

The Franco-British Exhibition of 1908: Legacies and Memories One Hundred Years On

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Summary: *This article seeks to 'locate' the memory and traces of the Franco-British Exhibition firstly in the geographical space of contemporary London and then within the broader 'space' of its contribution to social and cultural history, with a specific focus on the use of the postcard. Taking as a point of departure the context and development of 'memory studies' in the UK and a brief history of the postcard in that period, it goes on to ask what the 'memory-value' of the Exhibition is one hundred years on through the analysis of a series of postcard messages sent from the "White City". The research for this article is based partly on a BBC 4 radio programme commissioned for the centenary of the Franco-British Exhibition: "Postcards from the White City".*

Keywords: *Legacy, Public Memory, Private Memory, 'Memory Studies', Social History, Cultural History, Postcard History*

Résumé: *L'article cherche à 'situer' la mémoire et les traces de l'Exposition Franco-Britannique en premier lieu dans l'espace géographique contemporain de Londres, et puis dans 'l'espace' plus large d'une contribution à l'histoire sociale and culturelle, visant tout particulièrement l'usage de la carte postale. Le contexte et le développement des 'memory studies' en Grande Bretagne et une histoire brève de la carte postale à l'époque fournissent un point de départ. L'article procède à interroger la 'memory-value' ('valeur-mémoire') de l'Exposition au moment de son centenaire à travers une analyse des messages écrits au dos des cartes postales envoyées de la "White City". Les recherches se basent en partie sur une émission commandée au moment du centenaire de L'Exposition pour la BBC Radio 4: "Cartes postales de la White City".*

Mots-clés: *Héritage, Mémoire nationale, Mémoire personnelle, 'Memory Studies', Histoire sociale, Histoire culturelle, Histoire de la carte postale*

The time has come to sum up the Franco-Exhibition of 1908. It has had a brilliant career. From the first day, when wretched weather marred the opening day by the Prince and Princess of Wales on May 14th, the Exhibition caught the attention of the public and held it through rain and shine. It has been the great feature, not only

of the season, but of the year. It has overshadowed all other events of the London summer so completely that there is some difficulty in remembering what they were. Yet there were many, and some of them of world-wide importance. It has enjoyed great popularity, not among a section of the people, but among all classes, from their Majesties, who paid it repeated visits, to the working man, his wife and children. It has excited unflagging interest, not for a day or a week, but for nearly six months. And that means a great deal; for in London, with its multitudinous activities and distractions, one thing treads so fast upon the heels of another that some exceptional qualities are needed to make anything even a nine days' wonder. (Shadwell, 1908: 3)

Between January 1907 and May 1908, when the Exhibition opened, a vast 140 acre unused plot of land in West London around Shepherd's Bush was transformed into a great "White City" and became, according to the contemporary testimony above, the most talked about and most visited event during that first part of the year, attracting close on eight and half million visitors. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, London's "multitudinous activities and distractions" have increased manifold, and questions of what is remembered and what is forgotten compete for public and private attention in an era, one century later, that is at once obsessed with the preservation of certain memories and negligent of others. The final decade of the twentieth century witnessed a plethora of commemorative activities as the first millennium drew to a close and it appeared to become necessary to review, to mark, and perhaps to hold on to in some way, the events of a century that had twice seen war on a previously unimagined scale, the extermination of six million European Jews, the end of the British and French empires, global insecurity through the threat of nuclear war and terrorism, and a continuous evolution in technological advances that changed the lives of those living in the developed world so that they became unrecognisable to those of each previous generation.

