THE EDWARDIAN PICTURE POSTCARD AS A COMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION

A LITERACY STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

Julia Gillen
The Edwardian Picture Postcard as a Communications Revolution

This monograph offers a novel investigation of the Edwardian picture postcard as an innovative form of multimodal communication, revealing much about the creativity, concerns and lives of those who used postcards as an almost instantaneous form of communication.

In the early twentieth century, the picture postcard was a revolutionary way of combining short messages with an image, making use of technologies in a way impossible in the decades since, until the advent of the digital revolution. This book offers original insights into the historical and social context in which the Edwardian picture postcard emerged and became a craze. It also expands the field of Literacy Studies by illustrating the combined use of posthuman, multimodal, historic and linguistic methodologies to conduct an in-depth analysis of the communicative, sociolinguistic and relational functions of the postcard. Particular attention is paid to how study of the picture postcard can reveal details of the lives and literacy practices of often overlooked sectors of the population, such as working-class women. The Edwardian era in the United Kingdom was one of extreme inequalities and rapid social change, and picture postcards embodied the dynamism of the times.

Grounded in an analysis of a unique, open-access, digitised collection of 3,000 picture postcards, this monograph will be of interest to researchers and postgraduate students in the fields of Literacy Studies, sociolinguistics, history of communications and UK social history.

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Routledge Research in Literacy
Edited by Julia Gillen and Uta Papen
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I owe an immense debt to Nigel Hall, formerly of Manchester Metropolitan University. We began writing a book about writing Edwardian postcards many years ago. He had first introduced me to a specific genre of old postcards, Why haven’t you written?, and we worked together to produce Hall and Gillen (2007). As this book recounts, we branched out with the idea of collecting 1,000 Edwardian postcards, developing our writing with the aid of encouragement from colleagues at Lancaster University in the Centre for Mobilities Research to write Gillen and Hall (2010). I felt very honoured that our chapter was selected as the opening chapter in that book edited by John Urry, Monika Büscher and Katian Witchger.

I have also been very encouraged in this lengthy, often paused, project by members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre, including David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Karin Tusting. I am particularly grateful to Uta Papen, co-editor of this book series, for reading draft chapters of this book and making extremely helpful comments. I have benefited also from an interest in the project by members of the Department of Linguistics and English Language, including Tony McEnery, Ruth Wodak and, especially, Paul Baker, who noticed when I stopped mentioning this work. Corpus linguists at Lancaster University and beyond advised me on the work explained in Chapter 5, as I elucidate and thank them there. Besides the Centre for Mobilities Research, I have also been a member of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning and again am grateful for interest, and the photographic contribution of Phil Moffitt to Chapter 6.

But I return to the genesis of this book, and working with Nigel. Nigel’s investigations of writing implements were very useful to my discussion of ten cards in detail published by the Journal of Sociolinguistics (Gillen, 2013) and to my discussion in Chapter 4 of this book. However, it eventually became evident that I would need to write a book alone, owing to his diminishing health. It took me some years to succeed in pivoting away from the book we had wanted to write together to one that I could write alone. It has become very different from what we might have written together but nonetheless shows many traces of that collaboration, most of which I have acknowledged in the text. However, there are many ways in which he helped that have not been explicitly detailed; I recall for example he introduced me to the activities of Henniker Heaton MP,
as discussed in Chapter 2. He carried out considerable historical and geographical investigations; in many cases, he was the first to find one of our addressees in the census, although I returned to work on each of the postcards of the main collection in the census. As I explain in the text, we developed our initial categorisation system together. Nigel was the first to become interested in Ruby Ingrey and Arthur Waddelow, even travelling to London to retrace her addresses and the site of the Metropolitan Cattle Market.

I would like to mention too that the first people to help us with transcribing postcards were his wife June Hall and my mother Jeanette Riglin. I regret that I have not been able to record all the names of donors of postcards nor even all the transcribers of the 3,000 cards of the main collection. I am very grateful to all of them and also to Lancaster University Library for the tremendous work in transferring the collection to Lancaster Digital Collections, making the postcards and transcriptions available open access online (especial thanks to Phil Cheeseman, Liz Fawcett, Annette Lawrence, Thomas Shaw and their colleagues). We brought this participation to the Institute of Historical Research Our Centenary History, Past, Present and Future Festival at Senate House, University College London, in July 2022. More librarians have helped me in the research for this book than I can name but include Helen Clish, Lorna Pemberton and Paul Newman at Lancaster University, and also the British Library.

