GREETINGS FROM SCOTLAND:
POSTCARDS AND THE DIGITIZATION OF
TRAVEL EPHEMERA IN THE UNIVERSITY
OF GUELPH'S SCOTTISH COLLECTIONS

DIGITAL HUMANITIES SPECIAL SECTION

Kevin J. James, University of Guelph
Melissa McAfee, University of Guelph
Aritra Bhattacharjee, University of Guelph
Alexandra Kurceba, University of Guelph
AND
Ainsley Robertson, University of Guelph

ABSTRACT

This article describes the background behind and the process of the digitization of travel ephemera contained within the University of Guelph's Scottish Studies Collection. Developed as an experiential learning opportunity for undergraduate students at the University of Guelph, this project explores the place that postcards held in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scotland, the technologies involved with the printing and creation of postcards, their intended purpose, and what can be learned about Victorian, Edwardian, and postwar society based on postcard design, descriptions, and use. Through the creation of an Omeka online exhibit, those involved with this digitization project were able to share their analysis with the public, while making these materials digitally available for consultation and review.

Keywords: Scotland; travel; ephemera; postcards; 19th century; 20th century; digital humanities; digitization

Everyday ‘throw-away’ items surround us. They fill our pockets and weigh our fridge magnets, gain us entry to shows, advertise products and record our purchases of them. They are also subjects of consternation as we deliberate over the sheer volume of material that we produce for landfill and recycling, ponder the extent to which many have migrated to digital formats, and agonise over the extraordinary depth and range of documentation that we produce about our lives. In contrast to the medieval historian, who is often left to work with quite limited evidence, in one hundred years’ time, scholars may encounter a deluge of sources with which to reconstruct everyday lives as we lived them. They will be swimming in sources.

Historical acts of travel produce their own distinctive sets of records, from passports to hotel visitors’ books. The focus of a growing collection of material at the University of Guelph’s renowned Scottish Studies Collection, held in its Archival and Special Collections unit at McLaughlin Library, is travel ‘ephemera’—those everyday materials that are often deemed without value when their designated period of use and function ends. In the context of travel, consider luggage tags, hotel stationery, trip itineraries, menus, promotional pamphlets and similar material. When the travel ends, the meal is eaten, the business winds down, their immediate purpose—the function for which they are produced—is lost. Yet ephemera’s rich evidentiary status is revealed when historians use them to explore historical practices of travel.

Consider the postcard—as two undergraduate classes did at the University of Guelph in fall 2019, when they delved into the Scottish Collections.¹ When it was introduced in continental Europe in 1869 and then adopted as a popular

¹ For a discussion of postcard collecting in libraries, see Lois R. Densy-Wolff, “Why Libraries Collect Postcards: Two Case Studies,” in *Postcards in the Library: Invaluable Visual Resources*, ed. Norman D. Stevens (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1995), 35–9.

means of communication in the last decades of the twentieth century, the postcard was a cheap and efficient way of ‘keeping in touch’, in the days when the postal services were often remarkably speedy, with cities such as London offering many postal deliveries throughout the day.² Early postcards bore little resemblance to those with which we are familiar today: they may have featured an image, but no written message on the back, which was limited to the address of the recipient. Over time, however, the physical characteristics of the postcard changed and uses of the postcard expanded, reflecting changes in postal service practices and policies, developments in photographic and reprographic technologies, and travellers’ embrace of this textual form as a means of conveying condensed information, adopting new epistolary conventions that forsook the formalities of the letter form.³ Gone were the valedictions of the letter, often composed of grandiloquent expressions: ‘I remain, Sir, your most humble and obedient servant’. The postcard offered no space for such magniloquence when a simple and concise ‘Yours fondly’ would suffice.

In the UK, as elsewhere, one critical set of factors behind the rise of the postcard was institutional: in particular the decision to allow a different size of card beyond the standard dimensions, as well as loosening of restrictions which had initially granted the postal office a monopoly over manufacture of the cards. With an end to this monopoly in 1894, the market was open to private firms, which in turn

² Sandra Ferguson, “‘A Murmur of Small Voices:’ On the Picture Postcard in Academic Research,” *Archivaria* 60 (2006): 167–84. For an early account of postcard history, see Eric J. Evans and Jeffrey Richard, *History of Britain in Postcards 1870–1930* (London: Longman, 1980).

³ Julia Gillen, “The Picture Postcard at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: Instagram, Snapchat or Selfies of an Earlier Age?,” in *Literacy, Media and Technology: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Becky Parry, Cathy Burnett and Guy Merchant (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 11–24.

adopted new innovations as they competed for custom. This also encouraged technological experimentation, as well as a widening of the subject matter that featured on the front of cards. An additional change resulted in even more creative uses of the card as a means of personal correspondence: the lifting of restrictions on the use of the back of the card in 1902, creating a 'split' back which allowed for the address and stamp on one side and a personal message on the other. While there were restrictions on where correspondence could appear, very often senders flouted them: their writing wrapped around the front of the card, their scrawl often surrounded front matter too, and when the cards directed that only written correspondence could appear on inland postal deliveries, many writers ignored these restrictions.

