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[Book Review] The Picture Postcard: A New Window into Edwardian Ireland, by Ann Wilson

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Ann Wilson. ***The Picture Postcard: A New Window into Edwardian Ireland*** **(Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021) 256 pp. ISBN 978-1-78874-079-1 HC, €49.40.**

Review by Lauren Alex O'Hagan, University of Sheffield.

In recent years, there has been a marked growth in academic research on seemingly mundane objects and the ways in which they can shed new light on our understanding of the world around us.[1] These studies often bring attention to the voices of people who are not visible in historical records, thereby offering fresh perspectives that challenge traditional social, cultural and political discourses. *The Picture Postcard* by Ann Wilson extends this area of research considerably by using the material culture of the picture postcard as a lens through which to examine the island of Ireland in the early twentieth century.

Specifically, Wilson seeks to demonstrate how the picture postcard acts as a microcosm of Edwardian Ireland, its words and images revealing insights into the daily lives, social activities and relationships of 'ordinary' people, as well as the anxieties, tensions and frequent contradictions of Irish life, whether in the context of politics, religion, gender or modernity. In the introduction, she firmly sets out the book's dual goal: to explore the uses, values and roles of the postcard in Irish society, yet, at the same time, to illustrate how Irish postcard consumption practices were part of a 'broader nexus of commodity culture' (4) played out similarly across the world. Wilson argues convincingly that the picture postcard was just as revolutionary to Edwardians as social media is to us, changing how people interacted with one another and (re)shaping their world views, attitudes and beliefs, and puts this down to such factors as its cheapness, portability, visual appeal and variety, potential for manipulation, mass production and efficient postal service.

These overarching arguments run throughout the book and are expertly conveyed in its organisation into six core chapters, which enable salient topics to build dialectically in ways that foreground the strong relationship between the picture postcard, Irish society and the greater world. All chapters are accompanied by coloured illustrations, which bring the postcards to life and enhance our semiotic and material enjoyment of them.

In Chapter 1, Wilson provides an overview of the postcard phenomenon in terms of its development, production and consumption, drawing specific attention to Ireland and debates that took place in the popular press, as well as leading publishers of the era and the broad range of cards they created. Chapter 2 focuses on postcard collecting in Ireland, covering types of collectors, their collecting habits and the compositions of collections. This serves as a useful means for Wilson to outline the collections she used in her research (five personal and two institutional) and how their analysis was combined with newspaper records and archival evidence in order to provide a multi-layered account of postcard culture. Chapter 3 moves on to explore the imagery and written messages on postcards and how they build social bonds and facilitate everyday communication in all aspects of daily life. This data is extremely rich as we see the speed of interactions between people, the emergence of a distinct postcard writing style and the role of postcards in maintaining relationships, all of which support Wilson's

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[1] Rachel Hurdley. 'Dismantling mantelpieces: narrating identities and materializing culture in the home', *Sociology*, 40, no. 4 (2006): 717-733; Jennifer Rowsell and Kate Pahl, *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010); Lauren Alex O'Hagan, ed. *Rebellious Writing: Contesting Marginalisation in Edwardian Britain* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020).

persuasive claim that postcards should be reappraised as 'phatic technologies' (84)—a term typically used only in relation to contemporary media practices.

Chapter 4—perhaps the best in the book—looks at how the postcard intersects with discourses of nationalism, internationalism, tradition, modernity and empire and helped both construct a sense of Irish identity and challenge accepted ideas about it. Wilson skilfully demonstrates how postcards rapidly circulated ideas and concepts across Ireland, thereby fuelling fears around 'anglicisation', national identity, obscenity and the corruption of young women. Chapter 5 considers the postcard's interrelation with travel, emigration and constructions of place and society. Wilson shows how postcard imagery could act as 'markers' (160) that offered pieces of information about a tourist site, yet could also foster 'us' and 'them' divisions through visual synecdoches and stereotypes, which strongly influenced attitudes towards Irish and non-Irish groups and promoted what she terms a form of 'Irish exoticism' (168). In Chapter 6, Wilson examines the experiences of women in Edwardian Ireland, using postcards to provide insights into their day-to-day lives. As these women come predominantly from the middle and 'respectable' working classes—groups that have been underresearched in an Irish context—her findings are particularly valuable. She also considers how women are constructed in postcard imagery, noting the dichotomy between 'impossibly idealised' (glamorous actresses) or 'joke versions' (conventionally unattractive caricatures) of femininity (232) that they present.

A particular strength of the book is Wilson's ability to situate the picture postcard within a broader context of visual traditions, demonstrating that it did not exist in a vacuum but rather clearly drew upon, extended, altered and, in some cases, abandoned the conventions of *cartes-de-visite*, magic lanterns and 'picturesque' landscape painting, as well as scrapbooking and *album amicorum* in the case of collecting practices. At the other end of the spectrum, she shows how social media has many parallels with the postcard in terms of its forms and functions and the praise/criticisms it attracts. Here, her adept use of newspaper records is also to be recognised as she uncovers how—just like social media—postcards were the frequent topic of opinion pieces and news stories on such varied issues as censorship, libel and slander to boycotts, suicides and even breaches of promise. This aligns *The Picture Postcard* strongly with transhistorical perspectives, which are increasingly being employed in communication and media research to place 'novel' contemporary communication technologies within a broader trajectory of patterned practices and uses.[2]

The Picture Postcard also excels in its extensive evidence of how cards were often contradictory in their intended messages and purposes. Images and text could both celebrate and ridicule the British Empire or the concept of Home Rule, combine 'old' Ireland and its ruined castles and peasants with 'new' Ireland and its urban centres and bustling street life or repeat popular stereotypes of Irish (and other) people. Equally, the same image could be used on different cards by publishers (e.g. eviction scenes to either criticise or show necessity of British rule) or interpreted in unintended ways by consumers (e.g. ignoring, enhancing, making fun of it), demonstrating how postcards take on a life of their own once circulated. While it would have been enriching to learn more about the various ways that postcard imagery could be doctored by publishers, this may have fallen outside the book's clearly stated focus on *consumption* rather than *production* (4). Some attention to the factors that led to the end of

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[2] Caroline Tagg and Mel Evans, eds. *Message and Medium: English Language Practices Across Old and New Media* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

the widespread use of postcards may have been helpful in the conclusion, however, in showcasing why the years 1901 to 1910 truly represented a 'Golden Age'.

Overall, I wholeheartedly recommend *The Picture Postcard* for its innovative and comprehensive approach to the study of Edwardian Ireland. Wilson makes a strong case for why we should research everyday artefacts and demonstrates their high cultural value as windows into everyday life, offering perspectives and voices often unaccounted for in official historical narratives. The book and its unique methodology revolutionise how we understand both picture postcards and Irish culture/society, making it of great interest to scholars of art history, social history, visual culture and media and communication, as well as anybody with a general interest in deltiology, photography, art and Ireland. Wilson is to be commended for producing an exemplary book that offers unparalleled insights into the lives of ordinary people and how they converge with broader sociocultural and political phenomena through the medium of the postcard. Her groundbreaking work is likely to open up important new discussions, approaches and areas of research in Irish Studies.