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# Mourning Covers: A Scandinavian Perspective

By Ernest A. Mosher

Postal historians with a special interest in letters posted in Scandinavian countries may occasionally run into a black edged cover and wonder what it is! And if their cover collection is limited to the last half century, they may never have seen one.

This should not be surprising. Mourning covers – black edged covers that long served as harbingers of death and messengers of grief – from Finland, Iceland, and Norway are fairly rare, with those from Denmark and Sweden more common but still scarce. And like other countries known to have used mourning covers as a cultural practice, they are seldom found posted during the past 75 years except from a few countries.

This article provides a brief summary of the cultural and postal history of mourning covers (MCs), as used throughout the world, and exhibits several Scandinavia examples. Much of the information is taken from my 373-page book on the subject\*.

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**“Mourning covers may be simply defined as black-edged, posted letters used in many countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as harbingers of death and messengers of grief.”**

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This simple statement is probably as accurate as possible using only one sentence. That they were “used in many countries” is correct, but hardly acknowledges the fact that this included at least 225 different countries, ranging from Aden to Zanzibar.

Similarly, that they were used “during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” is correct, for this was the period of their most widespread use. However, the first proven MC was mailed in 1767 and they are still occasionally used in a few countries, notably Austria and Germany. Those in my collection range from Luxembourg in 1776 to Germany in 2003.

Defining MCs as “harbingers of death and messengers of grief” is also generally correct. Many mourning covers were used to mail death and/or funeral notices (see the Norway example in Figure 5), but even more of them were used to send a black-edged card or letter to extend sympathy or to express appreciation for condolences received. These are similar to the cards or folders (but not black-edged) that now are routinely provided by funeral homes and mailed by the deceased’s family.

Even more common was the use of mourning covers for social correspondence, especially by widows. The contents of some black-edged letters show no evidence that the sender was in mourning – I have one that is clearly a “love letter”. But we are seldom privileged to know the personal circumstances of the writer or recipient. Only a small percent of the several thousand MCs I have seen still have their contents.



Figure 1. Iceland, c1925. Mourning cover from Reykjavik, Iceland, local, with double circle dts, circa 1925. Franked with the 10a dark blue and brown Landing of the Mail issue of 1925, Scott 145. Unusual oblong cover. Mourning covers from Iceland are rare.

## The Color Black

The typical mourning cover has a black edge on the cover as well as the contents. The significance of black as a mourning hue is old, if not ancient, perhaps because black – the symbol of night – simply seems appropriate for the absence of life as well as light. Black was often chosen for funerals and masses for the dead in European countries by the 12th century. It was well established by the 16th century as the proper color for mourning dress.



The color black became the standard for mourning in many societies long before the advent of public postal systems, and its use on hand-delivered death notices, then on posted, folded letters and later on envelopes, seems but a natural course of human events.

### The Mourning Culture

Those who have traveled the road of life in both the 20th and 21st centuries may find the use of death-related, black-edged letters a strange if not bizarre cultural practice. But in the context of the social customs or ethos of the time, they were a rational social phenomenon.

Black-marked mourning covers were used because they were accepted as one of the natural, proper, and important rites of mourning and grieving, often for a full year by surviving widows. (And when they were not readily available in printed form, the black mourning mark was placed on the envelope by hand; I have 21 such “homemades.”) Mourning covers were as common in the past as wedding and birth announcements are today.

The gradual rise in the use of mourning covers began in the mid-1800s during the Victorian era, notably after the postal reform movement which led to cheaper postage available to the masses. Their use peaked in the early 1900s, and then gradually died in most countries beginning in the 1920s. The gradual demise of the common usage of MCs closely parallels Western society’s changing attitudes about death and dying and the developing culture – as one historian puts it – of preferring “invisible death.”

### Basic Forms of MCs

Excluding oddities, the six basic physical forms of all posted letters are shared by mourning covers – plus one other form that may be limited to mourning covers. These include:

- **Folded letters**, used primarily before the advent of what we now call envelopes, are simply a sheet of black edged paper with the message on the inside. Most early folded letters were sealed with black wax.
- **Envelopes** did not come into common usage for mourning covers until the mid-1840s, after the invention of folding machines. A typical example, although in an unusual oblong form, is the Iceland cover shown in Figure 1.



Figure 2. Denmark, 1934. Mourning cover from Denmark with ctds of 11 2 34. Franked with the 1934 black 4-öre surcharge on the 25-öre blue Caravel ship issue, Scott 234.



Figure 3. Finland, 1927. A self-enclosed mourning cover from Nurmo, Finland, local, with indistinct cds, posted in 1927 per contents. Franked with the 40-penni blue-green Helsinki Republic Arms issue of 1925, perf 15, Scott 131. This is a single sheet with printed death announcement inside, folded as an envelope with a cut flap for insertion in a slot on the reverse. Most self-enclosed covers are larger than this.