While constant change became the norm at macro- and micro-levels of human experience, (selective) interest in the past soared at both political (national and international) or personal (individual and community) levels, and at the levels of global historical events (witness the popularity of television history channels) and of family and local history. As those who had lived through sometimes devastating and always life-changing world events in the twentieth century began to pass from being living witnesses to being left to the vagaries of memory, an urgency to remember, and indeed the 'duty to remember', became a focus not only of private and public attention, but also of academic attention, as the new inter-discipline of 'memory studies' continued to develop encompassing multiple areas of the Humanities.¹

What of the relevance of the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition in all this? While an event that was essentially an industrial and commercial exhibition to showcase the power and productivity of two European imperial nations cannot be compared to historical events that have real positive or negative social and political impact on the lives of populations, the focus on memory that has taken a grip on public, private and academic life for the reasons and in the ways outlined above does mean that whether an event has endured in the public consciousness, through commemoration in the form of statues or plaques

or in other forms of civic naming and/or ceremonies, or whether that event has become largely forgotten by all but an interested and/or specialist few, and its physical traces obliterated, necessarily places a value, of greater or lesser worth, on that event. So where, therefore, does the memory of the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition reside in 2008? What ‘memory value’ can be placed on it? How can such an event, which is by its nature transient, be remembered? Should it be remembered?

The main legacy of the Exhibition for the average twentieth and now twenty-first century Londoner lies in a series of place names and buildings around Shepherd’s Bush in West London. These are notably the White City housing estate built on land purchased by Hammersmith Borough Council in 1936, the BBC Television and Radio Studios in Wood Lane purchased by the BBC in 1949 and on further land purchased in 1986, and Wood Lane station (Metropolitan and City Railway) which was in use until the 1950s when the new White City Central Line underground station was opened. A further physical legacy was also the White City Stadium, built for the 1908 London Olympics which followed on from the Exhibition and first leased from 1926 to the Greyhound Racing Association. It was subsequently used by various sports including speedway, boxing and horse shows until it was demolished in 1985, and at that date being one of the few urban reminders of the Exhibition’s “White City”.²

By 2003 any remaining buildings, including the main entrance, had been demolished to make way for a large shopping centre and leisure complex that opened on 30th October 2008, one hundred years after the Exhibition closed. Now called “Westfield”, part of the space then occupied by the great “White City” is now touted as the largest shopping mall in Europe. In a 2008 BBC Radio 4 programme commissioned about the centenary of the Exhibition, the British television and radio presenter Robert Elms, who grew up on the White City housing estate, is no doubt typical of the vast majority of Londoners in that area and beyond, having no idea of what had previously existed on the site where he had lived. It was, as he explained, “an almost forgotten story”, gone from living memory as far as he was aware until becoming involved in the making of the programme, and a “story” for which it is evident that he experienced considerable nostalgia on its discovery.³ It is as though the “vision of dazzling whiteness” that had cast such a spell on the Exhibition’s contemporary visitors, was just that and that its white facades had indeed conjured merely illusions, fantasies and dreams. As various writers of the time put it:

By day it is a vision of dazzling whiteness with its tiled court and splashing cool waters, its pointed arcades and lattice windows. At night it is equally effective with its thousands of lights and the rainbow colours of the cascade. (Carden, 1908: 32-37)

Or in the words of another:

The Exhibition is a “White City” indeed! Every building is white without shade and under the ardent sun it has looked like some brilliant Oriental fantasy - a dream of a virgin city bathed in light. (Mauve, 1908: 13)

The producer of the Radio 4 programme “Postcards from the White City” had also fallen under the spell of the White City:

This was a subject that had haunted me for years and a story I wanted to tell for over a decade. It was the postcard images of the White City that had first alerted me to its existence. Mooching round a postcard fair, I came across cards of the White City. The pictures grabbed me immediately, probably in the same way they grabbed visitors a hundred years ago. A complex of exotic, white oriental palaces on lagoons and lakes in London was such a bold, brazen, anomalous idea that I found it irresistible. The cards cost between 10p and a pound then, and I soon build up a small collection. The beautiful, unlikely architecture drew me back again and again. And the images on the cards had their own uncanny quality: the buildings were lit by drab English daylight, the walkways puddled, and yet the sky was often the bright blue of a spring day. I later learnt that this Magrittean mismatch was the result of the routine retouching that was usual at the time. The images stayed with me. (Tom Jackson, for this article)

