Reviews

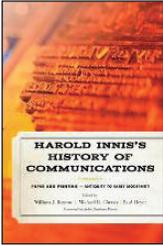**Harold Innis's History of Communications: Paper and Printing — Antiquity to Early Modernity.** *Edited by William J. Buxton, Michael R. Cheney, and Paul Heyer.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. 185pp. ISBN: 9781442243385.

With their recently published version of *Harold Innis's History of Communications: Paper and Printing — Antiquity to Early Modernity,* editors William Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer provide an excellent reminder of the tragedy of the premature demise of Harold Innis. Originally subtitled *An Incomplete and Unrevised Manuscript,* the *History of Communications* is a project that Innis assembled during the last dozen or so years of his life. As John Durham Peters notes, contributing a foreward to the volume, the manuscript has attained a near legendary status among Innis scholars. Consequently, its being published, in any format at all for the first time, has brought into broader light some of what we might have expected from Innis had he lived beyond the meagre 58 years he was allotted. Apparently totalling about 1,400 pages in length and going back approximately to 1500 BC with ancient India and China, the editors, in their introduction, draw our attention to the momentous scholarly significance of Innis's formerly unpublished work: namely, that it very likely constitutes the first true inroads ever made into the history of communications as a field and topic of study.

Noting the overlapping territory with Innis's monumental *Empire and Communications* (1950), Buxton, Cheney, and Heyer point out that *History* doubtless provided that text with some of its source material, contrary to what has become the established view within Innis scholarship that it had followed as outtakes of that classic work. Rather than being framed around civilizations, however, the incomplete and unpublished "History" manuscript was organizing its investigation around types of media, and, accordingly, included much greater textured detail in that regard.

Recounting that the first three chapters were meant to move from the Near East to Europe and to focus on the materials on which texts were written (specifically clay, papyrus, and parchment), our editorial trio delineates how Innis's overall intention was to trace the history of writing materials up to and including the twentieth century.

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With the remainder of the volume outlining how paper migrated from China to Europe, they emphasize Innis's analysis of how this process thus "set the stage for the epic battle between parchment and paper, culminating in the triumph of paper culture, as linked to printing and publishing, as well as a host of institutions and practices they underpinned" (p. 4). Paper was a revolutionary medium, and Buxton, Cheney, and Heyer keenly elucidate how Innis's fascinating project reflects a continuation of his earlier emphasis on staples, typically things like the fur trade and the cod fisheries, and, here, rooted in his focus on the pulp and paper industry.

Shortly after Innis's death, an edited version of this project was submitted to the University of Toronto Press but was rejected as a result of the poor reviews it garnered, claiming that it amounted basically to reading notes that would constitute plagiarism should they be published. Alexander John Watson (2007) upholds this interpretation, but this is an account that excludes any reference to previous versions of the manuscript identified in the Innis Archives at the University of Toronto. Buxton, Cheney, and Heyer have likewise edited and significantly "cleaned up" the text, and Innis originally intended the three chapters included in this volume to be Chapters Four, Five, and Six of a much larger work. Consecutively titled "The Coming of Paper," "Printing in the 15th Century," and "Printing in the 16th Century," these chapters address topics that are not significantly dealt with elsewhere, including the effects on Elizabethan book markets of the uncertainty of patronage, and questions about power, class, and labour struggles within the early French paper industry, issues that tend to be left unaddressed in Innis's political-economic analyses.

As Innis traces the spread of the making of paper and the paper industry from China through Turkestan, Baghdad, Tihama, Damascus, Sicily, and Fez, to what is now modern Spain, France, Italy, and Germany, he also explores topics such as the use of ink, movable type, and the distribution of both paper and books. The editors summarize the mammoth media ecological dimensions of the project, and the way that Innis clarifies how paper and printing were linked to a range of phenomena, "including language, religion, printed currency, public opinion, literature, and education" (p. 7). Summarizing the developments that paper helped to spawn, and that Innis here explores, they include "credit, monopolized lending, a growing interest in antiquity, the revival of Roman law, constitutionalism, the accessing of scriptures, the preserving of Latin, the subverting of feudal law, the reforming of the Church, the Protestant revolt, the strengthening of vulgate languages, and the beginning of the Renaissance" (p. 8).

In this regard, the editors point out how *History* now takes its place as the first among a number of important texts concerned with the role of print in early modernity that emerged in the wake of Innis's death, including Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book* (1958), Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), and the late Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (1978). Some of the interesting historical details that Innis notes in his work include the introduction of cursive handwriting at the end of the 11th century, along with the recognition of how writing's development on a large scale assumed the existence of a cheaper material than parchment, which until the late 13th century was

very expensive. Though paper was introduced generally in the fourteenth century, Innis notes that it was not a serious rival to parchment until the fifteenth century, when the paper industry had also reached Germany. And there, in 1534, Martin Luther published the first German edition of the entire Scriptures within one volume.

Looking ahead to the soon-to-be-released follow up to this volume, Buxton, Cheney, and Heyer have said that they are publishing Innis's hitherto unpublished and now missing MA thesis *The Returned Soldier* (1918), along with his incomplete memoir (which goes only up to 1922) and some of his central correspondence, including letters sent home from Toronto to Otterville that describe his agony and culture shock, when he first set off to McMaster University, back in the days before McMaster moved its operations from Toronto to Hamilton.

Fittingly, the editors refer to the chapters they have included here as Innis's analysis of "the paper and printing complex." And they suggest that what Innis accomplishes in this work is to probe its impacts in Asia and Europe "upon politics, culture, and economics" (p. 8). As it so happens, not least of these impacts were those in France, where, as Innis informs us, new regulations apparently exempted booksellers from military services; as an alternative, however, they were "compelled to light the public lanterns each evening to 1640" (p. 90). Though Innis never sounds off on the complexion of this arrangement, we could predict—given his own traumatic experience of the First World War—that he may have viewed this as a reasonable compromise.

Reference

Watson, Alexander John. (2007). *Marginal man: The dark vision of Harold Innis.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Phil A. Rose, McMaster University