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## Delivering Justice in the Mail: 6 Postcards on the Dreyfus Affair

David Murrell

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## Delivering Justice in the Mail: 6 Postcards on the Dreyfus Affair

### Abstract

Essay on postcards related to the Dreyfus Affairs

### Keywords

Postcards, Dreyfus

### Disciplines

History | Library and Information Science

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

17  
Monday  
Aug 2015

## Delivering Justice in the Mail: 6 Postcards on the Dreyfus Affair

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— Beitler Collection Postcards, PC162 to PC167

[Editor's note: Today's post is by David Murrell, a rising junior at Penn studying History and Political Science. Fascinated by all things French, he has spent this summer interning at the Kislak Center and happily sifting through piles of Dreyfus Affair postcards]

At first glance, postcards don't appear to be particularly unique. Mass produced and intended for broad public consumption, they're certainly not as rare as, say,

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the handwritten almanac that was [recently featured](#) on Unique at Penn. But that's not to say that postcards shouldn't be examined just as carefully. Indeed, with their unique handwritten messages and variety of printed designs, postcards provide a fascinating glimpse into the world from which they were sent.

The Dreyfus Affair (which began with the French captain Alfred Dreyfus' false conviction for treason in 1894 for sending military secrets to the Germans) corresponded with a dramatic rise of the postcard in popular culture. First invented in the late 1860s, by the time of the Dreyfus Affair postcards were both an exciting and novel method of communication for the masses. The Dreyfus Affair only reinforced the postcard's popularity, as it led to the production of thousands of different political cards documenting the twists and turns of the Affair. By 1906, the year Dreyfus was finally exonerated by the French military, postcards were ubiquitous. In Great Britain alone, over 2 billion postcards were purchased that year — in other words, given Britain's population of 40 million, every British citizen purchased an average of 50 postcards *in just one year* [1].

The Dreyfus Affair may have actually reinforced the postcard's popularity: thousands of different political cards documenting the twists and turns of the Affair were printed in France and other countries. Indeed, one observer at the time of the Affair estimated that over a period of 18 months, more than six million Dreyfus Affair postcards were printed [2]. The Kislak Center holds a large collection of over 200 Dreyfus postcards in the [Lorraine Beitler Collection of the Dreyfus Affair](#).

But how many of these postcards were actually used—written on and mailed? We can group the collection's postcards into four main categories:

- cards that were never sent
- cards that were sent but have no written text
- cards that have with writing that is unrelated to the Dreyfus Affairs
- and cards that have writing that makes explicit reference to the Affair.

For this post, I'd like to focus on this final category. In the Beitler Collection there is a series of pro-Dreyfus postcards, sent to and from Brussels in 1900,

- August 2018
- December 2017
- November 2017
- July 2017
- October 2016
- July 2016
- June 2016
- May 2016
- March 2016
- December 2015
- November 2015
- October 2015
- September 2015
- August 2015
- June 2015
- March 2015
- February 2015
- January 2015
- October 2014
- September 2014
- July 2014
- June 2014
- May 2014
- April 2014
- February 2014
- January 2014
- December 2013
- November 2013

that provides a brief history of the Affair from the perspective of a Dreyfus sympathizer. While we normally think of the postcard as a unitary item that can stand alone on its own, these cards were printed in a series, as were a number of other sets of cards during the Affair. In addition, the owner and writer of this set spread his or her message across the multiple cards in the set. Each card is thus a piece of a larger puzzle, each one contributing to the overall message. What I present here is a fascinating—and certainly atypical—case where we can follow a Dreyfus supporter, acquiring a series of pro-Dreyfus postcards and then writing a pro-Dreyfus message on them, and mailing the group to someone with similar sympathies.

Even if we momentarily ignore the postcards' written text, it is clear from their printed drawings that they are the work of Dreyfus supporter. For example, in the first postcard, we see an image of the novelist Émile Zola, an ardent Dreyfus supporter, spraying figurative "justice" on a crowd of anti-Dreyfusards. The crowd's anti-Dreyfus beliefs are revealed by the men's hats, which have on them the names of France's most virulent anti-Semitic newspapers, including Édouard Drumont's famously vile "La Libre Parole."



— Beitler PC162

- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- June 2013
- May 2013
- April 2013
- March 2013
- February 2013
- January 2013
- December 2012
- October 2012
- September 2012
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Similarly, in the fourth postcard, the French press is depicted as an old woman, a kind of monster that barely resembles a human. The figure is attempting to keep the lid on a coffin labeled "Dreyfus Affair" in order to prevent Dreyfus, whose hands are shown holding two pieces of paper labeled "humanity" and "justice," from escaping his coffin. The powerful image inspires sympathy for Dreyfus, while also vilifying the media for its attempts to suppress the truth.



— Beitler PC166

Finally, the fifth card, captioned "Close the boxes, damn it!" depicts a French soldier scrambling to literally keep the lid on the various scandals that troubled the military during the Dreyfus Affair, ranging from General Picquart's wrongful forgery conviction, to Zola's libel trial, to Dreyfus' multiple sham trials. All of these events and their backstories were linked to Dreyfus and threatened the military's cover-up. It is interesting to note that despite this drawing's bitter and critical tone, there remains a slight glimmer of hope — indeed, there are so many boxes in the picture that it would seem impossible for them to all be covered up by one soldier. This postcard would in fact prove to be quite prescient — though it was only sent in 1900, by 1906 the army could no longer cover up Dreyfus' innocence, and he was finally exonerated.