This more tangible legacy of the Franco-British Exhibition that provides real insight into the social history of the period is that which also provided the focus for the radio programme mentioned above - the tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of postcards that were sent from the Exhibition site from the millions produced at the time:

In 1908 the Exhibition company invited the Post Office authorities to provide an office at the Exhibition. They agreed and this was built into the British Industries Palace. Visitors could buy postage stamps, and send postcards, letters, registered letters, parcels and telegraphs and make telephone calls. Special hand stamps were made for use at the office for 1908 [...] There was also a post office in the ‘Irish Village’ (Ballymaclinton) [...] Mail vans made four daily collections from the Exhibition post office and post boxes, taking letters and parcels back to the Paddington sorting office. (Knight, 2008: 60)

The profusion of postcards was supported not only by the industriousness of the post office, but also through extensive production by a range of 22 postcard manufacturers:

They were printed both in colour and black and white and a number of glossy and comic cards were produced. The official postcards were printed by Valentine and Sons Ltd. of Dundee, London and New York. They were sold in packets and singly, and the first set was an artist’s impression of how the Exhibition was to look when built [...] but as soon as the Exhibition opened the manufacturers photographed the buildings [...] Some private companies that exhibited also had advertising cards produced [...] With 22 manufacturers producing postcards for the 1908 Exhibition in their various ways and settings, over 1,000 cards were available to the public. Valentine’s alone printed sets in seven styles, together with panoramic views and giant size cards measuring 185mm by 140mm. (Knight, 2008: 65-66)

The postcard as an object occupies both the private and the public spaces and as such can tell the historian a great deal about a society at a given time:

La carte postale par rapport à tous les autres supports visuels, présente deux caractères spécifiques : c'est d'abord un objet postal, véhicule d'échanges interpersonnels, qui pénètre dans la vie sociale ou intime des correspondants. C'est aussi un objet de consommation courante, accessible et bon marché, que l'on envoie comme petit cadeau, que l'on collectionne et qui permet toutes sortes d'associations visuelles, verbales ou imaginatives. (Huss, 2001: 20)

The Franco-British Exhibition took place in the middle of the period generally considered by historians of the postcard as its 'Golden Age', and it is notable just how popular the postcard became in just a few decades (Huss, 2001: 29).⁴ This period of phenomenal postcard activity seems to have emerged for a number of reasons: cheap, crisp printing techniques, increased literacy, a more mobile population and an astonishingly efficient postal service.⁵ Historians who have studied the development of the postcard generally agree that it first appeared in Austria in 1869, with Germany and Britain rapidly following in 1870, although there had also been various other attempts, in Britain, Finland, Russia and various German states for example, to find a fast and simple form of communication for a mass population that were now able to read and write (Huss, 2001: 20).⁶ By September 1875, the establishment of the General Postal Union, which became the Universal Postal Union four years later, allowed postcards to be sent across national borders. The special reduced postal rates for postcards assured its success, and it entered in huge numbers into everyday life, its evolution and various formats being testimony to the demands of the market and the creativity of postcard producers to satisfy consumer appetites (Huss, 2001: 22). The rapidity of delivery meant that postcards became a popular way to confirm or to cancel an appointment, even for that day, or to tell someone about one's time of arrival. And with the rate for postcards set at a half penny and for letters at a penny, why not send your short message on a card? The other great appeal of the picture postcard was, of course, aesthetic. They were, and are, pleasing objects, a delightful way of passing on a photographic image that might have meaning for the sender, the receiver or both. And the charm of these images has proved the postcards' saving: cards at the time were collected and kept in drawers or pasted in albums. The postcard is therefore a real mass phenomenon, a form of quick and effective communication that rapidly became the object of collectors, a new hobby suitable for men, women and children:

