

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)

[Review of] Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Random House, 1989).

by David Dooley

IN MOST RESPECTS this is an admirably successful biography. The reader must marvel at how much information Marchand has been able to compile about his subject, from books and papers and from innumerable people who knew Marshall. What is especially impressive is the author's ability to shape this material into a coherent story and to describe the development of Marshall's thought in lucid terms.

On a strictly human level, the story is rather sad. Marshall was fortunate to marry a talented and understanding wife, Corrine, who bore him six children and also typed out his manuscripts for many years (he did not have a secretary of his own until the 1960s). All but one of the children were a disappointment to him, however. In addition, illnesses plagued his life—a minor stroke in 1960; a brain tumour in the fall of 1967 when he was teaching at Fordham which required the longest neurosurgical operation in the history of American medicine; a heart attack in 1971.

Many times the doctors told him to slow down. His idea of doing so was to rest after lunch, which meant reclining on a couch and expostulations on whatever book he was reading to any friends who happened by. One day we would hear that he was cutting down on his commitments; the next we would hear that he was off to Japan. Still, one of his encounters with the medical profession had its humorous side; it even produced the nickname "Tiger" McLuhan. He had to go to London, Ontario for surgery because of a blocked internal carotid arteries, but he came back without having had the operation: the surgeon found that the external carotid artery had formed new connecting channels of its own, something which happens in cats but not in humans. Thus McLuhan he was able to send his friend Sheila Watson a diagram of a tiger's carotid accompanied by his version of Blake's lines:

What immortal hand or eye did bring this novel artery?

At the end of September 1979 came the stroke which left him capable of understanding but not responding; the great student communications became virtually incommunicado. He died the following year, 31 December 1980, at the age of 69.

Even though many of his sayings—such as “the global village” and “The medium is the message”—had gained worldwide currency, his career also had melancholy aspects. As Marchand describes it, he outlived his reputation.

He picked up his habit of analogical thinking, Marchand believes, from G.K. Chesterton, whose books, starting with *What's Wrong with the World*, made a profound impression on him in the 1930s. His analogies were sometimes bewildering or fanciful; yet he never lost sight of what Chesterton taught him: “all things are real and lovable and ultimately coherent because God had created them.” His first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, was a critique of an entire culture, an exhilarating tour of the illusions behind everything from deodorants to Buick ads. Even though it was the most delightful of his books, it did not sell well. Out of a discussion group which he and anthropologist Ted Carpenter formed in 1953 came a magazine called *Explorations*; in the eight articles which McLuhan wrote for it in the next six years, Marchand finds the seeds of all his later work. *Explorations* produced an embryonic cult; *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964) created a McLuhan craze. In a long review of the former in *Encounter*, Frank Kermode concluded that it offered a “fresh and coherent account of the state of the modern mind in terms of the congenial myth. In a truly literate society his book would start a long debate.”

Soon, ironically, he was being taken over and promoted by the advertising world which he had earlier ridiculed, and the results were disastrous. He engaged in self-parody in works such as *The Medium is the Message*; he wrote far too much; he began project after project which he would never complete; with collaborators—Wilfred Watson, Barry Nevitt, Harley Parker, among others—he engaged in dialogues out of which books eventually came, but the dialogues had turned into a monologue and the result might be what Marchand calls a “nonbook.” In 1965 Tom Wolfe had provided a tag line for the McLuhan phenomenon: “What if He is Right?” In the 1970s the intelligentsia began to think of him as a burnt-out intellectual comet.

Still, when Jonathan Miller, a former admirer, was concluding his brief study of Marshall by asking whether the Canadian guru had any clothes on, and when John Wain, who had described him as the source of many of

his ideas, was asking one of Marshall's Saint Michael's colleagues whether anything had gone on in Toronto in the past twenty years, those who knew him well were unwilling to write him off. How many times he had fooled them—just when they had decided that his peculiar vocabulary of hots and colds and bilateral thinking did not describe any world with which they were acquainted—by some startling perception, perhaps a new way of looking at their special areas of interest rather than his own? In his final tribute to Marshall, Marchand emphasizes his ability to stimulate a “stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits,” and to offer some genuine insights into a society in which the extensions of man had become almost more real and bizarre than man himself.

