

‘DRESSING DOWN’: IMAGING POVERTY

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In their book, *Images of Childhood in Old Postcards*, the late British historian Colin Ward and his cousin, long-time postcard collector Tim Ward, explore how childhood was depicted in picture postcards in the first two decades of the 20th century, when postcards were the most prevalent means of ‘instant communication’(Ward,1991). The Wards show that representations of poor children at work and at play were a popular postcard subject, as were staged studio portraits of children from affluent backgrounds, who had been deliberately dressed down. They note that, ‘to modern eyes there is something very strange about the Edwardian picture postcard cult of the ragged, barefoot child, published at a time when the streets were full of real poverty-stricken children who were not nearly so picturesque’ (Ward, 1991: 172).

Common themes included the school child, fun and games, war and the child, cleanliness, and working children. Staged depictions of children at work frequently focused on the ‘match girl’, the ‘newsie’, the ‘poor little chappie’, ‘boot boy’, ‘flower girl’, and the child beggar. The Wards ponder as to the reasons behind the ‘sentimentalization of the raggedness of the poor’ and state that, ‘... those [children] carefully posed in the studio and sent openly through the post raise questions for the knowing modern viewer.’ (Ward, 1991:166).

Citing historian Peter Laslett, the Wards explain that at the height of picture postcard circulation, more than forty percent of British children lived in poverty. Whilst poor children were often just part of the scenery in photographs taken in urban street scenes, affluent children were posed inside professional photographic studios dressed up as ragged children, acting poor. This was in stark contrast to visual representations of genuine poor children, who were not usually photographed inside studios. Moreover, the Wards explain that there are hardly any postcards of poor children taken inside their homes, either: ‘the indoor life of the ordinary child is almost outside the range of the picture postcard’ (Ward, 1991:4).

In their chapter, ‘In and out of the studio’, the Wards consider this cultural practice, placing it into a trajectory that belongs to a photographic tradition that originated with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865. Reading the backs of such postcards, they comment that senders often perceived of ragged child depictions as ‘charming’ (Ward, 1991:166). This approach to poverty appears both paradoxical and highly patronizing.

‘BEGGING BUT ITS ONLY A GAME’

In his book on found postcards, *Aus der Ferne, Auf der Kippe* [From afar, hanging in the balance] the writer Wilhelm Genazino speculates on the stories behind their inception, and their lingering pull (2012). The word *Kippe* has a double sense in German, it can also mean dump/tip – and indeed many found postcards in Genazino’s book were rescued from oblivion in this way.

More than five years ago, when I bought two postcards from the interwar years, I knew very little about child depictions in picture postcards. I had found the cards tucked away in a box at the back of a bookcase in an old shop in Newhaven, near Brighton, England, and bought them as I was immediately drawn to their physical and performative qualities. Neither card had been dated, but both were inscribed on the back as belonging to the 'collection of Sylvia More Haynes'. Printed onto fibre-based paper, sepia toned, undated, and unsent, both cards looked like a professional photographer had taken them.

The first card depicts a newsboy, or newsy, selling copies of the Daily Sketch paper.



FIG 1 Newsie

Looking at this postcard, it becomes immediately clear that this is a staged studio portrait. The child poses in front of a painted landscape; there is a real clash between the pastoral scene in the background and the child and folded newspapers in the foreground, which feels much more urban. Daily Sketch paper headlines commenting on 'the King's progress', 'doctors and the milk supply, and 'why Lord Lloyd resigned' make it possible to date the photograph's origins in or around 1929.¹

Printed on the back of each card, in English, German and French, the words: *Communication – Mitteilungen- Correspondence; and Adress to be written here.* Clearly, these postcards were meant to circulate, but what exactly was their message? What did the representations mean to communicate?

The second postcard also has an uncanny quality. It depicts four young boys, all seemingly destitute, and either deaf or dumb, lame or blind. The boy with the lame sign around his neck even seems to have a leg missing. At a time when the slum clearance act was about to be invoked (Greenwood Act, 1930), why would affluent children be dressed up in costumes that had deliberately been made to look torn, too big, worn? When I picked up this card for the first time, I briefly thought

the scene might be real, but the boy on the right, apparently blind, gives the game away – he looks at the photographer with a smile. It very quickly became apparent that this, too, was a staged studio portrait. The marble column in the background possibly painted onto the backdrop, the legs of a studio chair visible to the right. Someone, possibly its collector, wrote on the back, 'Begging but it's only a game'.



FIG 2 'Begging, but its only a game'

Why play at begging? This postcard raises many questions; in particular, what does this say about perceptions of poverty at the time?

Colin and Tim Ward provide a highly plausible answer: 'If charities produced pictures of tramps or destitute flower sellers, the postcard producers dressed up children as ragged but jaunty vagabonds or charmy, barefoot waifs. They made poverty, which was an everyday background of Edwardian life, into something that was both cheerful and cheeky'. (Ward, 1991:5).

As our exhibition, *From Street to Playground* shows, working class children, who were everywhere in the streets, typically only became incidental subjects in survey photographs or were used to further the aims of philanthropical initiatives.

End Notes:

1. Lord Lloyd, High Commissioner to Egypt, had to resign in 1929.

References:

Ward, C. & Ward, T. (1991) *Images of Childhood in Old Postcards*. The Bath Press, Avon. 2.