



The comic postcards down here are positively disgusting!
I must send you one!!



THE PLEA



Greetings from PLEA.
Wish you were here!

My Dear Reader
Anytown SK

THIS SIDE FOR ADDRESS

THIS SIDE FOR CORRESPONDENCE



THE PLEA

The story of the postcard is the story of change: change in communication technology and change in social norms. Greetings from PLEA tells this story, from the postcard's birth and rapid spread in the 1800s, to how postcards became a means—especially in Britain—for sharing risqué jokes and pictures in the 1900s, to how the law surrounding postcards adapted to changing times. Greetings from PLEA helps Saskatchewan Media Studies 20 teachers fulfil curriculum indicator MS 20.1, "Investigate the history of mass media and its role in society."



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Postcards! ...and the Law?

Most everyone posts on social media. From Instagram to Snapchat to TikTok, it's common to tell people where we are and how we're doing.

It wasn't always quite this way. Before social media, instant updates weren't a thing. That's not to say we didn't post brief status updates. We just did it in a different way, by posting updates on cards and sending them through the mail. This was the era of the postcard.

Postcards are single pieces of thick paper, usually with a picture on the front and space for writing a message and address on the back.

The first recorded postcard dates back to 1840 England. Theodore Hook, a writer and notorious practical joker, got his hands on a card with a painting that made fun of postal workers. He stuck a stamp on it, wrote his address on the back, and mailed it to himself. Nobody knows for sure, but it's believed he sent the card to troll postal workers.

Hook is lucky the card showed up. This isn't because Victorian-era postal workers couldn't take a joke. Rather, in the 1800s most postal systems were highly regulated operations, run by the government. Sending cards in the mail without an envelope was against British mail regulations, and in fact contrary to the postal rules in every western country.

The postcard got its big regulatory break in 1860. That year, the American Congress passed a law that allowed people to mail small cards without an envelope. Americans didn't much see the point, and the idea flamed out.

But the idea wasn't dead. Rather, it smouldered for nine years, primarily in academic discussions. This all changed

Right: Theodore Hook's Penny Penates postcard. Penny refers to Britain's penny-black stamp, the world's first self-adhesive stamp. Penates refers to Roman gods that protect pantries at home. ♪



in January 1869. The idea caught fire, thanks to economist Emanuel Herrmann. Herrmann took the idea of postcards to the people, by publishing a proposal for them in a leading Austrian newspaper.

Herrmann asked that if you have a brief message to send, why go to the trouble of writing a letter on paper, placing it in an envelope, addressing and sealing the envelope, and then sticking a stamp on it? Wouldn't it be more efficient if you could do all this with a single card?

Postcards, Herrmann said, could be printed with the postage prepaid. There would be space for an address on the front and a message on the back. Reflecting the brief nature of the message, the card could be mailed to anyone in the Austro-Hungarian empire at a discounted rate.

Debate burned across the Austro-Hungarian empire, with a frequent topic being the issue of privacy. Would people want their correspondence seen publicly?

To settle the question, the Austro-Hungarian Empire post office launched a trial-run. They printed pre-stamped cards and sold them for half the going rate of mailing a letter. The result? Almost three million postcards were sent in the first three months alone.

One thing that made postcards so appealing was how quickly messages could be sent. At the time, large centres had mail pick-up and delivery several times a day. Messages zipped back and forth on postcards, making them the text message of the day.

The idea spread rapidly. From the United Kingdom (1870) to Canada (1871) to Japan (1873) and beyond, post offices almost everywhere started printing and selling postcards.

The United States post office introduced their own postcards in 1873. People could still buy privately-printed postcards, stamp them, and send them under America's old 1860 law, though few people did. The new post-office-issued cards proved more popular because they could be purchased and mailed for 1¢, half the price of the postage alone on a private card.



At first, post cards generally could only be mailed within countries. This changed in 1874. Countries banded together to form the Universal Postal Union (UPU). The UPU is an international regulatory body, still in place today, that aligns global postal rules. At their first meeting, the UPU agreed to allow postcards to be sent across borders.

