Two recent publications invite us to consider new interpretations of the work and legacy of Harold Innis. In *Harold Innis and the North*, William Buxton and his colleagues offer a collection of articles with a deliberately understated theme—what Buxton (2013) calls the “micro-narrative” (p. 11) of Innis’ work on the Canadian North at a time when it was on the cusp of industrialization. This micro-narrative of northern development is proposed by Buxton as a counterweight to the grand narrative of the staples thesis articulated by Innis (1930) in a “northern” work, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, and familiar to communication scholars for its influence on Innis’ communication histories.

In *Emergence and Empire*, winner of the Canadian Communication Association’s 2014 Gertrude J. Robinson Book Prize, John Bonnett (2013) takes a different tack, applying to Innis’ work as an historian of major social change a unique theoretical perspective originating in the 1980s, based in several disciplines, and culminating in the concept of the complex adaptive system (p. 26). Bonnett proposes that the key characteristics of such a system, although theorized years after his death, are present in Innis’ work. Bonnett’s analysis of how these elements function together emphasizes how Innis understood change to arise within social systems (including Innis’ concepts of bias and monopoly of knowledge) whose rigidities Bonnett believes other inter-

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interpreters overstress. A major rationale for both works, then, is to balance the dominant or one-dimensional emphasis that is argued to prevail in other interpretations of Innis.

Buxton argues in his introduction that there is a tendency among Innis scholars to ignore detail and outlier evidence and to homogenize Innis’ own conflicting and contradictory interpretations of his findings as his work developed. It could be suggested too, that because of the relative youth of the communication field, we imagine Innis as one of the ancients of his own later work. We read or misread him through the unreliable medium of print, rather than understanding him as Buxton’s co-authors do, as a contemporary public intellectual of the early to mid-twentieth century, a not so very long ago period when Canadian intellectual life, the North, and public policy were taking their modern shape.

Originating at a conference held in Montréal in 2007, the papers brought together in Buxton’s collection cover key aspects of Innis’ research on the North, including his work on specific regions, his advocacy in research and public policy on the North, and on the geopolitics of the development of the Arctic regions of North America and the Soviet Union. These essays are complemented by several chapters and parts of chapters that are concerned with “voice” and the legitimation of knowledge; they delve more deeply into Innis’ position as a male, white, metropolitan academic, his methodology, his chosen informants, and his writing.

We hear early on in this collection from Innis himself, in the form of a previously unpublished 1924 report on wildlife conservation in the Mackenzie District that, until the 1990s, was filed at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, with no copy in Innis’ papers in the University of Toronto archives. This short report is in Innis’ characteristic blunt style and in tropes familiar to those who know his staples work and his discussions of the price system. He remarks on how scarcity and price were not necessarily related in the market for furs; how mission schools and hospitals (unnecessarily duplicated by competing denominations) stressed the available food supply; and how the natural shortage of food in the northern spring, exacerbated by chronic failure to adequately order imported food for communities served by an annual supply ship, inevitably led to illegal hunting in the spring, the most dangerous time to the successful reproduction of species: “… it is slight wonder that difficulties occur” (Innis quoted in Buxton, 2013, p. 124).

It is good to hear Innis’ own voice from the North as the book begins. But this is also where scholarship comes in. Without contributor George Colpitts’ archival research contextualizing this report—showing why Innis was invited to write it while on his first major research trip on the fur trade, the role the contacts he made would play in his future studies, and Colpitt’s arguments as to how Innis protected those relationships, avoided conflict, and guarded the information he shared—we would be left with the impression of an exceptionally observant but disinterested flâneur who happened to find himself on the Mackenzie River. Colpitts argues, rather surprisingly, that significant insight into Innis’ interpretations of his research for this report, or of the motivations of the report’s commissioners, can be gleaned by textual study of the report itself. On reading the report this seems doubtful, and indeed the suggestion is a disservice to Colpitts’ own archival work and that of his co-contributors. The portraits
of Innis that emerge in this book, and the contradictions and challenges to dominant interpretations of his work they may offer, owe their existence to archival research, collaboration with other scholars (many of the authors credit consultation with fellow contributors), and attention to lesser-known publications. Buxton acknowledges this in his appropriate dedication of the book to archivists.