Le phénomène carte postale prend une telle ampleur qu'il ne manque pas d'être observé par des organes complètement extérieurs, comme *La Grande Encyclopédie* qui, dans son édition de 1885, remarque que la carte postale s'est répandue "très rapidement". La presse nationale elle-même [en France] consacrera des séries d'articles au phénomène carte postale qui se déroule visiblement sous les yeux de tous. En Octobre 1904, *Le Figaro illustré* décidera même de lui consacrer un numéro spécial, *La Carte postale*. (Huss: 2001: 28)⁷

These collections, broken up and scattered, now form the bulk of the cards that are bought and sold by twenty-first century collectors. Even today, the cards can still be snapped up very cheaply.

Pictures of views, which became the first successful postcards, also assured in some way the authenticity of the communication: “elles avaient donc pour importante fonction de prouver la présence de l’expéditeur à l’endroit d’où il envoyait sa pensée, la poste jouant le rôle de garant de l’authenticité, sinon du message, du moins de son origine” (Huss, 2001: 24). These are very much the types of messages found on postcards sent from the White City, some bearing witness to the visit, others used simply to make or break dates. Indeed to the modern eye, the very intimacy of some messages, in a format sent without an envelope and therefore visible to all, can seem surprising, and this is, perhaps, a further product of the enormous numbers of postcards in circulation: “chaque carte était comme petit poisson dans un énorme banc ; ce qui protégeait sa confidentialité, était peut-être le nombre colossal d’autres cartes” (Huss, 2001: 26).

The postcard is therefore a pure product of the developing consumer society: mass production allied to the market mechanisms of supply and demand, it is the vehicle of both utilitarian and sentimental communications, endlessly adaptable and renewable in its images and its messages. No wonder then that, at the industrial, commercial and leisure event that is the Franco-British Exhibition, postcards proved immensely popular and today remain a conduit that allows the twenty-first reader/spectator an entry into the world of the early twentieth century. As Tom Jackson again confirms:

From my own small collection I knew that the cards might throw interesting sidelights on the Franco-British. However brief, obscure or cryptic the messages might be, they are primary sources. Although many cards illustrating the Franco-British Exhibition are unused or have no reference to the White city on their messages, the cards that interested me for the programme were the ones that had the immediacy of having been penned in the dust or rain of the Exhibition and carried the thoughts and reflections of real visitors. (Tom Jackson, for this article)

For the Radio 4 programme he also leafed through the cards in the Museum of London collection and the Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Archives. By far the largest collections, however, are in private hands, and he was also able to spend time with the greatest collectors of Franco-British cards:

With one collector of thirty-odd years standing I was shown box after box of cards, many thousands in all, and was wondering where to start. I asked whether there was a particular place where I might find the cards with the most interesting messages. ‘I’ve never really looked at the messages’ he replied. As a collector, he had concerned himself with the minutiae of printing details, variations in serial numbers and captions. He was and is the world expert in such matters. And yet he had simply never looked at the messages written on the cards. I fell on the cards with greater avidity, sure that I would be hearing echoes of voices from a century ago for the first time. I was not disappointed. I mention this story to demonstrate how collectors - who so often hold the greatest archive - may have interests that differ fundamentally from those of the academic historian - or radio producer. The cards are innocent: we take from them what we feel we need. (Tom Jackson, for this article)

So what light do the messages on the postcards throw? Cards were available before the Exhibition was open or the building even complete. The following cards represent different viewpoints on the imminent completion and opening of the showground:

27 April 1908

Dear Mother

This is one of the buildings we have done. Have you forgot to send the paper? Hoping you are all well.

Loving son, Whittam

27 April 1908

Monday

I hope you will forgive me for not coming yesterday. I was not at all well. Had a splitting headache. In the afternoon I walked to see the exhibition buildings. They are not near finished. It looks just like a great white city. It cost 3/4 of a million. Will you be at the usual corner at 7 o'clock punctual Wednesday?

