

The Bookery  
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H. A. Innis, *Empire and Communications*.

By Joshua Noble

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Harold Innis' classic book *Empire and Communications*, published in 1950, is based on a series of lectures Innis was invited to give at Oxford University in 1948. The lectures themselves were dismissed by the intelligentsia of Oxford as "an inferior colonial perspective on world history" (p. 14). Nonetheless, Innis reworked the lectures for the book, which he published two years later.

If Innis had hoped the reception for the ideas would be warmer when amalgamated into a single manuscript, he would be soon disappointed. Sales of the book were very slow and Innis' untimely death in 1952 (age 58) almost caused the disappearance of this work from the canon of relevant academic work. Ultimately, a resurgence of interest in Innis' work stemmed from the increased notoriety of Innis' junior colleague at the University of Toronto, Dr. Marshall McLuhan; a man who suggested that perhaps his own best-known work was simply a "footnote to Innis" (Marchand, 1989, p. 123). McLuhan and Innis had collaborated briefly before Innis' untimely death, but McLuhan remained indebted to Innis and his work, which provided the key for McLuhan to begin his work—which would be essential, if not foundational, to communications studies.

The rise of McLuhan's fame, together with his generous praise of Innis, helped the latter's work back into relevance, and indeed created a larger field of scholarship in which Innis' work was contextualized as meaningful and insightful. Among Innis' other works that contribute to communication studies (or perhaps media studies) are a great many seminal Canadian history texts: *The Fur Trade in Canada*, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy*, *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, and *The Bias of Communication*.

In *Empire and Communications*, Innis takes on the remarkably ambitious project of outlining the communication tools and strategies of six epochs. Beginning with Ancient Egypt (approximately 4,000BC), then Babylonia, the Greek Empire, and the Roman Empire, as well as many groups defined by parchment and paper, then paper and the printing press, Innis moves through approximately 6,000 years of communications history in the span of 180 pages. One must admire the scope and ambitiousness of the project even as it inevitably frays at the edges as he moves with breakneck speed through time periods, though he offers nuance (or even obvious counter-examples) that balance his generalizations.

But Innis cannot be fairly accused of being unaware of his speed and generalizations, or of being entirely singular or unbalanced. Innis writes in his introduction that he will attempt to "focus attention on...empires in the history of the West, with reference to empires of the East, in order to isolate factors which seem important for the purposes of comparison. Immediately one is daunted by the vastness of the subject and immediately it becomes evident that we must select factors that will appear significant to the problem" (p. 23). From here Innis goes on to choose the "subject of communication" (p. 23) as the factor he will explore, given that it is crucial for organization and administration of government. Innis recognizes that his own personal experience of Canada, together with his research on Canadian national development, biases him in this direction. Though one might critique Innis for these points, one cannot fairly suggest that Innis was himself blind to these structural biases in his work. The picture of Innis should not be of a man possessed with arrogance, believing himself to have the final word on millennia of human empire-building, but rather a man intentionally using a new, unproven tool to offer a hitherto unavailable perspective on

the nature of empire.

For the contemporary student of communications, media, history, political science, literature, and technology (to name just a handful of the most obvious fields), the work of Innis generally and *Empire and Communications* in particular represents essential reading. However, the reader should be warned—the book is never easy. A dictionary at your side will serve you well as Innis' prolific vocabulary weaves through the book, delivering a rich tapestry of ideas that prove their worth if the reader makes the effort to unwrap (or unlock) the full import of Innis' words. The reader should be keenly aware of the need to read for the double-resonance of the book—both the ideas being suggested and the lens being applied to history to arrive at the ideas. The pioneering work of Innis in providing the contemporary academic with this lens of communication analysis through history was done with a skill that is still worth studying today.

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## Richard Selzer, "Amazons" and "Palpating a Pulse".

By Tatiana Izerguina

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One of the most famous American surgeon-writers, Richard Selzer (b. 1928), began to shape his literary craft at the age of 40 (Toledo-Pereyera 320). His first works were horror stories, but he soon expanded his writing, experimenting with other forms of fiction as well as nonfiction (Toledo-Pereyera 320, 321). Many of his texts are inspired by his medical practice, such as his creative nonfiction stories "Palpating a Pulse, He Senses a Soul...Yeshi Dhonden at Hospital Rounds" (1976) and "Amazons" (1979), which describe what happened on two different occasions at Yale Medical Center where Selzer worked for 33 years (Toledo-Pereyera 320, 321). These narratives impress by presenting unique medical experiences and beautiful imagery

