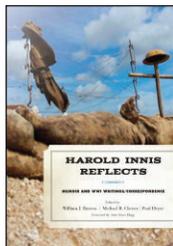


## Review



**Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/Correspondence.** Edited by William J. Buxton, Michael R. Cheney, & Paul Heyer. Foreword by Anne Innis Dagg. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 253 pp. ISBN: 9781442273993.

The justification for this volume is—or at least ought to be—self-evident to anyone who has a cursory knowledge of Canadian life and letters. Harold Innis was one of the most important intellectuals that Canada has ever produced. During the first half of the twentieth century, he made significant contributions to Canadian economic and global cultural history. Crucially, from the standpoint of the *CJC*, he was a founder of the Toronto School of Communication. For these reasons, the publication of *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings/Correspondence* is a welcome development. For a scholar of Innis' national and international stature, one would only expect that—over time—his unpublished writings and correspondence would be published to support and deepen scholars' engagement with his writings. That being said, there is an additional reason why the publication of this volume is important. Even Innis' most enthusiastic admirers will admit that he is a terrible read. As *The Economist* once noted, "Incoherence, indeed, is Professor Innes' besetting sin" (p. 239). The price of that "incoherence" is that his writings cannot be read in isolation. To gain purchase on what, in the end, is a sophisticated and coherent construction of history, Innis' writings must be read in relation to the other published and unpublished works in his corpus.

Innis scholars are therefore indebted to William Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer for their continuing efforts to publish works that heretofore have generally required a trip to the University of Toronto archives to access. In 2014, the three published an edited version of the first three chapters of Innis' unpublished "History of Communications" manuscript—one hopes they will undertake to complete the rest of it in a future undertaking—while in this volume we are presented with writings that, in one form or another, touch on his early life. The first section features Innis' autobiography, which treats his youth as a farm boy in Otterville, Ontario, his education at McMaster University, his service in the Canadian Army during World War I, his subsequent entry into the University of Chicago as a doctoral student, and finally his early years as a new faculty member at the University of Toronto.

While the first section covers Innis' reflections on his early life—he wrote it while he was dying from cancer in 1952—the second section offers writings Innis produced as a young man. More specifically, it features Innis' war correspondence, and his immediate public and private reflections about the war, written between July 1917, when he was wounded at Vimy Ridge, and October 1919, when Innis entered graduate school and proposed to his future wife, Mary Quayle. Among the most significant of the re-

flections featured here is Innis' MA thesis, *The Returned Soldier*. These materials are accompanied by a foreword from Anne Innis Dagg and an able introduction by the three editors, both of which are useful for putting Innis' writings in the contexts of his life and times. All writings are also annotated by the editors for the purposes of identifying individuals named by Innis, providing historical context, cross-referencing the autobiography with Innis' correspondence, and referring readers to relevant secondary sources in the Innis literature.

The significance of these materials, both original and contextual, is what they have to tell us about the trajectory of Innis' life, and his evolution as a scholar. With respect to the former, Innis grew up in a Baptist family where life was hard (some might even say austere), but also sheltered. Through education, and through service in the war, Innis came to learn that life was often fractious, complicated and deeply unfair. As an undergraduate student teaching summer school in Alberta during 1915, Innis directly learned a new word: region. Through encounters with friends and contacts, he learned that not all Canadians were equally happy with the political and economic compact that was Confederation. It was a lesson that would define his scholarship and, later, his participation in the Royal Commission on Transportation in 1948. Innis' horizons were further stretched while he was at McMaster, where the verities of his Baptist faith were tested by the philosopher James Ten Broeke, a lifelong influence. Ten Broeke was more than ready to engage with doctrinaire, evangelical students and produced books, Innis reports, that identified the problems "of working out a philosophical basis for theology, when to the orthodox no such problem existed" (p. 41). The philosopher was "by far the most heretical thinker in the university" (p. 41).

As for his military service, Innis had little good to say about it. He had hated life in the army, save for the exposure it provided him to soldiers from other parts of Canada, an experience which gave him "an understanding of individuals which I never otherwise would have had" (p. 82). One lesson that was purchased then and after the war was a deeper understanding of how industrial capitalism affected people. "There was a hardness" Innis writes of the Canadian industrial workers he encountered in Britain, "such as I had not come into contact with" (p. 50). In 1920, Innis gained a deeper understanding of why a person—in town, or in country—might become "hard." John Dell, his best friend from childhood, and then an employee at a Grand Trunk Railway plant, wrote: "You know it is not my lot to wear fine clothes. You know the chance I had to make a start and when I did it was none too brilliant" (p. 38). In a certain sense Innis did not know, and for that reason Dell's lines made a profound impression on him. "I doubt where I had ever forcibly realized," he wrote in his autobiography, "what lives of certain individuals meant until he wrote those lines. It was an indication of resignation to a certain type of life with no hope and consequently little prospect of rising above it. It was an indication of 'class' in a rural area" (p. 38).