This was the 'Golden Age' of postcards, lasting up to the war, when the extraordinary expansion in their use was accompanied by a remarkable diversity of card types, photographic and illustrated (and sometimes hybrids of the two), often showcasing new technologies or techniques of reproduction: 'real photo' postcards, tinted and coloured cards, Raphael Tuck and Sons' famous illustrated 'oilette' cards, to name a few.⁴ Following its Golden Age, the postcard enjoyed a vibrant, if not entirely genteel, dotage, epitomised by the saucy seaside postcards of Donald McGill, whose ribald creations, and the receptions they received, offer fascinating insights into vacationing, gender and racial stereotyping, broad humour and both subtle and not-so-subtle lampooning of dominant class-conditioned and legally enforced norms.⁵

⁴ David Prochaska, "Thinking Postcards," *Visual Resources* 17, no. 4 (2001): 383–99.

⁵ Svetlin Stratiev, "The Margin of the Printable: Seaside Postcards and Censorship," in *Modernism on Sea: Art and Culture at the British Seaside*, eds. Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 191–200.

The production of postcards involved a number of separate functions, often performed by different people in different places: the person who produced the image, often for a studio, which might then both issue the cards and grant licences to the images to other firms; the printer, which before the war was often a German firm, given the country's superiority in photomechanical processes; and the retailer of the cards.⁶ In Scotland there was a boom in small firms engaged in the trade, though two major manufacturers have attracted the lion's share of attention: George Stewart and Co. of Edinburgh and, most famously, Valentine and Sons, which was one of the leading companies in the United Kingdom for many decades. But for a desire to maintain the famous alliteration, postcard manufacture may well have lent Dundee a fourth industry to add to 'jam, jute and journalism'.

How did students approach the over 50 cards of Scottish scenes and other subjects that they examined in fall 2019? They began with attention to the composition of the images on the front, and to the diversity of postcard design, interrogating how they reflected technologies and commercial strategies. Many featured the tropes of 'biscuit-tin' Scotland: tartan, heather, Highland cows, castles and sublime mountain scenery. Burns and Scott lent their inspiration to more than a few postcards, too: images of the Burns Cottage, for instance, and the Library at Abbotsford abound. But there was other subject-matter that bespoke the diversity of the postcard's uses: one advertised the Glasgow Exhibition of 1908, another claimed to have been made of the oak of a tree planted by the Wizard of the North himself, while other postcards advertised

⁶ For a discussion of these complex stages of production in an imperial context, see Stephen Hughes and Emily Stevenson, "South India Addresses the World: Postcard Circulation and Empire," *Trans Asia Photography Review* 9, no. 2 (2019). <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0009.208?view=text;rgn=main> (accessed 6 December 2019).

Gleneagles and sometimes less grand hostelries, promoted Gretna Green using a marriage certificate, and reproduced a menu of Scottish fare. Even Scotland's industrial triumphs figures on postcards: the Forth Bridge, of course, but also the Kilwinning Ironworks. Students then turned their attention to technologies of production: was the card an example of Tuck's oilette? Was the image one that had been licensed, and thus appeared on other cards, and indeed printed matter (here eBay proved its worth!)? What was the meaning of the postcard border, of the juxtaposition of images, of the presence or absence of people and animals?

No less important, students underscored, was the back matter: was the printer identified, or the artist or photographer? Where was it made? What does that tell us about such themes as technology transfer, or the co-existence of various card styles in an increasingly diverse marketplace? What was the meaning behind those cards that proclaimed themselves to be 'Of British Manufacture'—could that telegraph the entwining of patriotic messaging and the movement of printing to Britain after 1914? How often did the postcard have a 'didactic' element that explained the subject-matter on the front, and did it also feature examples of how it was to be used: for inland correspondence only, for instance? Was it part of a series (often much valued by collectors), and, if so, what was the unifying theme, if any could be detected? When it came to the presence of manuscript, did it conform to instructions as to where to write, or were there ways that writers transgressed those prescriptions, and why? What form did their communications take, given the limited space afforded to them, and the public nature of the card? How did they engage textually with the image on the postcard—and how did the card mediate their correspondence and their relationship to Scottish space? Did they buttress or undermine Scottish representational tropes? Several, we discovered, had been posted from the United States, and the Netherlands. One was likely exchanged

personally, or perhaps never sent, as it bore a message but no address or postage stamp. Some bore the marks of age, while others were pristine in condition. All somehow survived for many decades, in collections or amongst personal effects, to serve as rich sources for the study of travel and the repertoire of Scottish representations.⁷

The students, each choosing their own physical cards for independent analysis, then collaborated in developing a public exhibit, using the Omeka platform, to showcase their research, using digitised versions of their cards, created through the library's new Digitization Facility, funded by the Scottish Studies Foundation. They learned technical skills navigating the platform, as well as communication strategies as they reflected on their audience, and how to develop consistent formats across their analysis. By the end of the semester, they had also learned more about the postcard, drawing connections to Instagram and other social media platforms that convey images and short messages simultaneously, and enable speedy exchanges between people at points around the world. And we had whetted appetites for the critical exploration of the caricatural kilted Highlanders and other figures in comic postcards, which did not feature in this exhibit, and demand one of their own. The postcard, to the historian, is of immeasurable value as a window onto technology, social practices, cultural conventions, and travel codes. In its heterogeneous forms, the postcard serves as testament to a broad range of uses, and wide range of users, and can be used to decode how the postcard was used not just to convey greetings, but also to circulate ideas about Scotland itself.

⁷ While there has been a substantial and rich scholarship generated on this topic, we still owe a debt to the landmark study by John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, *Imagining Scotland: Tradition, Representation and Promotion in Scottish Tourism Since 1750*. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).