Letters from Fanning Island
Roland Wenzlhuemer

Porthcurno is a little village at the tip of Cornwall. Following the scenic South West Coast Path further westward, one passes by stunning cliffs and sandy beaches, arriving at Land's End, England's most westerly point, after around eight kilometres. Getting to Porthcurno requires a bit of effort. The train from London to Penzance takes at least five hours, if all goes well. From the Penzance railway station there are hourly buses to Porthcurno. The 15-kilometre ride takes another 45 minutes. Alternatively, one can hire a taxi. In that case, however, some sang-froid helps as local taxi drivers tend to career down the narrow roads of western Cornwall as if they were on the M25. Bus and taxi alike go as far as a car park, from which it is a five-minute walk down the village main road to Porthcurno beach about which *Visit Cornwall* raves: 'With gorgeous fine soft white sand washed by a sea that turns turquoise in the sun and high cliffs on both sides providing shelter, it's an oasis of stunning natural beauty'. They are not exaggerating.

However, a sudden urge to inform loved ones at home of the beauty of Porthcurno can be quite a complicated affair. For a long time, the mobile reception in the village was notoriously weak. It's a popular joke among the locals that one must climb one of the surrounding hills for decent reception. Though an old joke, it is not completely off the point. I felt it myself while visiting spring 2011. In many ways, Porthcurno is a remote place. But that's only part of the story that the joke is alluding to.

Porthcurno's beach is not just a wonderful place to relax and dip a toe in the sea. It also provides easy access to the sea on a coast otherwise marked by steep cliffs. There are no strong currents, there is no major port close by, that stretch of sea does not see too much maritime traffic, and it is very far to the west. Taken together, these attributes convinced the Falmouth Gibraltar and Malta Telegraph Company to choose Porthcurno beach (instead of Falmouth, as was originally planned) as the landing site for an important telegraphic connection to British India.

The cable link went online in 1870 and was immensely successful. Two years later, the Falmouth and other telegraph companies were merged into the Eastern Telegraph Company, which soon became the biggest communications company worldwide. Many other global cable connections out of Porthcurno followed, and the little place in western Cornwall soon developed into the world's most important cable station. At its height, 14 telegraph cables with traffic from all over the globe landed at Porthcurno. For about half a century, it was the world's communications hub. This is why the old joke about the mobile reception still works.

This is also why I visited Porthcurno in 2011. Though the village is no longer a global communication hub, it is still the rightful home of the Porthcurno Telegraph Museum, a wonderful institution about the history of global communications. The telegraph museum also hosts the business archive of Cable & Wireless, the Eastern Telegraph Company's successor company. The archive holds a plethora of documents about the history of telegraphy in general and the

Eastern's global operations in particular. It is an inevitable port of call for anyone working on a book about the global telegraph network, as I was then. Still, as archives go, it's a relatively small and specialised place that does not see too many researchers. It sports a family atmosphere. The archivists really appreciate visitors taking an interest in their holdings. They, in turn, take an interest in their visitors' work and go out of their way to help. This is probably why I found a manila folder waiting for me on my usual desk when I came to the archive one morning. It carried a post-it note from the head archivist asking whether the contents might interest me.

It turned out to be very interesting indeed. The folder contained colour copies of three lengthy letters written between March 1914 and January 1915 by an unnamed telegrapher stationed on Fanning Island in the Pacific and posted to a friend in Canada. These letters make the remoteness, the isolation from the rest of the world, in which the telegraphers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often performed their duties palpable across generations.

Fanning Island is a small atoll situated around 1450 kilometres south of Hawai'i in the middle of the Pacific. From 1889 it was part of the British Empire. Beginning in 1902, the island came to be used as a relay station in the first trans-Pacific telegraph connection. This cable, run by the Pacific Cable Board, linked British Columbia via Fanning, Fiji and Norfolk Island with Australia and New Zealand. In combination with a second cable laid one year later and run by the Commercial Pacific Cable Company from San Francisco over Honolulu to Manila, these cables inaugurated the trans-Pacific line and the closure of the last major gap in the global telegraph network at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The two Pacific cables thus symbolised a new climax in the communicative networking of the world. But the staff who were stationed along this route were evidently woven into an appreciably more complex tapestry of connectedness and isolation. Even in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the telegraphic links between cable stations like Fanning and the rest of the world were outstanding. Hundreds of telegrams were sent each day down the cables and were transcribed in the relay stations. News from all over the world was received and passed on. The staff at the stations – above all the telegraphers – were always on top on world affairs.