With the postcard exploding in popularity, post offices across Europe started loosening regulations. By the 1880s, most post offices followed the American model and accepted postcards printed by private companies. Where the Europeans differed from Americans is they allowed privately-printed postcards to be mailed at half the rate of regular mail, the same price as post-office issued cards.

Privately-printed postcards became an innovative business. While the address side remained blank, exclusively for the mailing address, private printers began adorning the message side with artwork, sometimes in colour. With postcards now

Above:
Austro-
Hungarian
postcard from
1870. p



Above: *Leather Canada souvenir postcard, postmarked 1907. \$*

Right: *British wartime postcard featuring Field Marshal Horatio Herbert Kitchener. The British Secretary of State for War, he created the massive volunteer "Kitchener's Army." Kitchener died in 1916 when his ship struck a German mine. ‡*

featuring illustrations ranging from landmarks to portraits of public figures, the text message of the day was starting to look something like Instagram or Snapchat.

Meanwhile, postcards in the UK and North America languished under tighter regulations, leading to political movements advocating for postcard deregulation. In response, in 1894 the UK and Canada liberalized the rules governing privately-printed postcards. America pivoted in 1898, changing their 1860 law so privately-printed postcards could be mailed at the same discounted price as postcards sold by the post office.

Perhaps the most consequential regulatory change came when the UK permitted "divided back" postcards in 1902. No longer were postcards required to have the message on one side of the card, the address and stamp on the other. Now, the message, address, and stamp could all be on the back of the card. The front of the postcard became a blank canvas for art, turning postcards into art-piece collectibles.

Divided-back postcards got the green light in Canada in 1903, France in 1904, and Germany in 1905. The United States joined in 1907, in compliance with a global regulatory change agreed to by the UPU.

With print and photography technology quickly advancing, several onerous regulations gone, and the postcard now being a blank canvas on one side, picture postcards became a craze. You might say they were "trending." From advertisements to snapshots of current events to travel souvenirs, postcards were being sent around the world in the billions. The period from 1900 to 1913 became known as the Golden Age of Postcards.

To keep goosing sales, printers got more creative. They introduced embroidered postcards, glitter-coated postcards, postcards made out of leather, and postcards imprinted on tin. Even 78 rpm records were embedded into postcards.

The new postcards were fun, and people loved collecting them. But the creativity was frustrating post offices. Novel postcards often were difficult to handle, tin ones could cut postal workers, and glittery ones left sparkles on everything and everyone they touched. After years of deregulation, some rules had to be tightened. By 1907, most post offices required the zaniest novelty cards to be mailed in an envelope.



World War I ended The Golden Age of Postcards. With people encouraged to consume less, postcards became less a collectable craze and more a utilitarian form of communication. Nevertheless, painted pin-up girls, war propaganda, and national symbols became popular postcards of the era.

Wartime censors loved the postcard, because their open nature made it quick and easy to review people's correspondence.

When the war concluded, the postcard craze never picked up where it left off. Technology had moved forward, leaving the postcard behind. Telephones became the preferred method for speedy personal communication, and radio broadcasts and motion pictures drew people's attention away from postcard collecting.

The Golden Age may have ended, but the postcard carried on. Throughout the twentieth century, postcards remained popular for advertising, appointment reminders, party invitations, personal messages, and especially to send a souvenir message to friends when on vacation.

Unfortunately for the postcard, it couldn't dominate forever. Around the turn of this century, postcards fizzled out. Just as Emmanuel Herrmann saw the efficiency of the postcard in 1869, we realize today that email, instant messaging, and social media are more efficient than traditional mail.

Nevertheless, the postcard isn't dead yet. You can still find postcards, mostly at tourist destinations, to mail to your friends and family back home.

In fact, search #postcard on social media, and you'll find a surprising amount of postcard talk, along with artists who create custom and one-off postcards. For that matter, check out Postcrossing.com. These folks coordinate postcard events and can help you send and receive postcards from around the world.

Postcards will almost certainly never be the communication staple they once were. Yet, there is a tendency for retro things to come back. Who knows? Postcards could someday trend again.



Question 1.

