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# A LEGENDARY WORK APPEARS IN PRINT

## HAROLD INNIS'S HISTORY OF COMMUNICATIONS: PAPER AND PRINTING – ANTIQUITY TO EARLY MODERNITY

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## A LEGENDARY WORK APPEARS IN PRINT

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Abstract: A review is made of the book:

***HAROLD INNIS'S HISTORY OF COMMUNICATIONS:  
PAPER AND PRINTING – ANTIQUITY TO EARLY MODERNITY***

Edited by William J. Buxton, Michael R. Cheney, and Paul Heyer

Published in 2015 by D. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland

May I confide a pipe dream?

I dream of seeing, one day, someone “completing” the uncompleted works of those rare theorists of technology gifted with the ability to see around corners.

To my knowledge, three 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists have been graced with this incredible gift. All three died at a younger age than many, perhaps most of us are likely to reach: Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) died at 48. Harold Adams Innis (1894-1951) died at 58. Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) died at 69.

Benjamin's long-languishing lifelong retrieval of 19<sup>th</sup> century lore, *The Arcades Project*, was published in English in 1982. Benjamin's other writings, letters, manuscripts, and reviews, have only been published in English in part. My dream Benjamin undertaking is to see someone assembling from his fragmentary writings, a skeletal version of a comprehensive theory of technology, particularly the image-driven technologies first birthed in photography.

With Innis, I dream of someone daring to weave a fabric between the sparkling insights of his *Idea File* with the dense arcana of evidential data gathered in his recently published, but long archivally imprisoned manuscript, *The Incomplete and Unrevised History of Communications*.

And my dream of someone completing an unfinished McLuhan project? In the Marshall

McLuhan Fonds at Library and Archives Canada, there are many thousands of notes that McLuhan jotted and clippings that he gathered from 1948 to his death, for the book designed to support his frequent contention -- made from his Cambridge years on -- that new forms of perception emerge within the arts years earlier than they do among the sciences. McLuhan called this project his 20<sup>th</sup> Century Baedeker. A guide to new modes of perception initiated by artists, later shared by scientists and engineers. In the 1970s McLuhan turned unsuccessfully to many funding sources in search of a sponsor for this project. Occasionally he spoke of his 1968 collaboration with Harley Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point*, as an early tryout for his Baedeker. McLuhan's 20<sup>th</sup> Century Baedeker is the greatest book he never wrote.

Someday these books may come into being. Meantime, I suppose, I could follow the lead of Jorge Luis Borges, who, when asked about a book he said he ached to read but that no one had yet written, blew off the suggestion that he write it himself -- "It would take too long," he said -- and instead proposed that he review the nonexistent book as if it did already exist. Many of Borges's widely praised short writings are exactly that: reviews of, or reflections on, imaginary works that Borges did not care to go through the struggle of producing as complete books.

Tempting. However, I cannot see around corners, and I happily admit that what Innis might have intimated about the influence of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Parisian printing industry on the French revolution, or what McLuhan would have discerned as artistic precursors to the Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, are both frankly beyond me.

I mention my pipe dream as a preface to some comments on a legendary unfinished and unpublished text -- now, thankfully, published in part, as **HAROLD INNIS'S HISTORY OF COMMUNICATIONS: PAPER AND PRINTING -- ANTIQUITY TO EARLY MODERNITY.**

In my initial glossing through the pages of Innis's *History*, I was struck by two dominating features.

First -- and this will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Innis's work -- is the

encyclopedic range he has assimilated. His satellite-high view of the history of communication is not only vastly encyclopedic. In that sadly untrod term once favored by Coleridge, it is “esemplastic”: not merely all-enveloping but all-connecting -- a concept that today we barely hint at, when we couple “media” with “ecology”. The other striking feature of the *History* was Innis’s focus on extraordinarily fine detail, or, in the language of today, the fine granularity of his data. Here, for a sampler, is one paragraph detailing the physical requirements of a platen, the compressed plate of arranged type in rows that are smeared with ink and pressed onto a sheet of paper for printing. This passage is taken from very early in Chapter Two, “Printing in the Fifteenth Century,” Innis’s treatment of the very early decades following Gutenberg’s first working press of 1455.

