Harold Innis’ “French Inflection”:
Origins, Themes, and Implications
of His 1951 Address at le Collège de France

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Abstract: While Harold Innis’ address at le Collège de France in 1951 has
recently begun to draw some attention, the circumstances surrounding Innis’
brief appearance in France remain obscure, and the meaning and significance of
the address have yet to be explored in any detail. This article seeks to provide
context to Innis’ talk by examining his long-standing “French inflection.” It also
examines the address itself, not only in terms of its themes and concerns, but also
as a performative bid to find common ground with others (including the Annales
School) who were challenging emergent monopolies of knowledge about the
history of civilization. The presentation provides a point of entry into a final
phase of Innis’ intellectual life that has been overlooked, namely, his efforts to
generate a community of like-minded interlocutors who were opposed to partic-
ular currents of thought that had become ascendant in the post-war period.

Résumé : Bien que l’allocution d’Harold Innis au Collège de France en 1951 ait
récemment commencé à attirer de l’attention, les circonstances entourant le bref
séjour d’Innis en France demeurent obscures, et le sens et la signification de
l’allocution n’ont pas encore été explorés en détail. Cet article tente de fournir un
contexte au discours d’Innis en examinant son penchant de longue date pour la
pensée française. Il examine aussi l’allocution même, non seulement par rapport
à ses thèmes et préoccupations, mais aussi en tant que tentative performative de
trouver un terrain d’entente avec d’autres (y compris certains dans l’école des
Annales) qui posaient un défi aux monopoles du savoir sur l’histoire de la civili-
sation. L’allocution d’Innis permet en outre de comprendre une phase finale de sa
vie intellectuelle qui a été négligée, à savoir ses efforts de former une commu-
nauté d’interlocuteurs de même sensibilité s’opposant à certains courants de
pensée devenus prédominants dans l’après-guerre.

Keywords: Harold Innis; Toronto School/Transformation theory; Annales School

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Difficult for Anglo-Saxon to understand French—have something which we do not have and we have something they do not have—understanding impossible. No other country has made such contributions as French to west. French Revolution still active. Interest in artistic culture contrast with Anglo-Saxon obsession with politics. Food—taste—individualistic—rationing possible in England because English poor Cooks—black market in France because French insist on good cooking. England one Sauce and a hundred religions—France one religion and a hundred sauces.

—Harold Adams Innis, *The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis*

On July 6, 1951, Harold Innis presented a paper entitled “Monopolies and Civilization” at le Collège de France (Innis, 1951a). The session was chaired by Lucien Febvre, who had just retired from his position as Professor at the Collège (Hughes, 1966), succeeded by Fernand Braudel. While Innis’ presentation in Paris has recently begun to draw some attention, the circumstances surrounding Innis’ brief appearance in France remain obscure, and the meaning and significance of the address have yet to be examined in any detail.

In what follows, I will attempt to provide some background to Innis’ talk by examining his long-standing “French inflection,” giving particular attention to the immediate backdrop to the Paris address. At some level, Innis’ invitation to speak at le Collège de France could be seen as a belated recognition by his French colleagues of his lifelong engagement with material related to both France and to its colonial past in North America. Indeed, in all likelihood, the invitation was precipitated by Innis’ involvement in a transatlantic network of scholars concerned with French exploration and the founding of a French overseas empire. But Innis’ talk also represented a belated encounter with a tradition for which he had long-standing affinities, namely that represented by Febvre and the Annales School of historical studies. Both Innis’ thought and that of Febvre had been very much influenced by French social geography, as it had developed in the early years of the twentieth century. Moreover, around the time that Innis presented his talk, he and his French colleague Febvre were in the process of challenging various historical orthodoxies that were then current, with a view to rethinking the nature and development of civilizations (see Burke, 1990, pp. 44-45). Innis’ address could be viewed as an effort to find common ground with Febvre and his Annales co-workers; this provides us with an opening for exploring the affinities between Innis and the Annales School, which arguably had the same tradition as a reference point. The presentation itself is of great interest for the reflexivity that it reveals. While its subject matter, as reflected in its title, was that of how the political organization of civilizations was characterized by past monopolies of knowledge, the performance of the text was intended to help challenge current monopolies of knowledge that, according to Innis, had come to dominate how the history of civilization was understood. In this sense, the presentation provides a point of entry into a final phase of Innis’ intellectual life that has been overlooked, namely, his efforts to generate a community of like-minded interlocutors who
were opposed to particular monopolies of knowledge that had become ascendant in the post-war period. This orientation, it can be argued, had its kernel in his early writings, many of which were informed by an engagement with French historiography and human geography.

