From the beginning of September, 1985, to the middle of March, 1986, I was engaged in cataloguing part of the McLuhan papers in the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa. Over seventy cartons of materials fell to my lot. At the same time, Archives employees had already catalogued, or were then in process of doing so, two additional segments of the McLuhan papers.

One segment was devoted exclusively to McLuhan correspondence, arranged according to correspondents. Thus, the McLuhan-Trudeau correspondence was included in this segment and marked in a file titled "Trudeau." This part was easily the most eye-catching segment of the papers. The names on the files ranged from "Woody Allen" to such unlikely figures as "Hilaire Belloc" (a writer McLuhan particularly admired during the thirties, whose contribution to the McLuhan correspondence was a polite note declining a speaking engagement). The other segment was devoted to manuscripts of McLuhan's numerous articles and books.

My own segment also included a great deal of correspondence. Perhaps the most notable feature of that correspondence was its top-heavy inclusion of letters from the late sixties and the seventies, the period during which McLuhan obtained the services of a full time secretary. Not only was he able during this period to dictate letters, but to retain carbon copies, and later photocopies, of them. As in the case of Henry James, the acquisition of a stenographer resulted in some alteration of McLuhan's style—the prose of the dictated letters is usually more abrupt and distanced than that of letters he had personally penned.
Some Comments on the McLuhan Papers/P. Marchand

Of course, this alteration is partly due to the nature of many of his correspondents during this period, who were often casual acquaintances or outright strangers. Correspondence kept pouring into McLuhan's Centre for Culture and Technology during the seventies, and McLuhan's dogged determination to answer most of it wore him out at times, particularly when the mail accumulated during his numerous absences on speaking engagements. The trial was made worse by his tendency to take even crank letters seriously and to reply to them, very often, in some detail. Evidently he had no one he was willing to able to trust in composing, for his signature, brief and polite responses to insignificant correspondence.

In any case, McLuhan's secretary/amanuensis became, in McLuhan's terms, an extension of himself which enhanced his ruling passion, a love of talk. The bulk of the letters in this period repeat, almost endlessly, cherished McLuhan themes, explaining and clarifying, more or less, his "percepts." No handwritten letter of McLuhan's in the Archives is without interest, but the dictated letters of the seventies can very quickly become tedious to anyone reading a number of them at one sitting.

In his case, quantity affected quality adversely, although even those letters from this period obviously dictated in a hurry still contain the odd sentence or phrase which illuminates his thinking, and which are valuable to the dedicated McLuhan student. On the whole, however, these dictated letters, at least when they are read in bulk, convey the impression of man explaining his thought with almost compulsive, and mechanical, regularity.

No one who is fond of McLuhan can be happy reading certain letters that he wrote on controversial topics to men who held political or academic power. No matter how close to his heart the issue was—and no matter how urgent and valid his protest—McLuhan often seemed compelled, in these letters, to haul out an involved and barely comprehensible (because McLuhan was too impatient to include logical links or otherwise fully to explain himself) discussion of figure versus ground, acoustic versus visual space, North Americans going out to be alone, or some other characteristic theme. One can see the eyes of the recipient rolling upwards at the sight of these paragraphs.

It is common practice among McLuhan critics to contrast his earlier social or cultural commentary with his later theorizing about media, to the disadvantage of the latter. These polemical contrasts rarely assist intelligent appraisal of McLuhan's work, but I confess that poking around the papers in the Archives—and particularly the correspondence—put me in a state of mind similar to those critics. Certain intellectual themes are also repeated again and again in earlier letters but they are overshadowed by McLuhan's extremely dexterous characterization of things and individuals.
As is often the case with writers, the dexterity increases with the contempt felt by the writer for the thing characterized. McLuhan's contempt, even from the start of his career, had a kind of imperial quality. Dwight Macdonald, in a letter to McLuhan's friend Felix Giovanelli, in the late forties, protested against McLuhan's treatment of "every great social thinker of the past five centuries," and his particular "method," which Macdonald maintained was "to deny rationality and objective truth to all these theorists and to insist on taking them only as hallucinated neurotics." Nonetheless, Macdonald could still enjoy, as an intellectually curious reader, the treatment and the method.

