

HAROLD ADAMS INNIS, 1894–1952

THE death of Harold Adams Innis on November 8, 1952, removed a leading figure in Canadian scholarship, and left a multitude of friends on both sides of the Atlantic with a feeling of acute personal loss.

I

Harold Innis was born on November 5, 1894, near the village of Otterville, Oxford County, Ontario. His parents were engaged in farming, and in ancestry were mainly Scottish, although other strains, including Pennsylvania Dutch, were also present. His paternal grandfather was a native of New Brunswick, and about the middle of the last century settled on densely forested land in Oxford County. His mother's father, William Adams, migrated from Roxboroughshire, Scotland, and also occupied a pioneer farm.

The education of Innis began in the austere environment of a one-room country school. This characteristic institution of rural Canada commonly lacks material amenities, but has one important advantage: it puts the minimum restraint on the individuality and progress of a bright and independent pupil. Innis took the entrance examination, and after a year at the Otterville High School proceeded to Woodstock Collegiate Institute some twenty miles distant. For a son of the farm the road to a higher education has usually meant relentless work and for his family financial strain. The experience of Innis was no exception. From his entrance to high school he realized that to achieve his goal and lighten the burden on his parents, he could not afford to squander time idly, and the habit of intense concentration upon the immediate task became rooted and stayed with him for the rest of his life. Attendance at the Collegiate meant leaving his home before seven in the morning, walking two miles to the station, and taking a train to Woodstock, with a like routine late in the afternoon.

From the Collegiate he entered McMaster University, then in Toronto. Some members of his Baptist family and local community hoped that he would ultimately train for the ministry. But at McMaster, among other influences, two young and enthusiastic lecturers aroused an interest in subjects that for the rest of his life absorbed him: W. Stewart Wallace, the present Librarian of the University of Toronto, in history, and W. J. A. Donald, author of *The Canadian Iron and Steel Industry*, in economics. Innis chose economics as his special field for concentration.

Soon after graduating in 1916 he enlisted in the field artillery for service in France, and in the late autumn was experiencing the mud and enduring the discomforts of tent life in Shorncliffe. It was characteristic that when given leave he used his pass to travel, not simply to nearby London, but as far north into Scotland as time permitted in order to see the country and towns there and en route. The passion for covering space on the map and observing a land in its broad and varied configuration was present long before he began a systematic study of the Canadian economy. By the end of the year he was in

France and by the spring of 1917 his battery was in the line preparing for the Vimy attack, in which he participated. In July he suffered a severe leg wound from a shell splinter, which ended his combat duties and opened a prolonged period of hospital treatment. While his wound was slowly healing, he avidly read economics in preparation for taking a Master of Arts degree at McMaster. By the end of March, 1918, he returned to Canada and continued to prepare for his examinations; these were duly written and the degree conferred in the spring.

He had now to decide on a future career, and his thoughts turned to law. But he resolved first to study more economics in a summer session in Chicago, where the instruction under a distinguished and inspiring staff deepened his interest in the subject and made him determine to continue to a doctorate. He was wont to say that Professor Frank Knight's lectures in particular gave him two things: a fresh interest in economic thought and an acute sense of how little he knew. In after years he continued to be both entertained and stimulated by Frank Knight's critical and philosophical attitude. Throughout the terms at Chicago, however, his chief mentor was Professor Chester W. Wright, who supervised his studies in economic history, and enabled him to meet expenses by giving him assignments to read undergraduate papers and to teach elementary classes. On Professor Wright's suggestion he chose for his doctoral thesis the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Other scholars at Chicago whose courses he would sometimes recall with pleasure were James Field, H. A. Millis, H. G. Moulton, C. S. Duncan, and J. M. Clark. But at the time one of the most significant influences upon him was that of a former and famous member of the Chicago faculty, Thorstein Veblen. In the immediate post-war years three of Veblen's chief books appeared: *The Higher Learning in America*, *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*, and *The Vested Interests and the State of the Industrial Arts*, while *The Theory of the Leisure Class* came out in a new edition. A Veblen vogue rapidly developed among younger students of the social sciences, and on Innis the effect of this sceptical and provocative thinker was deep and enduring. In later years he was ready to admit serious limitations in Veblen's thought, but on his own outlook it left a stamp, especially in its emphasis upon the variety of human impulses and social forces that fashion the economy, the changing nature of the economic system rather than its equilibrium, the necessity for students of economic history to explore many subjects on its borderlands, the impact of technology upon production and trade, and the more obvious fact that contemporary economic institutions possess no necessary or permanent beneficence. To the end of his life Innis manifested the pervasive influence of Veblen's sardonic outlook.¹