Although Innis’ contributions to Canadian economic history, and later to the global history of communications, have long been recognized, little attention has been given to how his work in both of these areas reflected his engagement with French-language materials as well as his long-standing interest in France and its overseas empire. In his early research on Canadian economic history, he relied extensively on archival materials and secondary sources related to the French colonies in North America, the French exploration of North America (Innis, 1926) as well as the French fishery (Innis, 1940). Innis also frequently reviewed writings in the French language pertinent to economic history. While the place of French material in his work on the history of communications is much less evident in his published writings, his mammoth unpublished *History of Communication* manuscript has extensive materials based on archival research in France on such topics as the development of the paper-printing industry in the seventeenth century (Innis, n.d.). Moreover, Innis was quite familiar with the writings of French theorists of human geography, such as Albert Demangeon, Jean Brunhes, Vidal de la Blache, André Siegfried, as well as the work of Québec authors working in this tradition, such as Raymond Tanghe and Benoit Brouillette (see Innis, 1924, 1929b, 1938, and Brouillette, 1941). While this debt is not as evident as is the case with writers such as Adam Smith, Graham Wallas, and Thorstein Veblen, Innis kept abreast of French thought in the area of human geography and made frequent mention of this work in his writings. At around the same time, Lucien Febvre (1922) was also drawing on the same tradition of social geography in rethinking history. While Innis did not specifically mention Febvre in his earlier writings, there were strong affinities between his concerns and those of the French historian. Indeed, Innis’ contribution to the frontier of settlement series was very much inflected by the French possibilist approach that characterized the series as a whole (Innis, 1936).

Innis’ first publishing venture in the French language, however, did not occur until 1947. This took the form of short overviews of the contributions of three major early explorers of North America, namely Alexander Mackenzie, Peter Pond, and David Thompson (Innis, 1947). Innis was, of course, closely familiar with all of these figures through his earlier research on the fur trade and the exploration of Canada. These three short pieces appeared as part of a large collection containing 84 essays of this kind, all of which were intended to celebrate the great explorers of the world, from ancient times until the present, with a particular focus on the exploration of the main non-European land masses of the world: Africa, North and South America, Asia, Australia, the Arctic, and the Antarctic. Innis’ essays in the volume, which had been translated into French, appeared among the 11 contributions in the section on North America.
It is not entirely clear how it was that Innis’ work—which had previously been largely confined to English-Canadian and American venues—appeared in a French-language edition emanating from Europe. However, judging by the contributors to the North American section of the work, Innis was part of an emergent Anglo-French transatlantic network concerned with issues related to exploration and settlement. The set of essays on North America, unlike the other parts of the book, had been assembled and edited by two prominent researchers in the field of the exploration and settlement of the continent, John Bartlet Brebner (1895-1957) and Marcel Giraud (1900-1994). Brebner, a Canadian-born professor of history, taught at the University of Toronto from 1921 to 1925, before moving on to Columbia University, where he spent the remainder of his career. His interests in North American economic history and settlement overlapped a good deal with those of Innis (see Brebner, 1927/1973, 1937/1969, 1940, 1945a); and the two were in contact up until Innis’ death in 1952. Brebner was closely involved in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of Economics and History, and was a colleague of James Shotwell, who was editor of the series (Canada and the United States) to which Innis contributed. Moreover, Innis reviewed Brebner’s *Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia* (Innis, 1937), and when the Canadian Social Science Research Council was looking for a distinguished foreign academic to write a report on the state of the humanities in Canada, Innis suggested that Brebner be asked to do the job. The council acted on Innis’ advice, and Brebner wrote the report, which was to have enormous consequences for the subsequent development of teaching and research in the Canadian humanities (Brebner, 1945b). Brebner also kept abreast of Innis’ scholarly pursuits and wrote a highly insightful memoir of Innis after the latter’s death (Brebner, 1953).

