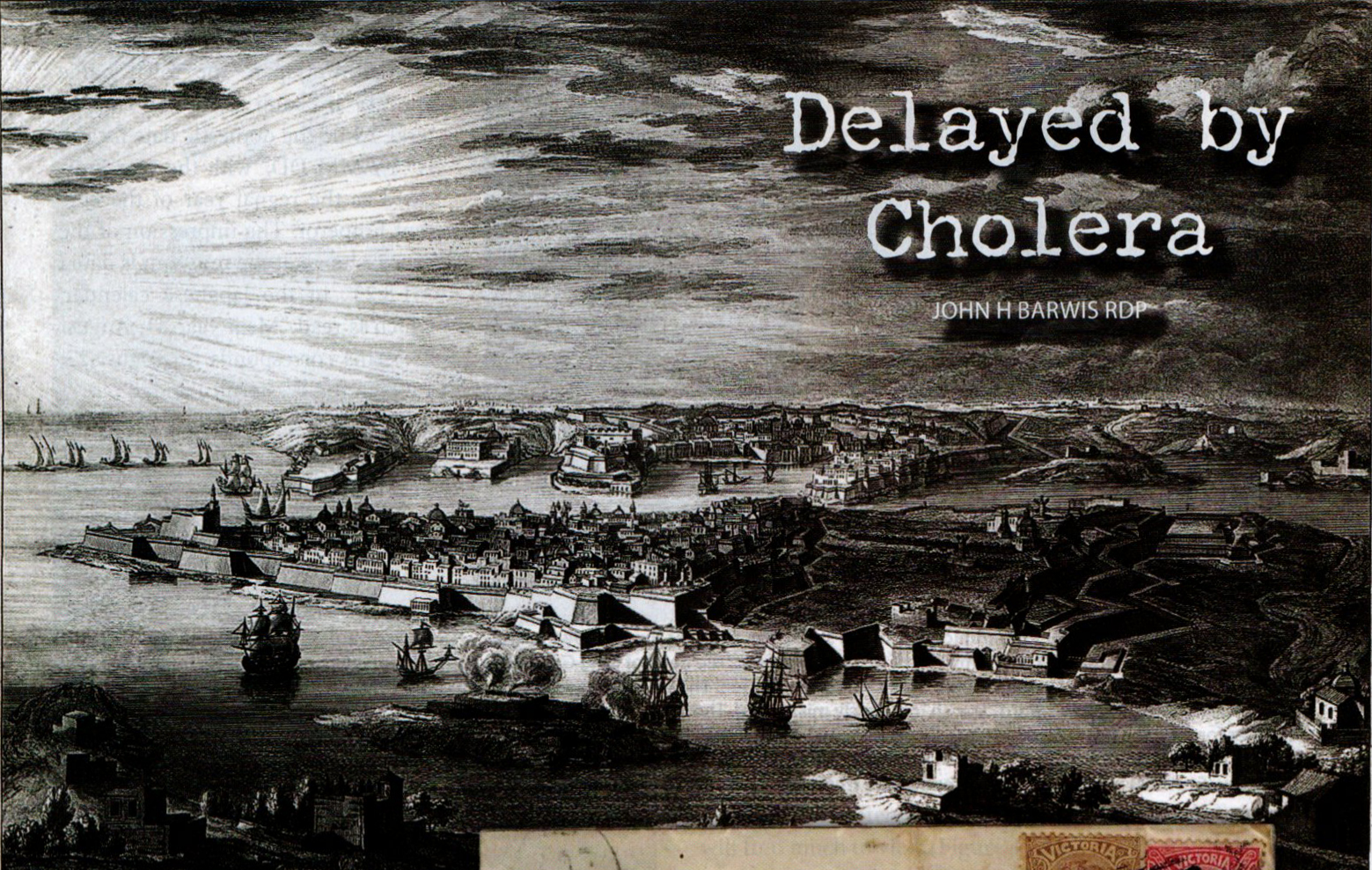


# Delayed by Cholera

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The cholera epidemic began in 1881, in West Bengal, and spread throughout Asia and Europe and into the U.S. and Latin America. The world's fifth cholera outbreak in the 19th century alone lasted from 1881 to 1896, and took hundreds of thousands of lives.

