

Chapter 6

Nigel Hall and Julia Gillen

Purchasing Pre-packed Words:

Complaint and Reproach in Early British Postcards

When the archaeologists of the thirtieth century begin to excavate the ruins of London, they will fasten upon the picture postcard as the best guide to the spirit of the Edwardian era. They will collect and collate thousands of these pieces of pasteboard and they will reconstruct our age from these strange hieroglyphs and pictures that time has spared.

(James Douglas, 1907)¹

Exploring the early pictorial postcard is not simply creating a historical study of how a literacy-related object functioned 100 years ago. It is actually a study of how changes in the materiality of literacy create opportunities and pose challenges for writers, and in this way illuminate human responses to a literacy innovation in a period of dramatic technological and social change. During the first years of the twentieth century, the picture postcard craze swept Western Europe, with an extraordinary impact on, it seems, all levels of society. Our chapter focuses on early twentieth century Britain, and considers how a society that for just over one generation had experienced universal education approached this innovation, through an examination of a sub-genre of these cards, that we term ‘cards of complaint and reproach’.

¹ James Douglas (1907) cited in F. Staff, *The Picture Postcard and its Origins*, London (Lutterworth Press), 1979, p.76.

The emergence of the postcard

The emergence of the postcard should be recognised as a significant technical and material innovation in the history of literacy. While in terms of the overall history of literacy it is a relatively recent and fairly minor phenomenon, and not a development on the same scale as the creation of movable type or of digital communication, it provides a fascinating case study of changes in social literacy practices.

In 1865, Dr. Heinrich von Stephan, a German postal official, proposed to an Austrian postal conference the adoption and use of an ‘open post-sheet’ (*offenes Postblatt*). His argument was based on there not being a form of letter appropriate to many communicative situations: that is, for situations that require only a short communication, and for which a conventional letter with its requirements of folding it or inserting in an envelope for posting take up time. Von Stephan’s proposal was rejected, but in January 1869 the concept reappeared in an article by Emanuel Hartman and this time it was received with more enthusiasm by the Austrian Post Office, which on 1 October 1869 produced the world’s first ‘correspondence card’ (a title later changed to the simpler ‘postcard’). In 1870 several other countries issued their first postcards (including the North German Federation, Switzerland and Britain), while many other countries followed this example during the next three years (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Canada, USA, Spain, Italy and Romania). The speed with which this new object was taken up suggests that the postcard occupied a significant social communicative space. At first postcards were sent mostly within countries but following the creation of the General Postal Union in 1874 its members gradually agreed on a common rate of

postage and postcard communication became international. In this year, according to Vincent, ‘Literacy in modern Europe came of age’.²

While the postcard was a significant innovation it was not a wholly radical technical departure. From one historical perspective it was an evolution from pictorial broadsheets and popular prints, and closely linked to decorative writing paper and pictorial envelopes. From another, it was of course a stage in the evolution of epistolary media such as letters and visiting cards. At first the postcard was a fairly regulated object and Britain, along with many European and British Empire countries, specified that on the stamped side of a the card nothing but the address could be written; any picture and message had to go on the other side. This situation prevailed in Britain until 1902 when the Post Office responded to vociferous complains by allowing the picture to occupy the whole of one aide, and the stamped side to contain both the address and the message. It was this move that turned the postcard into a revolutionary communicative innovation for the result was a massive increase in the use of postcards, and an extraordinary take-up across social classes. This is a consequence was attested to both in quantitative and qualitative terms; annual sales of around a quarter of million postcards in the 1890s rose to 860 million per annum by 1908.³ The picture postcard was the first writing-related technology to be a truly mass vernacular medium. If 1874 was the year when literacy ‘came of age’, then in Britain 1902 was the year in which writing was fully democratised. According to Staff, ‘Drop me a postcard’ was said in just the same way people later in the century would say ‘Give me a ring’.⁴

² David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*, Oxford (Polity) 2000, p. 1.

³ Post Office, *The Post Office – an historical summary*, London (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office), 1911.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The postcard as a material object

Unlike an e-mail or text message, a postcard is a very physical object. Without needing to be printed out, it exists as a strong material presence. A new material object of literacy always possesses affordances and constraints, and in this section we want to explore some of these in relation to the pictorial postcard.