Giraud had made the acquaintance of both Innis and Brebner during the period when he was conducting research in North America on the history of the Metis in Western Canada. A native of Nice, in the south of France, Giraud had originally developed an interest in North America as a result of his contact with American soldiers during World War I. He subsequently was awarded a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to conduct research in North America. His study of the Metis brought him into contact with Brebner and Innis, both of whom exerted a great influence on his own work. His research on the Metis first appeared in a massive volume published by the Museum of ethnology (Giraud, 1945) that was reviewed by both Brebner (1948) and Innis (1948). It was on the basis of this highly acclaimed book that Giraud ascended to the Chair of North American studies at Collège de France, avoiding the usual apprenticeship of teaching in provincial universities beforehand. In the late 1940s, Giraud returned to do research in North America supported by another Rockefeller Foundation grant, this time on the history of French Louisiana. This formed the basis for the four volumes he wrote on the subject, which were published by the Presses Universitaires de France (1953-74). It was likely during his second major research visit to North America that Giraud worked with Brebner to produce the section on North America for the *Grands explorateurs* volume.
Another contributor to the North American section of the volume was the HEC-based geographer Benoit Brouillette, who wrote an essay on Samuel de Champlain, a subject (as was the case with Innis) with which he was quite familiar through his own earlier work on the fur trade. In effect, then, the collection brought together the authors of the major English- and French-language accounts of the fur trade in Canada. Lucien Febvre, who was now in the final years as Professor at Collège de France, wrote an eponymous introduction to the section, “Essor de la découverte,” which dealt with the early transatlantic explorers such as Henry the Navigator, Barthomew Diaz, and Christopher Columbus. This essay was in line with the growing interest of the journal *Annales* (for which Febvre was co-editor) to examine broader civilizations rather than confining itself to nation-states. It may have been Innis’ contribution to the volume that led to his invitation to give an address at le Collège de France in 1951.11

Three years prior to his 1951 address, Innis had visited Paris to do some archival work in le Bibliothèque Nationale, squeezing this trip into a rather busy period of lecturing in Britain,12 which included the Beit Lectures at Oxford in the Trinity term,13 the Stamp memorial lecture at the University of London,14 and the Cust Foundation lecture at the University of Nottingham.15 Innis’ return to France for his address at le Collège de France took place just after he had completed his work for the Royal Commission on Transportation. According to Creighton (1957, pp. 140-141), this work had left him quite exhausted, and he “badly needed a holiday” in order to “be able to take up his old affairs with any enthusiasm again.” He set out for England and Europe in June, accompanied by his son Hugh. Innis’ itinerary reveals that his “holiday” was heavily laced with work-related activities, including a visit with W. F. Turgeon, former Chairman of the Royal Commission on Transportation, attendance at the fifth centenary celebrations at Glasgow University (representing the University of Toronto) as well as his address at le Collège de France. He also made a point of meeting with old friends in Oxford, London, and Cambridge. As was his habit, Innis also used the occasion to make notes of his travels, fragments of which were left in his idea files. What they revealed was an interest in comparing England and France, a keen eye for the built environments of urban spaces, along with various commentary on what he had witnessed and had learned from his discussions.16