Innis writes:

A printing form is necessarily “solid, rectangular, plane-parallel, and durable.” “Separate characters” or letters must be “compressed into a state of *temporary solidity*” which can be done by shaping the units in rectangular fashion in a “mathematically perfect” shape. The characters must be under control in “height, width and depth.” The metal must be “soft enough” to be easily handled and “hard enough to withstand pressure.” For large quantities, “casting” or a “mechanical method” is essential. Printing developed in relation to the use of a particular commodity, paper and a precise material metal. An alloy of 80 percent lead, 5 percent tin and 15 percent antimony with a low fusing point of 246° met the problems of “easy casting at low temperature, hardness, resistance to oxidation, economy” and of shrinkage through cooling evident with lead and tin, offset by metal of “greater toughness” namely antimony. A low melting point and requisite hardness made for rapid casting and precise filling of the fine parts of the mould. (Page 57)

Note the extreme particulars that Innis has assembled here, down to the percentage of metals making up the compound of a usable alloy. It is intriguing to consider how these physical details would play into a later version of Innis’s eventual completed *History*. As evidence, perhaps, of the evolving role of metallurgy in the printing process, to be compared with later methods, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century linotype machine?

From the year of Innis’s death, 1952, to 2015 when portions of *The History* were eventually published, Innis’s massive manuscript languished in archives at the University of Toronto and the National Archives in Ottawa. In 2001 William Buxton, then of Concordia University in Montreal (now retired) wrote an essay in which you can hear his fist pounding on the locked

door of that long interment. In “The Bias Against Communication: On the Neglect and Non-publication of the ‘Incomplete and Unrevised Manuscript’ of Harold Adams Innis,” Buxton observed:

Deterred perhaps by the legends about its gargantuan size, its labyrinthine impenetrability, and its ferocity to the fragile attention spans of unsuspecting readers, guides to Innis’ work have largely been content to navigate the safer and more accessible waters of his published writings.<sup>1</sup>

By 2014, Buxton had teamed with two other Innis scholars to bring portions of the massive manuscript into publication. Michael R. Cheney, a professor at the University of Illinois, had also joined with Buxton in editing and publishing *Harold Innis Reflects: Memoir and WWI Writings and Correspondence*. Paul Heyer, author of the succinct, insightful 2003 biography, *Harold Innis*, was also a contributing editor to *Harold Innis Reflects*. We should be deeply grateful to this triumvirate of Innisians: they have forged the foremost frontal wave front of Innis scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Harold Innis’s History of Communications: Paper and Printing – Antiquity to Early Modernity* was published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2015. I only learned of it in 2022, after dropping a note to Buxton, echoing his 2001 complaint, groaning at the legendary manuscript’s inaccessibility. In a responding e-mail Buxton informed me that several chapters of Innis’s legendary manuscript had indeed been published.

What is a reader to make of these sample glimpses into Innis’s longest work?

In its manuscript form, Innis titled the work, “Incomplete and Unrevised.” How did he foresee it when completed and revised? Already, in 1930, he had produced a work that opened a new discipline in economics. Canadian Economic History was born with the publication of Innis’s *The Fur Trade in Canada*, a work he completed at 36. It is entirely likely that Innis foresaw *A History of Communications* triggering a comparable new academic discipline in communication studies, or what today we more often call media studies.

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In effect, Innis's ambition has been realized. Today, media and communication studies are a relentlessly expanding arena of scholarly efforts worldwide. (Witness this very Journal.) But this has occurred not by means of a multi-volume, epic history of communication, rather, through a process revealing the nature of change wrought by the very media that Innis was the first to study seriously. Innis's insights only became the grit of a global scholarly effort through the relentless imaginations and energies of both Marshall McLuhan, whose career broadcast Innis to the world, and the canny advertising wizard who launched and broadcast McLuhan into public attention in 1966, Howard Luck Gossage.