¹He compiled "A Bibliography of Thorstein Veblen," published in *Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 10, 1929-30, 56-68. The article is more than a bibliography; it is a brief and thoughtful appreciation of Veblen's work, wherein a comparison is drawn between Veblen's position in the course of the industrial revolution and that of Adam Smith at its beginning. It is remarked of Veblen: "He has been the first to attempt a general stock-taking of general tendencies in a dynamic society saddled with machine industry, just as Adam Smith has been the first to present a general stock-taking before machine industry came in."

During the summer of 1920 he completed his studies in Chicago, and took his examinations. In the same summer he accepted from Professor James Mavor an invitation to become a lecturer in the Department of Political Economy in the University of Toronto.

II

During the next thirty-two years he studied, taught, and wrote in Toronto. He rose through the various ranks until in 1937, on the retirement of E. J. Urwick, he became Head of the Department of Political Economy, and ten years later added to that office the deanship of the Graduate School. At the outset of this academic career (in 1921) he married the gifted woman, Mary Quayle, who shared with him the remainder of his life, and whose wide intellectual interests, scarcely less wide than his own, contributed to his progressive growth in mind and personality.

The year in which he joined the Department of Political Economy witnessed also the establishment of a Commerce course within the Arts Faculty but leading to a Bachelor of Commerce degree. The Department of Political Economy, which was made responsible for most of the instruction in commerce, was anxious that besides theory, special emphasis should be placed on economic geography, the development of basic industries, and in general the evolution of Canada's economy. Innis, in view of his interests and studies at Chicago, was soon enlisted to teach economic geography and Canadian economic history, and for the next twenty years these subjects were the main themes for his research. He kept widening and deepening their conception, and in Veblenesque manner pushed into the borderlands of other subjects and other disciplines in order to make their content more significant. He worked with indefatigable energy to trace the relation between the geography of Canada and its economic development. This theme led him to study intensively the staple industries, beginning with the fur trade and fisheries and proceeding to lumber, wheat, and mining. It involved, not merely quarrying in all the documentary sources that he could discover, but travelling during the summer vacations into the remote regions of Canada, such as the valley of the Mackenzie, to observe on the spot how geographic environment affected development. In Chicago he had been influenced by the lectures on marketing of Professor C. S. Duncan, who had emphasized the intimate relation between the physical characteristics of a commodity and the marketing structure created in respect to it. In the history and analysis of staple industries in Canada he was mindful of this relation. He was no less mindful of Veblen's emphasis upon the peculiar role of technology, and he took over J. M. Clark's concept of overhead costs but adapted it in his own way to the facts of the Canadian economy.

His earliest book, *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (1923), is an inadequate reflection of what he was seeking to achieve and what he was learning. It had been his doctoral thesis, and its general character had taken shape at a time when he was still merely groping for leading ideas explanatory of Canadian development. Similarly *The Fur Trade of Canada* (1927) was little more than a factual survey of the contemporary trade in furs.

His first notable achievement in economic interpretation was *The Fur Trade*

in *Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930). In this work he carefully traced the development of the trade from its earliest origins in the St. Lawrence valley to its retreat over the centuries northward and westward and its culmination in the fur-farming of the present. Herein he illustrated the crucial factors in the growth of an industry and its effects on the whole economy which for a decade he had been examining: the basic control of geography, especially that of the watersheds and the Precambrian Shield, the relation between the culture of the Indian and the spread of European power, the adaptation of the Indian to the needs of the trade, the causal sequence between the physical features of the staple and the marketing structure, the effect of overhead costs in transforming the organization of the trade from competition to monopoly, and the influence throughout of changing techniques with the strides of western civilization. Every aspect of the subject was documented in detail. The broad conclusions drawn were pertinent, not simply to the industry, but to the economic and political evolution of the nation. The broadest conclusion was that modern Canada had emerged, not in spite of geography, but because of it. The fur trade had hurried the French and then the British into exploring and occupying the northern half of the continent. The territories and waters of this vast fur region, extending across the continent, became after 1783 the surviving portion of the British Empire in America and ultimately the geographic framework of Canada. Many consider, with reason, that *The Fur Trade in Canada* was not merely Innis's first significant work but his masterpiece. There may have been more learning packed into its sequel, *The Cod Fisheries*, but there was less unity in conception and less finesse in performance. At any rate *The Fur Trade In Canada* established the reputation of its author as one of the leading economic historians in North America.