Innis’ address dealt with themes he had addressed in both *Empire* and *Bias*. He provided a quick overview of how empires rose and fell depending on their ability to exert control over time and space. After having addressed particular tendencies of this kind in ancient regimes, he turned his attention to the West, in which “decline of control over territorial space in the face of barbarian invasions led to an emphasis on control over time and religion” (1951a, pp. 6-7). This tendency was reflected in the strengthening of Latin as a language to counterbalance “the divisive influence of several languages…the development of ritual, a concern with monasticism and celibacy, and the emergence of Gothic architecture” (1951a, pp. 6-7). This monopoly over time, according to Innis, was challenged by new forces attendant upon the spread of paper, and the growth of vernacular lan-
languages that eroded the domination of Latin. But what was of most urgent concern to Innis in his address is how the current configuration, with its emphasis upon the monopoly over space, had become problematic. The modern era, as Innis emphasizes, is characterized by an international system of states whose political boundaries were very much affected by both the Industrial Revolution and “the application of steam power to the paper and printing industries especially in the latter part of the 19th century” (1951a, p. 8). Given the close relationship between the territorial prerogatives of modern statehood and printing, Innis goes on to claim that the emergent monopolies over space have resulted in a neglect of “the problem of duration of monopoly over time”:

Time has been cut into pieces the length of a day’s newspaper. The tyranny of monopoly over space in its emphasis on change and instability has assumed graver threats to continuity than the tyranny of monopoly over time in the Middle Ages to the establishment of political organization. It may be that the concept of progress arises from the effects of a swing from a type of monopoly concerned with control over time to a type of monopoly concerned with control over space and that we favour this type of change in contrast with a civilization which assumes control over space and time which seems to us to favor stability and possibly stagnation. (1951a, p. 8)

While Innis was obviously inspired by the vestiges of a pre-modern and time-oriented worldview that he discovered in Paris, the extent to which French thought of the day was inspired by Innis’ presentation at le Collège de France awaits further analysis. To be sure, there was some indication that a translation of Innis’ Paris address was in the works. In a letter to Innis written well over a year after his speech in Paris, Marcel Giraud conveyed to Innis that he “always remember(ed) our lovely meeting in Paris and the reception with Lucien Febvre: lovely time it was, and I hope we shall have another one of those happy meetings here” (Giraud, 1951). He also mentioned that he was about to turn his attention to the translation of Innis’ paper, which in all likelihood was the presentation he had given at le Collège de France. Giraud had begun working on it, but was obliged to interrupt his work in order to complete a book manuscript. He was, however, planning to finish the translation soon thereafter, and planned to send Innis a copy “within a few days.” It is not known whether the translation was ever completed and sent, or if it ever appeared. But the fact that Giraud had taken it upon himself to work on the translation in the midst of writing up his research on the history of French Louisiana provides some indication of the great esteem with which he held the work of Innis. Innis’ approach, it can be contended, was carried on in France through Giraud’s monumental studies of North America, which, in translated form, have found an important place within North American scholarship as well.

Aside from its linkages to Innis’ long-standing interest in France and its possible implications for French scholarship, the address in Paris provides a window on Innis’ increasingly activist bent at the time, and his concern to link up with others who shared his discontent with the course of civilization and the study of communication. At first glance, the address appears to be very much in line with his Beit lectures (delivered at Oxford in 1948), upon which Empire and Commu-
nications was based. However, Innis framed his Paris address in a manner that was decidedly different. In his preface to *Empire*, Innis acknowledged the importance of the writings of Kroeber, Mead, Marx, Mosca, Pareto, Sorokin, Spengler, Toynbee, Veblen, and others for drawing attention to “the significance of communication to modern civilization” (1951b, preface). In the Paris lecture he now was of the view that the study of civilization had become dominated by two figures, whose works were threatening to become monopolistic, namely, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), the author of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1929-30), provided a very pessimistic view of the fate of Western civilization. This work appeared in English translation in 1946-47 as *The Decline of the West*, and in a French translation in 1948. Toynbee (1889-1975), a British author and educator, was best known for his monumental histories of civilization, particularly *A Study of History* (1934-61). By all accounts, his influence reached its apogée in the post-World War II period, during which his works were read by millions of people. Around the time that Innis presented his Beit lectures at Oxford, two other influential works by Toynbee appeared, *Civilization on Trial* (1948) and *The Prospects of Western Civilization* (1949).

