was the first Canadian political scientist or historian to write critically and academically about the changes to offices of the prime minister and the Cabinet. Notable are Smith’s observations on the marginalization of the House of Commons and the personalization of the prime minister, two themes that only intensified leading into and past the turn of the twentieth century.

The audience for this collection may vary. The collection would work as assigned supplementary reading in an undergraduate Canadian politics class or as a curious read for your average political junkie. However, because the concept of time plays a role in thinking about this book – do the essays age well? what do they tell us about the thinking around these political events or the phenomenon at the time? – one essay stands out as a result of the specific situation in which the Canadian Parliament now finds itself. Smith includes a 1965 essay on the role of the speaker of the House that, without recent events, may seem like an interesting thought exercise and nothing else. But Canada finds itself with the possible prime minister-in-waiting – the leader of the opposition, Andrew Scheer – as a former speaker. Therefore, when reading Smith’s fifty-year-old thoughts on the dignity, authority, and politics of the speaker, the proposals take on a context that would never have been considered at the time of writing, and it is when this occurs throughout the book that old ideas transcend time and context.

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Emergence and Empire: Innis, Complexity, and the Trajectory of History.

John Bonnett’s ambitious book, Emergence and Empire: Innis, Complexity, and the Trajectory of History, is the latest scholarly monograph to appear on Harold Innis and the first since Paul Heyer’s introductory text (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and Alexander J. Watson’s comprehensive intellectual biography (University of Toronto Press, 2006). Bonnett’s meticulously researched book complements these texts by offering a wide-ranging and critical reassessment of Innis’s work and should be of interest to scholars in history, media and communication studies, political science, and the digital humanities. The signal contribution of the book is to excavate from the Innis œuvre what Bonnett shows, convincingly, to be a coherent and consistent theory of historical change grounded in what we now understand as emergence. In so doing,
book addresses what he sees as the primary task of Innis interpreters: to move beyond facile statements that Innis initiated something intellectually significant and instead to show what that something is and how it came about. In this spirit, Bonnett proposes that the entirety of Innis's work “can and should be viewed as a sustained exploration of change” and that the “overarching purpose of Innis’s career was to demonstrate that the patterns of Canadian economic and global history should be identified with the characteristics of emergent change” (5).

The Innis of Emergence and Empire is therefore a theorist of systems and complexity avant la lettre. Such ideas are normally associated with developments in physics, biology, engineering, and information theory (among other disciplines) that occurred concurrent to Innis or much later. Bonnett argues in contrast that, though his theatre was the history of human culture and civilization, Innis was tuned to the same intellectual frequencies that produced theories of emergent change in the sciences. The key to the argument, most clearly stated in Chapter 1, is Innis’s serious and sustained engagement with the work of economists Adam Smith and, especially, Thorsten Veblen. In their work, Innis found a nest of concepts that allowed him to analyze patterns of historical change in emergent, rather than mechanical, terms. Among these were increasing returns, formal and final cause, and equilibrium. Such concepts, Bonnett argues, map nicely onto those found in the interdisciplinary science of complexity that appeared later, such as positive feedback, emergence, and control parameters.

Bonnett unfolds this argument across Chapters 2 through 5. These offer close readings of Innis’s major works and seek to render explicit what otherwise remains implicit in his account of historical change, namely, that Canada was “an economic system that displayed emergent properties and differential persistence, and was governed by formal and final cause” (Chapter 2, 51); that the process of increasing returns – that is, positive feedback – is of central importance to the dynamics of any given economic and historical situation (Chapter 3); that the amount (and material forms) of information circulating in a given culture is a “control parameter that govern[s] emergent cultural change” (Chapter 4, 130, a welcome return to Innis’s unjustly neglected Political Economy in the Modern State, which will be republished by University of Toronto Press in 2018); and that human intention and action matters, that how we engage with communication technologies plays a role in the biases toward which those technologies move. Bias, for Bonnett, is a concept that should be understood probabilistically rather than mechanically. It is not that paper inevitably exhibits a space bias but, rather, that certain
uses of paper (for example, administration) will affect the wider purchase the medium has over social and cognitive life (here one might protest that this is not an unusual interpretation of the bias concept, which most scholars of Innis understand in similarly relative, rather than absolute, terms). The framework and conceptual language of emergent change, which Bonnett sometimes excavates from Innis’s work and, at other times, applies to it, enables him to synthesize much of Innis’s published output as well as many oddments found in the Innis papers at the University of Toronto.