Colpitts argued that in Innis’ view government, always unreliable, was responsible for the conditions that made conservation necessary. At the same time Innis was an energetic advocate of better scholarship in the service of state expansion in developing the northern economy. Throughout the book as a whole, contributors add nuance to this duality in Innis, but struggle without resolution to overcome its two sides—the blunt realist, or fatalist, and the promoter of research in the service of state activity that might somehow achieve the economic equilibrium staples production seemed destined to deny.

Matthew Evenden’s chapter, “The Northern Vision of Harold Innis,” argues that, at least in the 1920s and 1930s when Innis sought opportunities to perform as a public intellectual on the topic of the North, Innis did not see the winding down of the fur trade, its institutions, and culture as a loss or something to be in any way regretted. Rather the fur trade’s decline was a now-familiar process in which one exhausted staple and its infrastructures contribute building blocks for the next staple, in this case mining and minerals. Evenden’s meticulous documentation of the advance planning of Innis’ northern explorations, which began in 1924, undermines, as Evenden intends, any romantic portrait of the energetic all-Canadian farm boy turned professor, prepared to sleep rough and paddle his own canoe. Reporting on Innis’ many public lectures on the economic development of the North and even the explorer-like persona of Innis promoted in contemporary press coverage of his talks, Evenden concludes that at least in these years, Innis’ career ambitions and sense of self marched hand in hand with a vision of Canada as “a geo-body that would be given life when its territory was filled in economically” (Buxton, 2013, p. 92). Moreover, “he took the view of the conquerors. Aboriginal peoples and women did not tint his optic” (p. 93).

Evenden’s critique of Innis’ methods and of his cultivated public persona of this time is the most severe review of Innis in the book. His portrait of Innis squarely seeking a position as a scholar of influence and cultivating association with academics and northern officials—even at the expense of the knowledge that Aboriginals, women, and others might have provided—contrasts with Paul Heyer’s discussion of Innis’ promotion of the explorer and fur trader Peter Pond in “Innis, Peter Pond and the Fur Trade.” In this chapter, Heyer argues that it was Innis’ sense of Pond (1740–1807) as a fellow outsider, one whose knowledge of the Mackenzie Basin was usurped by Alexander Mackenzie, which motivated him to the hyperbolic remark that Pond was an unsung “Father of Confederation” and to publish a biographical sketch of Pond in 1930. Pond’s outsider status also included his semi-literacy. Heyer argues that (in contrast to Innis’ apparently unthinking exclusion of Aboriginal peoples and women as advisors or informants) Innis sympathized deeply with Pond’s inability to write either a triumphal autobiography or even official reports of his activities, his mere sketchy “recollections” contributing by default to Mackenzie’s ascendance as the recognized
explorer. Moreover, Heyer argues that a concern with Pond reveals an interest on Innis’ part in the “human element” (p. 72), something that is missing in *The Fur Trade in Canada*, which was published the same year.

Pond features again in Barry Gough’s “Fur Trade and Nation” in which he credits the initial influences on Innis as W.A. Mackintosh of Queen’s University, who was arguing for attention to the “staple product” at the centre of newly settled economies (p. 54), and Marion Newbigin, a Scottish academic who visited Canada and suggested how the combination of the staples economy and the nature of the Precambrian shield and its resources and water routes contributed to the separate development of Canada from the United States (Buxton, 2013, p. 55). However it is Peter Pond’s story, and his association with the North West Company (NWC) that Gough finds most compelling as an example of Innis’ sympathies and approach. Unlike the Hudson’s Bay Company, which held a Royal Charter and was based in England, the NWC was made up of partners who were career fur traders, equals who came together to pool resources, develop new routes and partnerships with Aboriginal allies, and to try and achieve a monopoly in the territory they worked. “It was a Canadian, not an English, imperial triumph” (Buxton, 2013, p. 61)—at least until the merger of the two companies in 1821.