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– Beitler PC165

The writer who used these particular cards also reveals strong support for Dreyfus, criticizing both the Army and French press for their repeated attempts to cover up Dreyfus' innocence. The full text reads as follows (I have inserted a few explanatory names in brackets):

162: "The accused General Staff is extremely troubled. The government is very afraid that [Emile Zola] will [attain justice]"

*"L'état major accusé fut tellement troublé. Le gouvernement eut tellement peur qu'il [Zola] fit"*

163: "as this card shows. After receiving a terrible blow from the acquittal of Esterhazy, Emile Zola is coming to the aid of [Truth]."

*"comme le montre cette carte. Émile Zola après qu'elle (sic.) avait reçue un coup terrible pour l'acquittement d'Esterhazy vont a leur secours"*

164: "The rascal [Esterhazy] has been cheered, [illegible], embraced by a [illegible]"

*"Le grédin [Esterhazy] fut acclamé, [illegible] embrassé par un [illegible]"*

165: "Finally, throughout this whole Affair the army, the ministers, and basically everybody else wants to cover everything up. At this very moment the minister Waldeck-Rousseau who has proposed the armistice..."

*"Enfin de toute cette affaire l'armée, les ministres, bref presque tout le monde veulent toujours tout étouffer. Même en ce moment le ministre Waldeck-Rousseau qui propose l'armistice"*

166: "There have been almost no newspapers [defending?] poor Dreyfus. *Le Siecle, L'Aurore, La Petite Republique,* are all important papers who have alone undertaken the defense of the truth."

*"Il n'y eut alors presque pas de journaux [illegible] malheureux Dreyfus: Le Siècle, L'Aurore, La Petite République, comme journaux importants prenaient seuls la défense de la vérité"*

167: "I have sent you a series of illuminated postcards having to do with the Dreyfus Affair. To start, these are the reproductions of drawings by Julio, the cartoonist of *La Reforme*, which has defended the martyr with a veritable tenacity since the first hour. Also the filthy Parisian press has accused the paper of being bought by the Jews. This press has made every effort to bury justice and truth with Jules Meline but."

*"a vous envoyer une série de cartes postales illustrées ayant rapport à l'affaire Dreyfus. Pour commencer ce sont les reproductions des dessins de Julio de La Réforme, journal belge qui dès la première heure défendit le martyr avec un acharnement véritable. Aussi la presse immonde Parisienne l'accuse t-elle d'être achetée par les Juifs. Cette presse fit tous ses efforts pour enterrer avec G. Méline la vérité et la justice mais"*

A few interesting details arise when examining this text. Most notably, it appears that perhaps as many as two cards that were originally part of the set are now missing. This becomes evident when looking at postcards 165 and 167. The final sentence of postcard 165 reads, "Même en ce moment le ministre Waldeck-



Rousseau qui propose l'armistice," but ends mid-sentence. The next card in the collection makes no mention of Waldeck-Rousseau or any armistice, instead listing the most prominent pro-Dreyfus newspapers in Paris. Similarly, postcard 167 concludes with "enterrer avec J Méline la vérité et la justice mais" [bury with J Méline truth and justice but]. This is the final postcard in the collection, but it too ends mid-sentence.

While we'll likely never know what the sender's entire intended message was, the series as a whole, though incomplete, is nevertheless remarkably coherent. Some of the writing seamlessly transfers between postcards without even interrupting the flow of a sentence. We can see this most clearly between postcards 162 and 163. Postcard 162 ends with the phrase "le gouvernement eut tellement peur qu'il fit" [the government is very afraid that he will do], while postcard 163 finishes the sentence with "comme le montre cette carte" [what this card shows]. This sort of internal coherence between postcards makes the sender's overall message much easier to decipher, in spite of the two missing cards.

While we might normally consider a postcard's printed design and its written text as two distinct elements produced by two different people, the sender of these postcards manages to unite both elements by referencing the postcards' printed drawings in his or her writing. In postcard 167 we see a drawing of former French Prime Minister Jules Méline, leading what appears to be a funeral cart. On this same card, the written text reads "cette presse fit tous ses efforts pour enterrer avec J Méline la vérité et la justice" [This press has made every effort to bury justice and truth with Jules Meline]. By referencing the drawing on the postcard in the text, the writer creates a link between the postcard's written and printed elements, helping to increase the clarity of his or her message.



— Beitler PC167

Ultimately, this series is a testament to the power of postcards as an informational medium. Just like a newspaper, these cards helped to inform their recipient of the most recent news about the Dreyfus Affair, albeit with an important twist. Rather than transmitting information from media elites down to the rest of society, postcards enabled everyday people to send and receive information from one another. This is what was so revolutionary about the postcard during this era — it prompted the democratization of political thought, allowing everyone to express their political views on the Dreyfus Affair simply by sending a card in the mail.

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[1] Salo Aizenberg, *Hatemail: Anti-Semitism on Picture Postcards* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), p. 6.

[2] John Fraser, "Propaganda on the Picture Postcard," *Oxford Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (1980) p. 40.

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