In the next decade he continued to enlarge his knowledge of Canada's industrial development and to publish the results of his research in miscellaneous articles and in one major monograph, *Settlement and the Mining Frontier* (1936), wherein he dealt with the application of techniques to mining in the frontier regions and assessed the effects on the general economy.² In this period he also brought out, in collaboration with Professor Arthur Lower, *Select Documents in Canadian Economic History, 1783-1885* (1933), a sequel to his own and earlier volume, *Select Documents in Canadian Economic History 1497-1783* (1929).

The final achievement of Innis in Canadian economic history, apart from the occasional article, was *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (1940). Significant was the sub-title. The theme, unlike the fur trade, was not central to Canada's development throughout a prolonged period, although basic in the origins of the country from the age of discovery and always important for the maritime region. It involved the interests of New England in the Old Empire as well as in the expanding republic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed the cod fisheries became a subject of contention for nations on both sides of the Atlantic and were linked with the issues of

²Some articles of this period were republished in *Problems of Staple Production in Canada* (Toronto, 1933).

naval power and national prestige. Hence the author had difficulty in confining himself strictly to the industry but inevitably was led into the problems of mercantilism and the intricacies of international politics and diplomacy. Nevertheless, here as in the earlier book, there is a detailed and heavily documented description of industrial techniques and processes. The competitive character of the industry is described, the place of protective measures, the effect of fluctuations in the price of salt, and the revolutionary results of the technical advance which came with iron, steel, steam, and the perfecting of refrigeration.

Looking back for twenty years from the publication of *The Cod Fisheries*, one could not fail to realize how impressive was the contribution of Innis to an understanding of Canadian economic development. No other scholar had devoted himself with such single-minded zeal to this department of history, important in itself and crucial in explaining political and constitutional change. Adam Shortt, as Innis would promptly admit, was the pioneer in these economic studies, but beyond his published documents little of Shortt's industrious research got into print and became available for students. Some of his wide knowledge of the history of Canadian banking was embodied (and perhaps buried) in numerous articles contributed to the *Journal of the Canadian Bankers' Association*, but he never produced a monograph like *The Fur Trade in Canada*.

The achievement of Innis was the fruit of special powers. He was a rapid reader and a prodigious worker, able quickly to move through masses of documentary material. His remarkable energy was combined with an impelling will. He had the staying-power necessary to master the details culled from extensive printed and unprinted sources. But he learned not merely through reading but through contacts with men. His receptive mind enabled him to gather from conversations with numerous scholars and others impressions which he knew how to utilize. For him the fraternity among scholars was real and valuable. It is difficult to single out individuals who more than others influenced him in these years when he laboured mainly on Canadian history. The summers in the Dominion Archives in Ottawa introduced him to most of those pursuing serious research, and his gift for friendship brought him close to many of them. During his early years in Toronto the influence upon him of one unusual personality was significant, that of C. R. Fay, Professor of Economic History in the University from 1921 to 1930. He was both encouraged and stimulated by Fay's infectious zeal, broad knowledge, provocative ideas, and brilliant suggestions, and to him he aptly dedicated the volume of studies, *Problems of Staple Production in Canada*.

