

Lawrence and Postcards

Jonathan Long

Lawrence was a great writer of picture postcards. Hundreds survive and their texts but not the images on the postcards are printed in the eight volume Cambridge Edition of his correspondence, extending to 5000+ letters and postcards. The fact that generally speaking those postcard texts are not reproduced in selections of his correspondence reflects the fact that they are not of the same quality as his best letters. Postcards were and are often seen as a second class means of communication, shorter and much less likely than letters to contain more reflective and considered opinions or interesting detail. They were though a useful tool for Lawrence when he had neither time nor inclination to write a letter, but wanted to keep his family and close friends informed of his whereabouts, whilst still demonstrating his skill at communicating with different people in different ways, providing them with something they might treasure. Lawrence's postcards remain important and undervalued, particularly, as we shall see, as in many cases it is not just the image on the postcard that is not reproduced in the Cambridge Edition but also additional information often printed on the postcard to help contextualise it. It is often only with all these elements together that we can appreciate what the impact of the postcard on the recipient might have been.

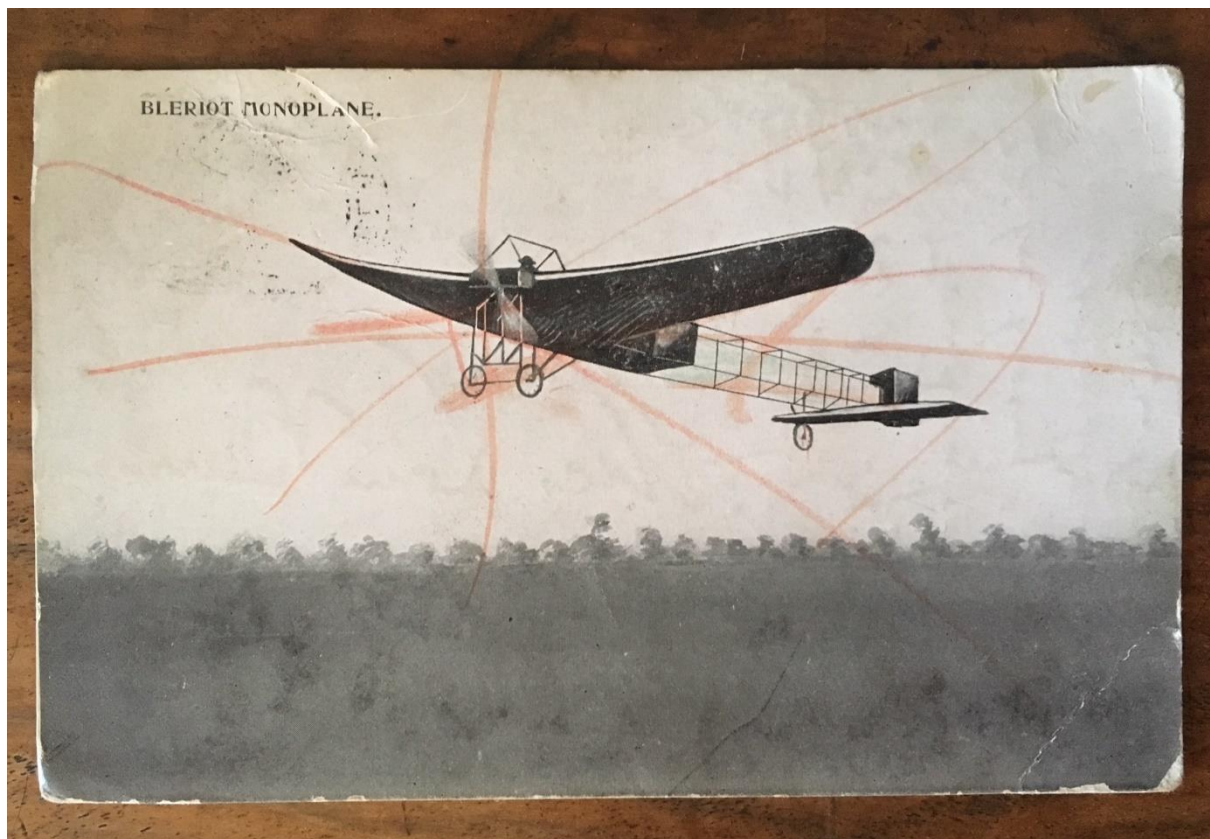
Postcards form part of Lawrence's surviving correspondence for most of his adult life. They are not all picture postcards, some of them were blank, such as the one of November 1913 to Henry Savage (672a) [Scan A]. Mainly with the address on one side and the message on the other they often dated from Lawrence's periods of greatest poverty, such as his time in Cornwall, and were the cheapest form of communication as the postage was prepaid; the postcard was not an extra cost. Most of the postcards were pictorial though and their subject-matter was no doubt similar to many other people's for non-business communication. The

difference in Lawrence's case was the extraordinary number and variety of places he visited and sent postcards from.



