Empire and Communications (2022 Edition)

reviewed by Chris Russill iD

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Harold A. Innis. *Empire and Communications*, edited and with an introduction by William J. Buxton. 288 pp., index. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. $45 (paper).

THE INVASION OF Ukraine by the Russian military and its inescapable reminder of the aggressions, murder, and genocide that shapes the colonial history of the Bloodlands all but ensures that questions of empire and imperialism will not soon slip scholarly attention. These events have not only reshaped the geopolitics of colonial ambition in strikingly overt ways, but foreground the importance of communication to questions of war and occupation more generally.

In this respect, the 2022 appearance of a revised edition of Harold Innis's text, *Empire and Communications*, is timely given his interest in the conditions through which empires emerge, extend, endure, and dissolve. His understanding of historiography, knowledge, and communication repays careful consideration, especially his concerns with the incapacities of scholars to set aside the biases of the empires they inhabit.

As a revised version of the 1972 edition edited by Mary Quail Innis, the 2022 reissue adds a nostalgic cover, expanded index, and updated bibliography, as well as an introduction by Innis scholar William Buxton. In this update, like several before it, the text is mostly unchanged. (Let us not speak of the Godfrey edition.[1])

This proliferation of editions brings the political and institutional investments of the field into the foreground, as each iteration raises anew questions about the stakes of working with Innis's understanding of communication. The key concepts and familiar arguments are too well known to rehearse at length and in some cases beside the point. The question of the early/late or A series/B series periodization of Innis might safely be set aside without the need to establish longer continuities across the wider oeuvre or sort out his relationship to Marshall McLuhan. (A series/B series is a division of Innis's scholarship proposed by Havelock (1981) that distinguishes between the writing on economic concerns (A series) and his later work on theoretical questions of philosophical history (B series).)

One result of the accumulating editions is that Innis's technique of aggregation shines through. If *Empire and Communications* is itself a product of aggregation, it should be no surprise that those most engaged with the text

[1] The Godfrey edition preserved Mary Quail Innis's improvements to the original text in an uncredited fashion, inserted editorial subheadings to reorganize the prose in an apparent attempt to aid readers, and added illustrations of questionable value, among other problems. For a concise summary, see Alison Beale, "Book Review: Empire and Communications," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 15, no. 1 (1990).

cannot resist adding notes when passing it forward. Innis loved to aggregate statements relevant to his perspective,[2] a practice of recording information mostly untroubled by the arguments of the texts he consulted (xxiv), a characteristic also applauded by McLuhan in his 1972 introduction, republished with this edition. While the text continues to accumulate minutiae mined by editors, the main throughlines remain as stark as ever and suggest that the concepts, arguments, and mode of analysis are less important than the problem of empire that Innis articulated in its communicative dimensions. (Innis used the terminology of empire consistently throughout the text and attended mainly to the large-scale administrative structures involved in its durability.) The dynamics of empires are illuminated through attention to the communicative systems in which they are embedded. In this respect, Innis developed a materialist conception of communication that remixed our received knowledge of civilization to pose novel questions about the durability and dissolution of British empire.

Buxton's introduction notes that Innis was uninterested in founding a field and that he took up questions of communication and media primarily as a way of "reconfiguring economic history" (xiv, note 41). Buxton drives the point home by attending to the internal economy of Innis's work in the 1940s, his wider research and reading practices, and his correspondence with peers. The argument is compelling and contributes to the main lines of Innisian scholarship by foregrounding an expert understanding of the archive broadly understood. *Empire and Communications* is one part of a broader cluster of research that Innis developed to address issues that were central to "the economic history of British Empire" (xvii). Buxton also illustrates in passing how the Beit Lectures were not just an occasion for the oral medium, but part of wider institutional circuits through which imperial knowledge was circulated. (Innis delivered these lectures in 1948 and they were the origin of the published text.)

Buxton's most interesting technique is to re-read Innis through the marginalia he left in the original text (Mary Quail Innis made these handwritten notes available to scholars by incorporating them into footnotes in the 1972 edition she edited, a feature retained in this new version.) It is a departure from usual approaches to Innis and a delightful way to reimagine the main contributions of the book. The results are perhaps not so surprising, insofar as they appear to reduce to a few key points: Innis's recognition that he had downplayed the violent role of war and the military, his desire to better integrate the different civilizational clusters in terms of an analysis that would amplify the exceptionalism of Greek culture, and his hints for expanding the evidentiary base and reading that informed the early chapters in

[2] Liam Cole Young, "The McLuhan-Innis Field: In Search of Media Theory," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 44, no. 4 (2019).

particular. These last kinds of glosses confirm (to my mind at least) that the relentless aggregation of material was not just a starting point or rudimentary form of historical analysis but central to Innis's way of tracing the networks of empire.