No doubt he would not have enjoyed so much McLuhan's "method," in his later correspondence, of dismissing everyone from Immanuel Kant to Jacques Derrida on the grounds that they lacked McLuhan's awareness of the nature of acoustic space or of the effects of the media, or whatever. No longer hallucinated neurotics, these men were simply pathetically ignorant of the secret McLuhan had discovered. It is only occasionally that McLuhan zeroes in on a target with the astringent humour of his earlier letters—when he accused R.D. Laing, for example, of devising a "program of brain-washing people who have any private identity so that by group therapy they can climb aboard the tribal canoe."

Of particular interest are prolonged exchanges of letters between McLuhan and certain correspondents. His correspondence with Wilfred and Sheila Watson, then teaching English at the University of Alberta, is remarkable for its length (it was commenced in the late fifties and continued almost weekly until McLuhan's stroke in 1979), and for the fact that McLuhan maintained the note of an affectionate and loyal friend in almost every letter. Of some historical interest is the correspondence between McLuhan and Pierre Trudeau. McLuhan rarely used this correspondence to lobby Trudeau on specific issues, which was certainly wise. Rather, in McLuhan's parlance, he tried to draw attention to the hidden "ground" of the "figure" constituted by certain specific issues. Even some of McLuhan's more eccentric proposals, such as a "national humour program," and his unconventional defence of capital punishment, have a certain cogency. Trudeau's replies to McLuhan's letters are both respectful and thoughtful, but obviously those of a man living in a different mental universe.

It is, again, the earlier McLuhan correspondents who participate in the more interesting series of exchanges. It is hard to forget the correspondence with Felix Giovanelli, colleague of McLuhan's from St. Louis University, an extraordinary, faithful squire to this intellectual knight errant from Canada, and one of the rare individuals to whom McLuhan gave his complete confidence. Or Hugh Kenner, McLuhan's brilliant and ambitious protege who discussed his illustrious professors at the Yale English Department with withering contempt in a series of letters to McLuhan. The academic stratagems these two discussed involved an almost unworldly complexity and sensitivity.
There are also, of course, famous literary figures McLuhan corresponded with in the forties and early fifties, chiefly Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound. The Lewis/McLuhan correspondence makes painful reading in its demonstration of McLuhan's anxiety not to offend the ever touchy Lewis—an anxiety which did not prevent Lewis eventually from lashing out at McLuhan. Giovanelli, sympathizing with McLuhan's dismay at Lewis's ingratitude, went so far as to call Lewis "this sick monster, this foul abortion out of hell."\(^3\) Doubtless Giovanelli, in this letter, was carried away; nonetheless, Lewis probably aroused similar reactions in many another benefactor, though few proved themselves as devoted to Lewis as McLuhan.

McLuhan also poured out his frustration at the insensibility of his environment in a series of letters to Pound, who barked out querulous, cryptic, sometimes incomprehensible replies on his St. Elizabeth's typewriter. In both the Lewis and Pound correspondence, McLuhan displayed a deference unusual to him, but it was in no ways fawning. McLuhan never lost his profound respect for artists, or his realization of the indispensable services they provided to society—even when he had first hand knowledge of their failings as human beings.

Aside from correspondence, the segment of the McLuhan papers I catalogued contained a great deal of clippings from newspapers and periodicals such as Life magazine. Perhaps a quarter of the material in my segment was of this kind. A great percentage of these clippings is of the most limited value, even to the most dedicated of McLuhan students, since it is difficult to see what exactly attracted McLuhan's attention to them. In some cases, of course, their use was obvious, as in the files marked 'UMR' ("Understanding Media Revised"), where they appear in individual folders devoted to specific media, which McLuhan intended to consult when he wrote his updated version of that book.

McLuhan's notes were also scattered throughout the collection, usually written in pencil on the backs of envelopes and on various scraps of paper. Again, unless the notes were attached to files devoted to specific topics, their use for McLuhan students is limited. They are, as is the way with handwritten notes, usually too cryptic to be understood by other than the person who wrote them. (Although they are always legible—McLuhan had beautifully crisp and incisive penmanship, somewhat like a medieval scribe's.)

