

The Edwardian postcard: a revolutionary moment in rapid multimodal communications

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Abstract

The Edwardian postcard offers a fascinating arena for studying vernacular writing a century ago in a communications revolution. This readily available, colourful and attractive object offered the opportunity for brief written messages that, with up to 10 deliveries a day could be experienced by writers and senders as near-synchronous. We first outline the technical and social background that led to the emergence of the card and why it was taken up with phenomenal enthusiasm. Using the Postmaster General's report we have calculated that around 6 billion cards were sent in the era (around 200 per person). We explain the methods of study we are using. For this paper we pose 2 research questions:

- How were the material qualities of the card and in particular its combination of image and words taken up? We give some illustrative examples of the diversity of the multimodal responses within the constraints of this regulated object.
- In what ways was the early postcard phenomenon similar to the contemporary digital revolution? We discuss rapidity of exchange, opportunity for informal writing and passionate social responses.

In some ways the Edwardian postcard craze was similar to today's Twitter enthusiasm; we demonstrate how we (with Cath Booth) are tweeting a sample of the cards. (Follow @eVIIpc). We conclude with a few thoughts as to why the cards are relevant not only to historians of the Edwardian period, exploring the impact of universal education at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also to those interested in literacy practices today and developing appropriate methodologies for study.

Emergence of the Edwardian picture postcard craze

In 1894 pictorial postcards were introduced into the UK, giving the opportunity of combining a very short message in the margin of a picture. With an increasing choice of images as printers spotted the opportunities, there was an immediate explosion in communication, as the newly virtually universally literate population grasped the opportunity for quick, informal and attractive written messages. Users were quick to combine use of the postcard image as a gift, with the appropriation of the small space for a message for their own purposes, not necessarily directly connected to the topic of the image at all; see figure 1 as an example.



Figure 1 Early postcard sent from Lockerbie

In January 1902 the Post Office gave in to popular demand and permitted the use of postcards on which one side was wholly taken up by an image, and the other side had half address and half message. A cultural shift in everyday communications practices ensued; our investigations of the Postmaster General's reports lead us to calculate that 5,920,933,334 of these cards were sent in the UK in the Edwardian age (the equivalent of 200 cards per person). With up to 10 deliveries a day in major cities, rapid responsiveness was enabled in a simple, exceedingly cheap way.

Vernacular literacy is : "essentially.... not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which [has] origins in everyday life" (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) – with the postcard people were given the opportunity to communicate in a short, convenient form that could not be governed by the

relatively formal tenets of letter writing etiquette, as bolstered as that was in formal education and prescriptive manuals. Combining these texts with images, some of which were originated through personal transaction with a photographer/printer, or customised in some way eg through annotation, gave a fabulous opportunity for creativity in multimodal design.

Methods of study and research questions

Mostly through postcard fairs we have collected fifteen hundred used Edwardian picture postcards. (While doing so we have also conducted ethnographic investigations of practices in collecting and dealing in the cards today – see Gillen and Hall [forthcoming, b].) For this paper we draw on a random sample of one hundred and fifty that we have transcribed and analysed in detail. Categories for analysis were developed inductively to examine features including: type and content of image; year of posting; genders of writers and recipients; characteristics of orthography; writing implements employed; orientation of writing; use of signature. Textual analysis examined features including: length of message; explicit mention of related communications; openings and closings; relation of message content to picture side and any particular creative or unusual features. For a subsample of the cards, we have calculated distances travelled.

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Postcards as multimodal, material objects

From its introduction the postcard was a highly regulated object; in the United Kingdom the shape and size were determined by the Post Office. The light weight of the card enabled it to be sold at one halfpenny rather than the penny cost of sending a letter. The relative stiffness of the card from which they were made meant that for the Post Office they were easy to sort and move, yet strong enough to survive a great deal of handling. At the same time the highly portable cards were stiff enough to be written on across a knee or even in the hand and its very constrained space actually made it very attractive for carrying short written communications. Combining these

texts with images, some of which were originated through personal transaction with a photographer/printer, or customised in some way eg through annotation, gave a fabulous opportunity for creativity in multimodal design.