On June 1st 1871, the Post Office Department of the Government of Canada, the forerunner to Canada Post, issued Department Order No. 7. This order formally introduced postcards into the Canadian postal system. Included in the order was the stipulation that:

"There must be no words, marks or designs, written, printed, or otherwise placed on the cards of an obscene, indecent, immoral, libellous, or grossly offensive character."

a) Why would the post office be concerned about transporting and delivering such messages?

b) Who should be held responsible when similar messages are spread through social media today? The sender? The social media company? Both?

Question 2.

By 1906, Canada's Post Office Department was growing concerned with picture postcards. They declared that "indecent" and "grossly vulgar and suggestive" picture postcards could not be sent through the mail. Postal inspectors were told to inform "criminal authorities" if they could identify the sender.

a) How do we decide as a society what constitutes "indecent" or "grossly vulgar and suggestive"?

b) How do these values change over time?

Question 3.

The story of the postcard is in many ways a story about rules and regulations.

a) What can we learn from the postcard about governments creating too many regulations?

b) What can we learn from postcards about governments not creating enough regulations?





Above: Donald McGill at work, 1951. β

Donald McGill: The King of Saucy Postcard Humour

In the development of the postcard, most every country put their own stamp on it. Germany's reputation for cutting-edge manufacturing saw them become a leader in sophisticated postcard-printing techniques. France, known for its embrace of the fine arts, led the way in risqué but tasteful pin-up postcards.

Meanwhile in Britain, postcards took a funnier route. The British have a long history of ribald and smutty humour, from Shakespeare's dirty jokes to Hogarth's raucous satirical art. This history played out on British postcards, too. Postcards filled with colourful illustrations, lewd jokes, and wordplay became something of a national tradition, known as saucy seaside postcards.

Saucy seaside postcards appeared in the first years of the twentieth century and flourished up until the 1970s. These humorous and sometimes scandalous postcards could be found at shops in most every British seaside town, along with chain stores like Woolworths. Untold millions of cards were sold, created by artists often under pen names such as Comicus, Xerxes, Gomez, and S.H.

Britain's most famous postcard artist, however, signed his real name: Donald McGill.

Donald McGill's lineage goes back to a prominent Canadian: he was the grandson of Peter McCutcheon, Montreal's second mayor. McGill's father John moved to England in 1859 and married Rosina Bisgood that summer. She gave birth to Donald in 1875 and raised him largely on her own, following John's death in 1883.

McGill attended art school in 1891-1892, but dropped out because he liked drawing caricatures and the course didn't allow for it. He resigned himself to a career of ship design, joining a naval architecture firm the following year and apprenticing as a draughtsman.

Pretty much by chance, his career path returned to art in 1904, thanks to a postcard he mailed to a sick nephew.

On the back of the postcard, McGill doodled a skater who had fallen through ice. He captioned it "Hope you'll be out soon." McGill's brother and sister, who had connections to The Pictorial Postcard Company, loved the card. They hooked him up with the company's owner, who offered McGill six shillings for the copyright to every card he created.

McGill thought drawing postcards would be a fun pastime. He accepted the offer with no idea that within four years, it would become his full-time job. McGill went on to create 12,000 cards.

In person, McGill was a modest man with a soft and cultured voice. You wouldn't know it from his postcards. His art laughed at everything from married life to town drunks. Some jokes were original, some were stolen from music hall shows, some were lifted from chats at the pub. He would first decide upon the joke and then set to work creating a colourful drawing, ranging from plump and curvaceous women to red-nosed drunks to hunched-over seniors.

His wide appeal was due, in part, to avoiding partisan politics and sectarian humour. One exception was the suffragette movement. He supported women's voting rights, yet his cards teased both sides of the issue. He also usually avoided jokes based on nationality and race, with

the exception of the Scottish. McGill insisted as a Scot, he and his brethren were always ready to laugh at themselves.

McGill knew his work was a bit controversial. While he enjoyed painting cards in the company of his children, he sometimes kept his occupation a bit dark with others, to protect his family's image.

As years progressed, McGill's cards became more popular. A big boost for McGill and postcards as a whole came when Britain passed the Holidays with Pay Act 1938. British seaside tourism boomed, because most everyone was now entitled to a paid week-off every year.