It is likely that Lawrence did not intend that his correspondence would ever be published. Indeed, however significant or accomplished the writer of a letter to him might be Lawrence did not keep it, he destroyed his correspondence unless he used it to write the reply on or to forward to another correspondent with comments. However, Lawrence is now widely acknowledged as one of the most gifted correspondents of the 20th century and the investment of the Cambridge University Press in the publication of all his surviving letters and postcards in a scholarly edition reflects that. But the fact that none of the photos on his picture postcards are reproduced in the Cambridge Edition is significant. Although his correspondence merits close study in its original form so that we can visualise how the recipient would have seen it, including the drawings and other illustrations that he provided in some of it, the changes he made et cetera, little of this is reproduced in the Cambridge Edition. In fact in the eight volumes only two of his letters are reproduced in the illustrations. Although this is understandable from a commercial perspective, the point is that the significance of the letter or postcard does not necessarily end with its text as printed.

I would put Lawrence's postcards into four main categories. The first is things that he found of interest, such as Bleriot's monoplane, seen here in this recently rediscovered postcard to Louis Burrows sent in August 1910 (????) [Scan B]. The second is things that Lawrence had probably seen, such as statues, pictures, museum artefacts and the like, exemplified in this postcard of a Celtic stone cross in the British Museum sent to his mother-in-law from Scandicci in May 1927 (4015) (Scan C). This is one of many postcards that he sent to her and is an example of the fact that he clearly bought postcards to send at a somewhat later date. He would not have been to London since the previous September.