Figure 2 below shows the message side of a card which begins with an allusion to the card's portability:

Wednesday
10 am
Dear Ethel,
We are now on
the (sands) playing whist.
Naughty boys! the weather
is still very fine here. I
hope you will have a fine
time on your holidays.
Keep your eye on Edie now
that we are away. Had a
grand night last night
dancing. Saw some Belfast
people there. Kind regards
from
Frank

The orthography and layout of the address seem designed to enhance the carefree flourish of the tone of Frank's message from holidays:

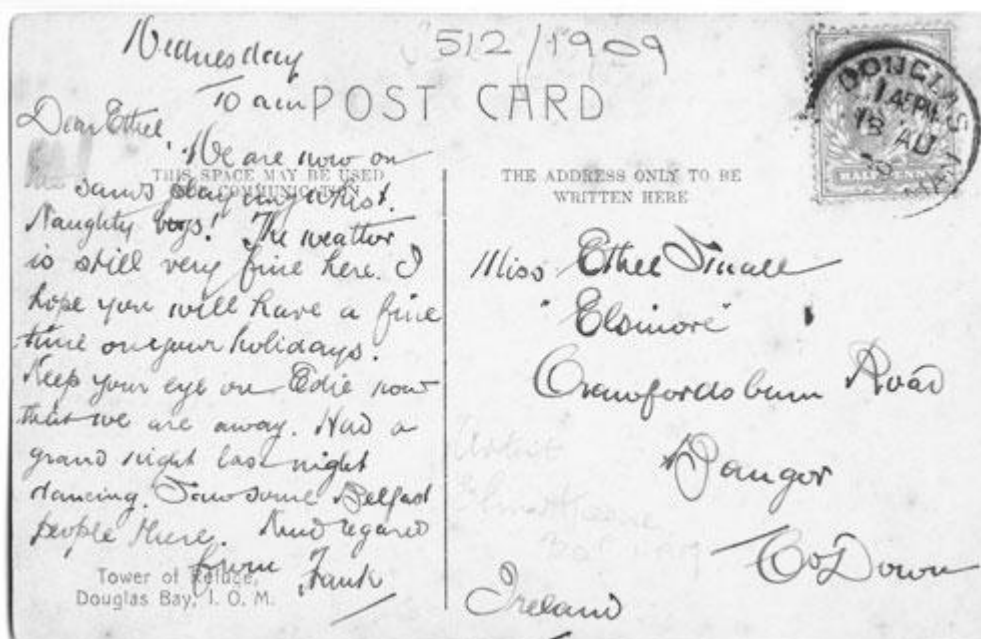


Figure 2 Postcard sent from the Isle of Man to Northern Ireland, 1909 – message side

If one reads the message first, Frank's choice of a picture side for his communications comes as something of a surprise (figure 3); perhaps it might have been received with amusement:



Figure 3 Postcard sent from the Isle of Man to Northern Ireland, 1909 – picture side

Comparisons with the contemporary digital revolution

We suggest that the low price and efficiency of the Edwardian postcard has meant that as an informal written communications technology it was not equalled subsequently until the twenty-first century. In this light, we will now examine three aspects of the postcard phenomenon that have resonance in the light of today's digital revolution:

Rapidity of exchange

As mentioned above, a key feature of the early postcard and the frequency of delivery – up to as much as 6 to 10 deliveries per day possible in urban areas. This enabled the kind of micro-coordination of activities that Ling and Ytrri (2002) identified in connection with the mobile phone.

