Robert Babe has undertaken an ambitious project with this book, one which seeks to produce a list of “foundational” thinkers in Canadian communications. The project hinges in part on the question of what is the specificity of being Canadian, a notoriously complicated bit of terrain, and this is perhaps the most troublesome dimension of the text. Having said that, however, I would still argue that Babe has nonetheless given us an interesting and provocative work that provides an immensely useful summary of the writers he has chosen, and that ought to stimulate much debate over who has been, should have been, and should not have been included in this top-ten list.

To satisfy your curiosity, let me begin with the list itself. The chosen, in ascending order, are: Graham Spry, Harold Adams Innis, John Grierson, Dallas W. Smythe, C. B. MacPherson, Irene Spry, George Grant, Gertrude Joch Robinson, Northrop Frye, and Marshall McLuhan. I say these names are in ascending order because the book is organized (although not strictly) around a sort of accumulation-effect; as Babe works through the authors consecutively, he refers back to those who preceded a given author, and only rarely looks forward in anticipation of those yet to come. The overall impression is of a ranking scheme, with McLuhan at the top, since he gets to be situated and compared with everyone else in the book. I am not convinced that this structure was a very good strategy, since it leads to this perception of hierarchy. I, for one, would have been happier had each thinker been given a descriptive chapter, with the comparative aspects of each with the others reserved for a later, fuller, discussion.

This criticism should not detract from both the quality and utility of the analysis of the work of each of the writers Babe has chosen. If, due to position, they lose out at times comparatively, all credit is due to Babe for the comprehensiveness—and concision—of his engagement with a very heterogeneous group. It was surely not an easy task to assimilate the work of ten complex thinkers and extract the essences, and Babe comports himself admirably here. There will, of course, be quibbles about this or that detail, but the thumbnail sketches in each of the chapters are dense little nuggets of information. These provided me with a useful refresher, at times an encounter with a novel approach to an issue, and I even learned a few new things. I suspect that this text would be particularly useful for students, especially since it not only provides intellectual portraits but also raises thoughtful questions about each thinker in turn, which stimulate reflection and analysis. Unfortunately, Babe does have an annoying tendency to consider all the authors in terms of political economy, and to rate them on their contribution, or lack thereof, to that domain of inquiry. In some cases this is entirely appropriate, with Smythe and MacPherson for example, but is rather forced, and unfair, when applied to some of the others.

This emphasis on political economy may arise from the need to have the ten conform to the overall thesis of the book concerning their distinctive Canadian-ness. Thus, in addition to the presentations of their thought, brief biograph-
ical sketches are also provided, which point to a relationship between their intellectual formation and place. It is a central contention of the book that all of these writers share a common outlook and are in that respect unique, an attribute of thought that is explicitly seen as a product of their environment. Their collective uniqueness derives in particular from their difference with the main thrust of communications thought in the United States. In the introduction, utilizing James Carey’s distinction between transmission and ritual models of communication, Babe argues that the former, concerned as it is predominately with space and efficiency, is particular to the United States whereas the ritual model, emphasizing time and social solidarity, is characteristic of Canadian scholarship. This difference is seen to be the product of divergences in the historical formation of the two countries. Canada, because of its “counter-revolutionary” tradition (as posited by Innis), has a distinct political character, one oriented toward community and the responsibility of the state in the maintenance of community, rather than the individualism spawned by the American revolution. For Babe, this foundational difference has enormous consequences for intellectual thought in Canada.

Furthermore, this is not a condition of political history alone, but also of nature itself. In an instant replay of the English left-nationalism (as Ian Angus calls it) of the 1960s and 1970s, Babe wields both Frye’s “garrison mentality” and Atwood’s “survival” like a double-barrelled shotgun pointed at the head of any post-nationalist within range. This encounter with nature, as we have heard before, is the foundation of Canadian collectivism and co-operation. Thus historical differences are quickly converted into ontological differences. As well, the preoccupation with space leads to a nation linked by a communications infrastructure (an argument Babe has disputed elsewhere), which, combined with the political tradition, produces an “environmental determinist” view of Canadian history.

Babe argues that the encounter with nature and American revolutionary politics results in the development of a set of distinct and identifiable features in Canadian (communications) thought. Along with similarities in the biographies of the writers (religious training, voluminous reading in childhood, “outsider” status, and so on), all of the writers are considered to be “critical” in outlook. Quoting Smythe and van Dinh, this is characterized by Babe as concerned with “how to reshape or invent institutions to meet the collective need of the relevant social community” (p. 16). Here, we immediately see the stress on political economy that Babe will foreground throughout. Despite differentiating between what he calls “critical cultural studies” as the analysis of relations between text, reader, and power, and political economy, the former gives way entirely to the discussion of institutional analysis as it appears in the various writers’ work, and indeed political economy is itself one of the distinct features Babe adumbrates.

