordoba to the peso) was introduced throughout the country.

This considerable difference in the currency standards of the Zelaya department from those existing elsewhere in Nicaragua made it profitable for people wishing to use mail services in Zelaya to purchase stamps in the paper currency areas of the country at approximately half the cost, thus losing a poor country much needed revenue. To put a stop to this, the Nicaraguan government issued a decree on 15 May 1904, requiring all postage, telegraph and fiscal stamps in the Department of Zelaya to bear an overprint, one type for Bluefields (which had eight post offices) and a different type for Cabo Gracias a Dios in the north (which had only one post office). All stamps of every description in stock at these post offices had to be overprinted.

Ever since the days when these overprints were 'new issues' collectors have fought shy of them, fearing forgeries, fabrications and general malpractice. It is high time to consider whether or not these fears are justified.

The general fears about any Zelaya overprint would appear to begin with the Gibbons' catalogue of 1909, when certain stamps which had been listed in the 1908 catalogue were omitted from the listings and described variously as 'made for dealers and never properly issued', 'made to supply dealers and never put into circulation' or 'bogus'. In the 1909 catalogue the handstamp now known as C2 collects the warning 'there are dangerous forgeries of this overprint'. Nevertheless the 1909 listings are prefaced exactly as in 1908 by the statement that 'other overprints are said to exist, but those listed are the best known'.

Gibbons' change of heart is almost certainly due to the articles on Nicaragua by Joseph B. Leavy serialised in Gibbons' Stamp Weekly from 3 July 1909 onwards. One would imagine that this work would have been in the editor's hands by the time the catalogue was in preparation. A re-writing of the stamps of Salvador in the 1908 catalogue had been acknowledged as 'compiled from the excellent articles by Mr J. B. Leavy now appearing in the *Monthly Journal*'. The very thorough listings provided by Leavy and the undoubtedly high quality of his commentary on the Seebeck period of both countries might at first suggest that his assertions about the Bluefields/Cabo overprints could be regarded as definitive. However, there are certain statements in the Leavy articles which prevent the same credence being given to his survey of twentieth-century material as can readily be given to his analysis of Seebeck issues. The phenomenon that historians and critics are less reliable when dealing with recent material is widespread and not confined to philately.

Leavy, discussing the handstamp now known as B1, refers to 'numerous counterfeits' but declares them 'not dangerous to the student or the careful philatelist. In none of the forgeries is the "B" of the proper shape and in all those seen the bow-shaped dash beneath "Dpto Zelaya" is missing entirely. In the originals the dash is never missing, although in a number of cases it is but a curved line instead of a bow.' Those of us who have applied rubber stamps in quantity will surely find it very hard to accept Leavy's 'never'. Much more sensible would seem to be Mr John L. Stroub's comment in his 1925 articles for the *New York Philatelic Society Bulletin*:

→ 'The handstamp was made of common rubber type in single setting. Only one surcharge could be applied or printed by hand to a stamp at a time . . . The nature of this work required the use of duplicate rubber stamps . . . Often the duplication of the rubber stamps was far from being exact in respect to reading matter, size of letters, fount of type, etc. . . . ←