Telegraphers were intimately connected with the world but geographically many of the relay stations were extremely remote, as these three letters make very tangible. Only every couple of weeks or months did a supply ship pay a call to stations such as Fanning. This infrequency impaired personal communications with family and friends, who could only be reached by post and not by telegraph. Perhaps more direly, it could also impede food supplies and necessary medical treatment.
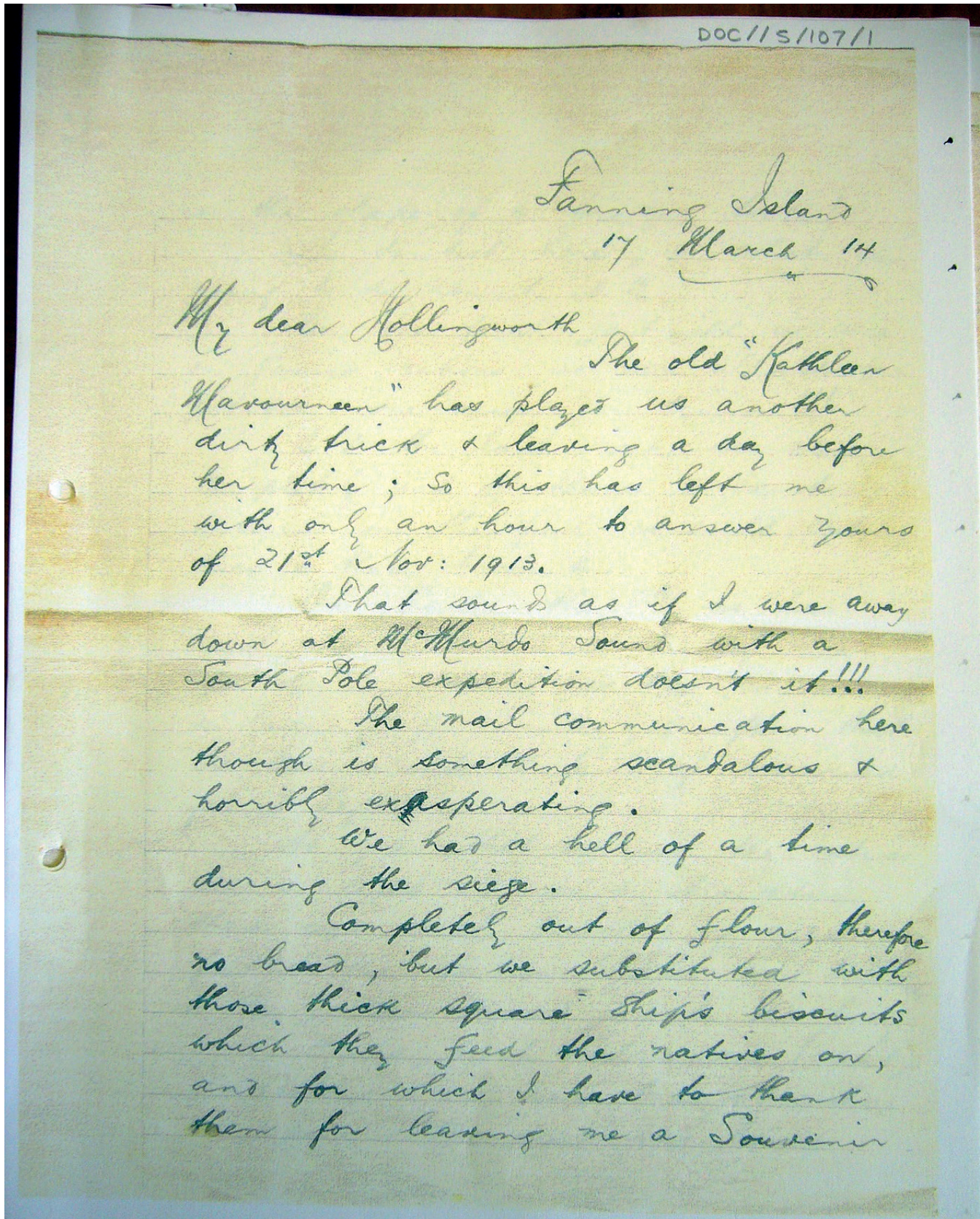
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Fanning Island
17 March 14