Love to all, Syd

27 April 1908

I have been very sorry to hear you have been ill again but pleased to hear you and Mr Walker are quite well now. I have been very lucky and still busy for the present and I expect a lot to do with the exhibition. It is nearly finished and the Prince of Wales will open it and on the 25th the King and the French President will open the French section. I hope it will be a great success. We are all well and hope this will find you the same. From all, best wishes to both.

Your friend E. Lavane

The changing state of the weather is a perennial British preoccupation, and a staple for picture postcards. In 1908 there was a lot of weather, from the rain on the opening day of the exhibition through blistering hot days in the autumn:

15 May 1908

Dear Nelly

I expect you have heard I am having a holiday. This is a view in the new exhibition opened yesterday. We went but it was dreadfully wet. It is a grand place but not really finished. Hope your mother is well. Kind regards to all.

Yours sincerely

R. Foot

14 May 1908

Dear H

Been singing here this afternoon. Raining all the time. A lovely exhibition but nothing nearly finished. Are you saving your halfpence yet? You must come to us this year.

Loo Loo

13 July 1908

Dear Slope

Shan't be down tomorrow. After all weather absolutely rotten here. If it rains tomorrow shall stop at home. If it's fine Dad and I are going to the stadium to see the beginning of the sports. Don't be downhearted. Will see you soon as poss.

T

19 September 1908

*Arrived here alright 6.30 this morning. Beautiful weather. Sun scorching hot. Enjoying ourselves. Champion.
Mrs T Holroyd*

Another aspect of the Exhibition that comes through very clearly from the cards is how impressive the buildings were. The sheer scale of the site is recorded by numerous visitors:

12 June 1908

Dear Allen

Have just come to the end of a lovely afternoon in the exhibition. We have been here 4 hours. I have seen about 1/20 part of what we would like to see. Shall be home tomorrow.

Mary

28 May 1908

I thought I must send you a card from here. It is a most wonderful place and so full of foreigners I feel in another country. I have had a long afternoon but have not seen a quarter of it as it is not nearly finished yet.

Love to all.

F.I.T.

12 June 1908

My Dear Dad

This is one of the places we have just visited. It is now about 5 and we have been here since 1. It has been splendid but we are tired now. We are at the far end of the city and have ½ an hour walk to get out. I shall really be glad to be out now. I am sure mother will, though she says she is alright. Shall carry on tomorrow evening.

Love from Mary

22 June 1908

Had a great time here yesterday from 4 o/c till 9.15. Got awfully brain tired and footsore. Wonder how you all are. Fond love to each

AHS

18 July 1908

Dear Annie

I wasn't able to go to the White City on Thursday after all but mother and I went yesterday. It is a delightful place. All the buildings are pure white and they shine splendidly in the sun. We only saw a very little because it is so vast. There are 30 miles of paths, so you may be sure it would take days to see it all. How are you getting on at school? I like college immensely. Goodbye now, much love to all.

From Gertie

Postcards of the White City offer all kinds of insights into life a century ago: the names - Ada, Edie, Nelly and so on; the copperplate handwriting; the complete lack of punctuation. The language too is distinct: people have a "ripping time",

and if something is good, it is “A1”. Postcards themselves were abbreviated to “PCs”. The following cards all tell their own stories, and, as is the nature of cards, give tantalising glimpses into the lives and attitudes of the senders:

5 October 1908

Dear Albert

Hope to see you at 7.45pm tonight but don't bring any French girls round please.
Nell

3 September 1908

I hear you are collecting PCs of the exhibition, so am sending you one. We were there last night, had dinner and saw the whole place lit up - a most glorious sight. Returning home tomorrow.
Love to all, E.D.