A final chapter offers some generative notes about the enduring significance of Innis’s work for scholars engaging contemporary issues around computation and digital culture. Bonnett suggests that recent scholarly and artistic experiments with information visualization resonate with Innis’s calls for the development and integration of new formalisms that could productively combine existing modes of representing time and space (such as the time series, the map, and the statistical mathematical equation). In Bonnett’s account, Innis believed such measures “would support the tasks of pattern detection and system prediction, and enable contemporaries to detect the emergent systems that defined and constrained human activity” (255). Regrettably, Bonnett does not pursue the full scope of these insights. This is primarily because he locates them in technical considerations and debates that occurred, in many cases, almost a decade prior to his book’s publication. Conversations about big data and information visualization have only become noisier and more complex since. One would have liked to see some of this material updated to reflect on developments in the years immediately prior to Emergence and Empire’s publication. A more generative thread, offered in Chapter 4, is Bonnett’s suggestion that Harold Innis be understood as an information theorist who had more in common with Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon than is typically acknowledged (an observation taken up at length, if implicitly, by Friedrich Kittler, whom Geoffrey Winthrop-Young once dubbed “Harold Innis in battle fatigues” (quoted in Optical Media, Polity, 2010, 6)). These pages, which show Innis’s conceptions of balance and equilibrium as anticipating the signal–noise relation that would be so central to information theory and everything after are some of the book’s most exciting.

A question that is left largely unanswered, but which arises as a result of the intellectual continuum that Innis himself tried to bridge (and within which Bonnett positions his book), is whether we should read Emergence and Empire as a work of traditional history (in this case, about who a scholar was, what he said, and why it was important)
or as a philosophy of history (which would unleash the figure of Innis, and our ability to think with him, from the confines of his official archive and institutionalized or disciplinary legacies)? Bonnett seems, for much of the book, more interested in the latter, namely, in teasing and parsing Innis’s works so that they might be cast into new frames and onto new trajectories, on the one hand, and in casting contemporary concepts back into archives and documents so as to create something new, on the other hand. And yet – perhaps due to the bias of the monograph form or, more simply, to scholarly convention – Emergence and Empire tends toward the former. It is a book that chases down references to concepts and conversations from the far recesses of the by now well-fished Innis archive in an attempt to demonstrate, definitively, what he said and when or, more ambitiously, what he did or did not mean. These annotations and reading notes offer scholars a fresh set of intellectual touchstones and influences. Yet, as always, attempts at authoring definitive accounts run the risk of establishing barriers beyond which ideas cannot pass; to claim to know what Innis said, thought, and meant is to risk diminishing what his work and ideas might become.

Such a tension inevitably arises around figures of profound influence. McKenzie Wark’s recent thoughts about Karl Marx resonate here: “Rather than squabble over what is the true and total interpretation, it seems to me more useful to think of the Marx-field that he enables. The Marx-field would then be a matrix of variations on themes, each more or less useful in particular situations. On that view there may be as yet unexplored quadrants of the Marx-field that might be of more help in constructing a critical thought for the times” (General Intellects, Verso, 2017). Though it sometimes falls back on notions of prescience or even genius, Bonnett’s book has gone some way in clearing the path for future scholars to move beyond the singular figure of Innis and, instead, to engage with an “Innis-field.” This is a substantial intellectual achievement.

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Linda Ambrose has written the first full-length biography of Margaret (Madge) Robertson Watt and brought worthy attention to a significant figure in the history of rural women’s movements internationally. Watt