Hence, a flurry of works by both Toynbee and Spengler appeared just at the time that Innis had begun to present his own accounts of the course of Western civilization. Nonetheless, he was heartened by the fact that other writings, originating in the United States, had appeared, thereby challenging the domination of Toynbee and Spengler. These included the work of Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) and Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960). Sorokin wrote extensively on the rise and decline of civilizations, most notably *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937, 1941). In his address in Paris, Innis may have been influenced by Sorokin’s then recent analysis of eight other prominent historians of civilization (including Spengler, Toynbee, and Kroeber) (Sorokin, 1950). Kroeber was a Columbia-trained cultural anthropologist who spent most of his career at the University of California at Berkeley. He was a specialist in the Native cultures of the American Southwest, and his main contribution to the history of civilization was *Configurations of Culture Growth* (1944).

In effect, the invited presentation at le Collège de France in 1951 can be seen as a more direct engagement with the “monopoly of knowledge” provided by Spengler and Toynbee, and a bid to find common ground with Kroeber and Sorokin as well as with Febvre and the Annales School. It appears that part of Innis’ difficulties with Toynbee stemmed from the latter’s inability to address how science was bound up with myth, a failure, in effect, to come to terms with “present-mindedness.” Innis was particularly opposed to the “inclusive systems” proposed by thinkers such as Toynbee and Spengler (1951a, p. 1), a position he felt was in need of correction. What he likely had in mind was a much more conjunctural approach, examining the particularities of time and space within specific contexts. Innis saw his own work—and that of Febvre and the Annales School—as posing a challenge to this orthodoxy in the study of civilization that had taken hold.
In some of his other writings of the period, Innis had indicated some of the ways that monopolies of space could be resisted through time-based forms of communication, such as in universities and the common-law tradition (Noble, 1999). This theme of how time-based forms of communication were jeopardized by the onslaught of space-biased modernity was certainly evident in his Paris address. However, what is particularly fascinating about his presentation is how it served as an *enactment* of Innis’ concerns with fostering oral communication and the interactivity that it entailed. He opened his address with the statement “I am taking advantage of this opportunity to put before you questions which have worried me in research on the character of civilizations and to solicit your advice” (1951a, p. 1). Innis obviously saw his address as providing the basis for dialogue with his audience on matters of mutual concern. That Innis had a particular idea of what the intellectual interests of the audience were is evident in his claim that it shared his disagreement with the perspectives of Spengler and Toynbee. “In France,” Innis asserted “you have been critical—I refer particularly to Prof. Lucien Febvre—of such monopolies” (1951a, p. 1). Innis also acknowledged his debt to “special studies such as those in the history of civilization series,” which was likely a reference to the work that had been done in this area by Febvre and his Annales co-workers. In effect, Innis conceived of his Paris address as an opening for dialogue with his French colleagues concerned with the history of civilizations, with a view to developing collective resistance to the monopolies of knowledge in this area, which had become ascendant. In this respect, it is instructive that Innis’ reference to *Empire and Communications* at the beginning of his address underscored its origins in the Beit lectures, suggesting that Innis viewed the oral version of his printed texts as having primacy. It was through the give and take of discussions of this kind that Innis appeared to believe that a community of like-minded intellectual practitioners could be developed.

