

## Messages in an Edwardian fonds of postcards: Rich in information and narrative

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As I established at my poster presentation last year at the Digital Humanities Conference held at DePaul University—see abstract below—studying a *fonds* of a family’s Edwardian era postcards presents significant research possibilities. Having established the network connections between and among the senders and receivers, I am now able to study the messages on postcards.

A widespread contention is that postcard messages are “automatic and ritualistic...these inscriptions are almost void of information but they are still messages with a strong expressive value.” (Rogan, B. 2005. *An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication, Cultural Analysis*, 4, 1-27)

The first part of Rogan’s claim is an over-generalization: my research shows that the message varies depending on: what kind of postcard is sent (i.e. photographic, “greeting” card, holiday card), why it is sent (i.e., as tourist communication, as friendship communication, etc.), the nature of the relationship of sender to receiver (as family, friend, student/teacher), and the gender of sender and receiver.

Using readily available software, I have undertaken a content analysis of the postcard messages sent in each social network group, and will show how rich the information is and how some of the information can even be seen as narrative in nature.

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### A fonds of Edwardian Postcards as a Site to Explore Social Networks

“Few material items are more aptly characterized as an ‘entangled object’ than the picture postcard of the Edwardian Era [roughly 1901 – 1914].” (Rogan, 2005) Rogan and others have noted how these early postcards served a multiplicity of uses including as gifts, aesthetic collectibles, consumer goods, souvenirs, and as a medium of communication. “What characterized the craze for the picture postcard a century ago and guaranteed its enormous spread and popularity was precisely these enmeshed functions, concrete as well as symbolic, and the many layers of meaning invested in the postcard.” (Rogan, 2005) Normally, researchers intent on unpacking different layers base their findings on a specific *collection* of postcards. (A *collection* being “archival documents that have been artificially accumulated through conscious collection practices”). See, for example, Naomi Schor’s analysis (1994) of early twentieth-century topographical postcards of Paris.

But when a researcher has a rare opportunity to study an extant *fonds* of postcards from this period—in my case the Auckland family’s— she has the potential to decode additional layers of meaning not available in a collection. (A *fonds* is a set of “archival documents that have been naturally accumulated...by an individual, [family], company, institution, etc. as a byproduct of business or day-to-day activities.” <http://archives.queensu.ca/about.html>)

Most of the postcards in the Auckland Family Postcard Fonds were sent to and/or sent by the Auckland girls, Nellie, Alice and Flossie, from 1905-1915. There are fewer cards sent to the girls' brothers Frank, Joe, Walter and Ralph, to the parents John and Catherine, and to the two grandmothers who lived at the family farm in Talbotville (a small farming town in southwestern Ontario). Cards were also exchanged with cousins in Ontario and Michigan. Thus, this fonds of 1327 postcards provides a window into social relations in a reasonably prosperous farming family in the first years of the twentieth century. As well, since all three of the sisters became teachers, and taught at schools close to their home, and in the summers attended teaching courses at universities in Ontario, the fonds also contains postcards from their peers and their students. The postcards were saved in shoe boxes, and given to me by the elderly son of one of the sisters when I expressed an interest in studying them.

One layer of meaning that analyzing a fonds of postcards, unlike a collection, makes possible is the underlying structure of the social/communication network. Using freely available relational database and graphing software, I have established a picture of the social networks between and among the family members, their friends and students. I also coded for subjects' names in the text messages and so was able to broaden the network to include those "mentioned" in the postcard texts. While much work has been done with the networks of letters (see [www.culturesofknowledge.org/](http://www.culturesofknowledge.org/)), I believe this is the first systematic correspondence network of postcards.

Cultures of Knowledge: Networking the Republic of Letters, 1550-1750. Retrieved 15 September 2013. [www.culturesofknowledge.org/](http://www.culturesofknowledge.org/)

Queen's University Archives. "Archival Terminology." Retrieved 15 September 2013 at <http://archives/queensu.ca/about.html>

Rogan, B. 2005. An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication. *Cultural Analysis* 4. 1-27.

Schor, N. 1994. Collecting Paris in *The Cultures of Collecting*. Eds. J. Elsner & R. Cardinal. London: Reaktion Books.