Buxton deserves credit for putting this gently modified version of Innis as a theorist of economic history and British empire before us, and for leaving open the implications of this depiction for communication and media studies. In addition, the way Buxton tracks the shifts from civilizational description to media thematics across chapters, and otherwise clarifies some of the opaque elements of the book, is immensely helpful. Still, the degree to which Buxton remains aloof from other efforts to mobilize Innis's work strikes me as curious. Buxton mostly refrains from engaging communication and media scholarship, even when puncturing some of the mythos about Innis that circulate in that space. As a result, he appears to avoid some of the difficulties that accrue when the significance of a scholar is situated as foundational to a field of scholarship; however, by indexing *Empire and Communications* so tightly to one man's intellectual biography, rather than the machinations of empire in which he was embedded, or the formalization of communication expertise within which those machinations are extended, the question of how our intellectual habits, archives, and exclusions are shaped by empire is somewhat constrained. To be sure, as Paul Heyer once put it, the connection between British empire and what is presented in *Empire and Communications* is "drawn in loose fashion,"[3] but Innis did force these questions into the foreground of communication theory.

[3] Paul Heyer, *Harold Innis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 45.

Buxton's hesitation to engage the field is set aside when Innis's notion of history is discussed. Buxton's introduction encourages readers to align Innis with Hegel's approach to philosophical history, an orientation that distinguishes an accumulation of information from the interpretations afforded by reflection as these attune us to the wider significance of historical change (xiii). It is an inclination to Hegel in apparent if unspoken tension with the many kinds of media and infrastructural materialism that Innis has inspired, not to mention McLuhan's own introduction to the volume (the first sentence of which distinguishes Innis's thought from Hegelian forms of abstraction). I found it interesting that Buxton mobilized Menahem Blondheim's approach to Innis and Hegel, itself a rebuke to conventional ways of reading Innis in the field, as a key to understanding the text today. Nevertheless, it is curious that this was done with little context or historical commentary on the last two decades of scholarship. I also wonder if tethering Innis to Hegel overrides the crucial realization by Innis that the apparent development of Canada's quasi-political autonomy from British empire was only a prelude to its

transformation by the forms of colonial integration fostered by post–World War II projects of American imperialism. Innis, it seems to me, is better placed among scholars emphasizing the intimacies produced by empire than with Hegel.

The problem is posed more precisely when we recall with Buxton how Innis situated his interest in empire. The introduction covers this ground with admirable clarity. Innis was concerned with the way present circumstances impress themselves on civilizational scholarship, a problem he viewed as shaping most studies of the subject in an unacknowledged or unconscious way. The growing interest in civilizational history, Innis noted, was probably a result of the nature of our civilization, a feature of which was the accumulation and storage of information in a context of extensive mechanization. It was through these elements that Innis understood the integration of Canadian geographies into a continental empire, a set of historical processes sketched by subsequent scholarship, including Jody Berland,[4] Shirley Roburn,[5] and Michael Stamm,[6] among others. The pulp and paper industry, a conglomeration of mechanical, energy, and chemical expertise, was the material network through which Canada's ecology was reshaped to support the informational demands of a rapidly extending American empire. It was, in brief, a colonial experience that brought communication into the foreground of intellectual thought as the medium through which empires expand, endure, and dissolve.

If resituated within wider genealogies of empire, or used as a means to explore them, the question of how to receive the histories offered in *Empire and Communications* re-acquires some of the political intensity with which Innis invested his work. Innis was more interested in aggregating information relevant to the historicization of empire than in an orderly presentation of facts within a theoretical framework or archival system of classification. Whether the overflowing nature of the text results from the hurried writing of a scholar doing too much, or from a patient willingness to reflect the contradictions and fractures in knowledge that colonial powers produce, Innis's remix of accepted expertise, administrative data, and personal reflection in exploration of the longer continuities and undercurrents of empire has called forth a variety of responses that are admittedly difficult to organize in efficient fashion.

Of these possible responses, I am most fascinated by the way aggregated material often explodes rather than confirms the philosophical histories that scholars have used to ground the field of communication and media studies. These might be constitutive exclusions, or what Wendy Willems[7] refers to as baffling silences in the manner of Michel-Rolph Trouillot—and one is reminded here of Pierre-Franklin

[4] Jody Berland, *North of Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

[5] Shirley Roburn, "Innis and Environmental Politics: Practical Insight from the Yukon," in *Harold Innis and the Canadian North: Appraisals and Contestations*, ed. William Buxton (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013).