With Brits now flocking to seaside towns for getaways, a "What happens at the seaside stays at the seaside" mentality flourished. Particularly after World War II, an era of relative decadence set in. Seaside pubs, dance halls, cinemas, and live entertainment flourished. In lockstep, postcards became even more ribald. Countless publishers joined in creating "saucy" postcards.

The ribaldry of these postcards did not go unnoticed. Local censorship committees popped up, and police raided shops for selling "obscene" postcards. McGill was even charged under Britain's Obscene Publications Act 1857. We'll talk more about this on the next page.

Towards the end of his life, McGill's eyesight started to fail and his output slowed to only a few cards a week. He began to look back upon his art with a bit of regret. He told a television interviewer "I'm not proud of myself. I always wanted to do something better. I'm really a serious minded man underneath. I would have liked to have done sporting caricatures like Tom Webster or even oil paintings, if I'd had my way."

Donald McGill passed away in 1963 at the age of 87, with very little money to show for his life's work. He never signed royalty agreements for his art. Instead, McGill sold the copyright for each card he created to his publisher for a set fee. His estate was worth only £735, even though his postcards sold over 200 million copies.

Despite his self-doubt and lack of riches, McGill holds his own in the history of British art and British humour. His art built on the long English tradition of ribaldry and smut, a small museum on the Isle of Wight is dedicated to his life's work, and because of his status as Britain's premier saucy postcard creator, his original artwork can now fetch hundreds and sometimes even thousands of pounds at auction.

And it all began with a good-spirited get-well card to his nephew.

"The comic postcards down here are positively disgusting! I must send you one!!"



Above: Donald McGill postcard, making fun of his own art. †

Question 1.

Donald McGill sold the copyright to each card he created for a flat fee. In other words, he gave up his rights to control his own art, with no guarantees he would share in any profits his art may generate in the future.

- What factors may have shaped McGill's decision?
- In retrospect, was this a wise decision?

Address This

Question 2.

When you post content to social media, what rights do you give up? Who holds the copyright to your work?

Stamping Out Smut

It may be hard to comprehend today, but saucy seaside postcards didn't just catch the attention of good-humoured holiday-makers in the first half of the twentieth century. Saucy seaside postcards caught the attention of the law.

Two years after Donald McGill began creating postcards, he received his first complaint. In 1906, a court in the north of England ordered a

large quantity of a postcard titled "Our Boarding House" to be destroyed. It depicted a man waiting for a bath with a maid peering through a keyhole, saying "'E wont be long now Sir, I can see 'im adryin' of 'imself."

The case was a harbinger of things to come. Postcard censorship and corresponding trials picked up pace as saucy seaside postcards grew in popularity, gaining steam in the years following World War II.

Initially, censorship cases tended to be prompted by local complaints. Somebody would see a postcard in a shop, take offence to it, and report it to the police. If the police believed the postcard may be in contravention of a local law or the UK's Obscene Publications Act, they would confiscate the cards and the shop owner would have to go to court to give reasons why the cards should not be destroyed.

One such case took place in Hastings, a seaside town in southeast England. An evangelist, Douglas James Wellman, went store-to-store buying cards he found offensive. He turned them over to the police, who in-turn charged six shopkeepers under the Hastings Improvement Act 1885. The law had a section meant to protect citizens from sellers of obscene publications.

In court, Wellman testified that the postcards "filled me with indignation. I noticed one which was apparently meant to be funny. It was not; it was filthy." Under cross-examination, the defence painted Wellman as someone who didn't smoke or go to the theatre, who wouldn't drink and objected to others being drunk, and who thought that jive dancing was immoral. The defence said the law was never meant to appease people like him, and he deliberately set out to get himself offended.

The court disagreed. They fined four of the six shopkeepers for being in contravention of the local act.

As more cases against shopkeepers mounted, the situation became more disorderly. Obscenities are difficult to define in a social context, let alone in law. The 1857 Act did not define obscenity, but instead left it to common law precedent. Courts relied on an 1859 case, R. v Hecklin, which ruled a publication to be obscene in law if



Above: Plaque in Ryde, Isle of Wight, marking a 1953 police raid on a postcard seller's seaside shop. \$

Right: The first Donald McGill postcard to be banned by a local authority in England. †



it had a "tendency... to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall."