25 September 1908

Dear F

Hope you will enjoy yourselves tomorrow. you ought to go up in the Flip-Flap. We were in the top cage 200 feet from the ground. Hundreds of people there.
Love from Edie

17 August 1908

Having a ripping time. Just waiting for it to get dark. To see the illuminations, of course.
Love Tubbie

25 August 1908

Started 9.45 yesterday morning arrived here 8. No punctures. Headwind all the way. Now off to Exhibition. Shall see you on Sunday.
Albert

15 October 1908

I am sending you just a card to let you see we are really here. The exhibition is very grand. Have any of you been up? Crowds of people here. London a very busy place. Traffic deafening.



'L. Private Collection' Tom Jackson

An aspect of the Exhibition that has attracted attention in later years is the Villages. The Irish Villlage, Ballymaclinton, was a huge favourite for postcards. The “colleens”, renowned for their beauty, exerted a grip on the male imagination, and the writers of the following cards appear delightedly scandalised by their demeanour:

11 May 1908

Some of these girls were very cheeky. The village is very interesting.

8 August 1908

The Irish colleens at the village are OK. Hold me back!
WHD

8 September 1908

I saw this girl. She's every bit as pretty as Zena Dare. Don't you think so?

12 September 1908

Dear L

I think the Irish lassies wanting in modesty, don't you? Saw a number of them on Saturday.

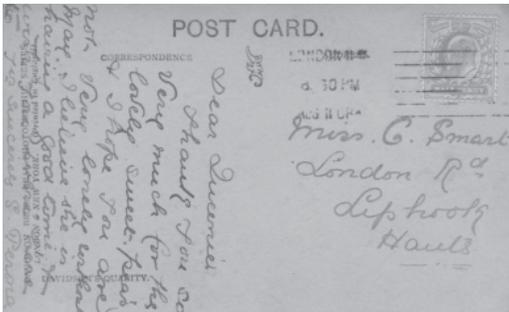
Love to all, A Phillpott

The Ceylon Village and the Hagenbeck's entertainments were also key attractions for the visitor.⁸ Attitudes, as might be expected, are patronising towards the performers, but fascinated:

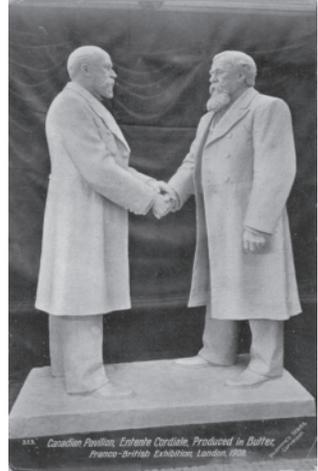
18 May 1908

I am sending you a picture which I have just bought from an Indian woman. Tell Daddy to expect me at 8.30 on Tuesday.

With love from Mother



2. Private Collection 'Tom Jackson



3. Private Collection 'Tom Jackson

25 August 1908

Have just bought this in Ceylon Village. Oh - and the noise is dreadful. Excuse writing as walking about. Well bye bye you ought to be here. love Marie

29 July 1908

Dear Maud

This is a tiger hunt. afterward in another scene the elephants slide down the chute. Very funny. Off to Ipswich this morning.

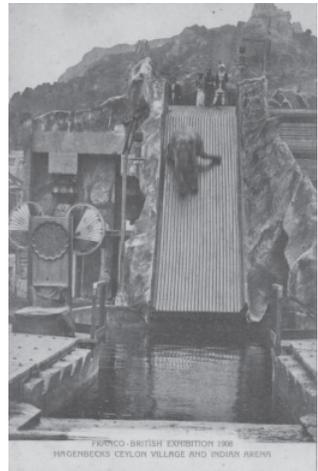
Love to all, Dad

20 August 1908

Dear Flo

This Ceylon village is very interesting. Don't know if you came in here. Hope it keeps fine tonight for the fireworks. If it does we are going on the stadium. Excuse scrawl, am writing this with crowd round, foreigners, monkeys and Indians - the people here are very beautiful with jewellery about their feet and hands.