Innis’ address in Paris was in line with some other community-building ventures of this period. A series of deliberations at the University of Chicago in 1945 had led to the drafting of a proposed “new world constitution” of which Innis was one of the signatories (Committee to Frame a World Constitution, 1948). During the winter semester of 1949, he had organized, and taken part in, a series of discussions with colleagues at the University of Toronto, who had formed what they called the Values Discussion Group” (see Buxton, page 187, this issue). Funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the group sought to clarify issues related to values in relation to the economy. Both Innis and McLuhan presented papers at the meetings, outlining approaches to the study of communications that were quite at odds with those that were in the process of development in the United States at the same time. The discussions that took place within the Values Discussion Group were arguably of importance for the development of the ideas about communication of both Innis and McLuhan. Innis’ dissent from the emergent American-based paradigm was evident in a review (appearing shortly after the Values Discussion Group meetings) that included a discussion of two collections on recent research on communications, edited by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and
Frank N. Stanton and by Wilbur Schramm (Innis, 1949b). After listing the contents of each volume (such as “an analysis of radio programming [aimed at attracting] a large number of obstinate women to listing to morning programmes”), Innis confessed that he turned with “relief” from these works to the third volume under review, namely the Royal Commission report from Britain on the press. That Innis found the report—with its probing analysis of the deficiencies of the British press—much more to his liking than the American collections was evident in his conclusion: “The volumes under review throw a flood of light on the problems of a society hamstrung by a written constitution and a society in which parliament is supreme” (1949b, p. 567). Underlying Innis’ assessment of the three volumes was his conviction that the oral tradition, as embodied in the British parliament, represented a much sounder foundation for a society than the space-biased written orientation to which the United States owed its existence. The same sentiments informed Innis’ response to a volume on the freedom of the press in the United States, which had been commissioned by the owner of *Time*, Henry R. Luce (1949c). In reviewing the volume, Innis felt that, as a Canadian, he had “some advantage in objectivity,” which allowed him to better appreciate the inherent biases in the report:

The volume is a product of a civilization, the character of which is...determined by the press. Sponsored by the press, it is a part of its own recommendations emphasizing self-regulation as a means of improvement as opposed to governmental interference. The problem of the American press is reflected in this book as well as its contents; it would be difficult to find a more striking illustration of its limitations. (1949c, p. 265)

Innis went on to suggest that “in few countries could the press illustrate such venality and subservience to its own interests as in the United States. Indeed the report is a tribute to this consideration” (1949c, p. 262). Finally, Innis noted that the report had effectively blurred the distinctions between “radio, newspapers, motion pictures, magazines and books,” failing to acknowledge that “each medium has its peculiarities and an appreciation of this fact is the beginning of a study of the press” (1949c, p. 266). In effect, Innis was of the view that the domination of the press and of the written tradition in the United States had made serious reflection about the current state of communications virtually impossible.

Innis’ dissatisfaction with the emergent study of communications in the United States was echoed by McLuhan in a letter to Innis in the early winter of 1951. Taking exception to yet another expression of American communications study, namely the Deutsch-Wiener model, which he saw as having failed “to understand the techniques and functions of the traditional arts as the essential type of all human communication,” McLuhan felt that Innis had suggested an alternative model in *Empire and Communications*, namely “the possibility of organizing an entire school of studies” of communication. According to McLuhan, this initiative would involve “studies of the function and effect of communication on society,” distancing itself from effects such as “mounting or sagging curves resulting from special campaigns of commercial education.” What he suggested,
rather, was the formation of an “experiment in communication” centred in a focus in the Arts and Sciences at the University of Toronto, whose organizing concept would be “Communications theory and practice” (McLuhan to Innis, 1951, cited in Cooper, 1979, pp. 193-194).

The first step in this process would be sending out “a single mimeographed sheet...weekly or fortnightly to a few dozen people in different fields,” hopefully resulting in “a feedback of related perception from various readers which will establish a continuous flow.” Innis responded with enthusiasm to McLuhan’s letter, suggesting that the latter’s views be elaborated “since they seem very important [and] could be used as a basis for general discussion.” He was also interested in McLuhan’s remarks on Deutsch, which had appeared in a pamphlet his Toronto colleague had evidently written. Finally, Innis expressed agreement with McLuhan’s proposal to circulate copies of a mimeographed sheet and asked to be included on the list of recipients (Innis to McLuhan, cited in Cooper, 1979, p. 195). Because of failing health and his commitment to serve on the Royal Commission on Transportation, Innis was unable to take part in the emergent communications project. But McLuhan followed through on the initiative, securing a generous $50,000 grant from the Ford Foundation in 1953 (shortly after Innis’ death) to organize a two-year interdisciplinary research project on “Changing Patterns of Language and Behavior and the New Media of Communication” (Marc-hand, 1989). The contributions to this ongoing discussion were published in the journal *Explorations*, which was funded through the grant that McLuhan had procured.