It is in Jim Mochoruk’s chapter on Innis and northern Manitoba and Jeff Webb’s chapter on Innis’ fieldwork in Labrador and Newfoundland that an analysis less concerned with the dualities within Innis in the 1920s and 1930s emerges. In these chapters the authors argue that Innis reveals not only concern for “dumb Indians” (Innis, 1929, quoted in Buxton, 2013, p. 162) but real acknowledgement of how northern industries depended on the knowledge and skill of fishers, the Inuit, and others with outsider status to the academic and government worlds. Webb situates Innis’ approach to the cod fishery in relation to later work by social scientists that dismissed Innis’ work for its inattention to class, and more broadly for seeming to ignore “the human factor.” Through Mochoruk’s own engaging analysis of Innis’ field notes as he travelled the Newfoundland interior and the Labrador coast, we rediscover an attention to detail and to processes of labour, patterns of settlement, and the rise and fall of small communities. Similarly Mochoruk provides a sympathetic reading of Innis’ field notes from the Arctic coast and Churchill, Manitoba, concluding that,

> for all of his commentary upon what one expects of an economist—the efficiencies and inefficiencies of various construction projects, the capital costs associating with dredging the harbour at Churchill, and the role that the HBR [Hudson’s Bay Railway] might play in opening up the entire Arctic to further economic development—it is his notes upon the Inuit that are the most impassioned.” (Buxton, 2013, p. 161)

Yet even if Innis was in sympathy with the lives that experienced the hard edge of the “cyclonics” of the frontier economy, this recognition did not extend to drawing on their knowledge directly. Liza Piper’s chapter compares Innis’ research travels with those of his doctoral student Irene Biss (Spry). While it reveals how their treatment by local officials and their access to information can be accounted for by conventions of race and gender, it concludes that their white, academic, and southern status led them to experiences and research findings that were more similar than different, and
that rarely drew directly on indigenous or local settler knowledge (Buxton, 2013, p. 145). Through the 1930s until her marriage to Graham Spry in 1938, Biss researched the mining boom and began to experience the North through aviation, contributing important updates to Innis’ own research and ultimately to his published work in *Settlement and the Mining Frontier* (1936). Yet Piper concludes that the mining economy and the shift in the North from “productive activities [that] went from relying on food [see Innis’ 1924 report, above] to fossil fuels” (Buxton, 2013, p. 144) finally eluded Innis’ interest and synthetic capacity as World War II neared.

William Buxton and contributing author Jeffrey Brison have made great contributions through their publications on Harold Innis’ central role in bringing together research foundations, government, and the social sciences in twentieth-century English Canada. In this book Buxton contributes two substantial chapters for the record, one on Innis’ role in shaping academic work on the North and another on his trip to northern Russia in 1945. On this high-level academic-diplomatic tour, Innis was concerned with the development of agriculture, mining, and settlement in the Russian north, and he reviewed culture, communication, research, and education in Russia. On his return he did his best to ensure that his findings did not become part of the emerging Cold War discourse in which any suggestion of similarity, let alone cooperation, between the two countries was anathema. Innis’ Russian diary nonetheless “fell prey to the ‘taking of sides’” (Buxton, 2013, p. 261) and though later published, has been largely ignored. Buxton’s co-authored chapter with the Russian scholar Sergei Arkhipov, “A Russian Perspective on Innis’ Russian Diary,” acknowledges fulsomely Innis’ imaginative and ideology-defying engagement with the Russia he encountered 1945. Yet this chapter’s conclusion pointing to a potential second renaissance in Russian-Canadian or Russian-Western knowledge exchange seems optimistic, to say the least.

Jeffrey Brison’s chapter on the Arctic Survey initiated in 1943 by the young Canadian Social Scientific Research Council (CSSRC) with Rockefeller Foundation funds offers insight into interests behind academic initiatives and shows how outcomes are not always most significant where intended. The interest of the Rockefeller Foundation in the survey was in supporting the CSSRC under Innis’ leadership, while the interest of American partners in the research was in developing the Canadian North, which was seen as empty territory susceptible to Soviet threat. The interest of Canadians included their concern with American military and economic dominance of the North, and the interest of Harold Innis was in defining the mandate of the survey as broadly as possible to include the natural and social sciences (a lasting influence on northern scholarship) and to build academic capacity (Buxton, 2013, p. 221). Innis, at least, was successful. While the Department of Mines and Resources and the territorial government placed obstacles in the way of some of the researchers, the result of the survey was not what it achieved for northerners, or for the North in a strategic sense, but rather the building up of the CSSRC and the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto.