- **Postal cards** (government issued) with a mourning mark were used as early as 1881. They were used primarily for death notices, especially by benevolent associations. See the example in Swedish shown in Figure 6.
- **Postcards** (privately printed), often with a religious picture, were commercially available and were mostly used in the early 1900s.
- **Lettersheets**, with gummed edges to be folded by the user to become an envelope, were rarely used as mourning covers.
- **Wrappers**, typically a sheet of paper used to enclose a separate sheet for a message, were also rarely used for mourning purposes. This is perhaps explained by the fact that most countries, before the use of adhesive stamps, charged postage based on the number of sheets.
- **Self-enclosed.** The self-enclosed form of mourning cover is a single sheet, usually quite large, where the printed message is on the inside that is revealed when opened. They often have a pointed flap for insertion in a cut slot on the back. I have never seen this particular form of cover used except for mourning purposes. See Figure 3 for an example from Finland.

### Franking Characteristics

The black marking on mourning covers make them distinguishable from other types of covers. Their typical contents also make them different, even though they were often used for ordinary correspondence during the socially acceptable mourning period of the time. But the franking (evidence of postage payment, usually stamps) and the postal markings on



Figure 4. SWEDEN-USA, 1937. Mourning cover from Broeryd, Sweden to Trowbridge, Wisconsin, posted 9 4 37. Franked with two of the 15-öre brown King Guystav V booklet stamps of 1936, Scott 169. This cover has a black tissue lining, unusual in Scandinavia mourning covers. Swedish communities were common in Wisconsin at the time.

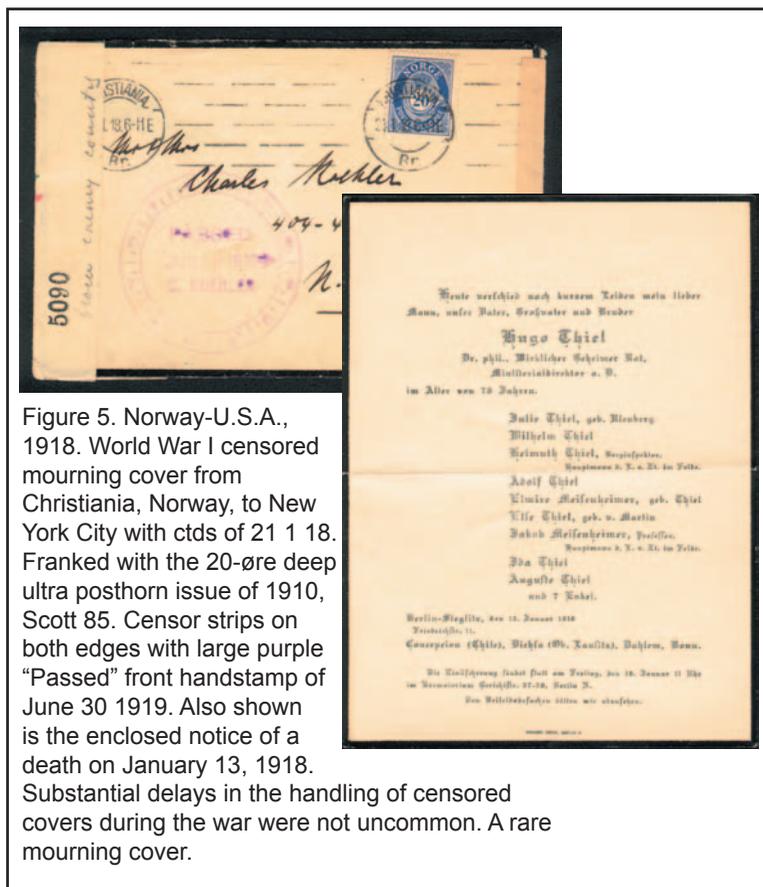


Figure 5. Norway-U.S.A., 1918. World War I censored mourning cover from Christiania, Norway, to New York City with ctds of 21 1 18. Franked with the 20-øre deep ultra posthorn issue of 1910, Scott 85. Censor strips on both edges with large purple "Passed" front handstamp of June 30 1919. Also shown is the enclosed notice of a death on January 13, 1918. Substantial delays in the handling of censored covers during the war were not uncommon. A rare mourning cover.





Figure 6. U.S.A., 1897. Mourning postal card from Boston, Massachusetts, local, posted December 21, 1897. The reverse is a printed death notice in Swedish, announcing death on December 18, 1897. The use of postal cards as death notices was not uncommon in the U.S. but those printed in a foreign language are rare.



mourning covers make them remarkably similar to other covers used for social and family correspondence.

Indeed, with one type of exception, all those in my collection are substantially similar in franking to other covers used for non-commercial purposes in the same era. This exception is that the proportion of

MCs sent at low postal rates, such as for local or printed matter, seems high when compared to other non-commercial covers.

