

Europeana Research Grants Final Report



Return to Sender: Mapping Memory Journeys in the
Europeana 1914-1918 Postcard Archive



Source: George Buchanan, *Embroidered postcard*, National Museums Scotland. CC BY-SA
Europeana 1914-1918 Collection:
https://www.europeana.eu/portal/record/2020601/contributions_20084_attachments_228547.html

Author: Elizabeth Benjamin
Affiliation: Coventry University
Date: 8 July 2019 (abridged version)



Archives, as a combination of individual artefacts from different contributors, times and locations, are where society builds its collective memories. Europeana, as a transnational digital archive, furthers this aim in terms of both scale and accessibility. But, like the shift from data to information, memory only exists if it is recalled, used, and (re)lived. *Return to Sender* takes postcards as its medium, as objects that are inherently tied to (transnational) movement. Using the Europeana 1914-1918 thematic collection, our project draws out the journeys these postcards have taken, both during the war and afterwards into the archives and on to viewers. This plotting of movement can reveal a great deal about the ongoing memory of WW1.

The project, aiming to create new findings about how the war affected movement and communication across Europe at the time, asked the following questions:

- How can we recapture and display the ongoing memories of archival objects?
- How can we sustain a living memory of the objects in the Europeana archive, and thereby of the archive as a whole?
- What can the journeys of archival objects reveal in the transnational movements of people during WW1 and into the archive?
- What do these movements tell us about the context and memory of WW1?

Our project website is <https://returntosendermap.eu>. Here you can find introductory information, multiple language menus, and a project blog. The blog, created for greater accessibility to the project, contains posts on the development of the project, initial findings and analysis, and presentations. We have also run a Twitter page for *Return to Sender*, to publicise developments and connect with key audiences. We have been keen to maximise the impact of the project, which is why we have maintained an emphasis on social media presence.

Throughout the project, we have been working with a student researcher (Stefan Bernhardt-Radu, final-year undergraduate in History at Coventry University), who helped with analysing archive and location data, as well as looking at the postcards themselves. Stefan made a list (dictionary) of locations which the web developer used to make the map. He is now working on using the map to produce research material for future publications. Working with Stefan has allowed us to share the benefits of working on a funded project with future generations of researchers - he also brings several languages to the project!

The main output of our project was an open-access online map tool where researchers and members of the public can: explore the WW1 postcards in the Europeana 1914-1918 collection and the collections of contributing archives from across Europe; trace the movement of people and communication at the time and into physical and digital archives; filter by date and location, or by the archive and digital aggregator; adjust map layers directly to change what is displayed. The interface has been developed visually and includes animated paths of postcards on the map.

Return to Sender is a digital humanities project, and that means emphasising both parts of the term. It was always important to us to highlight not only the metadata of the postcards as entries in vast transnational digital archives, but to link this digital approach with what might be the core of the humanities – the specific narratives of individual people and their perspectives on society at the time of great historical events. For this reason, we always aimed to keep the artefacts themselves ‘on the map’. Clicking on a map location reveals the postcards that originated there, which in turn brings up the details of the specific entry. It will look something like this:



Carte postale représentant l'église détruite d'Ablain-Saint-Nazaire

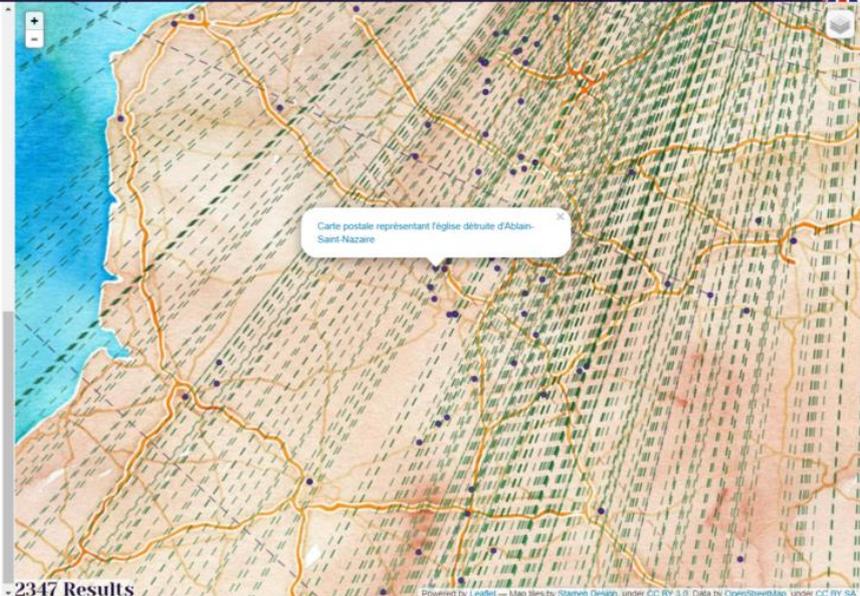
Location: Western Front

Archive: Europeana 1914-1918

Aggregator: Europeana 1914-1918



Carte postale adressée par un soldat prénommé 'Henri' à sa mère ; le recto représente la destruction de l'église d'Ablain-Saint-Nazaire.



Here you can see the postcard as a data point on the map, as well as in its 'full' form as an image in the sidebar. You can then click through to see it in its original digital form, with further information, on the Europeana website.

The key communities to whom the project is aimed are:

- Researchers working in fields of digital humanities, early twentieth century history, cultural heritage, visual arts, and modern languages;
- Archivists and librarians;
- Citizen historians.

The project research and results have been presented at the American Comparative Literature Association Annual Conference in Washington DC, and a talk at the Solent University Culture, Media Place research group seminar series. The final map was showcased to the general public at the Royal British Legion Southampton Drop-In Centre, in conjunction with the Solent University Festival of Ideas.

Possible future publications following on from the project include:

- Elizabeth Benjamin, Garfield Benjamin and Stefan Bernhardt-Radu, academic article on postcards, archives, metadata and visualisation for *Memory Studies*
- Elizabeth Benjamin, academic article on remembering movement across Europe for *Memory Studies*
- Elizabeth Benjamin and Garfield Benjamin, academic article on a comparative analysis of WWI postcards and social media, for *New Media and Society* or *Digital Creativity*



Co-financed by the European Union
Connecting Europe Facility

The sole responsibility of this publication lies with the author. The European Union is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.