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*The Edwardian Picture Postcard as a Communications Revolution: A Literacy Studies Perspective* by Julia Gillen; pp. 158. Routledge, 2023. \$241.27 cloth.

For most people today, postcards are typically seen as frivolous and somewhat mundane material objects, confined largely to the domain of vacation souvenirs. So, it might seem startling to hear them declared as a “revolutionary communications technology” (5), but as Julia Gillen so expertly argues in her book *The Edwardian Picture Postcard as a Communications Revolution*, that is exactly what they were in Edwardian Britain (1901–10). Postcards brought about a sudden and radical change in the way that people interacted with one another. Their low cost, portability, variety, visual appeal, and potential for creativity, coupled with an efficient postal service (post could be delivered up to eight times a day in major cities!), meant that by 1903, five hundred million postcards were being sent in Britain each year. In Gillen’s view, until the dawn of the digital age in the 1990s, there was “no comparable means of exchanging rapid, cheap, accessible written messages with images” (2).

Gillen’s book draws upon more than a decade of detailed study into these intriguing artifacts, tapping into their unique history from a literacy studies perspective, yet extending this method by drawing upon tools from the sociolinguistics of writing, corpus linguistics, and social history. Gillen convincingly points out that an overarching posthumanist or socio-material approach is needed to appreciate postcards truly because they have an agency that “go[es] beyond human intentionality” (14) and entwines a wide range of people, materials, and technologies. While many scholars—and indeed collectors—are attracted to the colourful images of postcards (and in this regard, I must point out the excellent *The Picture Postcard*, by Ann Wilson), it is the other side to which Gillen is drawn. She seeks to explore the writing of the postcard “as a social practice” (6), shining a spotlight on the everyday literacy of its users and navigating the challenges of historical records to uncover the lives of those who typically pass under the radar.

Commented [SMD1]: Okay to agree with "agency"?

Commented [LO2R1]: Yes, absolutely

This is done beautifully in chapter 6, which crafts the stories of three women from three different walks of life: Annie Parrish, Janet Carmichael, and Ruby Ingrey. Through their postcard collections, we gain a deep insight into their social networks, personal relationships, hobbies, and interests in ways that very few other surviving examples of ordinary writing can offer. Gillen's diligent research also enables a reconstruction of the postcards' movements around Britain, clearly visualized in map form. However, she equally reminds us that we are mere eavesdroppers into private conversations from long ago, as exemplified by the compelling correspondence between Ingrey and Arthur Waddelow, which cannot be fully untangled. For researchers unfamiliar with using census records, they may be pleasantly surprised at what benefits they can offer and even inspired to explore them. Gillen helpfully includes a step-by-step guide to their use in chapter 3, also pointing out potential difficulties (e.g., illegible handwriting, incorrect spellings) and how they can be overcome.

In its focus on the materiality and multimodality of postcards, chapter 4 is another standout. Here, we get into the nitty-gritty of the dataset as Gillen explores patterns of use in terms of writing implements, orientation, writing systems, non-standard fonts, unique codes, and languages, as well as texts and marks by both publishers and the Post Office. She puts forward the important argument that linguistic communication always employs multiple semiotic resources to make meaning and that, therefore, postcards should be viewed as technologies that interact with people in specific socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts. Drawing on the work of Diane Mavers, she later introduces the term "semiotic resourcefulness" to describe how writers select from a broad spectrum of available resources according to their communicative purpose. This is something that she takes further in the concluding chapter, referencing Caroline Tagg and Agnieszka Lyons's recent work on "mobile resourcefulness" in WhatsApp messages and positing the extension of this term to incorporate historical meaning-making practices.

