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REVIEWS

Robert E. Babe, *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press 2000. (448 pp.).

Two things I was vaguely aware of became strikingly clear as I read this impressive contribution to intellectual biography. First, communication themes crosscut the work of a variety of influential humanities and social sciences scholars who have worked in Canada over the past one hundred years. The show has not been all Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. Second, the stage has been largely Toronto, despite Montreal's more eminent cosmopolitan and economic status during much of the twentieth century. By way of contrast, in the United States, New York had a worthy intellectual rival in Chicago.

Despite conservative Hogtown holding sway here in the world of ideas, it managed to provide a home for some very un-conservative thinkers. Many of them came from non-metropolitan areas at a time when such origins were decidedly unfashionable. Again, a somewhat different scenario existed south of the border. For every Thorstein Veblen, who brought an earth-clotted sensibility to scholarship—Babe nicely highlights the Veblen/Innis connection—there was a child of the polis, such as Lewis Mumford. Although numerous significant figures in American social science were immigrants from central Europe (often Jewish), or their first generation offspring, they were, nonetheless, enculturated in the American urban experience. Most were and remained outsiders, but their

marginality was ethnic. In the case of the Canadian tradition discussed in this book, it has been geographic.

Babe has selected not three, nor seven, but ten such individuals for his pantheon. My first reaction was, "Too many". I was wrong. Despite major figures being juxtaposed and compared with several we might deem minor, the arrangement works. What results is an effective montage, or mosaic, to use a favorite McLuhan term, that never lapses into hagiography. It tells us as much about the Canadian context that nurtured and helped elaborate a series of revealing concepts—communication, medium, dialectic, time and space, the social versus the individual, and of course, the centre against the margins—as it does about the first and second order luminaries who attempted to explicate these concepts. There is also a useful biographical portrait of each figure at the outset of their respective chapters. The source for this is not solely archival, but draws from interviews, some quite candid, that the author did while researching the book.

The scholars discussed come from a variety of academic fields. Although emphasis is placed on their "communication thought," the book can be read profitably from almost any disciplinary perspective in the humanities and social sciences. Interestingly, almost all the writers who are assessed point out in their own way what Innis (perhaps as a legacy from Robert Park and the Chicago School) declared axiomatic: it is important to study communication because it provides the dynamic link that connects the individual to the social and social institutions with each other.

The cause of the book is greatly aided by the introduction. Indebted to the work of American scholar, James Carey, it serves as a primer on the development of various concepts of communication in both the United States and Canada. This ground better enables us to understand the ten figures selected for examination and why they were chosen.

The sequence of sages discussed, ending as it does with McLuhan and proceeding in a roughly chronological fashion, would seem to invite starting with the first born, Innis (1894-1952). He is, however, preceded by Graham Spry (1900-1983). Spry was, like Innis, a historian and a reformer – although less of the latter and more of the former than his renowned contemporary. His work in broadcasting, especially with the Canadian Radio League, has been much acclaimed and is duly assessed. Underlying it and less well known is a concept of communication that Babe meticulously unpacks.

Of Innis and communication, much (Too much?) has been said over the past several decades. In a book such as this, basic ground must by necessity be covered again, and is done so with aplomb. Yet even to a veteran Innisphile like

myself, Babe has shown a new thing or two. His comparison of several Innisian notions to those of Adam Smith—with reference not only to the *Wealth of Nations* but the equally important and much neglected *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as well—is convincing. Ditto for his careful reading of Innis's early work on the Canadian Pacific Railway and application of Innisian ideas to the information age.

With John Grierson (1898-1972), we have a figure who spent only part of his career in Canada. Nevertheless, his work as a social reformer, documentary filmmaker, and founder of the National Film Board has been momentous. In profiling this legacy, the author defends Grierson against some recent critics. One area where he does not go that I have always found fascinating, is the relationship between Grierson and Nanook auteur, Robert Flaherty—Grierson appreciated the latter's artistry as a filmmaker, but regarded as misguided his attempt at ethnographic purity.

Dallas Smythe (1907-1992) was our colleague when the author and I were both at Simon Fraser University. I remember fondly Dallas' warning me against the idealist assumptions he believed characterized Innis's writings. He was a Marxian (not a Marxist), whose pioneering work on content analysis, monopoly capital, and audience commodification has been highly influential. Yet for a number of us, he tended to regard the audience as a bit too passive, a critique addressed in this chapter, which also makes good use of an unpublished autobiography.