Since Marchand did his undergraduate work at Saint Michael's and received an MA from Toronto, it is surprising that the weakest part in his biography concerns Marshall's relations with the College and University. McLuhan was invited to Saint Michael's, he writes, by “an austere priest named Father Louis Bondy,” and he joined the faculty at a time when the place had the air of *petit seminaire*: “Mediocre instructors who wore the right kind of collar found shelter there from time to time. . . .” In five years of teaching at the College, McLuhan complained, he had not had one good student.

It is difficult to know where to begin, in refuting this accumulation of nonsense. Father Bondy could certainly give an impression of austerity, but he was an urbane gentleman who knew a great deal about the beginnings of modern poetry, since his specialty was Baudelaire. In 1964, Saint Michael's was a *petit seminaire* which had undergone an invasion: the war was over, and the universities were filled with men just released from the armed forces, mature people who were some of the best students the University ever had. As Marchand writes, the professors of the Pontifical Institute of Mediæval Studies lent real intellectual weight to Saint Michael's; but he is wrong about the priests and nuns who taught at the college itself. Many of them were people of distinction.

He is wrong, too, about the relationship between the College and the University when he says that the University as a whole established the curricula of the English courses and set and graded exams. No University body performed these functions; they were carried out by the combined Departments of English, of which all English instructors were members: Marshall had as much involvement in setting and marking exams as anyone else.

There is much more to criticize. Marchand disparages A.S.P. Woodhouse, the Grand Cham of English studies at Toronto and indeed in

Canada at the time, suggesting that he had had his last aesthetic experience at the age of four, and that he kept carefully hidden the fact that he himself did not have a doctorate. Everyone knew he had *not* received a doctorate from Harvard, and everyone knew why: he refused to fulfil the philological requirements. And those who were fortunate enough to take his graduate course in Milton undoubtedly still have ringing in their ears the phrases he applied to the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

In fact Marchand gives a McLuhanesque picture of the Toronto English Department in the 40s and 50s, and it is a caricature of the truth. Reviewing Robin Harris's book on English studies at Toronto in a recent issue of *English Studies in Canada*, Rowland McMaster gives a much more accurate description, and reveals just how exciting and intellectually stimulating the atmosphere was. Marshall complained that no one knew anything about modern poetry; but somehow or other an article on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* had crept into the *University of Toronto Quarterly* just before Marshall came, and it was by a graduate student, William Blissett. Blissett was only one of an outstanding group of post-graduates—Milton Wilson, Peter Fisher, to name only a few—who were going to be important figures in the Canadian academic world for decades to come. But they were not McLuhan's students; they were probably Woodhouse's or Northrop Frye's.

Still, the University was not as hostile to Marshall as his biographer suggests. When it honoured his own, at a special sesquicentennial convocation in 1977, he was one of the nine professors given honorary degrees. He was one of the three from Saint Michael's (the others being Fathers Kelly and Shook), and one of four from English (the others being Father Shook, Frye, and Claude Bissell).

Marchand says very little about Marshall's Saint Michael's colleagues, especially Fathers Kelly and Shook, great men and great supporters of Marshall for over three decades. Father Shook was his department head for years; it was he who said that he was not bothered by the fact that Marshall rarely dealt with the books on the curriculum, since the students were bright people and could compensate, and since it was a fine thing for them to come into contact with an exciting mind like his. It is odd, too, that Marchand says nothing about the magnificent funeral oration which Father Kelly preached. Nevertheless, the deep faith emphasized in the eulogy is apparent in some characteristic McLuhan one-liners which Marchand quotes:

The Prince of this World is a very great electrical engineer.

Put not thy trust in the worldly extensions of man.

And one could hardly disagree with the note on which Marchand concludes this interesting and readable biography. Unlike the R.D. Laings and the Marcuses and some of the other cerebral heroes of the time, he writes, Marshall was not filled with gloom but possessed with sheer spirits:

The work of these others has an underlying dourness of outlook, a hint perhaps—and more than a hint, in some cases—of despair. McLuhan, on the other hand, lived and worked as if he really believed—in the most strictly orthodox Christian sense—the words of the medieval mystic that all would be well, and all manner of things would be well. ❧