III

The last twelve years of Innis's life marked a distinctive stage in his scholarly work. Hitherto he had been mainly engaged in studying the staple and allied industries of Canada, although in *The Cod Fisheries* he was drawn into phases of political and diplomatic history, involving the whole Atlantic region. But after 1940 he became increasingly absorbed by the wider themes of cultural history on a world stage. Culture and civilization assume the fore-

ground in his thinking rather than industry and trade.³ There is no mystery about this shift in interest. His ambition earlier had been to follow up the study of the fisheries with a similar investigation of the pulp-and-paper industry, a theme on which for years he had sedulously collected information. He came to the conclusion, however, that a study of pulp and paper, apart from the revolutionary changes in printing, would have slight meaning, and that in turn the changes in printing had deep consequences in contemporary civilization: they affected the media by which ideas were communicated. He was soon more keenly interested in the media of communication and their profound political and social effects than in the economic development of an industry. Thus he became much more than an economic historian, and he could not help himself; he was driven by the insistence and momentum of his own widening interests and deep convictions. He was in the grip of an exploratory spirit which would not let him be content with the traditional highways of economics. His new interests, moreover, were stimulated by certain elements in the climate of opinion at the time. The violent years of the Second World War awakened in him, as in many thoughtful people, fundamental questions about the nature of contemporary civilization and the special factors which shaped it and were likely to determine its fate. He was reading the works of Toynbee, Spengler, Kroeber and others who nourished his own questionings. He became interested in the concepts of time and space relative to civilization. A friend and colleague at Toronto, Professor Charles Cochrane, who in 1940 published the distinguished *Christianity and Classical Culture*, did something to direct his interest to the classical world and to certain features of its culture.

In this period his writing consisted mainly of articles contributed to learned journals, or papers read before academic groups. Both articles and papers he commonly brought together and published in book form. These works may strike a reader as lacking in strict unity, and their titles are not always suggestive of the miscellaneous fare one finds within their covers. But while not unified treatises, they reveal the widely ranging explorations of Innis's mind and the general direction of his thought. Such a volume is *Political Economy in the Modern State* (1946), which embraces essays written in the thirties with reference to Canadian economics, and others of the period after 1940. The subjects extend from the newspaper in economic development to the role of the university, the ethics of reviewers, transport and tariffs, the fur trade, the economic importance of gold rushes, and the relations between Russia and the West. Some of the essays are the product of extensive and thoughtful research. Others are merely impressions drawn from omnivorous reading. In the Preface he remarks that the essays "constitute an attempt to interrelate patterns of Canadian development with those of the Western World in the full realization that much remains to be done before the outlines and the details of the pattern can be clearly discerned."

³Within this period he sat on two royal commissions: the Manitoba Royal Commission on Adult Education (1946) and the Royal Commission on Transportation (1948-51). The last of these inevitably involved him in examining some of the central problems of the Canadian economy as it had been affected by the Second World War and recent technical change, especially in transportation.

Some of the earlier essays were dictated, or at least deeply coloured, by a distrust of the collectivist thought fashionable in the thirties, and in presenting his own political and social philosophy he quoted from Goldwin Smith: "The opinions of the present writer are those of a Liberal of the old school as yet unconverted to State Socialism, who looks for further improvement not to an increase of the authority of government, but to the same agencies, moral, intellectual, and economical, which have brought us thus far, and one of which, science, is now operating with immensely increased power. A writer of this school can have no panacea, or nostrum to offer; and when a nostrum or panacea is offered, he will necessarily be found rather on the critical side."⁴

Much of his writing in the period reflects this type of liberal faith. Nowhere did he state it more explicitly than it is stated in the words of Goldwin Smith, but throughout various addresses and articles it is the one strong undercurrent. The strict economic historian of *The Fur Trade in Canada*, who seemed to eschew political views, was now ready to assume a position among the clashing political and social ideas of the time, although it was not perhaps a position readily assimilated to that of any existing political party. In essentials it was the philosophy of a sensitive humanitarian and cautious liberal, who had grown up in a devout and rural Baptist home, who had early come to cherish individuality, and who was anxious above all that individuals should not be pushed around by public authorities, powerful corporations, or ecclesiastical sovereigns. He dreaded regimentation and its concomitant uniformity. Hence he feared any substantial growth in the powers of government, any exalting of the public service (which he often referred to as a bureaucracy), and especially any monopoly over such media for communicating thought and opinion as the press and the radio. At times in the essays of the forties there is a pessimistic note and the occasional echo of Oswald Spengler and Wyrdham Lewis. There are also doubts, in the fashion of certain nineteenth-century liberals, about the ultimate effects of democracy. "Universal suffrage," he writes in one place, "heralded the end of parliamentary government. The more successful a democracy in levelling population the less the resistance to despotism."⁵ He quotes frequently from such writers as Lord Acton, Henry Maine, and Dean Inge, expressing concern about some manifestations of democracy under modern conditions, manifestations which he evidently feared as much as they did.