Shirley Roburn’s chapter “Innis and Environmental Politics: Practical Insight from the Yukon” is in fact far more wide-ranging than the title suggests. As an environmentalist, Roburn is concerned with the politics of knowledge, and the already successful
establishment of First Nations knowledge systems from the centre, not the periphery, where they are fully recognized and operational in land claims and self-government. Roburn also documents the work of the late Gail Valaskakis, Lorna Roth, and others in establishing institutions and protocols that foster the work of Aboriginal students and researchers, and she credits the influence of Innis on their work in “shaping the institutional arrangements that define how knowledge is discovered, and circulated” (Buxton, 2013, p. 319). Roburn's Innis is not the expected one. I anticipated that an environmentalist and advocate for First Nations knowledge would find every opportunity to critique Innis’ dispassionate academic language, his failure to transcend casual racism, the rigidities that others find in some of his key concepts, and his championing of elite academic institutions. Instead Roburn embraces Innis, and in her analysis is inspired by an Innis of details, an Innis who wrote “careful taxonomies of staple commodities [that] deconstructed the roles that technologies, resources, government regulations, methods of production and distribution and social and political hierarchies played in the economic formations of his day” (Buxton, 2013, p. 318). She advocates for a parallel meticulous deconstruction and reconstruction of education and research in the North in the service not only of the northern people but also of “balance and equity” in North-South relations.

The ever-present question of Innis as imaginary interlocutor for each of these authors, as for other writers and readers on Innis, comes to a head in the final chapter, “Innis and I on the Highway of the Atom,” by Peter C. Van Wyck. Van Wyck has Innis as ghost-companion on a northern voyage concerned with those unstable staples, uranium and radium. He travels by boat on the Mackenzie Delta along many of the same routes Innis followed, finding as he goes that the Innis of his field notes is an unsatisfying companion who refuses to theorize, let alone accurately record, where he is on any given day; and whose valuing of orality is at odds with his deafness to northern voices. Van Wyck wants to answer difficult questions such as: “What manner of writing is appropriate to an emphatic landscape such that it is both ethically engaged and alive to the proximity of the remote?” (Buxton, 2013, p. 348). Innis is silent.

John Bonnett (2013) also feels the “problem” of Innis’ silence, and he then offers a solution. For example, if Innis did not present a “high resolution” portrait of how he understood change to come about, we can extrapolate from Innis’ approving citations of the essays of Thorstein Veblen, that Innis understood and endorsed “emergent change,” or in Veblen’s vocabulary, evolutionary or genetic change (p. 30). Bonnett requires himself to make this scholarly excursus, and another on Immanuel Kant’s influence on Innis, partly because he is introducing concepts and terms not used directly by Innis in his major writings, and partly because he also introduces a more recent theory of complex adaptive change (drawing on physics, biology, systems theory, and the business cycle) to apply to Innis’ work. The theory, he argues, is concordant with Veblen, who also drew on biology, psychology, and a range of social thought to provide more complex accounts of human agency and aggregate behaviour in the economy than did classical economics.

Following his introduction to complex adaptive change, Bonnett applies it in chapters on major works of Innis: “The Fur Trade,” “The Cod Fisheries,” “Political Economy
in the Modern State,” and “Empire and Communications and the Bias of Communication.” Each of the chapters contributes insights to these works, issues they raise, and contemporary scholarship related to them. These insights sometimes do, and sometimes do not, relate to the argument Bonnett is building about the interpretive value of complex adaptive change to Innis’ œuvre. Along the way, Bonnett (2013) also introduces other theoretical and research tools, notably “information visualization and formalism integration” (p. 255) and “geographic information systems” (p. 261), arguing quite convincingly that these tools would have been compatible with Innis’ research methods, and that we can re-imagine his research organized with their help. In his conclusion Bonnett stresses that Innis was not a technological determinist, and that in his histories we find examples of both system collapse and system adaptation to change.