The postcard starts as a mass-produced object that has a particular shape, size and weight, and is created out of particular materials. In the United Kingdom the shape and size were determined by the Post Office, for as we have already seen the postcard was from the start a highly regulated object. The relative stiffness of the card from which they were made meant that for the Post Office they were easy to sort, move and deliver. At the same time this stiffness meant that no desk was needed on which to write a postcard; it could be held across a knee or even in the hand. This made the postcard a very manageable object, and once the fully pictorial postcard emerged, particularly the full pictorial postcard, they became quite attractive objects and began to function rather as gifts. Pictorial cards were collected and displayed on notice-boards, in albums and on mantelpieces.

The material and technological nature of postcards created a number of issues for users, some of which bear interesting relationships with those facing contemporary users of digital communications. The early pictorial postcard contained images and different kinds of texts, and thus users, both as writers and readers, faced issues relating to multimodality, just as do contemporary users of digital technologies. The use of such texts makes complex demands upon their authors and readers, yet despite this complexity they also offer great freedoms to users.⁵ For picture postcard writers the presence of the illustration meant that the tone and tenor, as well as the substance of the message, could be partly or wholly conveyed without writing, thereby potentially reducing the

⁵ Gunther Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age*, London (Routledge), 2003.

burden for the writer. Employing images, however, created issues of relationship between these images and the authored text. Is the pictorial postcard a gift or a commodity?⁶ and is the text or the illustration the primary bearer of meaning? The postcard also offered a new physical space for texts, and less space demanded different styles of written language and also encouraged unusual forms of layout as writers utilised every particle of spare space on the card.

The early picture postcard service was cheap and for its time very fast; indeed it was possible to write: ‘Dear Ethel, will come round to your house, between 10 past and quarter past 8 tonight’,⁷ and know that the card would arrive in time. The disadvantage of the cards, however, was that they could be read by anyone with whom they came into contact. Equally, digital technologies offer wonderful opportunities to send simple, fast and effective messages to friends, relations, business contacts, and so on, but these communications often suffer from problems relating to security and privacy.⁸ Companies and governments routinely monitor e-mails, and commercial communication using the internet is constantly under attack. The desire for security has led to complex encryption technologies. For some postcard writers privacy was not an issue: one correspondent in 1903 wrote:

‘And as for privacy, who expects it in these days. If he has secrets to hide from the light of day, by all means let him use a sheet of paper, enclose it in an envelope, seal it with red wax, put on a penny stamp and be happy.’⁹

⁶ Alexandra. Jaffe, ‘Packaged sentiments: the social meanings of greeting cards’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 1999, 4:2, pp. 115-141.

⁷ Andy Brooks, Fred Fletcher, & Brian Lund, *What the Postman Saw*, Nottingham UK (Keyworth), 1982, p.48.

⁸ Hazel Oliver, ‘Email and Internet Monitoring in the Workplace: Information Privacy and Contracting-Out’, *Industrial Law Journal*, 2002, 31:49, pp. 321-352.

⁹ Anon., *Postcard Collector*, 1903, p. 324.

Others, however, did have anxieties (and indeed such anxieties were one of the reasons why von Stephan's original proposal had been rejected). The challenge for postcard writers was to find ways round this problem. A solution adopted by some was to use codes, such as those that enabled one code-book author to comment:

'No longer will the servant or the Village Postman be able to read your private messages, no longer will the mistress know of the tender phrases sent by the maid's followers, no longer will parents scowl, or the sister's brother tease her, for when in possession of this book, by simply placing a few figures on a post card, a private message can be send to any part of the United Kingdom for a halfpenny, or for a penny to any part of the world.'¹⁰

Like digital communication technologies, the picture postcard was experienced as a novel, exciting and flexible means of communication, with its new multimodal possibilities combined with an unthreatening sense of informality and necessary brevity.

The postcard and popular writing

While the picture postcard was not such a revolutionary material innovation as moveable type or the computer, it nevertheless had a powerful impact on vernacular literacy practices. Barton and Hamilton define vernacular literacies as 'essentially ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their origins in everyday life'.¹¹ When the picture postcard appeared, the conventions associated with its use did not derive from

¹⁰ Captain Barnard, *The Postcard Code: A Novel and Private Method of Communicating by Postcard*, London, Simpkin and Marshall), 1908, Preface.

