Editorial:

In The Rear View Mirror

— It was mid-afternoon on December 31—the last day of 1980—that we got the message: Marshall McLuhan was dead. He had passed away in his sleep the night before, the tragic climax to a stroke he had suffered a year before that left him with speech difficulties. Barrington Nevitt had called with the sad news by telephone, our most personal medium.

It sounds trite, but it is very true: this was the end of an "era"—The Age of McLuhan. In the 30 years that we had known him personally and by reputation while engaged in the teaching of communication and mass media, we knew at least that McLuhan was always there: there as a cryptic but piquant observer of society and media, with his wry humour, his brilliance and that exploratory mind. His facile, quipping style was not always endearing to "linear" academics but significant and meaningful to those who hold that sometimes lugubrious work in the academic world can stand some leavening of intuitive thought. But while he is gone, not so his writings, or the McLuhan approach.

In this special issue, the Canadian Journal of Communication is publishing part of a bibliography of Marshall McLuhan’s works compiled by one of his many friends, Margaret Stewart of Toronto. Alas, this is only a fraction of a small volume which totalled 112 pages of print and was too long for the Journal to publish.

We were also able to secure on short notice an article by Barrington Nevitt, Visible and Invisible Bias Via Media, as an example of what will be called the McLuhan approach and a short piece by Edwin Black in the chapter "Understanding McLuhan’s Media" from his Politics and the News which is to be published in the near future by Butterworths, and an article from D.L. Doeden.

This tribute is not as immediate as news wire or electronic messages flashed around the world on December 31, but it is made as soon as it could be for a scholarly journal wanting to offer something unique. And it may tie in with the movement to create McLuhan societies in Canadian cities. Already one U.S. university has spoken of a McLuhan Institute in the making.

Barrington Nevitt is, of course, the man who as co-author with McLuhan of the book, Take Today—The Executive As Dropout (1972). He worked closely with Marshall and his associates at the University
of Toronto’s “Centre for Culture and Technology” in the years of its existence between 1953 and 1980. Now a consulting engineer in “communication and innovation” living in Toronto, he has been engaged in consulting and teaching at many universities around the world, (in Stockholm, Montreal, Mexico, Ottawa to name a few places) as well as marketing and management for government and business. (Additional information is contained in the bibliography of his article in this issue regarding, inter alia, other pieces he has written with McLuhan or with the McLuhan approach.)

We welcome Barry’s article and those of Edwin Black and D.L. Doeden as part of the tribute to Marshall McLuhan.

Our own association with McLuhan over the years was only peripheral. But we do remember with affection as in a rear-view mirror, and before he became world-renowned, his coming down St. Mary's street from his home near the University of Toronto to visit a mutual friend, Bill Hagon. Hagon, a public relations man and rather dynamic himself, used to call him “Plato of the Platters” because Marshall sometimes, the man who came to dinner often insisted on doing the dishes afterwards.

We remember publication of his first book, The Mechanical Bride, and how a magazine editor exclaimed “Have you read The Mechanical Bride?” and urged us to do so at once.

We remember McLuhan and his charming wife, Corinne, visiting London, Ontario, where both gave talks at Brescia College for girls, maintained by the Catholic Church. On being asked to introduce McLuhan, we referred to him as “L’enfant terrible of the communication world,” whereupon he quipped “Then Corinne must be “La femme fatale.” He finished by saying “When you hear the sound of your own voice, it’s time to stop talking.” And their coming out afterwards on that rainy night to our home in Lambeth where a few faculty members from the University of Western Ontario had gathered. We remember, too, going to Toronto from London with Bill Key who wanted to meet McLuhan. Key was then preparing his book, Subliminal Seduction about imbedding hidden sex symbols in advertising and later got McLuhan to write an introduction to the book. It was probably one of the few McLuhan writings with which we thoroughly disagreed.

Then there was the chance meeting at the Centre for Culture and Technology in Toronto with Michael Karem, another mutual friend, who had gone to Israel and became mayor of Enkarem, a suburb of Jerusalem. Marshall was delighted at the story of how Michael kept in touch with Enkarem by sending back sound tapes. “Michael put on the village,” McLuhan said in an instant lecture on the subject of media. “He wears the village as a mask.”

Finally, we recall the winter at the end of the fifties when we attended his evening seminars at his home near Casa Loma.
What Barrington Nevitt has called "thinking the unthinkable" was thinking that Marshall McLuhan would ever die.

But that final day had arrived and the very moving service at Holy Rosary church on St. Clair sorrowfully confirmed it. There were some six hundred academics from Canada and the United States, media people, friends, and centering out the solemnly beautiful ceremony, the McLuhan "clan" or extended family. Author and broadcaster Patrick Watson and Prof. John Culkin, the communications chairman at Fordham University, gave tributes. The Sky Boat song and Amazing Grace, piped by the Toronto Scottish Regiment were elegies of an eerie, high-pitched quality that were profoundly moving near the end of the service, and notes from the well-known hymn "Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory" of especial poignancy as McLuhan's casket passed down the aisle.

The section of the Journal has been titled "Into That Silent Sea"—taken from a quotation from Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Marshall McLuhan liked that quotation as expressing the excitement he and others experienced in entering the uncharted area of communication studies. He quoted the lines in a press interview:

We were the first that ever burst
into that silent sea.

-Earle Beattie