Arguably, the 1949 Values seminar (see Buxton, page 187, this issue), which provided the basis for the exchange of letters between Innis and McLuhan about the formation of a group to study “communications theory and practice,” could be seen as the starting point for the Ford Foundation–sponsored venture that underpinned what has come to be called “the Toronto School of Communications.” This latter loosely linked network derived from the desire of Innis and McLuhan to challenge the monopoly of knowledge about the study of communication that was emerging in the United States, akin to the Toynbee-Spengler monopolies of the study of civilization that had originated in Britain and in Germany. And in the same way that Innis wished to find common cause with the Annales School and other similar-minded thinkers to rethink the history of civilizations, he sought to develop joint action with other scholars to create an approach to the study of communication alternative to the biased and distorted version that was in the process of formation in the United States. This belies the widely held notion that toward the end of his life Innis largely worked in isolation from others in his efforts to examine the nature and impact of communications (see, for instance, Bladen, Easterbrook, & Willits, 1953). Indeed, as is evident in his strong identification with the project of French social geography, along with the later human-settlement series, the Carnegie publication series, and the movement to draft a new world constitution, Innis had a life-long interest in taking part in international movements of like-minded scholars. In this respect, his well-known antipathy to space-
biased communications and his partiality toward orality and time-binding communications were closely aligned with an intense interest in collective intellectual action.

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Notes

2. This movement can be traced back to the founding of the journal Annales d’histoire économique et sociale by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929.

3. It was Febvre who coined the term “possibilism,” to refer to that approach to human geography, which emphasized how the creations of human civilization (such as road systems and settlement patterns) represented various “possibilities” inherent in the natural environment.

4. Reflecting the widely held view that Innis had little to say about Canada’s French colonial past, Alain-G. Gagnon, Sarah Fortin, and Daniel Salée all stress the extent to which Innis’ ideas have failed to gain a foothold in Québec. See Gagnon & Fortin (1999) and Salée (1999).

5. See Innis, The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History (1930a). That Innis was quite familiar with accounts written by French authors on the economic history of New France is evident in a review of a book by Vignols in which he compared and contrasted the work of the author with the accounts provided by M. P. E. Renaud, Emile Salone, and Joseph-Noel Fauteux. See Innis, 1930b. See also Innis, 1928b, 1928c, 1931, 1934a, 1935.

6. See Innis, 1928a, 1929a. He even reviewed particular issues of Études Economiques (a journal published at Université de Montréal) on a regular basis for The Journal of Economic History (see, for instance, Innis, 1934b), and helped to translate La Conquête des Marchés Extérieurs by Henri Laureys (see Laureys, 1929).

7. The series was conceived of by Isaiah Bowman, who was very much influenced by Jean Brunhes, a founding figure in French social geography.

8. The text was the second volume in the series “la collection la galerie des hommes célèbres” published in Geneva and Paris by the Swiss-based firm Éditions d’art Lucien Mazenod and was edited by André Leroi-Gourhan, who also provided a lengthy introduction on the psychology of the explorer.


10. The series was published in an English translation by the LSU press and is considered to be the definitive writing on the subject. Giraud also authored a popular history of Canada for the “Que sais-je?” series in France (see Giraud, 1971).

11. In an effort to entice Innis to accept an offer from the University of Chicago, a member of its faculty, John Nef, noted in a letter to him that “there is a sort of gambler’s chance that we may be able to establish at Chicago something resembling the Collège de France, with a great deal of freedom both for the faculty members (in teaching and research) and the graduate students who participated (no course requirements for students at all) and who would necessarily be a rather small group” (1943).

12. This trip is discussed in Creighton, 1957.
13. This consisted of a series of six lectures “‘on any subject in the economic history of the British Empire’” (Creighton, 1957, p. 126). These formed the basis for Empire and Communications (Innis, 1951b).

14. This was entitled The Press: A Neglected Factor in the Economic History of the Twentieth Century (Innis, 1949a).

15. This was presented on May 28, 1948, and was entitled “Great Britain, Canada and the United States.” It was published as a chapter in Changing Concepts of Time (Innis, 1952).