His attitude towards the social planner was disposed to be cynical and distrustful, but not out of hostility to all social reform. He usually distrusted enthusiasm for social change among the politicians on the ground that in the contemporary state they were primarily concerned with furthering their own political interest—the gathering of additional votes—without regard for the shackles of restraint that they might consequently impose on the people. The reforming zeal of other and ordinary folk might be genuine enough, but often was rooted in ignorance of economic realities and possibilities, and this as an economist he could hardly condone. He was specially critical of the social scientist as a planner for he was convinced that, when the social scientist was personally and deeply involved in attempting to shape the course of develop-

⁴*Political Economy in the Modern State*, xvii.

⁵*The Bias of Communication*, 140.

ment, he would cease to have the open mind so imperative for an objective and critical judgment of what happened.

His liberal thought came out most forcibly in his view of the scholar's position in contemporary society. Never was he more intensely earnest than when he was defending the scholar's freedom to pursue research and expound its results, unmolested by the vulgar pressures of the time. He would uphold the university as a much-needed ivory tower above the political and social struggle, and hence in the best position to depict its shortcomings and assuage its passions. On the control of universities by business men he had caustic comments reminiscent of Veblen in an earlier day; he feared that they would misapprehend the essential tradition of a university which they were obligated to protect. "Business and political exploitation of universities by bribes," he remarked in an address at McMaster, "reflects a complete inability to understand that universities honour donors and not donors universities. The impression that universities can be bought and sold, held by business men and fostered by university administrators trained in playing for the highest bid, is a reflection of the deterioration of western civilization. To buy universities is to destroy them and with them the civilization for which they stand."⁶

As noted already, Innis in these later years became an unremitting student of the media of communication in society. His most ambitious treatment of the subject is attempted in *Empire and Communications* (1950), which constituted the substance of the Beit Lectures on Imperial Economic History at Oxford in 1948. Other writings on the topic are contained in *The Bias of Communication* (1951), which consists of essays and papers, not always closely related to one another, but all relevant to this general theme. The subject is also pursued in another collection of essays, *Changing Concepts of Time* (1952), which appeared shortly after his death.

Empire and Communications is a brief book, but it attempts a singularly difficult task. In some respects it is unsuccessful. Judged by the fulfilment of its aim, it falls below the genuine success of *The Fur Trade in Canada* or *The Cod Fisheries*, yet this fact does not destroy its significance. Innis set out to show the influence on certain empires in ancient history of the different media for communicating thought, whether by oral tradition or by conventional symbol in stone, clay, papyrus, and parchment, and he hoped thereby to further an understanding of the role of communication "in a general sense and as a background to an appreciation of its significance to the British Empire." The immense complexity of the task consisted in attempting to isolate the factor of communication, however crucial it may be, from other factors in the involved structures of civilization which affected the rise and fall of empire. Causes and effects were extremely difficult to disentangle. The difficulty was accentuated by the fact that the author, as a modern historian coming freshly to ancient cultures, had to rely upon many classical authorities who held contradictory views on some of the important facts, and inevitably his own generalizations, resting at times on disputed evidence, were open to challenge. Here he was not, as in his studies on the fur trade and the fisheries, working directly on the

⁶*Political Economy in the Modern State*, 75.

raw materials of history. He had to depend wholly upon the spade-work of others. But if *Empire and Communications* fell short of establishing firm conclusions, it served a purpose in setting forth a theme for future social scientists to pursue. Its leading assumptions may constitute the starting-point for investigation by historians of institutions on the broadest basis, and to Innis's imagination they will be indebted.