In practice, shopkeepers had no idea who would take offence to what.

To try to bring some order to the situation, local Chambers of Trade or Commerce began setting up Local Censorship Committees. These committees would preview cards and either approve or reject them for sale. The committees had no legal standing. Rather, they gave shopkeepers informal community acceptance to sell certain postcards. We think of this today as "social license." Because social license has no statutory standing in law, shopkeepers were still at risk of prosecution.

Further complicating matters was that not every community had a committee, nor were these committees centrally coordinated. As a result, postcards deemed acceptable in one town were sometimes banned the next town over. Add to that, in towns without a committee pretty much any postcard could be for sale.

In the hopes of creating standards that would put shopkeepers at ease, postcard publishers lobbied the Association of Health and Pleasure Resorts, an organization representing over 100 British resort towns, to create a national system of postcard review. Those efforts failed.

Prosecutions only grew, perhaps spurred on by the election of a Conservative government in 1951. An estimated 11,662 postcards were

"Oh! Professor, I'm afraid I've ate it. I thought it was a pickled gherkin!"



"And what is baby's Christian name?"
"Christian name! I've not had time to think of that. I've been six months trying to find a Surname for him!"



Far Left: Postcard from McGill's 1954 trial. Responding to the obscenity charge, he submitted to the court that "There is nothing to indicate here what the woman had eaten. It might have been a thumb or a big toe. The prosecution have no right to put the worst construction on everything without evidence." †

Left: Postcard from McGill's 1954 trial. Responding to the obscenity charge, he submitted to the court that "To say that there is any obscenity in suggesting—and suggesting only—that the girl had an illegitimate child is just ridiculous. That joke first appeared in the "Pink Un" about 60 years ago." †

ordered destroyed by local magistrates that year, increasing to 16,029 in 1952 and 32,603 in 1953. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Theobald Mathew, began keeping records of what cards were prosecuted locally, with an eye to creating national guidelines.

The situation came to a head in 1953. Police raided 16 shops in Cleethorpes, a town in northeast England. When they discovered several cards for sale that had been taken in previous raids, Sir Mathew decided it was time to take prosecution to the next level: he charged the publishers under the Obscene Publications Act.

The high-profile trial unfolded in Lincoln in July 1954. In total, eight publishers were charged, and four publishers along with Donald McGill

Right: 1955
letter from Donald
McGill's postcard
publisher D.
Constance, Ltd.
to their solicitors,
expressing
alarm that police
continue to pursue
the company
for publishing
obscene postcards.
From the
Donald McGill
Collection, British
Cartoon Archive,
University of
Kent.

Opposite:
McGill postcard
reviewed by the
Blackpool Post
Card Censorship
Board. The board
consisted of nine
people: four trade
representatives,
four lay members
from the
community,
and chairman
F. Holland,
a local bank
manager. §

Local View Publishers.

Sole Publishers of the Donald McGill Comic Postcards

Telephone: TULSE HILL 7352

Telegrams: Tulse Hill 7352 London (2 Words)

D. CONSTANCE, LTD.

Directors: Donald McGill. E. J. F. Maidment

22, Christchurch Road, Streatham Hill, London, S.W. 2

Ref. EJM/GER.

22nd. June 1955.

Messrs. H.H. Wells & Sons,
Vestry House,
Newgate Street,
London. E.C.

Dear Sirs,

We have been advised by our Northern representative that one of our customers has received a visit from the police in Morecambe, who have taken 3500 of our cards comprising twelve numbers - details of these are being sent to us.

The disturbing factor however, is that the police stated that they were not after Farebrother (our customer) but our firm and did we supply any other shop in the town. You will recall that this was the same statement given to the St. Ives customer. As the Chief Constables were circulated with the result of the Lincoln case, it does appear to be sheer victimisation as we were the miscreants - after Mr. D's handling of the case.