The archival manuscript of Innis's "Incomplete and Unrevised History of Communications" is huge, numbering 2,400 pages. The first three chapters of the manuscript are missing. In their Introduction to the printed book, Buxton, Cheney and Heyer suggest what those chapters likely would have been.

Some clarification can be found in the "Empire and Communications" files of the Harold Innis Papers in the University of Toronto Archives, which contain numerous drafts of the early chapters of the "History of Communications" manuscript. Evidently, after going through a number of iterations, Innis arrived at the following titles for the first three draft chapters: I, "Feet of Clay" (dealing with Sumerian cuneiform writing and its impact); II, "Papyrus" (dealing with ancient Egypt); and finally, III, "Parchment" (covering the Middle Ages). What is strikingly different about "History" as opposed to *Empire* is the chapter titles that are deployed. The draft chapters in "History of Communications" (not only chapters I–III, but also the subsequent chapters) are organized around the *media on which the texts are written*, whereas, the chapters in *Empire*—quite fittingly—refer to successive civilizations. (Page 2)

What follows is an overview of the manuscript's content, accompanied by the number of pages for each item. For the untitled treatments, the first few words of each have been used to indicate the place in question:

Chapter IV, "The Coming of Paper," 96 pp.

(nt), "Classical Literature . . . ," 18 pp.  
(nt) "Within the middle of the 13th Century . . . ," 9 pp. (nt) "Chaucer wrote for . . . ," 6 pp.

Chapter V, "Printing in the 15th Century," 43 pp. (nt), "The Fifteenth Century saw . . . ," 6 pp.

Chapter VI, "The Paper and Printing Industries in the 16th Century," 121 pp.

Chapter VII, "The Paper and Printing Industries in the 17th Century," 101 pp.

Chapter VIII, "The Paper and Printing Industries in the 18th Century," 307 pp. (Unnumbered chapter)

"Paper and Printing in the 19th Century," 161 pp. (Unnumbered chapter)

"Printing Industry in Britain in the 19th Century," 180 pp.

(addendum) 5 pp.

(nt) "A newspaper is . . .," 18 pp.

(Unnumbered chapter) "The American Printing Industry in the 19th Century," 262 pp.

(nt) "After the Revolution . . ." 12 pp.

"Newspaper Press before 1900," 12 pp.

"Newspaper Press after 1900," 19 pp.

"Frankfurt Bookfair," 16 pp.

"Printing in China in the 19th Century," 3 pp.

"Printing in China in the 20th Century," 8 pp.

(Page 5)

Note the size of the chapter, "The American Printing Industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" -- 262 pages!  
A formidable manuscript of its own.

From this grand trove, Buxton, Cheney and Heyer have selected three chapters for this published sampler of Innis's huge *Incomplete and Unrevised History*:

- (1) "The Coming of Paper" (96 pages in Innis's manuscript, 31 in the published book);
- (2) "Printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century" (43 pages in Innis's manuscript, 27 in the printed book); and
- (3) "Printing in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century" (121 pages in Innis's manuscript, 79 pages in the printed book).

In their Introduction the editors give the impression that this published work is as much of Innis's manuscript likely to see publication. Other chapters in the original manuscript would only be forthcoming if posted by the Innis Archives one day on the internet, or published in book form, under the pressure of substantial demand.

Buxton, Cheney and Heyer note that many readers have found the manuscript consists largely of "densely packed factual material and is quite lacking in the occasional theoretical glosses that accompany [Innis's] other writings on the history of communications." (Page 5)

Yet what has been published gives us an inkling of what Innis had in mind for an encyclopedic history that would do for communication on a grand scale what such historians as Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee and Will Durant had done for the rise and fall of civilizations.

In the published work, Chapter 2, "Printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century," and Chapter 3, "Printing in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century" present the residue of Innis's intrepid research: raw findings, with little of what the editors call Innis's "theoretical glossings." These chapters are indeed, highly "Incomplete" and extremely "Unrevised." However, Chapter 1, "The Coming of Paper," suggests a more processed text, one filled with the kind of accelerated pinball connections that show up Innis's genius in communication theory, what McLuhan compared to observing the actions of subatomic particles in a cloud chamber.

