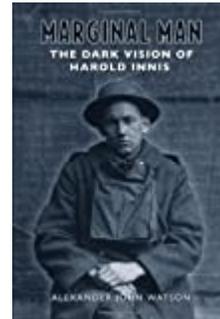




Alexander John Watson. *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xi + 525 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-3916-3.



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From Farm Soil to “Dirt” Research: Contextualizing Harold Innis

The problem with biography is that trivialities—Diefenbaker’s childhood bicycle or Clinton’s brand of cigars—move to center stage for no apparent reason and with little analysis. The reader is too often left to invent relationships between anecdotes and worldviews. John Watson avoids this tendency and examines only the most critical details of Harold Innis’s life and thought. *Marginal Man* is a serious intellectual biography, and not for those interested in the extraneous. The author tackles the story of one of the most mystifying characters in Canadian historiography and addresses the big question about Harold Innis’s shift from economic history to communications theory.

In 1972, Robin Neill admitted the difficulty of neatly summarizing Innis’s economic thought.[1] With over three times the space to elaborate, Watson has attempted a much broader and more challenging synopsis. His bipartite text unfolds Innis’s life and thought from 1894 to 1939, and from the Second World War until his death in 1952. It traces the course of his life from inauspicious beginnings in small town Ontario to one of the most respected, if questioned, careers in Canadian scholarship.

Innis is described as a man born in and working from the margins of empire and the academy. Innis believed (as does his biographer) that the vantage point of the periphery was a critical aspect of intellectual development and not a barrier to creative and influential work. Innis’s worldview was bleak throughout most of his career. We learn that at first this was a result of personal feelings of inadequacy and horrifying experiences in the First World War, but later, Innis despaired over the attenuation of oral tradition and marginal areas. His career is framed as a project to build “institutional support on the periphery,” be it Canada or the one-room school, without importing paradigms from the center; in other words, high-level scholarship without intellectual deracination of the “indigenous perspective” (p. 17). Watson disparages the fragmented and specialized historiography of Innisian thought, the speciation of Innis’s economic and communications theories, and the dismissal of Innis as a commodity and media determinist. He promises to avoid these snares “by applying Innis to Innis” (p. 11), or by engaging in the kind of “dirt” research that characterized, at least, the early part of Innis’s career. He mines new material such as the war letters and the Irene Biss (Spry)

documents; nowhere else will one find such a collection of thought on Innis and his ideas. However, Watson's strategy has a number of problems. Innis had little faith in his early methods, or at least his findings, and Watson has little faith in Innis's later methods. Furthermore, Innis's "dirt" research is never clearly defined, and Watson ignores the complaints of a generation of social historians who argue that it was not dirty enough.

Innis's peers and commentators usually divided his career in two: a successful and influential study of Canadian economics, characterised by his focus on staples, and an incomplete and seemingly unrelated examination of communications, with an emphasis on empire and the oral tradition. Watson confirms and qualifies these categories. He recognizes dramatic differences between Innis's early and later research methods, and describes the communications theory in terms of a leap into the darkness. Watson believes Innis came to the limits of the staples research and jumped from there into uncharted intellectual territory. Most discredited the move and considered it irrational and unproductive, but Watson argues that the trajectory into communications and empire made sense.

Innis's cod research of the late 1930s was the jumping off point and took him from a two-way fur trade within one empire to multiple empires and exchanges (p. 211). A conjunction of problems followed, including Innis's personal disappointment with a co-researcher and love interest, and his profound fear of impending war in Europe. A study of the pulp and paper industry then "led naturally" to an examination of newspapers and his first publication on communications and mass media in 1942 (p. 249).

One highlight from part 1 is Watson's rich analysis of young Innis's combat and postwar experience. He uses the war to understand Innis, and Innis to understand the war. Watson's work is most poignant when he dissects the scholar's unpublished writings, especially his wartime correspondence. The book vividly displays the great conflicts that formed in Innis's mind in this period. The young man had always been a faithful Baptist, but despite a spiritual florescence he was never baptized. During his studies at McMaster and subsequent military service, he became a different person, facing "baptism in a set of ideas ... [and] a more sinister baptism in the trenches of the First World War" (p. 60).

Part 1 is also the most problematic section, and historians will be frustrated by the generalizations and the paucity of historiographical references. Thankfully, the

glaring editorial errors in the first few pages are not representative of the book's presentation. Logical gaps are more persistent: for instance, Innis's decision to teach at Toronto rather than Brandon is not by itself evidence of his loss of faith. We are told repeatedly that Innis was a "precocious child character," and at one point that he was a "precious" child character (p. 42), who possessed a "hope for social advancement" (p. 57). Here Watson overlooks the tensions between parental and personal aspirations. Later, we are told that Innis made "plans ... based on the hopes of his parents" (p. 62), and that he despaired after only three months at McMaster and had to be convinced by family to return.