¹¹ David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*, London (Routledge), 1998, p.247.

published writing manuals or schooled literacy practices but evolved through usage by ordinary people. People learnt to write postcard texts through everyday practice, just as today they adapt to using e-mail and text messaging.

James How argues that when the Post Office was established in Britain during the second half of the seventeenth century, ‘the opening up of epistolary spaces allowed many more people to write letters.’¹² In the same way the epistolary space afforded by the pictorial postcard meant that anyone could engage in written correspondence, even those with less conventional literacy skills. As a result, the postcard was a very open space, offering great freedoms to writers to say what they wanted in any way they wanted. This democratisation of writing was welcomed by many, but for others it induced a sense of moral panic. In 1900 one writer welcomed the postcard, commenting, ‘The picture post-card is a sign of the times. It belongs to a period peopled by a hurried generation that has not many minutes to spare for writing to friends’,¹³ while a critic moaned that ‘postcards were utterly destructive of style’.¹⁴ Another Edwardian commentator found them so helpful that, ‘People today wonder how our fathers and mothers got on without those useful adjuncts of civilisation - postcards’,¹⁵ while yet another complained ‘The Picture Postcard carries rudeness to the fullest extremity’.¹⁶

As postcard writing developed out of social practices so styles of writing became very varied. For those who worried about standards and correctness, postcards could still be written as meticulously as any formal letter. For the majority of writers, however, a fast moving medium meant

¹² James How, *Epistolary Spaces: English Letter Writing from the Foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa*, Aldershot UK (Ashgate), 2003, p. 2.

¹³ Margeret Meadows, Untitled article in *The Picture Post Card*, Jan. 1900, p. 9.

¹⁴ George Sims, Untitled article in *The Picture Post Card*, August 1900, p. 22.

¹⁵ Anon., in *The Picture Post Card*, July 1901, p. 101.

¹⁶ James Douglas (1907) cited in Staff, *The Picture Postcard*, p. 81

the relaxation of conventions, scrawled scripts, a loose attitude to spelling, an avoidance of punctuation and often a truncated, almost telegraphic form of writing. Virginia Woolf caricatured contemporary complaints, writing ‘We commit our half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the postcard.’¹⁷ In 1907 James Douglas welcomed the introduction of the picture postcard, as he wrote: ‘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.’¹⁸

Cards of complaint and reproach

The postcards being considered in this chapter fall mostly into a genre that can be colloquially described as the ‘Why haven’t you written?’ card. This is clearly a complaint, often a heartfelt complaint, and the complaint is almost always very clearly signalled on the pictorial side of the card (in this instance the ‘pictorial’ side may only contain printed text). Given the highly specific nature of this complaint it may be surprising that many hundreds of different versions were produced, and the large number of these cards still found in postcard fairs suggests that it was a very common complaint.

On the whole, the strategies adopted in both the pictorial messages and the handwritten messages are different from those suggested in earlier letter-writing manuals and indeed, in these manuals, model letters of apology for not having written exceed those of complaint for not having received a letter. There are relatively few really brusque postcards, but in the eighteenth century one letter-writing manual’s author talked about messages of reproach having to ‘strike home, like bitter

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘A letter to a young poet’ in Leonard Woolf, ed., *Collected essays vol. 2*, London (Hogarth), 1932 and 1966, p.182.

¹⁸ James Douglas (1907) cited in Staff, *The Picture Postcard*, p. 79.

invective'. This author's example says: 'I shall break at last with you, if you do not break Silence. Indeed, I fancy you esteem me very little, since you have entirely forgot me.'¹⁹

Most models offered, however, chose more positive means of eliciting a response, like this example from 1612:

'Nevertheless seeing you have had no good opportunity to write, I pardon this silence, and as one who holds you deare, will content my selfe with your best leisure, and conveniencie.'²⁰

However, most of the models of complaint and reproach about absent letters could be characterised by their emphasis on the suffering caused to the sender, as in this text from the early seventeenth century:

'You are happily innocent dearest friend what paine I am in, and with what unrest I spend my irksome daies, through your parcimoniousnesse, and sparing of a little inke and paper. Is it not enough that I am deprived of your sight, but I must be also unsaluted by your letters.'²¹

While the letter-writing manuals' examples of complaint and reproach may well have provided models that heavily influenced what was written by letter-writers, it was still up to the writers to take the published text and adapt it to their particular circumstances, and all that was received by the addressee was the handwritten text of the sender.

