

More ha, ha, ha, than ooh, la, la

Dick Henrywood takes a peek at the famous postcard artist Donald McGill who, despite a conviction for obscenity, was more funny than crude

Whenever postcards get a mention in the press, the spotlight almost inevitably seems to fall on Donald McGill.

For more than 50 years McGill designed comic postcards, and his name will forever be associated with the saucy seaside card with sexy overtones – but it was not always like that.

Born in 1875, Donald Fraser Gould McGill went to art school at the age of 16, but soon left to join a firm of naval architects. An apprenticeship as an engineering draughtsman followed but, by 1904, he had begun drawing comic postcards in his spare time.

His skill in this field soon became clear and he left his job in 1907 to work full-time designing cards and, by the time he died in 1962, he had some 12,000 designs to his credit and a total sales estimated at 200 million copies.

The most popular card, depicting a small girl praying at her bedside with her puppy pulling at her nightdress and pleading: "Please, Lord, excuse me a minute while I kick Fido", was drawn in 1906 but remained in production throughout McGill's life, with total sales of around three million copies.

Interestingly enough, it was one of his most mild designs – later on McGill graded his output, with the stronger, more saucy designs generally being the better sellers.

It was after the Second World War that censorship reared its ugly head, and the watch committees of several local seaside councils took action against the publishers of comic cards, and many designs were banned and destroyed.

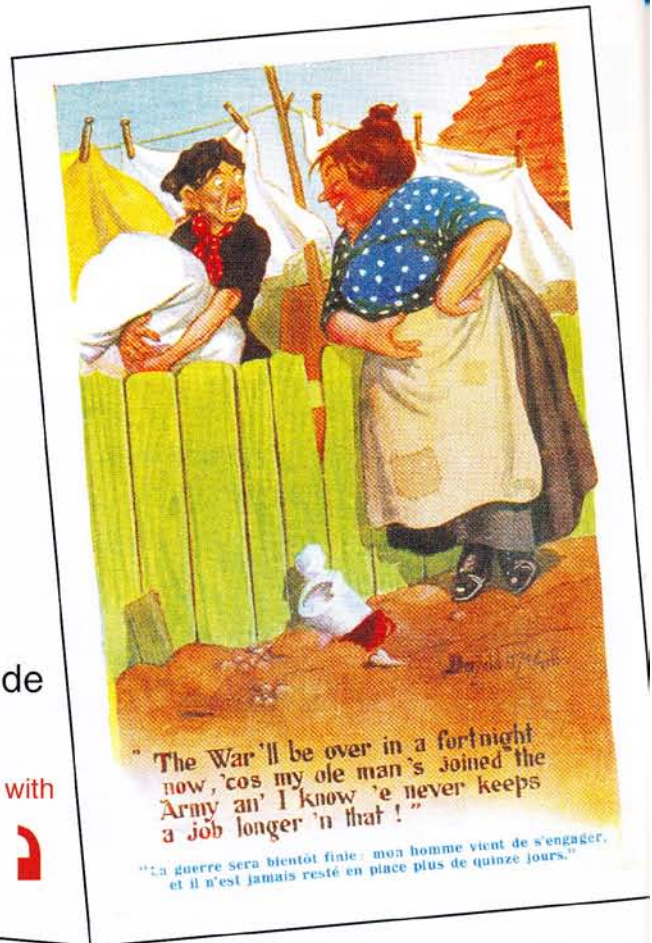
This culminated in 1954 when McGill and his publishing firm were charged with breaking the Obscene Publications Act at Lincoln Crown Court, to which he eventually pleaded guilty and was fined £50.

The conviction, however, had a serious effect on several publishers, some of which went bankrupt. As censorship died out, though, the market revived and the Act was subsequently amended.

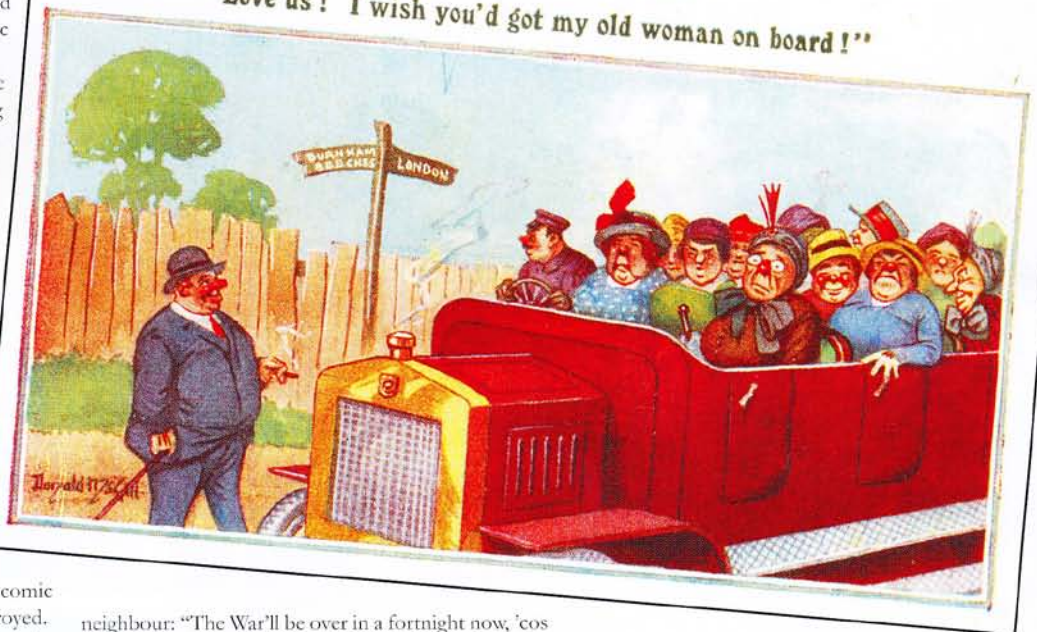
Although remembered predominantly for his saucy cards, most of which in retrospect are surprisingly mild, McGill's early output included many cards with no sexual overtones, which are genuinely very funny.

I have chosen two of my favourites to illustrate this article. The first is from the First World War period, posted in 1916, and shows a rather ample housewife leaning over the fence on washing day and telling her

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"Where are you going with that lot, Bill?"
"Goin' to Burnham!"
"Love us! I wish you'd got my old woman on board!"



neighbour: "The War'll be over in a fortnight now, 'cos my ole man's joined the Army an' I know 'e never keeps a job longer 'n that!"

As with other cards from this period, the caption is repeated in French, although in a few cases the French caption is by no means an exact translation.

The second card is one I always show in my lectures on postcards to the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies and other predominantly ladies' groups.

This one was posted in 1927 and depicts a group of rather fierce-looking old ladies off on a charabanc trip with a male onlooker asking the driver: "Where are you going with that lot, Bill?" Following the reply: "Goin' to Burnham", the onlooker responds with the punchline: "Love us! I wish you'd got my old woman on board!" The prominent signpost shows that the

trip was from London to Burnham Beeches, not Burnham-on-Sea, which shows clearly that such humorous cards sold in city and country areas just as well as at the seaside.

I hope that these two cards demonstrate that Donald McGill had an eye for genuine humour, not just bawdy innuendo. His later cards were certainly more risqué, but even then most of them are funny rather than crude. It was other artists who dragged the genre towards the gutter.

□ Dick Henrywood is the consultant responsible for collectors' items at the auctioneers Dreweatt Neate of Donnington Priory. They would be pleased to advise on the valuation or sale of any interesting old items ranging from valuable antiques to more modern "collectables".