Like many other works of creative nonfiction, these texts consist of two functional constituents: the reporting of facts and the writer's "response to the facts" (Francis 4). In "Palpating a Pulse," the author portrays a unique medical case: during his visit at the hospital, Yeshi Dhonden, who was physician to the Dalai Lama, reaches a diagnosis by carefully listening to the pulse of a patient and examining her urine (Selzer, "Palpating a Pulse"). Witnessing the procedure, Selzer feels overwhelmed with respect, seeing the highest level of medical professionalism demonstrated by his Asian colleague. Responding to the incident, he admits in a confessional voice that this occurrence transformed him into a more attentive, purer person who has been "touched by something divine" (Selzer, "Palpating a Pulse"), thus turning the story into a spiritual autobiography (Miller and Paola 40). Of course, some may argue that such an experience should not have so powerful an effect on our souls and minds, as today's doctors, equipped with modern technology, are capable of coming to the same understandings and conclusions as the greatest, most knowledgeable physicians in previous generations. Still, Selzer presents an interesting, unique situation and an exceptional expert.

In contrast, Selzer astonishes his readers in the last paragraphs of "Amazons" by portraying an extraordinary medical experience in the response part of the story. While mastectomy was a relatively common procedure done quietly by female surgeons at Yale, the dream he has after the event, which is an unconscious reaction to reality, illustrates an odd custom in the history of humankind. Selzer reminds us that, according to ancient legends, Amazons were the only society that widely performed mastectomy, even though they did not need to do that dreadful operation for health reasons ("Amazons" 39). In this fashion, the narrative suddenly transforms the perception of the surgery from the removal of a serious illness to a warrior women's tradition (Selzer, "Amazons"

39).

Another fascinating aspect of Selzer's writing is beautiful imagery. The author creates an atmosphere and impression by characterizing sounds and conjuring up mainly religious and animal images. Carefully selected and expressed, these details are artful and beautiful embellishments to his renditions. For instance, describing the space around Yeshi Dhonden and his patient as an area "about which a vacancy hovers, and across which no violation is possible" (Selzer, "Palpating a Pulse"), Selzer forms a poetic visual-auditory representation of a sacred emptiness. And by describing female surgeons as deer with long necks (Selzer, "Amazons" 36), he makes the scene romantic and the hospital's highly controlled environment enchanting and more natural.

Besides invoking appealing mental pictures, the author has a tendency to incorporate animal images in religious episodes to heighten the spiritual tone of the texts. In "Amazons," he portrays the preparation for the surgery as a ceremony that consists of numerous prescribed and necessary actions:

They step toward the center of the room, their hands held up before them in a gesture fixed and ritual. Their arms are wet; water drips from their elbows. They are given towels, and dry their hands and arms with infinite care. The towels are taken from them, and the three women are dressed by the nurses in long gowns of the same green color. The gowns are tied at the back. Next, rubber gloves are held open for them, and they dive with their hands in a single quick movement. As waterbirds dive. (Selzer 37).

The image of the birds in this passage is not just attractive; it also serves as an element of the enacted "medical rite." Likewise, in "Palpating a Pulse," Selzer inserts a similar image in the following scene replete with religious associations: "Now he bends over the bed in a kind of crouching stance, his head drawn down into the collar of his robe. His eyes are closed as he feels for her pulse. In a moment he has found the spot, and for the next half hour he remains thus, suspended above the patient like some exotic golden bird with folded wings." The writer's consistent inclusion of animals in his ritualized descriptions suggests his comfort about mingling faith with the natural world. This way he combines different cultural traditions and enhances spirituality in the stories.

"Amazons" and "Palpating a Pulse" are two wonderful creative nonfiction texts containing facts, medical data, and interesting images, together with the author's thoughts and ethical considerations. They subtly show two important things about writing: how unique experiences enrich creative nonfiction content and how imagery enriches a creative nonfiction style. As the texts illustrate, a unique experience can offer an absolutely different approach to life and health. Such information is captivating and increases the worth and influence of realistic accounts. Selzer seems to use this effect intentionally. The competence of Yeshi Dhonden is unquestionably extraordinary, and Selzer finishes the story quickly to ensure that he does not diminish the impact of his factual descriptions. However, mastectomy is a more common occasion, which might not impress the reader; therefore, the author cleverly shifts our attention from the dangerous contemporary case to the antique female society that practiced mastectomy for a highly unusual reason. In doing so, he emphasizes a radically different attitude towards the procedure, lightening up the mood of the narrative whose subject is ultimately disturbing and arousing curiosity about the ancient surgical custom. Similarly, imagery is a crucial element in Selzer's writing that enables him to communicate and embellish real or imagined scenes. In my view, it is not just an effective stylistic tool employed by the author, but it is his most successful, versatile and powerful stylistic device.

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