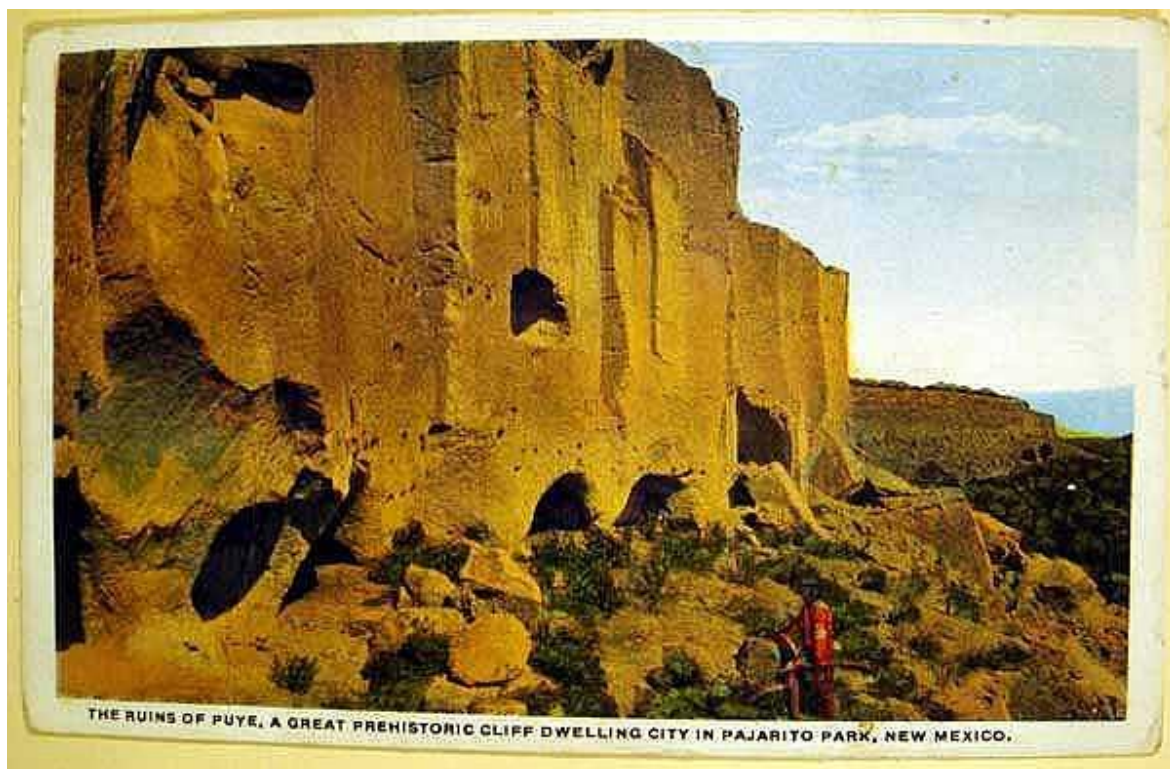


My third category is the photographic images of himself and/or of Frieda that he sent, which were real photo cards. These were original photographs as compared to mass-produced postcards of poorer quality, which were usually distinguished by their dot or grain pattern on the image. Film was specifically produced for cameras to enable photographers to take images that would be used for postcards, Dorothy Brett, Witter Bynner and his partner Spud Johnson being the main exemplars in Lawrence's circle. As well as real photos of himself, he also bought real photo cards of other subjects, no doubt appreciating the more artisan quality of the process compared to the general mass-produced way that most postcards were manufactured, in the same way that he preferred the small-scale production of books using traditional techniques instead of their mass-production e.g. by photolithography. In this example used for a postcard sent to his mother-in-law in November 1924 during his stay in Mexico (3304) [Scan D], the photo taken by Brett shows Lawrence and Frieda in a street in Oaxaca. It must have been reassuring, in a way that a letter never would be, for Baroness von Richthofen to have a photo of her daughter looking so well, taken the

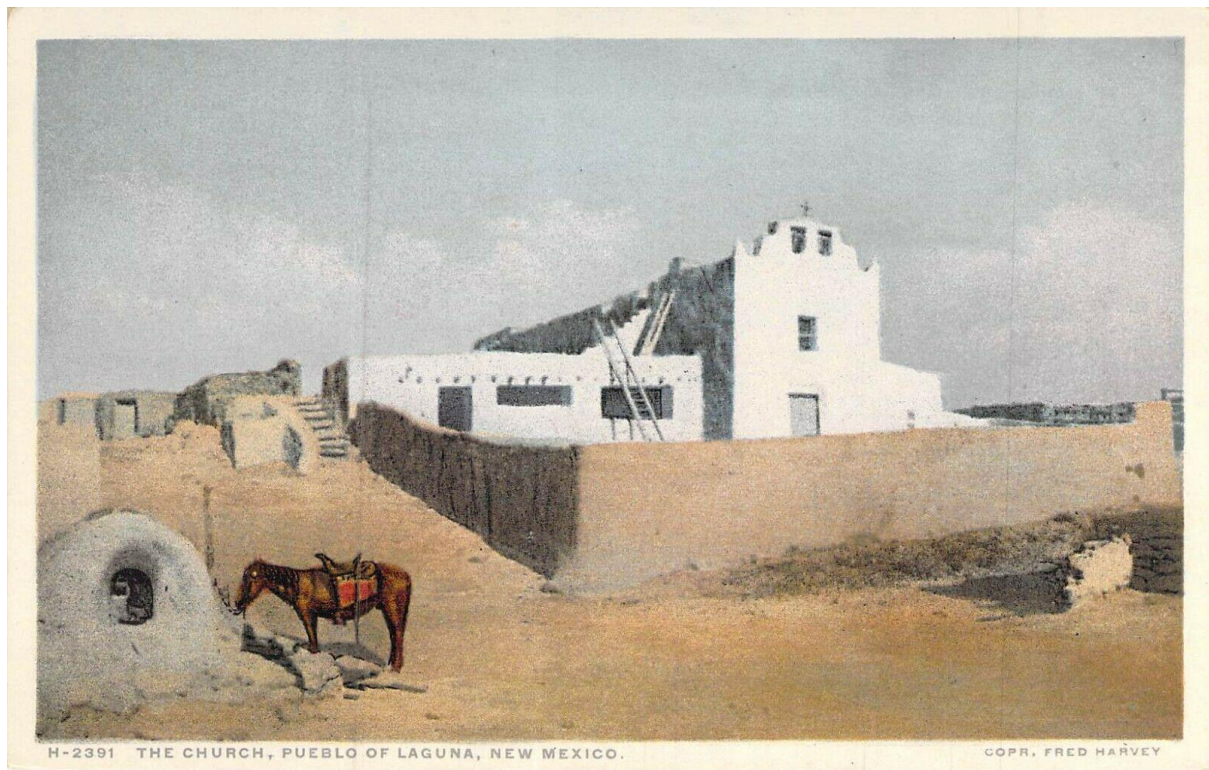
other side of the world from where she lived in Germany. Lawrence would have enjoyed the opportunity in the postcard to pass on Frieda's comment that 'she looks fatter than she really is'. He added that 'she is starting to guzzle less bread and cake'. In another example, from April 1923 (2776) [Scan E] the Lawrences are pictured with Witter Bynner on top of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan in a photo taken by Spud Johnson. The postcard was sent to Lawrence's sister Ada, amongst others, and she must have been reassured to see her brother looking well and impressed to see this well-known author standing in a place she could only dream of going to.