Political philosopher C.B. Macpherson (1911-1987) is one of the most well-known personages the book covers. A colleague of Innis, Macpherson went his own way in conceptualizing communication as a result of his examination of human nature, individualism, and private versus common property. The comparison of Macpherson with Innis, which entails contrast and complementarity, is especially revealing.

Although Irene Spry, nee Biss (1907-1998) may have been the wife of Graham, she had her own bent of scholarship. She was inspired by and worked with Innis. Her writings on Canadian economic history extended and refined his program. A key project, and one Babe justifiably emphasizes, was her research and commentary on the Palliser Expedition that went from the prairies to the Pacific (1857-1860), which she saw as an event of great significance to Canadian communication. I still remember her warm and encouraging words to me, when as a very junior academic, I presented my first conference paper in communication. It was on Innis.

The gallery of thinkers examined in *Canadian Communication Thought* includes at least one figure bearing a decidedly pessimistic vision: philosopher

and Red Tory, George Grant (1918-1988). His avowed intention was to bring the "darkness into the light as darkness" (p.205). That quest has yielded some noteworthy perceptions on mass society and communication, especially his take on advertising — critical to be sure, but not completely devoid of hope, as Babe points out.

Coming to McGill University as a German émigré via the University of Illinois, Gertrude Joch Robinson (b. 1927), studied with some major figures in American communication — George Gerbner and Herbert Schiller among them — and with Dallas Smythe. Press studies and feminist issues have been her forte. More than any of the ten, as Babe notes, she has been responsive to the dynamics of Quebec culture, having done an important study of press coverage there during the 1980 referendum. As a former colleague of "Gee Gee," I can also attest to her diligent labours on behalf of the Canadian Communication Association, where she served a term as president.

Renowned internationally as a literary theorist, Northrop Frye's (1912-1991) work on language and myth justifies his inclusion in the pantheon. Throughout his career Frye has explored both the internal dynamics of a variety of narratives, and their interpretation and appropriation. Occasionally, this concern led him to consider the world of mass media, a realm where his more famous University of Toronto colleague and rival, McLuhan, held global court. Read the book and find out what happened.

And finally, the media maestro himself, Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). As was the case with Innis, one would be hard pressed to find something new to say. Babe covers the basics with tact, given the controversial nature of some of the views McLuhan espoused. I have only one thing to add. Having studied with the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, who was McLuhan's close friend and collaborator, especially during the Explorations period in the 1950's, I find that Babe, and just about every other McLuhan commentator, underestimates the influence "Ted" exerted on Marshall. Carpenters work in cultural and linguistic anthropology helped open McLuhan's intellectual sensibilities to non-western and non-linear worldviews, and the possibilities of an oral tradition more attuned to an inclusive sensorium than the one conceived by Innis. This provided a foundation for the first part of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and important segments of *Understanding Media* (1964).

Each of these chapters is, in effect, a mini-treatise; the overall study, a scholarly landmark. If I may be so bold as to suggest "instructions for use," I would recommend that it be read serially, one or two chapters at a time. Although Babe's engaging presentation renders some of the rather complex themes discussed quite palatable, reflection is still necessary for complete digestion. He also excels

in the art of making each chapter build logically on its precursors, and in so doing highlights the relationship each thinker has to several of the others. The conclusion augments this by summarizing their common themes and arguing for the continued relevance of the legacy.

As is also shown, the paths of some of the ten crossed occasionally in print; and, in a few fleeting instances, in life as well: Innis and McLuhan for example. Sometimes there was amity — Irene Spry on Innis; sometimes enmity — Northrop Frye on McLuhan. Always there was a quest for social and cultural understanding that has bequeathed to Canada a major intellectual tradition. In Babe, it has found a cartographer most worthy.

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BOOKS RECEIVED FOR REVIEWING

The following books are available for reviewing.

Please Contact Hart Cohen or Geoffrey Sykes at the following addresses if any of these titles are of interest.

Hart Cohen
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NSW 2747
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Examples

Dictionary of Aboriginal English. 1985-. Editor-in-chief Arthur H. Onslow. Brisbane: Queensland University Press.

Pilgill, Neville, and Edith Jayne. 1985. *Inuit English: A Guide to Varieties of Standard English in the far North of Quebec*. 2nd ed. London: Edward Arnold.

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Peterson, Neville. 1988. Untitled article. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 14 November: 11-12.

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