The postcards of complaint and reproach differ from the letters in three significant ways. The first is that they represent a dramatic change from letter-writing in their combination of a pre-selected illustration (which usually includes printed words) with the freely composed handwritten text on the other side. As a result, the complaint postcard occupies ambivalent spaces. Most (but not all) personal uses of 'Why haven't you written?' and their counterparts, the 'I'm sorry I haven't

¹⁹ Anon., *The new art of letter-writing*, London, 1763, p. 165.

²⁰ Anon., *The Prompter's Packet of Private and Familiar Letters*, London, 1612.

²¹ Anon., *Cupid's messenger*, London, 1629, p. 31

written' postcards involved a card being sent from one individual to another, a highly particular relationship; yet the postcard was inevitably totally generic. While a commercially produced postcard was sent to one individual, copies were also being sent to many thousands of other people. The sender was essentially purchasing a protest, literally lifting it off a shelf. The postcard publisher was acting as complaint or apology broker in the interaction between the sender and the recipient. To make a point all the sender had to do was sign the postcard, put a stamp on it and send it off – job done! Thus a medium that was at one level associated with handwritten, personal messages, and came from a longer tradition of personal letter exchanges, was also positioned as a mass-produced, impersonal commodity.

These ambivalences make the postcard, and the complaint postcard in particular, a very interesting social object in the way they and their usage manifest social identities and relationships. While people might have many purposes for sending messages for which there are expectations of a response, those addressed to acquaintances, friends and family, being situated in personal relationships, are always likely to have particular significance. If a letter written to a company or business fails to elicit a response, it is relatively easy to write an irritated or angry communication to them; it is after all sent to a relatively impersonal institution. But the issues change when a complaint has to be made to someone with whom there is a personal relationship and where the wrong move could imperil that relationship.

The second critical difference compared to complaint and reproach in letter-writing lies in the very public and open nature of postcard communication. It is one thing to complain in private, sending a letter that is closed and protected by a seal, or travels enclosed in an envelope, but it is a critically different step to complain using a postcard that that can be easily read by other people. As will be seen below, the 'Why haven't you written?' postcards almost force the message onto a reader as it is often signalled in large letters. Even a very casual glance will make it clear that the recipient is a 'guilty' party. It is something of a paradox that, as the postcard emerges and almost explodes

into public revelation, so notions of personal privacy become significantly more important in people's lives.²²

The third critical difference is that the notion of authorship has to be extended when a 'Why haven't you written?' card is sent to another person. It was and is certainly possible for a letter-writer to incorporate illustration into their text,²³ but with the pictorial postcard the image is not provided or produced by the postcard writer and it has to fulfil specific conditions laid down by the Post Office. Thus the relationship between illustration and the handwritten text is quite formalised. Because the image has been drawn or designed by a professional and has been mass-produced by a commercial company, its pre-purchase life has no relationship with the sender. Nevertheless, we would argue that as soon as the decision is made to send such a card, this commodified image becomes part of an authorship process. In some ways it is an extension of the use of letter-writing manuals, but instead of purchasing a whole set of letter-writing examples one purchases a perfect example of a complaint or reproach message. The act of authorship starts with the act of choosing the right image out of the hundreds that would have been available, of finding the words and images that represent what the sender wants to be said.

If a complaint is not to result in the fracture of a relationship then great care has to be taken over how it is framed. The maintenance of the personal relationship usually means that the implicit negativity of the complaint card needed to be attenuated and ameliorated. How did the complainers set about this task? The senders of the cards could adopt a variety of strategies to assist this process.

²² Cecile Jagodzinski, *Privacy and Print: Reading and Writing in Seventeenth-Century England*, Charlottesville VA (Virginia UP), 1999.