My fourth and final category is the places that Lawrence visited. They reflect how extraordinarily well travelled he was. The images include villages, towns, cities, churches, cathedrals, castles, houses, hotels, gardens, mountains, lakes, waterfalls, deserts, landscapes (especially those with trees) and coastal scenes. Many are idyllic locations, which the recipients of the postcards would marvel at. There is a vast number and variety of places, so I will pick out just a few of particular note. The first is a colourful one of the pueblo at Puye near Española in New Mexico, which Lawrence sent to his mother-in-law in October 1924 (3268a) [Scan F].

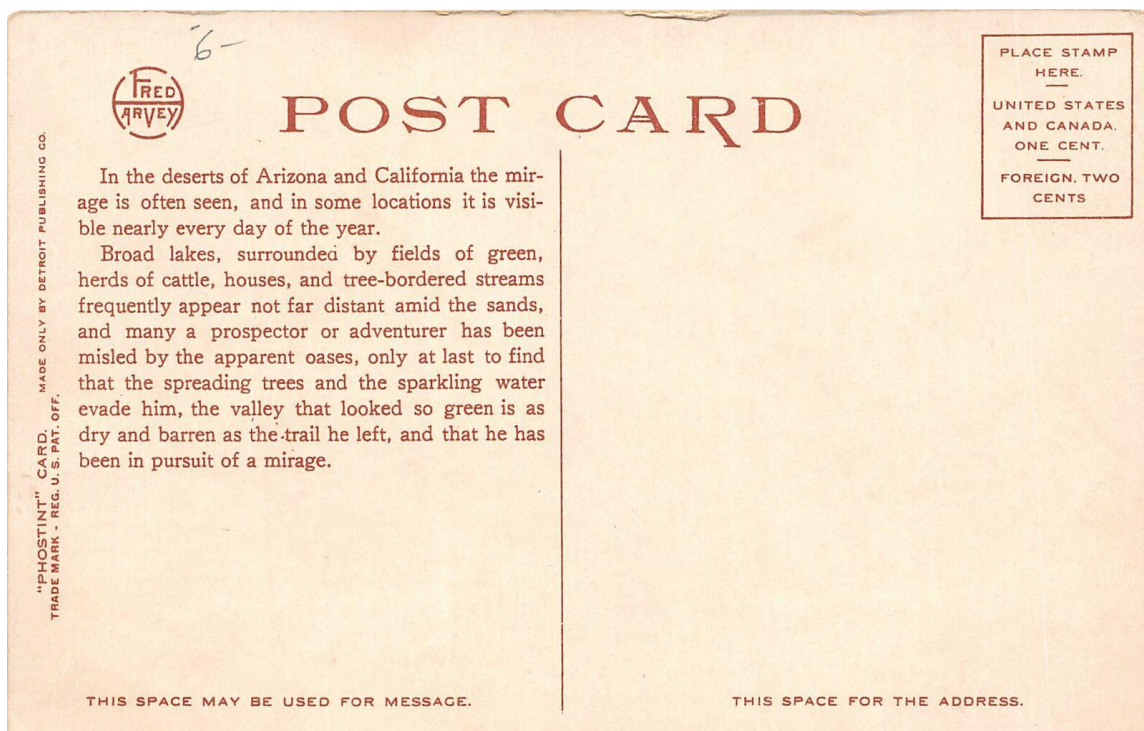


The text is one sentence but the printed information on the card tells the recipient a great deal about the history of the dwellings, carved into the rocks, and was no doubt very warmly received, the exotic location a welcome change from the baroness's routine in her retirement home in Baden-Baden.