Control of the spread of the disease, especially in busy ports, led to the creation of lazarettos (or lazarets), quarantine hospitals, first conceived in Venice. A permanent lazaretto was built in 1643 on Manoel Island in Malta and was used to contain plague and cholera contamination from incoming ships for several centuries. The lazaretto also fumigated and disinfected mail on a large scale.

On May 9, 1883, the sender of the letter in Figure 1 to Naples paid the 6-pence uniform rate at the General Post Office (GPO) in Melbourne. Because the rate to Italy via Brindisi was 7 pence per half ounce from January 1876 to March 1888, Melbourne



Figure 1. The front and back of an 1883 letter, Melbourne to Naples, fumigated against cholera contamination.



Figure 2. From the front of the Figure 1 letter, an enhanced example of the PURIFIE AU LAZARET hand stamp.

stamped “T” to note postage due. The 20 centesimi deficiency was paid with adhesives on July 8, by the addressee, Messrs. Cerulli & Co. in Naples.

The letter was carried by Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) ship *Carthage* to Colombo (May 22-June 9), P&O *Clyde* to Suez (June 1-24), then P&O *Tanjore* from Alexandria to Brindisi (June 26-28).

Due to the cholera epidemic in Egypt, the mails were refused at Brindisi, so *Tanjore* was sent on to Poveglia, a small island three miles south of Venice, for fumigation. The departure date from Venice is unknown, but southbound from Venice, *Tanjore* called at Ancona on June 15. The letter was then transmitted via Pescara (June 30) then to Il Lazzaretto, in Malta (July 5) where it was twice slitted for additional fumigation and hand stamped in French PURIFIE AU LAZARET in blue (Figure 2). A small circular hole, visible below and left of the uppermost adhesive, was punched through both sides of the cover. Where that was done is unknown.

The letter was then sent to Naples, where it arrived on July 8 and was postmarked 20 centesimi due (2d). Which ship carried the letter from Malta to Naples? On July 9, the *Northern Whig* reported that Malta-Syracuse mail service had ceased on July 8. On July 13 the *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* repeated that news, and added: “Notice has been received from Italy that, owing to quarantine regulations, the mail service between Malta and Syracuse has been suspended, and a special weekly service arranged between Naples and Malta.” It is possible that this letter was carried to Naples by that service.

Now a tourist destination, remains of Malta’s Il Lazzaretto still exist on Manoel Island in Marsamxett Harbor (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Above, Lazzaretto Hospital, Malta 1906, courtesy the Royal Army Medical Corps. Below, view from St. Andrew's Bastion in Valletta to the Lazzaretto on Manoel Island, 2013, courtesy of photographer Frank Vincentz.

## The Author

John Barwis is President Emeritus of the U.S Philatelic Classics Society. He has been a member of the APS Finance Committee since 2007 and was Chair of the Search Committee that hired the current APS Director. He co-founded and is President Emeritus of the Institute for Analytical Philately. He is a Fellow of both the Royal Philatelic Society London and the Royal Philatelic Society of Victoria. In 2010 the Royal Philatelic Society of Victoria awarded him the Gartner Medal for best philatelic literature for his book *The Half Lengths of Victoria*. In 2018 he was honored with the APS Luff Award for Distinguished Philatelic Research, and in 2020 was honored by the Collectors Club Lichtenstein Award. In that same year he was honored by having his name added to the Roll of Distinguished Philatelists. He is the co-author of the award-winning book with Richard Winter, *North Atlantic Non-Contract Steamship Mailings 1838-1875*.