²³ Charles Hamilton, *The Illustrated Letter*, New York (Universe), 1987; Michael Baker, ed., *Pictures in the post: the illustrated letters of Sir Henry Thornhill to his grandchildren*, London (Bantam), 1987; Liza Kirwin, *More than words: illustrated letters from the Smithsonian*, (Princeton Architectural Press), 2005.

Choosing an appropriate card

The first strategy is to choose a card that already performs the act of amelioration. It is important to reiterate that while all one has to do is pull a card out of a rack in a shop, such selections are necessarily authorial choices. They are part of the way a writer seeks to convey the message, and the polysemic design of the cards often conveys the message in multiple ways. The message on one card simply says: ‘Don’t forget to write!’ The illustration on the card shows a child shouting and pointing. The force of the message, however, is reduced by having the child pointing to the side, not directly towards the readers, as in the British First World War posters showing Kitchener pointing directly at the reader just above the caption ‘Your country needs you!’.

Another card simply says: ‘Oh, what’s the use of an excuse. WRITE! THAT’S ALL!’ This is a very plain card with little more than the message, so it has a blunter effect, something that is reinforced by several of the words having their initial letter printed in red. Perhaps the most direct card in our collection is one that simply says: ‘It’s your turn!’ This message is in white, while the rest of the card is a solid red. Thus the isolation and terseness of the message is reinforced by the use of a colour that suggests a warning.

Some convey the sentiment but in a less brusque and politer way, and one of the most widely used messages was: ‘If a body writes a body – getting no reply, may a body ask a body – what’s the reason why?’ – a rhyming verse mimicking the familiar song ‘Comin’ through the rye’. This message occurs in many different contexts, sometimes as nothing but text but more often with a supporting illustration, for instance of a young woman putting a letter into the post box, or of a young man doing the same. Another group of cards makes exaggerated affective appeals using a kind of emotional blackmail, apparently attempting to indicate how sad and desperate the writers are not to have heard from their correspondent. One example has an illustration of a mother looking

forlorn as she stands at the cottage door while the postman walks on by. The printed text extends the emotion of the illustration:

‘The Postman daren’t approach me,
And quickly fades from view
When he murmurs, faint and falt’ring,
That he brings no word from you.’

Children are often used in these appeals. One typical example shows two children saying:

‘Papa dear, why don’t you write?’, while another has a child at the door watching the postman walk by while the text reads ‘He’s gone past me again! Don’t you love me now?’

Most of the illustrations on these cards, however, make their point by filtering the message through humour or cuteness. The humour comes through a very rich range of visual and textual puns, jokes, rebuses, irony and mildly comic verses. These range from the fairly short ‘If living, please write – if dead, don’t trouble’ to quite extensive wordy sentiments, as in this card:

‘Why? Is all the ink in the world gone dry? Are all the pens mislaid? And pencils too – are there none to buy? Is paper no longer made? If you are not deep in this awful plight then why in the world do you never write?’ (See illustration 1)

This is a visually complex card, arranged very symmetrically but using many colours and decorative effects. The overall impression is reminiscent of decoratively framed mirror, so that the reader seems to be looking into the mirror but seeing the reproach looking back instead of his or her own reflection.

The humour in the messages is often partly conveyed through the accompanying illustration, such as in the fairly simple card with a pair of legs sticking up from the sea, while an old man watches from the dockside. The message reads ‘Why don’t you drop me a line?’ Similarly, take the example of a more complex illustration and text:

‘Here’s a drop of (*illustration of an inkwell*) and a (*illustration of a pen*) a (*illustration of a stamp*) and a (*illustration of a penny*) to buy a postcard. Now perhaps YOU WILL WRITE!’

(See illustration 2)

The cuteness is usually achieved by creating quaint or cartoonish illustrations of children, animals and other characters, or having messages conveyed through variant spellings and regional words that suggest different dialects and accents.

There is no record of how many different forms of ‘Why haven’t you written?’ cards were published, but based on the authors’ own collection, it seems there are many hundreds of examples. While a person’s choice at any one moment would have been limited by what was available in a particular shop, the range of places selling postcards was so huge that there would almost always have been an opportunity for authorial decision-making.