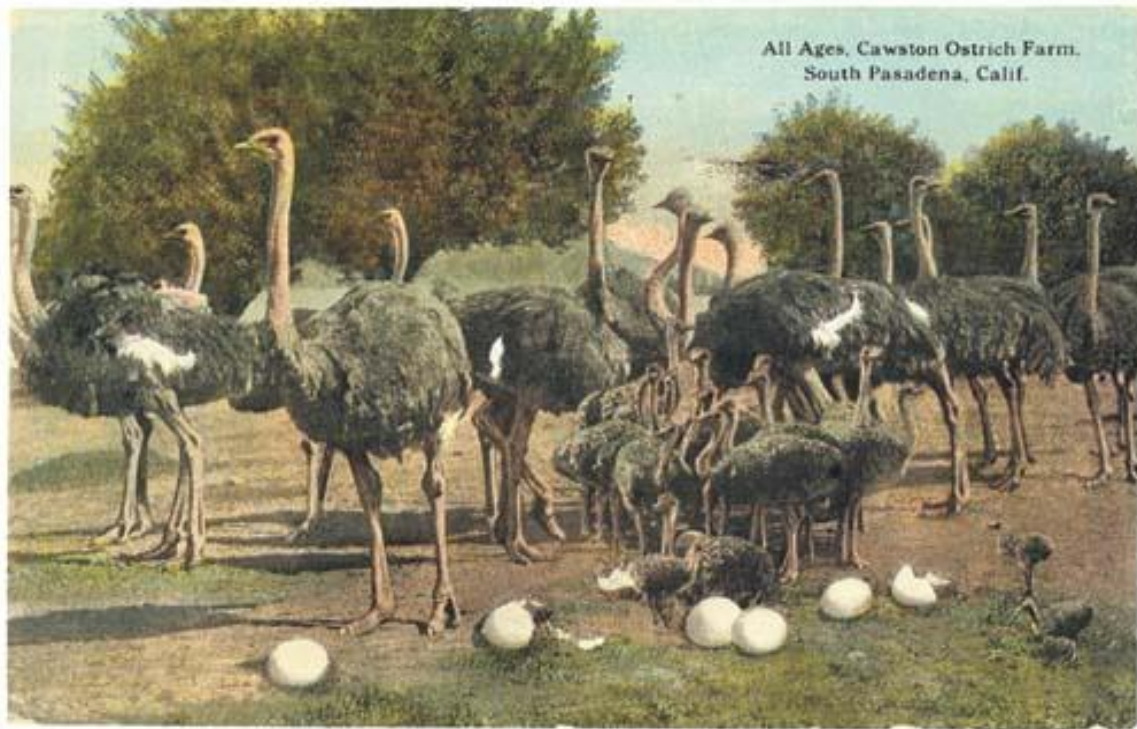


Another example is the postcard Lawrence sent to his sister-in-law Nusch in September 1922 (2590) [Scan G], showing the church in the pueblo of Laguna, near Albuquerque. The short text tells her that Mabel Luhan has driven him and Frieda '100 km by motorcar over high desert' but the postcard's image and the lengthy printed note say a lot more.

And imagine Lawrence's young niece Peggy receiving a postcard of a mirage on the Arizona desert sent in September 1922 (2592) [Scan H], in a brief note telling her that her uncle had travelled '75 miles over the desert, that his new home in Taos was '7000 ft. up – wonderful' coupled with the printed description [Scan I] of a scene way beyond her experience in Nottinghamshire, transporting her as far as a postcard ever could do to that place.



Finally, amongst my examples of more unusual scenes, when staying in Los Angeles in September 1923 Lawrence sent postcards of the Cawston Ostrich Farm in South Pasadena both to his mother-in-law and to Mabel Luhan's friend Charlotte Becker (2912b) [Scan J]. The recipients must have been very entertained by the subject-matter!



But I will end with a postcard that is of a lakeside scene much nearer to England, not just geographically, the one of Gargnano that Lawrence sent to his sister Ada in October 1912 (508) [\[Scan K\]](#). The text is mainly of no great consequence, mentioning some clothes Lawrence wanted, asking after some home news, but ending by telling her that the trees in the picture were olive trees and that the image was 'a very true view'. That colour image must have seemed very special indeed to Ada, but the Cambridge Edition text merely tells us that the postcard is of Gargnano, with no further information. The likely impact on Ada is much more discernible if you have the image available, a scene so far removed from where the Lawrence children grew up.



Bibliography

Taylor, Oliver. "‘The Day of My Letters is Over’": D.H. Lawrence’s Picture Postcards from the Americas’. *JDHLS*