I would like to raise a couple of issues that apply to both works. First, is it necessary to argue that someone else (Innis or another interpreter, not always identified) has made it necessary to “correct” an interpretation of Innis that is excessive in some way? In neither book is there real discussion of the work of these allegedly limiting interpreters. The “straw man” method of introducing one’s own ideas is quite unnecessary. Insinuating one’s intervention into Innis scholarship in this way at this point in time diminishes the impact of an idea. The secondary literature is vast, the publication of the Innis archive proceeds, and if exasperated readers have dealt with what Bonnett calls Innis’ “data dumps” or grown frustrated by his failure to theorize to a satisfactory degree, such that they dismiss or oversimplify his work, the best challenge is to positively introduce one’s own work. In Buxton’s book the archive-enlightened study of Innis’ northern research stands on its own strong merits and does not need to be presented a counterweight to a “grand narrative,” which in the end is just a conventional periodization of Innis’ research, frankly of little concern except to Innis specialists. What also gets lost in this way of introducing the book is a strong statement from Buxton and his colleagues as to why the North, now, is an important topic or series of topics that scholarship on Innis’ North can shed light on. Similarly, John Bonnett does not need to argue for Innis’ indirect approval of the recent scholarship he applies to Innis’ work, but could legitimately proceed directly to demonstrate the value of that interpretive exercise. The persistent question of what Innis would have thought is understandable, but cannot be answered. What matters is the soundness of Innis scholarship on its own merits.

For most of us in Canadian communication studies, one person populates the world of Canadian scholarship of the 1920s to 1950s: Harold Innis. Historians, geographers, and political economists (those who remain) have the advantage of being able to situate Innis in relation to bodies of research and theories of the political-economic evolution of Canada, the British Empire, and the global economy. If Innis did not appear in the recent major retrospective reviews of northern research (Buxton, 2013, p. 7), we have to depend on our colleagues to interpret this disquieting fact for us. As communication scholars, we have our own responsibilities. A significant one is the teaching of Innis’ work. As the scope of archival work on Innis expands, and as contemporary methods and theories related to some of his work are explored, we have a broader and
broader appreciation of the scope and significance of Innis’ work. The next question is how to translate these insights into the present university teaching environment and into greater juxtaposition with the work of contemporary communication researchers.

Notes
1. While Innis may have been promoting the North as the “next frontier,” his lectures were concerned with the economic and territorial fulfillment of Canada’s destiny rather than dwelling on a romanticized past. Barry Gough is very clear that Innis was not “attracted by the allurements described by Grey Owl (Archie Delaney)” (Buxton, 2013, p. 56), or by others busy creating the image of the Canadian wilderness, especially its Rocky Mountain variant.

2. Innis was contrasting the lack of public concern for Aboriginal peoples with that shown to “dumb animals.”

3. An exception was Innis’ contact with Métis men working in northern transportation. As Lisa Piper notes, “Southerners created a racialized trajectory along which First Nations were seen as primitive ... the Métis were thought to be racially equipped to act as intermediaries, and the Inuit were to provide the necessary expertise for the extension of industry into the Arctic” (Buxton, 2013, p. 136).

4. On the demands of gender performance and the academic role see Piper (Buxton, 2013), “[Biss] also remained distanced from the land, water and peoples of the North, in part as a result of the objective research persona that she wished to emulate” (p. 145); and Van Wyck, “… Cameron Bay, a wild-west radium boomtown in the 1930s, where Irene Spry spent a summer pretending to be Harold Innis … (p. 339). One of the themes of this book is Innis’ multiple roles—his self-awareness and ethics in playing those roles, including at times the coarse “masculinist” able to trade jokes and stories with Indian agents and other men, and his multiple voices as he addressed different publics, and even himself in his field notes. How much less latitude there was for Irene Biss in her time, and in the judgment of posterity.

Reference