

Letters of Marshall McLuhan

Selected and edited by Matie Molinaro, Corrine McLuhan, and William Toye.
Oxford University Press, 1987, Toronto, Ontario.

Success, said C. W. Wendte, is a matter not so much of talent or opportunity as of concentration and perseverance. Certainly the late Marshall McLuhan's Letters provide abundant evidence of those vital qualities as well as his great energy, encyclopedic, voracious reading, and, in his own words, his "unyielding, independent temperament" (103).

For example, of the revision of English studies at the University of Manitoba in 1931, a young McLuhan writes: "I cannot help but think that the revision should have started with the staff" (9), calling one professor "an erratic hayseed." To Ezra Pound in 1948, he writes: "For the prudence and timidities of the professorial mind I have no use whatever. But from the point of view of leisure to work and of possible contacts with those young enough to be furnished with some tools and directives, the university is increasingly important" (198). In the same letter he says of North American public education that "grade school and high school education together do not suffice to nourish two years of adolescent growth."

In 1951, he complains to Pound about how poetic activity is received by the public: "In a mindless age every insight takes on the character of a lethal weapon. Every man of goodwill is the enemy of society" (227).

In 1930, McLuhan's juvenile interest in popular culture was stimulated by "an illuminating lecture on the development and technique of modern advertising," a continuing interest which led eventually to the publication of *The Mechanical Bride* (1951).

By 1939, his non-specialist intellectual orientation is clear: "I have masses of materials for articles on a dozen subjects including education. But I feel that I must first make my mark as a 'scholar' in Eng. Lit. before seriously embarking on any other careers. Because, once you are caught up in the hurly-burly of controversy and journalism there is small opportunity to cultivate the qualities of mind which can alone make such activity worthwhile" (127).

In McLuhan's articles and letters of decades ago, there are always matters of immediate and striking relevance such as the editorial footnote in which he is quoted as saying that Wyndham Lewis' *The Doom of Youth* (1932) "is an elaborately documented analysis of all aspects of 'feminism' and of its twin-homosexuality" (213). Both, of course, are increasing today, a theme that could be profitably explored in relation to the present linguistic emasculation and obfuscation, the logical culmination of which will be such infantile and meaningless verbiage as calling a mailman a "postperson."

In an amusingly ironic letter (364) to William Wimsett, the author of *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (1954), McLuhan paraphrases a Johnsonian quote about Oxford, that it must be a seat of great learning because many young men went there with a little learning and left with none, and attributes it to an anonymous College president.

Generally, the sychophantic, sympathetic, and supportive letters to Wyndham Lewis are duller than those of Ezra Pound whom the overzealous McLuhan sometimes irritated and annoyed. Exasperated at McLuhan's probing emphasis on 'influence' in literary creation, Pound tells him in 1952 that "yr/crit/writing will become a lot livelier when you start looking for credits rather than debts/not matter where a man GOT what, but what he did with it (or without it) AFTER he got it" (232).

The *Letters* would be a livelier volume if some of the juvenilia were excluded in favour of a few early articles such as "The Cambridge English School" and "Dagwood's America," one much alluded to in the book. Moreover, the inclusion of idle letters to people like Woody Allen serves no purpose.

While generally doing an admirable job editorially, William Toye's reach occasionally exceeds his grasp. For example, he identifies a 1976 letter to Jacqueline Tyrwhitt (359) on the hemispheres of the brain as being written in 1968 (the letter in question being identical to one sent me in 1976), and then compounds his error in a misleading footnote. The back photo on the dustjacket was likely taken in McLuhan's old office in the mid-1960's, not in the 1970's.

In a recent review of the *Letters* in *Maclean's*, the continuing correspondence between McLuhan and Pierre Trudeau is seen as "perhaps the most remarkable exchange between philosopher and statesman to take place in modern times," the writer not being aware of the ancient learning that regards the scholar, statesman, and sage as one. Both McLuhan and Trudeau were aware of that tradition.

In a letter to Trudeau's assistant, J. M. Davey, McLuhan describes how the use of alcohol and drugs relates to technological change, pointing out, for example, that television is the key to understanding the drug panic: "TV intensifies the already numerous forms of inner-tripping. Colour TV is psychedelic input. The kids are simply putting jam on jam when they take to drugs. ...In the 20's booze created a huge police state as we tried to prop up the old form of social arrangements. Drugs likewise provide a field-day for the Mafia as we try to maintain the patterns of the pre-electric age while the kids are miming electric speeds and the externalization of their nervous systems created by electric circuitry" (401).

Of the environmental technology of today, the computer, the ultimate assembly line, McLuhan, aside from dealing with the effects of computerized automation, says very little in the *Letters* or elsewhere. Recognizing that it was becoming a dominant technology in his lifetime, he reacted against its "two-bit-wit," as he called it, an

extension or outing of the analytic logic created in our minds by phonetic literacy and typography. That logic is at odds with the world of "secondary orality" created by radio, television, and the telephone. Despite his constant disclaimers, some of his sympathies lay with the electric milieu, the one that contrasts with the typographic universe so brilliantly delineated in his magnum opus, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

Prophetically, McLuhan wrote to Wyndham Lewis in 1944 that "there is some sort of work in me. I shall impinge in some sort of way, but whether academic or not I am unable to see" (147). Also foretelling is Corrine McLuhan's studied comment the day after their 1939 wedding: "My foremost thought will always be Marshall's happiness, for we're going to build a significant life together" (113).

Reviewed by: R. D. Berg

Labour's New Voice: Unions and the Mass Media

Sara U. Douglas

Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1986.

The labour movement, recognizing the opposed class interests of the private mass media, has historically resigned itself to a relationship with them which has been partly defensive, partly dismissive. Its failure to prosecute the class struggle in the symbolic realm as effectively as it has done so at the factory gate has, in the long run, weakened its capacity both for internal cohesion and external militancy.

Sara U. Douglas' richly-detailed study of the US labour movement's current and historical public relations efforts provides useful evidence both of labour's typical shortcomings and of its occasional successes in the use of the media. Her general findings are that union leaders are learning to mobilize relevant media publics, and that they are committing their organizations' resources to the job. The scholarship is broad and detailed (though lacking critical depth). This volume's 300 pages include: (1) an historical survey of labour PR at a national level, from the turn of the century; (2) four historical PR case studies of large active unions (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, United Auto Workers, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees); (3) a current questionnaire survey of the US AFL-CIO affiliates on PR and publishing budgets and activities, advertising and sponsored programming activities, and legal and policy issues in labour communications; (4) probably the best worm's-eye view of constitutional case law on media access, reply, and advertising yet published; (5) studies of three recent campaigns (United Farm Workers, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, and the Missouri United Labour Committee); and (6) a detailed case study of a second, successful and recent campaign of ACTWU.