From Chapter 1, "The Coming of Paper," where Innis discusses the copyist profession in the year 1300 in Bologna, Italy:

In 1300, it was said that 50 people made their living by copying and at Bologna copying was "a regular occupation at fixed prices." Paper had probably contributed much to the extension of writing beyond monastic walls. The richly illuminated manuscripts and innumerable workshops of parchment makers and copyists in France were unable to survive the competition of paper. The increasing use of paper facilitated attacks on the clergy. According to Hallam, the greater part of the literature after the twelfth century consisted of "artillery levelled against the clergy [and attacks on] ecclesiastical corruption." Within the Church, "the secular clergy detested the regular [clergy], the regular monks satirized the mendicant friars" and the latter, [exposed] "both to the ill-will of the people, incurred a double portion to themselves." (page 32)



And this, from Innis's discussion, how the Chinese were constrained by a pictographic writing system:

Chinese thought was hampered by "the pictorial and the descriptive. The power of defining and reasoning" was not available to the Chinese. A "purely scriptural education detached thought from gesture and expressive movement. The pupil learned to paint about 2,000 characters." A "training in calculation" was lacking in "Chinese education" and was acquired by merchants in their business affairs. (Page 27)

You can see the familiar darting mind of Innis in those passages, connecting tissues of raw data, or quotes from his sources (I have removed footnotes) into fresh vivid stabs of observation. All in all, "The Coming of Paper" is not so far from the essays in *Empire and Communications*, *The Bias of Communication* and *Changing Concepts of Time*.

You can see the great difference in these passages from Chapter 2, "Printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century", where the casual reader is easily intimidated by the "densely packed factual material".

For example, on the rise of individual consciousness, and the emerging "individual" of the 14<sup>th</sup> century:

At the end of the thirteenth century, "Italy began to swarm with individuality. . . . The ban [on] human personality was dissolved." "Despotism fostered individuality" "in the highest degree," "not only of the tyrant, but of [his] men." "The private man, indifferent to politics, partly serious, partly a *dilettante*, [operated] fully formed first in [the] despotisms of the fourteenth century." In the fifteenth century, there was an "increase in the number of complete men." It was above all a century of "many-sided men." The "[increased] development of the individual corresponded [with] a new sort of outward distinction." In Italian society, "equality appeared before tyrannies [and] democracies." The poet and scholar had "the fullest consciousness that he was [the] giver of fame and mortality or oblivion." Italy was without the feudal system and the "artificial scheme of rights . . . nobility [and medieval] sense of honour." Each prince and counsellor acted with his own power for a "particular case" and end. "An *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all things became possible (Page 35)."

Or this, on the spread of printing 20 years after first Gutenberg bibles:

By 1474 there were three printing houses at Basel. Johann Emerbach of Reutlingen concentrated on the publication of classical texts at Basel. Fust took the first printed Bible to Paris in 1462 and Schoeffer sold an edition of Cicero in 1466. Printing was introduced in Paris by a Frenchman and three Germans, and in Lyons by printers from Nuremberg and Liege. Over 160 printers had settled in Lyons between 1473 and 1500. By the end of the reign of Charles VIII, French printers were displacing German printers in France.<sup>63</sup> Schoeffer was in Frankfort in 1479 and contributed to its development as a publishing and bookselling centre in Germany. In a period of thirty-six years after 1466, he printed fifty-nine books, mostly folios of "fifty to sixty lines" per page averaging 150 sheets or 300 pages. He carried on business in several towns and sold books published by other printers. Johannes Mentelin, in an active period to 1478, used Roman type for printing theological works and became prosperous while competitors were ruined printing Latin classics.

