CONFEERENCE ON CONTRIBUTION OF HAROLD INNIS AS SEMINAL THINKER

Themes of INNIS and MARX compared

By Earle Beattie, Editor

In the words of an Innis College song "Who the hell was Harold Innis?"
My history professor, Arthur Lower, made his works familiar to our class many years ago at United College, Winnipeg. But I suspect I relied on Lower's lectures more than on reading Innis, for as Lower told us, Innis was a very turgid writer. He was an economic historian who devoted the last twelve years of his life, up to 1952, to communication subjects, writing Empire and Communications in 1950 and The Bias of Communication and Changing Concepts of Time in 1951. Communication was not just added on as another subject as he believed that it was the key that unlocked history, bringing about social change - not exactly a class-struggle theory of change.

All this is to say that something of an Innis revival is underway in the academic world and serving this on March 30-31 was a conference entitled "H.A. Innis a Symposium. Legacy, Content, Direction." It took place in the amphitheatre-like setting of Simon Fraser University with its great, fountained courtyard atop a low mountain plateau in Burnaby, B.C., overlooking Burrard Inlet. Across the Inlet were the snow-capped peaks of the Coast range, a fitting setting for a revival of a great Canadian scholar after 25 years in eclipse. (On the opposite page three authors from Simon Fraser discuss in a new book The Tangled Net how Innis concepts formed the basis of their work).

Mel Watkins says the contemporary revival of political science in Canada "centres critically on the wedding of Innis and Marx." (This Magazine Vol.12, No. 1). Watkins, Reg Whitaker and Ian Parker presented papers (as part of a panel) that linked Innis themes to Marxist themes, for example, Innis "centre to margin" theory on how empires exploited their hinterlands. Imperial control centres such as ancient Rome or modern London dominated outlying territories through the use of fast, lightweight media (papyrus, paper) and good transport. The metropolis held the hinterlands in a state of dependency in which a staples trade had thrust it in the first place. The materials used in message-making assisted in that domination. However, counter media developed on the periphery of empire as resistance to centralism and gradually won over. It was a thesis-antithesis, - synthesis theory based on media as determinants. Empires achieve equilibrium only through a harmonious balance between the bias of "time" and "space" - that is, between media that celebrated the past, religion, history, permanence of materials, continuity, and personal, small oral societies such as the Athenian city state. Temples, spires, pyramids pointed heavenward, stone building showed solidity, and so were styled "time biased." Space media on the other hand were lightweight, secular, scientific and mechanistic, concerned with the present, covering distances speedily, such as provided by paper, printing, high speed presses and electricity. The media establish monopolies of knowledge not by what they say but by the particular bias of their materials, technology or form. They favour certain kinds of information over other kinds inevitably, creating social instability, or as McLuhan put it "the medium is