

A marvellous Belgian telephone from around 1890!

A while ago, I received a postcard, issued by the former Telephony and Telegraphy Museum in Brussels, Belgium, with a beautiful telephone.



Figure 1: A beautiful Belgian telephone from around 1890

Source: postcard of the former Museum of Telephony & Telegraphy (via Fons Vanden Berghen)

According to information on the back of the postcard, this telephone belonged to Minister **Jules Vandenpeereboom**, who was *Minister of Railways, Post and Telegraphy*¹ from 1884 to 1899. Later on he became prime minister of Belgium for a few months. A street in Brussels is named after him.



Vandenpeereboom was also an art collector. His collection is currently (2021) in possession of the Royal Museum of Art and History.

Figure 2: Minister Jules Vandenpeereboom (1843-1917)

Source: Wikipedia

The telephone we are looking at here is a typical telephone from around 1890.

¹ Telephony was also his responsibility, but this was not part of the official name of the Ministry in those days ☺

- As the quality of the telephone lines was limited at that time, two "ear pieces" were provided to increase the intelligibility of the conversations.
- The microphone was presumably a carbon transmitter and was mounted behind the wooden rectangular panel on the front.
- It is a typical "hierarchical" telephone for a "boss", in this case the minister, could call his assistants. His assistants could call the minister only, and not each other.
- On the front there is an oval plate with the name of the manufacturer, but unfortunately, it is unreadable on the postcard.



By coincidence, we came in touch with the "heirs" of the former telecommunications museum, being the Royal Museum of Art and History (RMAH) in Brussels and we were allowed to view this phone "in real life".

Figure 3: Telephone "in real life" in the depot of the "Royal Museum of Art and History"

Source: picture made by Stefan Biesemans/Jan Verhelst in the RMAH depot

The recipients could be chosen by inserting a plug in the appropriate socket and turning the crank.

The name of the recipient, which in this case was a department of the Ministry was engraved around the socket (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Socket of the destinations, with engraved names

Source: picture made by Stefan Biesemans/Jan Verhelst in the RMAH depot

i.e. "Direction Marine" and "Direction Exploitation" were two departments of the ministry.



Figure 5: Nameplate of the manufacturer

Source: picture made by Stefan Biesemans/Jan Verhelst in the RMAH depot

A search in old Brussels address books (the so-called "almanacs") showed that the "Compagnie de Télégraphie et

de Téléphonie Internationales" was founded around 1890 by Charles Mourlon (1851-1932).

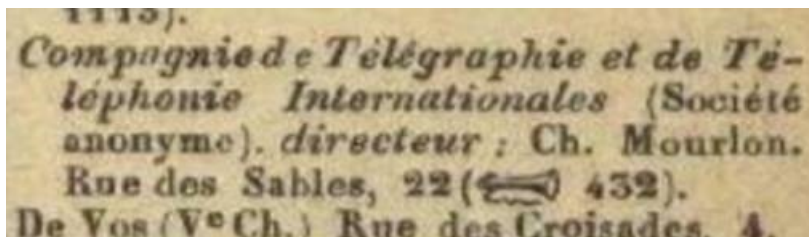


Figure 6: Entry of the firm of Mourlon in the Brussels address book of 1890

Source: Brussels address book 1890

The company "Compagnie de Télégraphie et de Télé-

léphonie Internationales", located at "Rue des Sables" number 22 (Sand street 22) has already in 1890 a phone with number 432.



Figure 7: Charles Mourlon (1851-1932)

Source www.geneanet.org

Charles Mourlon was an important person in the Belgian electro-technical industry from about 1880 to 1930. Already in the early 1880s, he was active as an electro- technical manufacturer. In the Brussels address book of 1882, we find the following advertisement about the company he was running at that point in time "**Mourlon & Co**".



Figure 8: Advertisement Mourlon & Co (1882)

Source: *Brussels address book 1882*

In addition to telephony and telegraphy products, he also manufactured Leclanché batteries with a licence and other things such as electric bulbs.