I have been extremely fortunate to benefit from AHRC grants to Lancaster University. The Physical Social Network in 2016 enabled a productive collaboration with Adrian Gradinar. One of our activities was a public exhibit and event “Hands on with the Crank Machine” at Brighton Digital Festival in partnership with The Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove, part of the Brighton Digital Festival in 2017. I am grateful to Kevin Bacon in Brighton. Much longer ago, in 2010–2011 I developed an exhibit “Janet Carmichael and the Edwardian Picture Postcard” at Buxton Museum and Art Gallery and thank Martha Lawrence, then the Assistant Museum Manager. I also developed an exhibit on the Edwardian postcard for the public exhibition “Picture This: Postcards and Letters Beyond Text” supported by the AHRC at the University of Sussex in March 2011. In 2010 I also organised a postcard fair at Lancaster University, which included talks by Nigel Hall and Andrew Brookes. To return to the AHRC, in 2016 I also benefited from a grant from the AHRC Cultural Engagement Fund. I have also received internal funding from Lancaster University to support public engagement with research. I have been able to meet with postcard clubs and local history groups and give a number of talks, both physically and online. Online talks given from Lancaster City Museums and Lancaster University Public Events in 2021, as part of the AHRC Being Human Festival in 2020, and for the UK Literacy Association also in 2020, are available on YouTube.

Discussions with people interested in Edwardian postcards, including as dealers or collectors, have been as enjoyable as my academic presentations, and I never cease to be amazed at the diverse sources of knowledge about Edwardian
postcards. I even benefited from the only initially hostile contact I have ever had about the project, when a member of the public phoned and alleged I had used taxpayers’ money to buy the postcards. Having assured him this was not the case, and having offered to share some scans of the type he was particularly interested in, I was very pleased when he gave me some useful information about one of the postcards in my collection. I have enjoyed discussions with many people in the postcard collecting world and must especially mention Brian and Mary Lund. Indeed for a time, Nigel Hall and I wrote a monthly column for *Picture Postcard Monthly* under the editorship of Brian Lund.

I have been very fortunate in meeting many academics through research on Edwardian postcards. In 2018 I contributed to an invited talk at “Postcard Journeys: Image, Text Media” at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. I was also invited to present “The Edwardian Postcard: Breathing New Life into Early Twentieth Century Social Media” at a Sheffield Institute of Education seminar at Sheffield Hallam University in 2018. At “Valuing the Visual in Literacy Research” at the University of Sheffield in 2017, I presented “‘Above Is the Street I Walk along Daily’: Re-examining Multimodality through an Examination of the ‘Undivided Back’ Format of Early Twentieth Century postcards.” This work developed into a book chapter (Gillen, 2017), with support from that book’s marvellous editors: Becky Parry, Cathy Burnett and Guy Merchant, and the kind author of the Foreword, Donna Alvermann. Earlier, I can still recall how nervous I was at presenting to the Edwardian Culture Network’s second annual conference at Liverpool University in 2014. Fortunately, I can also remember how much I enjoyed the papers of that lively group and indeed went on to organise an event myself in Lancaster.

“Edwardian Postcards: Learning from Early Twentieth Century Social Media Practices” was my plenary paper at Historicing the Digital BAAL/CUP seminar, University of Leicester, in June 2016. I have also spoken about my research on Edwardian Picture Postcards at the University of Hong Kong, for which I thank Adam Jaworski, and the City University of Hong Kong, for which I thank Rodney Jones. In that year, 2014, I also presented at “What Is a Letter? An Interdisciplinary Approach” at St Edmund Hall, Oxford. I am indebted to the organisers, M.I. Matthews-Schlözing and Caroline Socha, who edited a book to which I contributed (Gillen, 2018). Another very memorable gathering at which I was fortunate to present was the Historical Sociolinguistics Network meeting: “Examining the Social in Historical Sociolinguistics, Methods and Theory” at New York University and City of New York Graduate Center in April 2017. I have also presented to the American Educational Research Association’s Writing and Literacies SIG, of which I am a longstanding member.

Besides Nigel Hall, the most significant intellectual and indeed practical contribution to the project was by Amanda Pullan, who was a researcher on the project, funded by the AHRC for 12 months from September 2017. Amanda contributed substantially to the project in discussions, public and community engagement at events and online, and contributed to the development of a new
citizen humanities website idea. Joanne Thistlethwaite and Jane Demmen also acted as research associates and were particularly skilled transcribers. Several undergraduate students have also assisted the project, particularly with social media dissemination; Cath Booth of MMU made useful suggestions also. I apologise to all those who have contributed but have not been mentioned here.

I am grateful to the many colleagues at Routledge I have worked with, including most recently Alice Salt, Elizabeth Spicer and Shalima Begam in the production of this book. Finally, my greatest thanks go to members of my family, including my children, Daniel, Conor and Kathleen, and my husband Jim to whom this book is dedicated.

References


Data availability statement

The main collection of 3,000 Edwardian postcards that is the basis of this book is openly available in Lancaster Digital Collections: https://digitalcollections.lancaster.ac.uk/collections/ep/1
The social media of the early twentieth century?

Quite half of the company who sit and sip their lager beer in the German gardens or “Tonhalle” have a packet of postcards at their side, and the despatch of mementos of the occasion is a regular part of the proceedings when friends meet …. All so easy too. Just “Love from Jack,” or “Fine place this,” and the picture does the rest. The picture postcard is simply a continuance of the “you touch the button and we do the rest” idea. It is part and parcel of the busy, rushing, time-saving age we live in.