IV

The influence of a scholar and a teacher are the product, not merely of the intellect, but of the whole personality. The fact is evident in the career of Innis. He acquired an ascendancy as a social scientist in Canada, not simply on account of published books and numerous articles, but because of himself as a person. He was keenly interested in all genuine co-workers in the common field. In journeyings back and forth across the country he sought out and came to know most of those engaged in studying its history and economics; he took an interest in what they were doing; he learned from them; he promptly joined with them in furthering common ends; and when in his own university he had reached a commanding position, he continued to forge and maintain links with colleagues in other universities. His sincerity and integrity in the world of scholars gave him influence, and his fellow workers naturally viewed him as a leader. It was characteristic that he took an active part in reviving the Canadian Political Science Association in 1929, helped in founding the Canadian Social Science Research Council and in it held a position of unique influence, assisted in establishing the Humanities Research Council (he believed in an intimate alliance of the social sciences and the humanities in order to strengthen the humanist side of social science), and in the United States acted for years on the Committee on Research in Economic History, which promoted in North America the subject which won his first devotion.

Fellow scholars recognized and honoured him for his writings and activities: he was elected President of the Canadian Political Science Association in 1937, President of the Economic History Association in 1942, President of the Royal Society of Canada in 1946, and President of the American Economic Association in 1951. Honorary degrees were conferred on him by the universities of Glasgow, McMaster, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Laval.

As a teacher, his personality no less exerted influence. He was not a popular teacher in the ordinary sense of the term, for he was not a notably lucid or forcible expositor of ideas. His rapid delivery and his tendency to place in juxtaposition statements whose connection was not readily apparent (a defect also evident in some of his published work) had the effect of bewildering many students; they were puzzled as to what he meant. He was no showman. Indeed he shrank from showmanship so much that he preferred to err on the side of dullness. As one of his acute and admiring students has written to me: "He would enter the room unobtrusively, flop into a chair at the front like a collapsed tent and with notes before him on the table read his lecture in a semi-inaudible mumble. He seldom inserted a joke, though . . . he privately displayed a keen sense of humour, and when he did make a witticism it was so

much a part of the even flow of his delivery that it would often be several moments before the audience realized that he was being humorous." Yet the cumulative effect of Innis never failed to tell upon the more intelligent students, especially the effect of his dispassionate views, open mind, eclectic learning, and attitude towards knowledge and the search for knowledge. He awakened them to the fact that the quest for truth was extremely exacting and that he who set out on the quest must often admit defeat. He emphasized by his own example the necessity for a humble attitude in pursuing social study because of the complexity of society; never did he convey the impression of a confident and facile dogmatist or slick performer who had discovered all the answers. He made them feel that intellectual modesty was the essence of a sound scholarship. In all this there was an integrity in the man which impressed and influenced the perceptive.

The real person is likely to be most apparent to his colleagues who see him subjected to the exacting test of a daily and yearly routine. Under that scrutiny Innis was always unpretentious, patient, fair-minded, and magnanimous. He seemed invariably to look at the big rather than the little aspect of a matter. As an administrator he was doubtless at times casual about details, but he was never casual when he faced an important decision. On the minutiae of an issue he would yield with easy grace, but on a question which affected his deeper convictions he could be as firm as granite. His personality had the integration which guarantees strength. Doubtless few men are without some internal conflict, but if in Innis's mind there were aspirations in serious collision, his colleagues did not detect them. Admittedly he was not given to self-exposure. It was very difficult to induce him to talk about himself, and rare indeed was the comment which touched on a detail of his inner life. He had reserve, but it was of the kind which respects reserve also in others.

His capacity for friendship was genuine. Despite his consistent and intense industry, he seemed always to have time to talk with friends. He never gave the impression of an absorbed and fussy scholar who was irritated by interruptions. His broad smile would greet a colleague on entering his office, and incidentally that smile had a versatile power. It sometimes acted as an agent of appeasement when Innis had something not wholly pleasant to say. On other occasions, when he was making a request, it would exert a disarming influence; confronted by it one could not say no.

These are impressions of a man who was by no means simple—who had indeed his complex and enigmatic side—but whose integrity of character, single-minded devotion to scholarship, and magnanimity in all personal relations deserve to be, and will be, long remembered.

ALEXANDER BRADY

EDITORIAL NOTE: A bibliography of the publications of Harold A. Innis will appear in a later number of the Journal.