Undoubtedly the greatest biographical interest of my segment lay in a set of journals McLuhan kept. The earliest journal covered the year 1930, when McLuhan was in his second and third years at the University of Manitoba. For almost every day of that year, McLuhan wrote a full entry, containing details of how his day went and various of his reflections, personal and philosophical, on his experiences.
The reflections, in particular, show him to be a young man serious even for that stage of adolescence (he celebrated his nineteenth birthday in July of 1930). They show him to be a pious, moral—and sometimes moralistic—young man, yearning with unspecified ambition, plagued with indigestion, discouraged by the poverty in which his family lived, and scornful of the second rate. He can be a very severe judge, as well, of this friends, relatives and professors. Doubtless the cold Manitoba climate helped discourage any counter-impulses in the young McLuhan toward laxity.

In fact, the moral and intellectual climate of his environment comes through very clearly in this diary. It is a climate of strenuous moral uplift, combining the spirits of Emile Coue and Thomas Carlyle, and tinged at its extreme with the mystic sciences of phrenology and Rosicrucianism. The nineteenth century was very slow in departing from Winnipeg.

The English Department of the University of Manitoba, as reflected in the pages of this diary, shared the climate. Literary appreciation as taught by that University was of the "adventures of the soul amidst masterpieces" kind: the literary critic appraised the diction, sentiments, poetic fancies, characterizations, prose and poetic rhythms of these masterpieces, and was not afraid to soar, in his own prose, to eloquent heights of appreciation. The result: "aesthetic enjoyment and spiritual uplift," as the young diarist put it.

The spirit of this critical school was typified by the remark of one of McLuhan's professors, captured in the diary, to the effect that "the appreciation of Milton's poetry is the reward of consummate scholarship." In other words, for aesthetic enjoyment and spiritual uplift, nothing beat Milton. This at a time when McLuhan's later literary idols, Pound and Eliot and F.R. Leavis, were already launching their lethal critical broadsides against that poet. No wonder McLuhan tended to blame the University of Manitoba for his later problems in navigating through the English school at Cambridge, birthplace of the New Criticism and McLuhan's home for two years after leaving Manitoba.

The second diary McLuhan kept covered the years 1935-1939, from his first year as an undergraduate to the end of his second year teaching at St. Louis University and the beginning of his year of Ph.D work at Cambridge. The diary, a gift from a friend, contained space for entries for five years, one under the other, for each day of the year. (On December 1, 1938, for example, McLuhan noted that he was "impressed" by Hitler's Mein Kampf - the next year, with World War II well underway, he added to that entry the notation, in brackets, "[!! 1939]"). Space on the page for individual entries was therefore limited; and McLuhan abandoned his earlier practice of writing long accounts of the day and limited himself to brief remarks.
Some Comments on the McLuhan Papers/P. Marchand

Usually they are of the 'had tea with Mr. and Mrs..." variety, and so not very illuminating. Sometimes they are intriguing. On February 21, 1936, for example, he notes "Heckled by Gertrude Stein at Eng. Club." The reader can only wish McLuhan had described that incident in the same detail he had described fierce debates with fellow University of Manitoba students, in his earlier diary. Again, there is no doubt, from later accounts, that McLuhan felt painfully like a hick from the wilds of Manitoba in the sophisticated and elegant world of Cambridge. Of this feeling, however, there is very little notice taken in the diary. The days of McLuhan pouring out his heart-felt emotions in the pages of a journal had passed forever.

It is the same with the journals he kept throughout the seventies, in the kind of spiral bound books stamped with the year's date on the cover and used by most people as day-timers. These journals no doubt give a distorted impression of McLuhan's last years. They tend to emphasize the petty annoyances of his life, and what he regarded as the wilful obtuseness of others, particularly his colleagues and institutional superiors at the University of Toronto.

In some respects these years really were distressing to McLuhan. He witnessed his university converted into a swollen, bureaucratic version of a large American state university. His sons and daughters, now grown, were frequently in troubles of various kinds, and more of a concern to him than they had ever been as children. And his reputation continued to fade.

Yet the tone of these entries is never peevish or whining. They reveal a man as confident as ever in the value of his work, possessed of an insatiable intellectual curiosity, and, despite everything, basically cheerful and affectionate. As with the other diaries in the Archives, they are a fascinating testament to his personality and his outlook on life.

ENDNOTES