In the mid-1880s, he commercialised François Van Rysselberghe's invention, which combined long-distance telephone connections with long-distance telegraphic connections over the same wires by using filters.

This was demonstrated at the 1885 Antwerp World Fair, where 35 listeners could simultaneously hear a concert performed in a concert hall in Brussels, sent over telephone lines to Antwerp² (see Figure 9). This was 1885 streaming technology!



Figure 9: Demo long-distance telephony at the 1885 Antwerp World's Fair.

Source: book *“les téléphones usuels, édition 2”* (1887) by Charles Mourlon

² See article *“François Van Rysselberghe- long distance telephone pioneer”* in THG Journal nr 107.

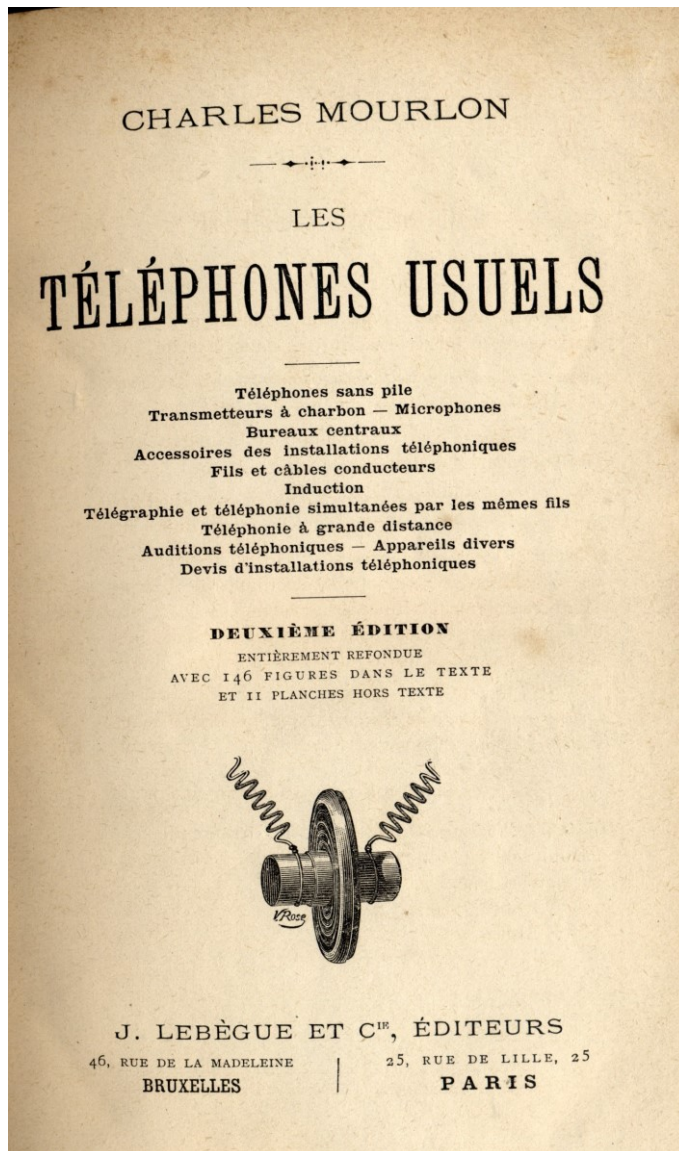


Figure 10: Front page book on tele-phones written in 1887 by Murlon.

Charles Murlon, who was called an "*ingénieur-électricien*", was not only a good businessman, but he was also technically skilled. He wrote several books about electricity, including a book called "**les téléphones usuels**"(the usual tele-phones) written in 1887. He described all the telephones he knew at that time and how they worked.

In short, he was someone who strongly supported and promoted the emerging Belgian electro-technical industry at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

I shouldn't be surprised that this telephone should have been a gift from the business man Murlon to the minister, but that's just a guess...

Thanks to Bruno Stroobants and Stefan Biesemans for their help in writing this article.

Jan Verhelst

Antwerp, Belgium