Composing an appropriate message

In our sample of 150 posted ‘Why haven’t you written?’ cards (acquired over several years from dealers in old postcards), only three were sent anonymously, and presumably there was some way in which the message would be understood by the recipient as having come from a known person. Four senders wrote nothing on their card except their signature, leaving the packaged message to convey their meaning. Of the cards that had been posted, 94% of the writers felt the need to do more than simply sign their name; there was a felt need to add a written message to the force of the illustrated side of the card. It is clear that some of the cards were not necessarily used for their ostensible purposes. One cluster of writers reversed the printed complaint by apologising for not having sent a card or letters (and this is despite there being a whole genre of apology cards to buy), while on other cards there is no reference at all to the printed message. In these later cards the handwritten message is often a simple piece of news (frequently from a holiday resort) or a birthday greeting. Some card writers suggest in their text that they simply thought the card was funny and

that their correspondent would enjoy the joke. One correspondent apologised for having started to write on the wrong card but thought he would send it anyway: 'I addressed this card to you by mistake so hope you will excuse it.'

It is, of course, impossible to tell whether or not these writers were simply using the text as a humorous accompaniment to their letter or whether the illustrated side was meant to convey the unwritten thoughts of the writers, but one has to ask why, given the extraordinarily wide range of cards available, these particular cards were chosen if not to convey to the reader at some level the printed message.

One third of the card authors included some kind of reference related to the complaint side of the card. This could be as gentle as: '...will look for some word from you', or 'ask Rosetta to give you my address and drop me a letter, don't forget' or 'I thought I'd send this just as a reminder'. Some are more specific, like the following messages:

'Take notice of what it says on the front of the card.'

'Please take this postcard to heart & write to me soon.'

'Please follow directions on the other side (*of the card*).'

In one case, the card, sent at Christmas and containing the printed message 'Does my old friend remember me?' is accompanied by this longer handwritten text:

'I am wondering if you have slipped off the map as it is such ages since I heard from you just now in the time when one renews old acquaintances, so I thought I would just enquire if you were still amongst the living.'

Other authors were prepared to be more abrupt in their choice of words, as in this selection of messages:

'You have no excuse whatever now for not writing.'

'Dear Mother, just a line to ask you if you have forgotten you have two daughters.'

'You must think I'm dead, and I've about made up my mind you are.'

It is either a measure of how carefully these cards and the authors' words were chosen, or a sign that the writers were sufficiently confident in the strength of their personal relationships, that only one of the cards in our sample seeks to explicitly reassure the reader not to be offended by the reproach. In this case, the printed text says: 'If you run short of pen and ink this gift combines the two. So just sit down and write to me, I want to hear from you.' On the other side was handwritten: 'Please take the sound advice on the other side, but don't take offence, as none is meant.'

Conclusion

It will come as no surprise that a market that can commodify complaint and seek to make personal complaint redundant, should also have commodified the response. Although we can do no more than mention it in this chapter there is a parallel postcard genre, fully equal in variety to the complaint and reproach cards, which exists to apologise for not having written a card or letter. Like the former cards, this genre relies heavily on using humour to enable the embarrassed apologist to avoid being too obsequious. Once again the apology is pulled down from a bank of published message cards, off the shelf, just as modern companies send their pro forma letter to complainants. It is as if the whole process of complaint and apology, while part of a complex personal relationship, could be carried out without involving anything very face-threatening. These commodified sub-genres offered new opportunities for easily handling personal messages, so that tricky moments in relationships could be negotiated with relative ease. Yet it is clear to us that this capacity to purchase messages did not obliterate personal creativity, for in so many cards we see interesting ways in which the writing was combined with the picture to generate a richer communication. The multimodal integration of the two produces a multiplying effect so that whole becomes greater than

the sum of its parts.²⁴ Postcards of complaint and apology were easily absorbed into the vernacular literacy practices of the early twentieth century writer, and alongside other sub-genres they helped put the postcard at the centre of a writing revolution.

²⁴ Anthony Baldry, and Paul Thibault, P.J., *Multimodal transcription and text analysis: a multimedia toolkit and coursebook*, London (Equinox), 2006, p. 42.