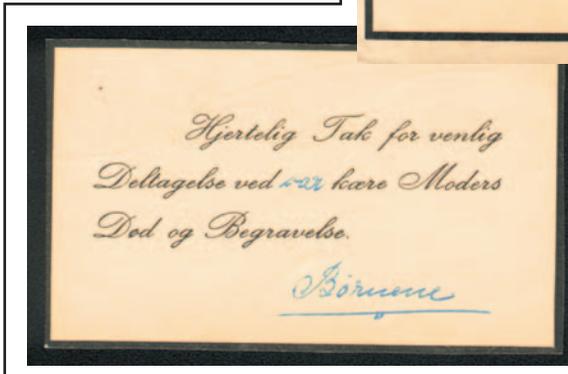
There is also some

convincing evidence that underpaid, postage-due mourning covers are much less common than are other kinds of covers, which may be explained by the fact that some sympathetic postal clerks simply ignored the fact that a black-edged cover was underpaid.

Other than these two differences, the franking or stamps on mourning covers, their method of delivery (e.g. ship, rail, air, registered, special delivery, etc.) as well as their auxiliary markings (including censorship – see the Norway example in Figure 5) seem no different from covers used for other purposes. Those mailed for normal delivery with high-value stamps are suspiciously philatelic.



Figure 7. Denmark, 1947. Mourning cover from Lyngby to "Brorishaj," Denmark with ctds of November 24, 1947. Franked with the 6-öre orange numerical value issue of 1940, Scott 224c. Small, long cover with unusual inset black border encloses a black-edged printed mourning card.



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## Physical Characteristics of MCs

As noted above, mourning covers, except for the mourning mark, are remarkably similar to other types of covers in basic forms and franking. Following are brief comments highlighting their physical variations.

- The **width of the marking** varies from about one mm to very wide, such as a large 1948 Swiss cover with a black band of 4.1 cm.
- Their **size** varies, ranging from a miniature 1912 Canada cover only 7.9 x 4.1 cm to a Switzerland envelope which is 22.9 x 16.2 cm.
- The most common **shape** is rectangular, but some are square and even a few in the shape of triangles or parallelograms are known.
- The **placement of the black marking** is typically on the edge but a few have them on the back only, some inset (see the Sweden cover in Figure 4), some with diagonal stripes or a single stripe, as well as a few other forms.



Figure 8. Sweden, 1905. Mourning cover from Lund to Holstein, Sweden, with ctds of January 6, 1905. Franked with two of the 10-öre pink King Oscar II issue of 1891, Scott 45. On the reverse are two purple tuberculosis cinderella stamps, rare on mourning covers.

- The **design of the marking** is usually a straight line, but a few are very different, such as a Kentucky cover with a black tree limb and ivy or the classic Canadian “black lace” cover.
- The **reverse and backflap designs** of MCs are sometimes more fancy than the front, particularly on those from the 1800s that came complete with a flap embossment and a wax seal.

## Comparing U.S. and Foreign MCs

With some over-simplifications, here are a few general comparisons of the differences between U.S. and foreign mourning covers:

- Small covers were in general use by most all countries until about 1875, when foreign MCs tended to become larger than the common U.S. size.
- Small, name-card-size MCs are found from the U.S., Canada, and European countries but tend to have been used more in Latin America. I have not seen one from a Scandinavian country.
- The large, self-enclosed type was used in several countries, but I have never seen one from the U.S. These typically are much larger than the Finland self-enclosed cover shown in Figure 3.
- “Squarish” MCs (shaped like modern wedding invitations) became popular in many countries in about the 1880s but were never common in the U.S. I have not seen one from a Scandinavian country.
- Wide black bands or borders (wide in proportion to the cover size) were used in many countries but are not common from the U.S. or England, nor have I seen one from a Scandinavian country.



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- Black tissue linings, such as within the Sweden cover shown in Figure 4, are found mostly from Western European countries. They are very rare from North America and Scandinavian countries and from British Commonwealth countries.
  - Registered and special delivery MCs are found from many countries but were not commonly used in the U.S.
  - Censored MCs, such as shown by the Norway cover in Figure 5, are found primarily from foreign countries and are scarce from the U.S.

### **Collecting MCs from Scandinavia**

Developing an extensive collection of mourning covers from the several Scandinavian countries would be challenging and probably frustrating. This is not because they are expensive. They are simply not often found in the postal history market. Of the several thousand MCs in my collection or that I have seen in photo form, from 225 countries, they are generally in the fairly scarce to rare class, except those from Denmark and Sweden. This is particularly true in comparison to those available from Western Europe or from countries of the Americas with a historical Western Europe influence.

The above appraisal of the relative scarcity of Scandinavian MCs was affirmed recently by some of the dealers advertising covers in *The Posthorn*. Indeed, one dealer believes those from Iceland should be in the very rare category. Another dealer said he has never seen a mourning cover from Greenland or the Faroe Islands in 30 years – nor has this author.

The challenge is there, and for those who have an interest in the societal and cultural practices of peoples in the past, as well as in postal history, mourning covers are fun to search for! ■

\* Ernest A. Mosher is author of the book *Mourning Covers: The Cultural and Postal History of Letters Edged in Black*. He received the Elliott Perry Cup award from the U.S. Philatelic Classics Society in 2004. Copies of the book may be purchased for \$35.00, U.S. postpaid, by writing him at 1939 SW Oakley Avenue, Topeka, KS 66604 (USA).