



## **The capitalist and colonial logics of Rowland Hill's postal reforms: terra nullius, uniform pricing, and "conveyance at the lowest rate"**

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Great Britain's Postage Act of 1839 – which introduced the Uniform Penny Post and postage stamps was a result of legal, technical, and economic thinking. This thinking is largely attributed to Rowland Hill's postal reform advocacy, articulated in his 1837 *Post Office Reform: its Importance and Practicability*. These reforms were celebrated and remembered for introducing uniform pricing, prepayment (in the form of stamps), and greater affordability of the postal services. Sending mail went from an expensive, often unreliable activity to a more standardized, efficient, and widely available service which led to a spike in personal and business communication in Britain. By the 1870s, many of Hill's reforms were reproduced domestically in numerous countries, and they were codified internationally in the 1874 creation of the General Postal Union.

Close attention has been paid to Hill's contribution to political economic thought, particularly in the work of Ronald Coase. However, not enough attention has been paid to Hill's life experiences which shaped his thinking around state bureaucracy and political economy. His first and most sustained foray into political economy was his involvement in theorizing and implementing colonization. His first pamphlet was on the topic of *Home Colonies*, and his second, more famous pamphlet *Post Office Reform* was written while he served as secretary of the South Australian Colonization Commission. Particular attention is paid to Hill in this paper, but this is to identify him as a microcosm of the sort of political economic, legal, and scientific thinking of his time. He was informed and influenced by many key thinkers of the era, namely Bentham, Wakefield, and John Stuart Mill, all of whom show the nexus between colonialism, British political economy, and 19th century reforms.

By studying the intellectual context and network of political economists and legal reformers that Rowland Hill was in dialogue with, I argue we gain new insights into the colonial and capitalist logics that informed the 1839 postal reforms. Such an approach reveals the following things about the postal reforms: first, the postal reform extended the commodity logic of abstraction to the realm of interpersonal communication; second, this logic of abstraction was informed by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham, whose "abstract notion of ownership" was already rooted in a racialized thinking; and third, Hill's understanding of political economy and his thinking about bureaucracy were both informed by his engagement with the colonization of South Australia.

*Post Office Reform's* argument for uniform pricing mirrors the uniform pricing in Wakefield's schema of colonization that was followed in South Australia. Finally, the imagination of South Australia as *terra nullius*, "wasteland" was also crucial for Hill to gain first-hand experience in thinking about creating the ideal conditions for capitalist exchange and development unencumbered by feudal remnants and corrupt bureaucratic practices.