**Commented [SMD3]:** Okay? You have pluralized most of the other nouns in this list.

**Commented [LO4R3]:** Yes, that's fine

**Commented [LO5]:** I would be inclined to keep this capitalised because it is the name of the institution itself. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/post-office>

Chapter 5 begins with a comprehensive mediated discourse analysis, which reveals the types of occasions on which postcards were sent, before introducing corpus linguistics and the many benefits of its tools for the exploration of writing. As she does with census records, Gillen succinctly outlines how to use corpus linguistics tools for those unfamiliar with the methodology. Then, by identifying frequently occurring words and word patterns in her dataset, she is able to tease out conventions carried over from letter-writing but also gain a sense of what was important for Edwardians when they wrote postcards. Fascinating interpretations of words such as *dear, love, hope, thanks, you, and I* are offered, foregrounding the fact that most postcards involved “making plans and giving accounts” (126) and served as “links in a chain of communication that included letters” (133). These findings make clear that the language of postcards is “profoundly dynamic, dialogic and performative” (13) and that, just like social media, postcard writing is inextricably associated with personal relationships and the performance of identity.

Indeed, the point on the Edwardian postcard being “the social media platform of its day” (5) lies at the very heart of Gillen’s book and is worth underscoring. Then as now, people expressed concerns about privacy, downfalls in writing standards, inequalities, mental health challenges, and pressure on young people. Equally then as now, people praised the technology for its functionality and potential for creativity, its users’ ability to interact quickly with others and participate in a broader community of practice, and it was widely embraced by millions, becoming a true “social phenomenon” (1). Not only do these important arguments contribute immensely to the growing body of transhistorical research in media and communication studies (cf. Tagg and Evans), but they also have broader implications for the field of multimodality, which too often plays up the novelty of contemporary communicative practices without accounting for their broader historical trajectory. This An historical approach to multimodality is something for which I have long advocated (along with Adami

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Commented [SMD6]: Okay? I read "equally" to refer to the similarity between then and now.

Commented [LO7R6]: Yes, that's fine

Commented [SMD8]: Not completely clear what "this" refers to. Please add a noun to clarify.

Commented [LO9R8]: Resolved

and Holmberg), yet limited work continues to be carried out from this perspective. *The Edwardian Picture Postcard as a Communications Revolution* makes clear why we need such a refreshing approach, and I hope that it fosters further work in this area.

While the book is clearly aimed at a scholarly audience that straddles the disciplines of literacy studies, social history, sociolinguistics, and media and communication studies, it has widespread appeal for postcard collectors, as well as anybody with a general interest in the Edwardian era, photography, and art. It is inclusive of both experts and novices, providing an extensive overview of key moments in the timeline of the postcard (ch. 2)—from regulations and formats to key publishers and core users—as well as clear guidance on how to use a range of methodologies and tools (ch. 3). As the Edwardian era is too often overshadowed by the long reign of Queen Victoria that came before it, it is also wonderful to see part of chapter 1 dedicated to what made the years 1901–10 so worthy of investigation (i.e., their culture of speed, rapid urbanization, education reform, social upheavals, and class struggles).

Another major selling point of *The Edwardian Picture Postcard as a Communications Revolution*, which cannot be understated, is the rich dataset of three thousand postcards that it has yielded—all of which are offered open access via Lancaster Digital Collections. A real treasure trove of data is, therefore, available for researchers to explore and put Gillen's methods into practice, whatever their particular interest or motivation. Gillen and her research team are to be commended for their painstaking efforts in bringing this collection to light through a long process of data collection (largely bought at postcard fairs), photography, transcription, categorization, census searching, and textual/multimodal analyses.

In her conclusion, Gillen describes postcards as “the best guide to the spirit of the Edwardian era” (136)—another bold claim, yet one that is hard to dispute. This is made all the more significant by the fact that the Great War, which broke out in 1914, not only brought

a swift end to the Golden Age of postcards due to shortages of paper and letter carriers, rising delivery costs, and transportation challenges, but it also intruded into and disrupted the lives of all writers. The popularity of the medium never recovered. Thus, through her novel and innovative approach, Gillen offers a new way of looking at these seemingly mundane objects, providing a rare window into the everyday lives of Edwardians and deftly demonstrating their importance as a complex and interconnected literacy practice.

To end on a personal note, Gillen's work motivated me as a young undergraduate back in 2013 to pursue a PhD specializing in the Edwardian book inscription. Where I am today is in no small part thanks to her inspirational research. I can only hope that her latest book on the topic inspires the next generation of academics, as it did me ten years ago.

Lauren Alex O'Hagan

[The Open University](#)

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