... if
George is not coming
today our George will
come and fitch the
peelings and bring

you a bit of pork
so don't get any meat

Opportunity for informal writing

As all the examples in this paper show, for many people the postcard was taken as an opportunity to write informally; they frequently make reference to the past or intended future writing of a letter as if contrasting the practice of dashing off a postcard against a letter. At the time, letter writing manuals were very common and there was a shared social sense bolstered of course through the formal education system that they should feature correct spelling, conventional orthography and grammatically standard English. Postcard writing was far more relaxed and often (although certainly not always) made use of a more conversational tone. Although the space on a card was obviously very limited, people varied in how they made use of the space. Figure 4 illustrates how 2 correspondents made use of the space on the card, both acting within the regulations of the post office. Following are the texts of the messages.

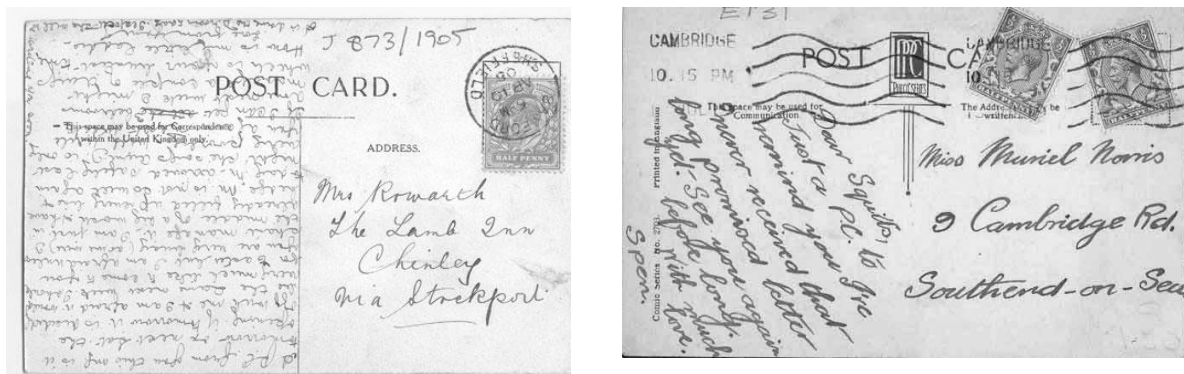


Figure 4: Two message sides illustrating contrasting use of space

The first card to a Mrs Rowarth of 'The Lamb Inn' sounds as if it may be from someone also in the hospitality business.

A P.C. from you this mg. is it
tomorrow or next Sat. the
opening. if tomorrow it is decidedly
off with me. & I am afraid it would
be the same next week. I should
very much like to come to you
for Easter but I am afraid unless
your are very busy (as we were) I
shan't manage it. I am just in
the middle of a big wash & I have
already filled up every line &
hedge. M. is not so well again

today. M. arrived safely 1st
night she says Aunt J. is only
very poorly will write
you again next week
If I can get 3 bedrooms
done next week I might
manage a couple of days
which is your busiest time.
How is my little laddie.
Love from [?]
A is doing the D. room today. I expect she will
[orientation shifts to side of writing]
be writing you soon.

The second card writer is desirous of a letter:

Dear Squills
Just a P.C to
remind you I've
never received that
long promised letter
yet. See you again
before long.
With much
love.
Spem

Passionate social responses

The postcard was recognised at the time as a social phenomenon with considerable impact; the media was often hyperbolic in expressions of concern, a kind of 'moral panic' for its impact or, occasionally recognition of its benefits. "In ten years Europe will be buried beneath picture postcards" worried the Glasgow Evening News, October 1903 (cited by Carline 1971 p. 9). In terms of literacy, there is a parallel with media concern about children's informal literacy practices in particular. The spontaneous outbursts of informal written communications were not necessarily welcomed as a good thing, but rather felt to threaten 'standards'.