As you might have already surmised, the emphasis on “collective need” is itself an ontological attribute of Canadian-ness, so it comes as no surprise that political economy would be central to the work Babe examines. Indeed, one of the other characteristics of Canadian communications thought he describes is an emphasis on ontological concerns, defined as “concerns, speculations or beliefs
regarding the place of individuals and or groups within the larger whole” (p. 30). This, according to Babe, is something U.S. communications researchers avoid, and Canadians foreground as a result of our proximity to nature (and, one presumes, to death). The question of being is further mediated, if I may put it this way, by mediation itself as another central concern of these writers. Again, space looms large, especially large in Canada, where those “empty spaces” require technology to produce social solidarity; thus, various institutions stand between our experience and social relations, and so we end up again with political economy.

The most important attribute, and the one Babe stresses throughout the book, is dialectical thought. What he means by this is more or less a version of the Hegelian dialectic, in which the premises are antithetical, but which, following Innis, favours balance over synthesis. Referring to Henry Giroux, Babe suggests that dialectical thought has as its domain the social totality within which it seeks to uncover the relations between people (and things), and to uncover the forces which mediate those relations. In the case of Canada, again following Innis, the main impetus toward dialectical thought lies in our subordinate position at the margin of empire. According to Babe, the lack of dialectical analysis elsewhere (i.e., the United States) “may be because people at the centre of power are inclined to see things instrumentally,” whereas at the margin, people see things differently since “they cannot escape being exposed to dominant perspectives . . . and they understand that the power the centre wields is frequently used on them, and not necessarily for their benefit” (p. 309, emphasis in original). Again, the virtues of location: “Concern for ontological understanding,” Babe writes, “accords well with Margaret Atwood’s contention that the theme of ‘survival’ permeates Canadian literature . . . Canada’s harsh climate and vast empty spaces have had much to do with this concern for ontology” (p. 311). The question raised by these latter comments is the extent to which Babe attributes a concern for ontological issues to ontological conditions, thus veering toward a tautology.

The bigger problem with this, however, is that it is, ultimately, undialectical. The slippage from historical circumstances into ontological truths about the “nature” of Canadians and Canadian thought posits those essences in an ahistorical manner. Rather than the “truth of correspondence,” here we are in the realm of Frye’s “mythopoeic knowledge.” As Babe points out, “mythopoeic knowledge does not progress; rather, it recurs” (p. 240), and this is indeed the character of our encounter with nature; it is mythic in proportion, a good fairy story. As we know, however, fairy stories usually have a purpose, sometimes as sinister as the story itself. Babe himself points out, apropos of Frye, that “myths lend support to . . . the power structure of society” (p. 243). What comes, therefore, as a surprise, is the way in which Babe seemingly ignores his own analysis with regard to this particular issue (and, furthermore, in his unwillingness to engage with Quebec thought). He implicitly succumbs to what W. L. Morton claimed was our moral superiority (over the United States, of course) as an outcome of forging a nation in the north.
In the book, much of Babe's discussion is preoccupied with a rejection of American foundational thought, and he looks to the foundational myths of Canadian nationalist cultural discourse to accomplish his goal. It is interesting, then, that we are to grasp the difference between Canadian and American communications scholarship through a distinction (as I mentioned above) provided at the outset by James Carey—an American. Of course, given his debt to Innis, we like to think of Carey as an honourary Canadian communications scholar. The point, however, is that critical thought, though central to Canadian communications scholarship, is not its exclusive property, especially vis-à-vis American work in communications. Indeed, if we take a closer look at Babe's book, we can note that Smythe was one of the founding members of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois in the 1940s (the spot where Carey was also to make his mark), and one of his students was none other than Gertrude Joch Robinson. If these, and the other writers featured in the book share a critical disposition, they clearly do not do so necessarily in opposition to American thought.

Despite the realism that creeps into Babe's analysis, the writers he has chosen to survey do indeed share similar dispositions across a variety of issues. If those dispositions do not reside in the shared experience of nature, there is still much to suggest that the similarities are more than just coincidental. Aside from the problems engendered by seeking a commonality in some kind of ontological specificity that is Canadian, there is no reason we could not take the similarities themselves as signs of Canada, as long as we understand them as contingent. There is little doubt about the crucial contributions each have made to the formation of subsequent students of communications in Canada (myself most assuredly included), and the debt owed to them for the paths of inquiry they have opened for us. What the book asserts by virtue of its existence is perhaps of as much importance as the claims within it: we have a solid tradition of critical communications scholarship in this country that, assembled in one place, is most impressive, and which provides both a basis and a standard for future research. This in itself belies the need for Babe's rather parochial assertions. Indeed, what is most valuable is the way in which Babe demonstrates how the work of these thinkers transcends local and national interests, and that the scope of their thought is not limited to a particular place—inflated though it might be by that place—but applicable to a wide range of communication phenomena as they impinge on everyday life everywhere around us.

Kevin Dowler
York University