Love NC



4. Private Collection 'Tom Jackson

'5. Private Collection' Tom Jackson

The Franco-British Exhibition has been described as “one of the largest and most complex of events in modern British cultural history” (Greenhalgh, 1985: 434). Its avowed main aim was to build on the Entente Cordiale of four years earlier, while there were several other political, social, cultural and economic aims:



An underlying aim of this and of most other international exhibitions was to present to an international audience an image of national cohesiveness and progress, and this could only be accomplished by presenting a wide spread of attractions capable of engaging most groups within society. The population had to go through the turnstiles as it were before they could ‘show’ their cohesiveness to foreigners and themselves. Such motives for holding an exhibition caused little embarrassment at the time to the organisers, their sponsors or to the majority of exhibitors, open recognition of them often emerging in the press. (Greenhalgh, 1985: 436)

A certain vision of Britain was therefore created and presented, and the Exhibition carried greater significance at the time in the host country than it did in France, where press reaction was often critical (Greenhalgh, 1985: 451). The French were disappointed commercially, feeling that the ‘amusement’ and ‘novelty’ aspects of the Exhibition such as the Flip-Flap and the Scenic Railways were promoted to the detriment of the range of French goods and other forms of cultural production on display. Indeed, while the human experience as expressed through postcards as vectors of memory has been emphasised here, it has also to be noted that amongst the multiple social trends present at the Exhibition which have endured, above all it is the continued evolution of the modern leisure/pleasure sector and its models of consumerism that are most prevalent. And yet, even though the Exhibition’s commercialism and ‘novelty’ may have eclipsed the very real exchanges between two very different industrialised nations and their capital cities, between very different artistic and literary movements on each side of the Channel, between very different imperial systems, it is also true that the ‘Franco’ of 1908 with its “Great White City” also represented a real milestone in an alliance that would be tested within six years on the brutal battlefields of the First World War. Of the voices that have been handed down to us through those tantalising snatches of human communication on postcards posted at the “White City”, how many survived the Great War? How many lost a father, son, brother, husband, lover, friend? It is perhaps fitting that the memory of 1908 remains for the most part ephemeral, being as it is one of the last symbols of a Europe that was about to disappear.

Postcard messages are by their nature brief, and can at times tend toward poetry. A final favourite message from the thousands trawled through puts the wonder of the Exhibition in a few words but captures an emotion with startling clarity:

4 July 1908

If you were to see this at night, you would never want to leave it. It is a dream.

CFK

Notes

¹ See, for example, Bal, Crewe and Spitzer (1999); Connerton (1989); Hodgkin and Radstone (2003a) and (2003b); Huyssen (1995); Nora (1984); Wertsh (1993).

² See also Knight (1978, revised 2008: 68-70).

³ "Postcards from the White City" (12th May and 15th September 2008).

⁴ See also, for example, Kyrou (1966: 151); Holt (1971: 274).

⁵ The usual story goes that you could send a postcard at lunchtime saying you would be late home for supper and the message would arrive in time to avoid your food being burnt.

⁶ See also Ripert et Frère (1983: 196); Willoughby (1994: 159).

⁷ The reference is to *Le Figaro illustré* (Oct 1904).

⁸ "... In the second half of the [nineteenth] century a pattern emerged which led to the full development of the model of the human zoos as human exhibitions of 'exotics' with a certain racial element (from 'ethnic shows' to 'negro villages'), which were either independent or formed part of larger performances, such as the universal and colonial exhibitions.

The first troupe of this type was shown by Carl Hagenbeck in Hamburg in 1874, the year of Barnum's arrival in Europe. This date therefore acted as a watershed in the development of human exhibitions." (Blanchard, Bancel, Boëtsch, Deroo, Lemaire, Forsdick, 2008: 7).

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