The Times commented, 'Some people, too, urged that the use of a post-card was little short of an insult to the recipient, inasmuch as if the communication were not worth a penny it was not worth sending at all.' (Times, Nov 1st 1899), while James Douglas, who was quoted above also acknowledged: 'There are still some ancient purists who regarded postcards as vulgar, fit only for tradesmen.' for, 'The picture postcard carries rudeness to the fullest extremity.' (cited by Staff, F. 1979, p. 81) . Even in 1908 it was possible for a character in a story to say, 'I have always been brought up to

think it rather rude to send postcards, unless they are picture ones for people to put in their albums' (Williamson & Williamson, 1908). George Sims (1902) admitted that they 'are utterly destructive of style, and give absolutely no play to the emotions.'

However, there were some genuine reasons for concern. Sending postcards was for a time regarded in legal terms as a public act, resulting in controversies analogous to disputes that arose over the introduction of the worldwide web, when the transgressions of national boundaries created problems for governments' attempts to ban the distribution of undesirable information, or for individuals trying to have injunctions enforced. There are references to postcards being found as either 'defamatory' or 'libellous' in legal cases; perhaps the most surprising example is the following:

Melita Macready, a music teacher, was charged with defamatory libel, having sent the principal of the Guildhall School of Music a postcard saying, 'You old rogue, villain and liar. You old coward. Why don't you fight?' Melita Macready was committed for trial. *The Times, May 20th, 1905 (page 16)*

The project on Twitter

Together with Cath Booth the first author is currently using Twitter and the associated application Twitpic to 'resend' some of the cards a century or more since they were first sent. In cases where we have multiple cards from or to a specific person, we have set up a unique Twitter identity for them, otherwise we send them from an account we've set up to represent the Edwardian post office. All messages are then 'retweeted' via a single identity so that anyone interested in following us can at least start by adding just one identity to follow: @eVIIpc.

Conclusions: current work and future directions

We are currently completing two chapters which take up some of the issues raised in this paper in more detail. In one (Gillen & Hall, forthcoming a) we examine the postcards as examples of vernacular writing, exploring why such everyday writing is complex and interesting. In the second (Gillen & Hall, forthcoming b) we examine the mobilities of the cards. We contrast the circulation patterns of the early postcards when they were originally posted with how they circulate today, within an ethnographic investigation of practices of collecting and dealing. In each we also

discuss further parallels with features of today's digital revolution, arguing that the early postcard can best be understood in conjunction with other technological changes of the day, for example in transportation. This new 'epistolary space' (How, 2003) arose as people took up the opportunity offered to rethink how they dealt with their social networks (see also Thurlow, Jaworski, & Ylänne, V. in press).

This study is essentially a historical venture; the postcards offer us a fascinating opportunity to better understand the literacy practices of the Edwardians. We find support for the idea of the contemporary London journalist James Douglas, writing in 1907:

'When the archaeologists of the thirtieth century begin to excavate the ruins of London, they will fasten upon the Picture Postcards as the best guide to the spirit of the Edwardian era... Like all great inventions the Picture Postcard has wrought a silent revolution in our habits. It has secretly delivered us from the toil of letter-writing...' (quoted in Staff, 1979: 79).

In addition, we have made comparisons with the contemporary 'new communications landscape' (Kress, 1998) in part to argue for the worth of taking an interest in peoples' spontaneous vernacular literacy practices which can be extremely creative and interesting as well as valuable in furthering their own purposes. This short paper has used illustrative examples rather than undertaken thorough analysis of the cards but as we work forwards on this we suggest that such studies do have the potential to contribute to contemporary understandings of issues around multimodal communications. In our continuing work we would like to:

- Extend our collecting, transcription and analysis work to a set of two thousand cards;
- Continue the Twitter project to see what others make of the cards and what impact they might have when 'resent' approximately one hundred years after their original posting;
- Investigate addressees against the 1901 and 1910 censuses to see to what degree practices of postcard writing percolated through all sections of society and hence what this reveals about vernacular literacy practices at the time.

So far, bids for external funding have been unsuccessful. This led us to decide that we needed to do more to communicate to people why these cards are so interesting and why investigation of them is relevant, not least in developing research methods

appropriate to (multimodal) communication technologies. We would welcome any comments or questions and would be glad to share more results of our work.

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