The texture of Innis' life, however, was defined by much more than contingent events that suggested life is nasty, brutish and short. Innis saw human misery, but he also knew wonder. He was confronted with complexity, but also found heuristics that made sense of much of it. Innis obtained that wonder—and intellectual purchase—while completing his undergraduate and MA degrees at McMaster. Originally intending

to use the two degrees as a foundation for a career in law or the ministry, it is striking to see how many ideas initially acquired at McMaster later found expression in his scholarship. Innis' commitment to the concept of balance is a well-known feature of his early and late scholarship. He applied the term to analyze multiple practical, institutional, economic and cultural contexts, but all applications of the term "balance" could be and were reduced to a simple proposition: healthy systems require the maintenance of balance between freedom and constraint. His autobiography suggests his commitment to this concept was inherited from William Stuart Wallace, his history lecturer and later librarian at the University of Toronto: "I can still remember his statement that 'liberty is impossible without order,' 'that the economic interpretation of history is not the only interpretation but it is the deepest interpretation' " (p. 39).

A second feature of Innis' writings—particularly his economic histories—is that Innis sought to be different. The trajectory of Canadian economic history, he argued, could not be analyzed by rote application of economic theory derived from the history and operation of foreign economies. Canada's economy, past and present, was different from its American, British, and European counterparts and therefore required a distinctly Canadian economics. What Innis meant by his appeal for difference has been a source of scholarly debate. Nationalist interpreters have typically seen it as an appeal to the particular: a call for the creation of an economics that applied to Canada and only Canada. Other interpreters, based in part on Innis' appeals to Adam Smith and Thorstein Veblen, argue that Innis subscribed to a more universal conception of economics. In this reading, Innis saw economic activity—and history for that matter—as being regulated by general laws. However, that fact did not preclude their manifestation and operation from being influenced by contingent circumstance and geography. It was perfectly possible, under a scheme of general law, for one locale to have a very different economic profile and history from its neighbour, as Canada did with the United States. Given this divide, it is intriguing to see the nascent conception of history and economics that we find in Innis' MA thesis. There, Innis counselled policymakers to look to precedent when considering the problem of soldier repatriation after World War I. There was much they could learn from similar efforts undertaken after the U.S. Civil and Boer Wars. While historical analogues were useful, Innis further cautioned that decision makers should never be bound by them. "It is true that history repeats itself," he wrote, "but it is equally true that history never repeats itself. The same universal laws are in operation, but with relation to different phenomena" (p. 160).

While important continuities arise from these documents, there are also important distinctions to which we should briefly attend in closing. This is a heterogeneous collection of documents. Its contents were produced in different decades, and expressed via different genres (memoir, letter, lecture, article, and thesis), so it is no surprise that we find marked differences in topic and Innis' self-presentation as we proceed from one part of the collection to the next. Here, in their introductory essay, the three editors do a masterful job in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each source under scrutiny. Innis' reflections in his autobiography, the editors write, "are candid as well as guarded—for example, we learn about his anxieties as a student and teacher, but find out nothing regarding his romance with and marriage to Mary

Quayle” (p. 3). The autobiography presents the reflections of a middle-aged man displaying a “penchant for self-discipline” (p. 4). His correspondence, by contrast, shows that Innis was far from being the dry scholar presented in his autobiography. He was in fact “an intense and emotional person prone to irrational outbursts” (p. 4). He was also a warm person, one who wrote passionate, even beautiful, letters to his wife. “Interviews with those who knew him,” the editors write, “also cite a strong sense of humor and fondness for the off-color joke” (p. 4).

In short, Innis, like all of us, had multiple masks that he used to express his person; masks including those of lover, soldier, dutiful son, middle-aged man, and established scholar. The mask he chose—and the facts he chose to reveal or conceal—depended on his needs, his circumstances, and the genre in which he was writing at the time. The three editors do a superb job in identifying these junctures. The one criticism that might be made of their effort is that more could have been done to show the connections between what is shown in this collection and the materials in Innis’ corpus that followed. The introduction would have been much stronger if more attention had been paid to the events, individuals and early writings that anticipated core ideas expressed in works such as *The Cod Fisheries* (1940), *Political Economy in the Modern State* (1946), and *The Bias of Communication* (1951). That criticism, however, is a comparatively minor one. This is a fine effort, and should find a place on the shelves of any scholar invested in the writings of Harold Innis and the Toronto School of Communication.

## References

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John Bonnett, Brock University