In the event of any action we suggest that the Counsel who specialises in "obscene publications" is briefed. We cannot allow the police to act on their own in this case and all Cornwall (last year) without any public complaint.

To relieve any thought in respect of Lincoln - those numbers have not been sold in the U.K.

Upon hearing which cards are involved we will submit details with copies to you.

Yours faithfully,
p.p. D. Constance Ltd.

6/55
himself ultimately were tried in court.

The defence submitted examples from Shakespeare and Chaucer to demonstrate England's long-standing tradition of smutty humour. McGill insisted that with many cards, he didn't intend for them to be smutty. He wrote in a court brief:

I would desire to point out that in quite a number of cards in question I had no intention of 'double meaning' and, in fact, such was in some cases later pointed out to me, and I would also state that in my private life I have what might be called a Victorian outlook and do view with considerable criticism the modern trend of 'sexual exposure'.

The court acquitted three of the four publishers. McGill and his publisher D. Constance, Ltd. weren't so lucky. Their lawyer advised them to plead guilty with respect to four cards, and agree to not republish another 17. D. Constance, Ltd. was fined £50 plus £25 in costs, and McGill was fined £10.

The case brought public attention not just to the issue of postcard censorship, but helped open public discussion about censorship in general and whether or not the century-old Obscene Publications Act was still fit-for-purpose.

The government, still Conservative, responded to the changing times. Parliamentary hearings were held, and in 1959 a new Obscene Publications Act was passed. The new act clarified the definition of obscenity, enshrined the right to bring forth expert testimony to speak to the artistic value of

a work, specifically allowed for an artist's intentions to be factored in when determining an obscenity, and added a "public good" defence to justify an obscene work if it had scientific, literary, or artistic merit.

The law's first major test came the following year. Sir Mathew prosecuted Penguin Books for publishing D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover, a book with sexual content, obscene language, and a class-defying affair. After only three hours of deliberation, the jury unanimously found Penguin not guilty. The acquittal is widely seen as a cultural turning point, paving the road in Britain for the more permissive 1960s.

With society and the law evolving, postcards in the 1960s evolved too. The Department of Public Prosecutions stopped tracking postcards in 1962, successful prosecutions of postcards dried up, and Local Censorship Committees began to wind down.

The changing times might be best-understood in light of the end of the Blackpool Censorship Committee. They disbanded in 1968, not long after a shop in Wales advertised for sale "Postcards Banned by the Blackpool Censorship Committee."



Question 1.

When censorship laws are stricter, art often needs to be more clever to pass the censors. Saucy seaside postcards reflect this tendency. When censorship was eased in the 1960s, postcards became more graphic and vulgar, with the jokes far more obvious.

- In what ways do constraints make us more clever?
- Can society have less censorship and more clever art? If so, how do we encourage that environment?

Question 2.

Considering postcard censorship, historian Nick Hiley says "The random nature of it made it a much more powerful censorship campaign... it made retailers more reluctant to stock anything suggestive because they just couldn't tell what would be found offensive."

- Why are clear rules important?
- Is it always possible for rules to be clear, especially when dealing with something as subjective as art?

Address This

Question 3.

History doesn't repeat. But it does echo. Consider everything you've learned in this issue of The PLEA. What lessons from the story of postcards can we apply to modern media and how we regulate it?

Special thanks to the British Cartoon Archive at the University of Kent. They house the Director of Public Prosecutions' obscene postcard index, the research papers of McGill biographer Elfreda Buckland, and the Donald McGill Collection of postcards.

Post Card

Here are just a few resources that helped inform this issue of *The PLEA*. Many are available through your local library!

Learn More, Saskatchewan!

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To learn more about Donald McGill or buy a set of his banned postcards check out the Donald McGill Museum.

saucyseasidepostcards.com

October 1 is
World Postcard Day!
Consider sending a
postcard to a friend.
Find out more at
worldpostcardday.com

WORLD
POSTCARD
DAY 1/OCT

"The corner of the human heart that [comic postcards] speak for might easily manifest itself in worse forms, and I for one should be sorry to see them vanish."

- George Orwell,
"The Art of Donald McGill"