(Editor of the Process Photogram, cited by Corkett, 1906: 624)

In the twenty-first century, social media are acknowledged as providing sites for presentation of identity, interaction with others and participation in society. Despite enormous and ever-growing popularity, social media are also blamed for many social ills, from the spread of dangerous misinformation to widening inequalities and deleterious impacts on mental health. Social media platforms are often blamed in media discourses for increasing pressures on young people, especially, to see and be seen, to display and have their messages shared, while still being recognised as inescapably linked to many domains of everyday life for many of us. It is one of my arguments in this book that society in Britain – probably as in many other places, but this is the location where I research – has, long ago, in an almost forgotten and misjudged era, experienced a social phenomenon with many of the same qualities as today. Relatively few people, it is true, put quite so much energy into deploring the picture postcard craze in the first decade of the twentieth century as critics of social media now, although there certainly were some strong detractors. But in terms of its functionality in society, its popularity and the creativity with which many people embraced it, the Edwardian picture postcard can fruitfully be compared to today’s social media. It should be explained immediately that the term “Edwardian” refers to the reign of Edwardian VII, 1901–1910, almost exactly aligning with the heyday of the picture postcard and the collection discussed in this book, more precisely from 1 January 1902 until the end of 1910.
Between that era and the dawn of the digital age of society in the 1990s, with SMS and email, there were no comparable means of exchanging rapid, cheap, accessible written messages with images. I would like to immediately introduce you to one, perfectly ordinary picture postcard from the first decade of the twentieth century. This, as are all the cards discussed in this book, unless noted otherwise, is from the Edwardian Postcard Project’s main collection and can be freely viewed online in Lancaster Digital Collections.

Ethel’s actress card and the Edwardian era

Ethel’s card demonstrates a world of rapid connections, plans and communications interwoven with a shared sense of popular culture. Phyllis Dare, pictured, was an actress who owed much of her international popularity to her carefully managed presence on picture postcards (Kelly, 2004). Bartlett (2013) discovered from the archives of Foulsham and Banfield, the leading theatrical photographers of the time, that Dare signed annual contracts of £100 (over £12k in 2021) and would have sat for these postcard portraits monthly. The Edwardian era was the time when media representations of actors and actresses developed on the picture postcard into what Stephenson (2013: 9) termed the

![Image of Postcard 1647.](image)
“modernizing iconographies of celebrities – stars …” The final reference in Miss Clowes’s card, written upside down, is to the practice of collecting postcards, an immensely popular hobby at the time (Carline, 1971). Implicitly, it acknowledges that the card, in an era before colour photography, could well have been a valued object, a gift someone might want to add to their collection. Sharing displays the affection cemented by the message. Finally, it is the speed of the communications technologies, both the card and the planned railway journey, that might impress us now. Ethel had posted the card before 10.30am in complete confidence that it will reach Miss Clowes hours later. She could well have been promising her arrival later that same evening. Admittedly, Biddulph is only just over 9 miles from Corporation Street, Stoke-on-Trent. Today, the journey could be made in approximately the same duration, but not so late at night, and by bus rather than train. The postal service and trains were more efficient in that era, than now, both instantiations of what were felt to be increasingly rapid communications technologies.

The first years of the twentieth century, before the Great War – later better known as the First World War – are sometimes thought of as an idyllic, pastoral and stable era, calm before the storm. But this is the effect of retrospection, a largely fictional view of “Edwardian perfection” promulgated by authors such as L.P. Hartley (Wright, 2004). Substantial enquiries by social investigators, Charles Booth working in London in 1886–1889 and Seebohm Rowntree in York in 1899–1900, had led to the recognition that Victorian assumptions of growth, prosperity and consequent reduction in poverty, at least by working families that were not feckless, did not hold (Read, 1972). These late Victorian investigations revealed levels of poverty that had also come to the notice of society when a high proportion of men recruited to serve in the South African War of 1899–1902 were rejected as unfit. These findings were experienced as disturbing at the time, leading to understandings that factors such as low wages, especially for unskilled labourers, large families, periods of unemployment and the effects of old age had consequences experienced as unavoidable by even responsible individuals. The work of those investigations and other data from the era have been reanalysed using modern methods with a finding that 18% of working households experienced absolute poverty and that certain points in the lifecycle, including childhood and old age, were particularly vulnerable (Gazeley & Newell, 2011). In its own time, Edwardian Britain witnessed political turmoil, with a Liberal government elected in 1906 expected to tackle these conditions, while opposed by powerful and wealthy landowners (Short, 1997: 19).

For people living at the time, those years in Great Britain and Ireland were experienced as a time of rapid mobilities and change. Processes of urbanisation were unparalleled (Collins, 2000: 1; Thompson, 1992: 24); one-quarter of women were employed in some four hundred different occupations (Crow, 1978: 137) and technological advances impacted all areas of life, whether urban or agricultural.