[6] Michael Stamm, *Dead Tree Media: Manufacturing the Newspaper in Twentieth-Century North America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

[7] Wendy Willems, "Provincializing Hegemonic Histories of Media and Communication Studies: Toward a Genealogy of Epistemic Resistance in Africa," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 4 (2014).

Tavarès's[8] and Susan Buck-Morss's[9] recovery of Hegel's fascination with slave rebellion and anti-colonial war in Haiti when fashioning his accounts of freedom, slavery, and world history, a fact elided by most Hegelian scholarship and historiography more generally.[10] More recently, Darin Barney[11] has drawn scholarship on settler colonialism and Indigenous resurgence together with Innisian strands of study to illuminate how the historicity of empire animates the biases of an infrastructure that operates as an administrative medium of a colonial state. The implication of education in the administration of such infrastructure is well-known and documented in government and church archives, in settlement agreements, and in the experiences and memories shared publicly with those composing the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada. The role of education in policies described by the TRC as cultural genocide has meant challenging refusals to acknowledge the historicity of the present, a form of contestation evident in the vandalizing, toppling, and removal of the Egerton Ryerson statue on the campus of what is now called Toronto Metropolitian University (TMU). Ryerson, an educational administrator at Victoria College (now part of University of Toronto), crafted arguments that were influential in the design of Canada's residential school system and had been honored in higher educational institutions in Toronto, most notably when TMU was still named Ryerson University. These facts, widely known and largely uncontested, acquired new significance when the erasure of Indigenous presence by educational institutions was challenged by claims connecting these historical events to the present. The destruction of the monument to Ryerson soon followed.

The forgetting of the colonial divisions of humanity through which official history is often constituted is not only belied by the historical records of state administrative systems that document and manage the inequalities through which wealth, advantage, and movement are regulated, but as Lisa Lowe[12] teaches us, also interrupts knowledge of how British and European empire was constituted through relationships with Africa, Asia, and America that are rarely documented in our field. It is in this context that Innis's desire to contest the absorption of Canada into an Anglo-American form of empire remains valuable, not as an argument for cultural nationalism or claim that Canadians are unique in their capacity to make American empire more perceptible, but as one way into the wider histories of which our world is composed. As a communication student in Ontario, Canada, I knew of Ryerson only as an eponym to a press once sold to a US publisher in 1970, an event that crystalized intense fears about US cultural imperialism, as the rising sales of textbooks to schools, colleges, universities, and libraries had encouraged American compa-

[8] Pierre-Franklin Tavarès, "Hegel et l'abbé Grégoire: question noire et révolution française," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 3, no. 4 (1993).

[9] Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000).

[10] See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of the Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Armond Towns, "The (Black) Elephant in the Room: McLuhan and the Racial," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 44, no. 4 (2019); Wendy Willems, "Provincializing Hegemonic Histories of Media and Communication Studies: Toward a Genealogy of Epistemic Resistance in Africa," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 4 (2014).

[11] Darin Barney, "Infrastructure and the Form of Politics," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 46, no. 2 (2021).

[12] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of the Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

nies to enter the market.[13] In the political ferment around the sale, a literary figure draped a US flag on the Ryerson statue to protest this apparent loss of intellectual and cultural autonomy. Once mobilized as a symbol to defend education against integration into empire, the statue fell when a fuller range of empire's intimacies were connected through the history of education it materialized.

Empire and Communications remains valuable in such contexts because its abstractions never double as claims to transcend empire, never assume a position detached from its dynamics, and never suggest a progressive arc to historical change. Yes, there are lots of other histories that do this work too. Yet, its departure from form illustrated how the material conditions for knowledge production were themselves organized by administrative structures that subsumed communication and the forms of historical evidence that are available.[14]

On this approach, the ceaseless parade of details in the text is not contained by any of the abstractions, arguments, or narratives one might wish to read out of historical changes, but is simply an aggregation of evidence pointing to the administration of communication that became central to the durability of empires and our knowledge of them. What is of crucial importance, to my mind, is the way this aggregation of seemingly disparate details challenges prevailing forms of historical reflection, then and now. Innis dissociates historical information from the reflection and arguments of many of the sources that he consulted, a technique that not only moved the wider administration of time and space into the foreground of historical development, but did so as a politics of knowledge perhaps more inclined to aggregate than hold apart the intimacies generated by empire.

[13] George L. Parker, "The Sale of Ryerson Press: The End of the Old Agency System and Conflicts over Domestic and Foreign Ownership in the Canadian Publishing Industry, 1970–1986," *Papers of The Bibliographical Society of Canada* 40, no. 2 (2002): 18.

[14] Shirley Roburn, "Innis and Environmental Politics: Practical Insight from the Yukon," in *Harold Innis and the Canadian North: Appraisals and Contestations*, ed. William J. Buxton (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013).

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