My dear Hollingworth
                              The old "Kathleen
Mavourneen" has played us another
dirty trick & leaving a day before
her time; So this has left me
with only an hour to answer yours
of 21st Nov: 1913.
              That sounds as if I were away
down at McMurdo Sound with a
South Pole expedition doesn't it!!!
              The mail communication here
though is something scandalous &
horribly exasperating.
              We had a hell of a time
during the siege.
              Completely out of flour, therefore
no bread, but we substituted with
those thick square ship's biscuits
which they feed the natives on,
and for which I have to thank
them for leaving me a Souvenir

Fig. 02
A paper letter from a hub of global lightspeed communication in the 19th century. Photo by the author.

In one of the opening paragraphs of the first letter, the writer apologises for penning the letter in considerable haste. The supply ship suddenly had to leave a day earlier than planned, rushing everyone who wanted to entrust letters to the ship. 'That sounds as if I were away down at McMurdo Sound with a South

Pole expedition doesn't it!!!', the frustrated writer admits. He later describes the scarcity of supplies on the island when the supply ship was delayed (which seems to have happened rather frequently):

'Completely out of flour, therefore no bread, but we substituted with those thick square ship's biscuits which they feed the natives on, and for which I have to thank them for leaving me a Souvenir in the shape of a broken tooth! No dentist here, so what you going to do about it!!!'

In the third letter dated 8 January 1915, the writer eventually addresses his friend after a long period of silence, apologises and then gives 'a true version of the German invasion of [Fanning Island]' during the first month of World War I. The island had been raided by a landing party from the German cruiser Nürnberg who held the British telegraphers captive and destroyed all the communications equipment. The staff on the island had been informed about the Nürnberg approaching Fanning, but could do nothing about it. It is in these passages that the tension between connectedness and isolation is particularly apparent.

Also, the story of how copies of these letters landed at the Cable & Wireless business archive in Porthcurno is in itself full of detours and disconnections. The unnamed author, who only signed with the alias 'Napoleon', sent his letters to his good friend who was a telegraphist in Montreal. The friend kept the letters. They remained in his estate and eventually found their way to the addressee's granddaughter who, in 2010, contacted the Porthcurno archive about the letters and later let them make copies to be stored there. Thematically, the letters were a wonderful addition to the holdings, but they fit a business archive only a little awkwardly. They were hard to file and catalogue according the system of the archive and stood out. That's basically how the copies eventually landed on my desk that morning – thanks to a wonderfully supportive archivist who saw a possible connection here.

While reading these letters and their accounts about the isolation and disconnectedness of Fanning, I first became aware that globalisation is not just about connectivity, that our standard narratives are missing a crucial component here. However, I was already in the final stages of a book project on the history of the global telegraph network. In the book I did advocate for a nuanced look at the so-called communicative 'shrinking of the world', but in the end I concentrated on the global connections and information flows carried by the telegraph. The book's main argument was built around issues of connectivity. The letters, with their emphasis on disconnections, did not quite fit. They did not make it into the manuscript. Still, they fundamentally changed how I thought about global connectivity. It took some time until I could see how and where they fit into the larger picture.

I started to develop a little piece about the plurality of global spaces and later turned this into a chapter in a book introducing the field of global history. Writing up these texts, I started to recognise how global connections and disconnections interact in

particular settings. In a way, these letters from Fanning stand at the core of what we do at global dis:connect these days. To me, they are truly dis:connected objects, if there ever were any.

Photo:
**The library at global dis:connect.
Photo courtesy of Lambert Strehlke**