In the period from 1481 to 1501 it has been estimated that one hundred printing offices produced about two million volumes. A further estimate of 10,000 to 15,000 editions from 1470 to 1500 suggests that more than half appeared in Italy. . . . Cicero's works were first printed in their entirety at Milan in 1498, but at least "291 editions of different portions" appeared before 1500. Of the Vulgate, ninety-one editions were printed and of the Digest and Decretals, enormous numbers were published. The scriptures were printed in "the living languages of Europe," as well as in "Vulgate Latin." Euclid was printed in 1482 with diagrams engraved on copper. A Hebrew press at Soncino published the Pentateuch in 1482 and Hebrew learning began "about the end of the century" in the Franciscan monasteries of Tübingen and Basel (Page 63).

Here, on the status of the writing profession before the popular novel emerged:

With the closing of theatres as a result of puritan feeling, leading writers turned to the political field. Writing was a relatively immobile profession. Philip Henslowe was "a hard bargainer" with companies renting his theatre and with playwrights "10 pounds was a good market price for a play," though sometimes the author was given a "benefit" play with "a second or third day" in addition. "The company responsible for management of the theatre" hired it for half the receipts and met the costs of players and properties before dividing the remaining half. The social position of the actor was at a low level and the ambitions of every player was to be a "sharer" by buying a half or a whole share (Page 125).

And this, on some of the ways that the printing press splintered the long-coherent Christian belief system:

Christianity continued its fissiparous characteristics as it had been the religion of the most “progressive peoples of the world” since the fourth century. “Intellectual activity [had been a] potent cause of division and heresy.” Heresies developed into sects. The Waldensians had “followed the book rather than the church,” “reduced the sacraments” to baptism and Mass, and were “anti-clerical.” Lollardy in the fourteenth century and the “scholarly” and “aristocratic” character of [John] Wycliffe’s movement was followed by the Hussites in the fifteenth century... Sects multiplied and conceded “the priceless gift of toleration” in order to protect themselves. Their greatest contribution consisted in “[producing] toleration in spite of themselves.” “Political liberty. . . is the residuary legatee of ecclesiastical animosities.” “The prolific source of Protestant sectarianism was the notion that ‘the Scriptures speak unmistakably.’” The concentration of Luther on “one positive dogma” broke the “doctrines of the Romish Church.” Idols were destroyed and the Bible put in their place. “The antinomian extravagances of Luther” were followed by “the growth of fanaticism.”<sup>S</sup> “Zealous . . . eloquent preachers” “[won] over the multitude” and the “introduction of free preaching” was followed by “abolition of the mass.” . . . (Page 131)

If Innis had completed this vast masterwork, certainly a work that would have required multiple volumes, how would it have stood beside the epic histories of Spengler, Toynbee, and Durant?

Or perhaps today that is not the most relevant question. More usefully: whose historic work comes nearest to Innis’s dream project, if it had ever been realized? I would propose Joseph Needham (1900-1995), the celebrated biochemist at the University of Cambridge who turned, mid-career, into an avid student of all things Chinese and proceeded to write his 16-volume masterwork, *Science and Civilization in China*, which asked why the planet’s earliest inventors of moveable type, gunpowder and other transformative innovations, did not extend the uses of those technologies beyond the fashioning of such ephemera as children’s toys and fireworks. In other words, why did the Chinese cede mastery of technological evolution to the West?

Needham answered this great question in one simple aphorism: “Daoist thought is the root of science and technology in China.”

Innis never read Needham, whose volumes of *Science and Technology in China* began appearing only two years after his death. Innis would have applauded Needham's answer, as well as the Chinese genius of keeping their culture secure from the tectonic effects of major innovations. Daoism, after all, is the home of yin and yang; it is a grounding philosophy of unflagging and intricate balance. Innis's absorption in communication was an endless search for balance. Innis had immense respect for the Greek genius when it achieved the balance of its oral tradition with the skills of writing and reading. Innis sought, in all his communication researches, glimpses of latent balances.

A hearty round of congratulations to William J. Buxton, Michael R. Cheney, and Paul Heyer for bringing these fragmentary remnants of Harold Innis's large dream -- however "Incomplete and Unrevised" these pieces may be -- into the public realm.