Despite much of his own "dirt" research, Watson's early chapters cite few recent, scholarly publications and even take recourse to a popular genealogical website (p. 446 n. 67). The useful study of Innis's dark vision as a veteran makes no reference to the important Canadian literature on the subject. Watson situates Innis's childhood in rural Ontario, the "margin" that formed his view of peripheral economies, but unquestioningly employs common Canadian myths about rural life. For example, we are told that alcohol abuse plagued the countryside, that immigrants to Canada came out of coercion and not preference, and that Innis's economy was relatively simple and in the process of changing from wheat to cheese staples. Later, Watson repeats myths that Innis helped create—that First Nations people grew quickly dependent on European goods and that New France's agriculture stagnated because of the allure of the fur trade—without reference to the corrective literature.

More seriously, Watson relies on the perplexing assumption that the countryside disconnected people from urban ideas and culture, and that insular life for Harold Innis and others in communities on the margin was disappearing. He is surprised that Innis was educated at such "high-quality institutions," considering his "relatively deprived" and "unsophisticated rural background" (pp. 60, 100, 102). The scholar's "poor rural background" is so called because he lacked "material resources, powerful contacts, or *savoir faire*" (p. 134). Yet, elsewhere we are told that Innis always made a point of developing many of these skills and worldly connections, even when commuting to secondary school in the smoking car of the train. Watson argues that Innis was always more at ease with country folk, but there is little to suggest that Innis was embarrassed of his rural experience. Innis's son anecdotally mentioned his father's awkwardness in public, but no others voiced such an opinion. Watson makes a special point to identify other "marginal" men

(and women like Mary Quayle Innis) with rural roots that gave them “an uncommon perspective, held in common” with Innis (p. 155). But, there is no evidence that rural, spiritual, conservative, or “uncultured” childhoods were uncommon among scholars, or that these roots made Harold Innis or anyone else more likely to espouse indigenous theories.

Even after a lifetime in prestigious international circles and a career as one of Canada’s best scholars, we are told Innis wrote “as a peripheral intellectual” (p. 323). Here Watson demonstrates the connections between Innis’s training and his later thought. However, it is one thing to suggest that communications theory marked a return to his undergraduate interests in philosophy; it is quite another to assume it was an effort to compensate for “the cultural aridity of Innis’s rural, ‘colonial,’ childhood” (p. 325). To truly apply Innisian methods to Innis, we must define the margin and understand it on its own terms, not from the perspective of the center. Where, for instance, is the boundary between the core and periphery? Is it geographical or ideological? At times the essential dichotomy here is between metropolis and hinterland, but marginal men as Watson describes them could certainly be found in the most urban areas. The connectedness and complexity of rural worlds are unquestioned in this book. Innis’s “farming family” held concepts similar to his communications theories, Watson affirms, but they were incapable of formulating them in any sophisticated way (p. 327). The marginality theory is a useful heuristic device when applied to Innis’s work, but imposing that structure on his life and society is an unsubstantiated leap into the darkness.

Watson typically provides excellent studies of Innis’s intellectual context, such as his formative studies in philosophy and political economy and an entire

chapter on his reading of classical theorists. Yet Innis’s posthumous influence on the historical profession is overlooked. Speaking of the deluge of American media, Watson claims “this gathering darkness ... was invisible to the majority of [Innis’s] colleagues” (p. 393). Innis had distanced himself from former colleagues during the communications phase, but his anti-Americanism and fear of cultural continentalism became an agenda of many historians. Here we stand to learn more about how historical questions and other scholarly pursuits were clouded by the dark visions of Harold Innis and his contemporaries.

The most important contributions of this book are in part 2, where Watson deciphers Innis’s communications reading notes and examines his theories of imperialism, consciousness, and technological change. With penetrating literary criticism, he synthesizes and validates the work of often ignored scholars and casts a new light on the gems of Innis’s later thought. These contributions will resonate with the growing body of scholars who are critical, as Innis was, of the “rise of the West” mythology.^[2] These latter chapters are more progressive and coherent than those in part 1, and should help students and scholars from many disciplines understand the importance, and limitations, of Innis’s communications research.

Notes

[1]. Robin Neill, *A New Theory of Value: The Economics of H. A. Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 106.

[2]. For an introduction to this literature see Robert B. Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 1-20.

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