16. Among those with whom he met was the economic geographer François Perroux (b. 1903), who told Innis that Simeon (another French economist) was largely responsible for the disappearance of the Cornot (Ferdinand de Cornot, baron of Cussy [1795-1866]) tradition in France (Innis, 1980, p. 216). He also remarked on the significance of the low fixed rents in Paris, noting that his friend Giraud paid “$80 a year for apartment (located at 2, rue Emile Faguet, Paris 14).” Innis speculated that the cheap housing had possibly led to the “high price of food … low wages” and even the “strength of communism” (Innis, 1980, p. 226).

17. Innis’ preoccupation with the decline of time-binding forms of communication in the face of space-binding technologies was evident in some of his observations during his Paris visit. He noted that the Collège de France was established by Francis I in 1536 “to offset narrow theological interests of Sorbonne.” He speculated that the “legal separation of church and state” may have represented “an extension of state monopoly at (the) expense of church, i.e. education,” possibly making for an “increased friction between time and space” (Innis, 1980, p. 215). Similar themes were present in Innis’ reaction to his visit to a Diderot Encyclopédie exhibit at the Bibliothèque Nationale a few days before his presentation. He commented on the “great row against monopoly of knowledge of church” occasioned by the publishing efforts of the Jesuits and represented by “the organization of secular knowledge preceding revolution and undermining position of state and church.” Such tendencies, in Innis’ view, were “precursors of encyclopedia especially in technical field of industry and arts.” That Innis was less than enthusiastic about the Enlightenment was evident in his observation that the “encyclopedia may tear knowledge apart and pigeon-hole it in alphabetical boxes—necessity of constantly attempting a synthesis to offset influence of mechanization—possibly basis for emphasis on civilization as a whole” (1980, p. 215).

18. For instance, there has been a lack of references to Innis’ writings in major works of French scholarship on the history of communications, such as Febvre’s massive co-authored work on the emergence and development of the book. See Martin & Febvre (1958).

19. He was presumably referring to the first volume of what was to become a four-volume history of French Louisiana.

20. The letter (Giraud, 1951) was in response to a letter that Innis had written to Giraud. Innis was, as this time, gravely ill, and Giraud sought both to convey his concern about Innis’ health and to inquire about how he was feeling. The letter also revealed that the two had developed a close friendship. Giraud had met with Innis’ daughter-in-law (evidently the wife of Donald Innis) and was grateful to Innis for telling Giraud that “Toronto was (his) home.” He also referred to a jest that Innis had made about his colleague, geographer Griffith Taylor, as having the appearance of a penguin, a characterization with which Giraud agreed.

21. Indeed, Innis acknowledges at the beginning of his Paris lecture that it derived from Empire, “being the Beit Lectures for 1948” (1951a, p. 1).

22. Innis first presented his views on the history of communications in the presidential address at the Royal Society in 1947 (“Minerva’s Owl”), at the University of Michigan in the spring of 1949 (the portmanteau essay in Bias of Communication), and in his Beit lectures presented at Oxford in 1948.

23. Sorokin was a Russian-born sociologist who emigrated to the United States, where he taught at the University of Minnesota, before becoming Harvard’s first Professor and Chair of Sociology in 1930. He held this position until 1945, at which time the Sociology Department was merged into the newly formed Department of Social Relations.
24. In a symposium on current trends in geography published in 1945, Innis emphasized how Toynbee had drawn attention to the importance of mythology in history as well as to the impact of the advance of natural science on society. However, Innis also noted that “it may be that Professor Toynbee has not fully recognized that science creates its own mythology and that it has failed to create a satisfactory one” (Innis & Broek, 1945, p. 301).

25. See Buxton, page 187, this issue.

26. This referred to the ideas in communication developed by Norbert Wiener and Karl Deutsch, which stressed how information was transmitted in discrete messages between senders and receivers. See Wiener (1950), Deutsch (1953).

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