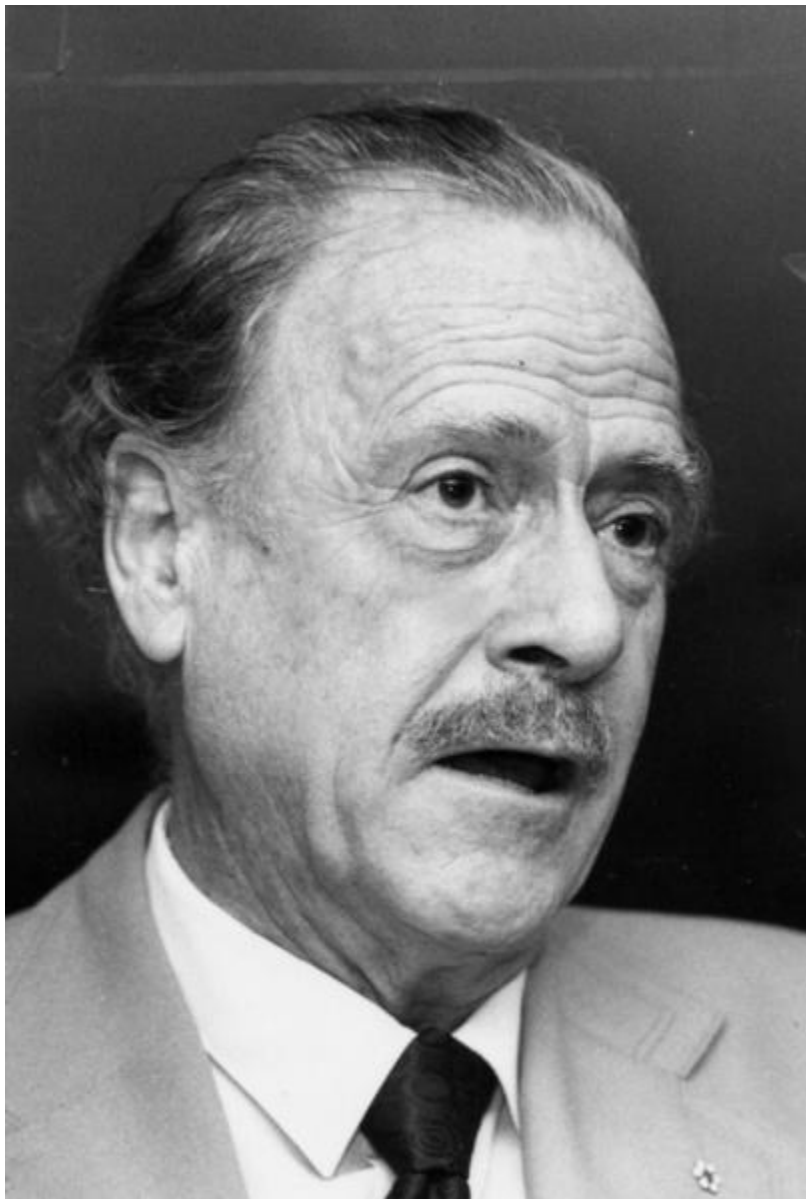


Googling Marshall McLuhan seems just so appropriate

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Marshall McLuhan

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The latest offering in what has been thus far a very disappointing Penguin series of lives of Extraordinary Canadians gets back to basics in a self-referential way by highlighting the question of why we want a new biography of celebrated media guru Marshall McLuhan in the first place.

Series editor John Ralston Saul provides the standard boilerplate about how through these books, each by an author “engaged in building what Canada is now becoming,” we “discover what we have been, but also what we can be.” This is just a way of dressing up with nationalist cant what has proven to be a slickly effective bit of marketing on the part of Penguin, the same “less-for-more” strategy that has proved successful in their Penguin Lives and Great Ideas series. It can and should be ignored.

But why, and author Douglas Coupland raises the point himself, another McLuhan bio when two “terrific” biographies — by Philip Marchand and Terrence Gordon — already exist? Coupland suggests that with the accelerating pace of change in the texture of daily life we need a McLuhan for the 21st century and the Internet era; a goal that, given McLuhan’s prescience, almost seems redundant.

Mentioning the Internet raises another question about the project, highlighted in the Acknowledgments. Among the sources Coupland thanks we find AbeBooks, Amazon, Google, MapQuest, Wikipedia, Yahoo! and YouTube. This isn’t surprising — none of the Extraordinary Canadians books I have read contain much if any original research — but it does make you wonder what Coupland sees as the value of this particular book, or even “the book” itself as a medium. After all, why go to a library to look things up when one can find the same information online?

In a section talking about McLuhan’s time at Cambridge, for example, Coupland admits that “much of this information came from Wikipedia.” When discussing McLuhan’s seminal *Understanding Media* from 1964, a Coupland footnote directs the reader to the Wikipedia entry on same as it is “wonderfully done and can elaborate far more than there is space to do here.” A later passage describing brain anatomy is sourced as “condensed from Wikipedia.”

Anyone can Google McLuhan. What is the point of a book that is a condensed version of material that is developed at greater length online? Was space at such a premium? For such a short book, the amount of padding is remarkable, amounting to some 20 per cent of the whole. There are two lengthy excerpts from Coupland’s novel *Generation A*, pages of computer-generated word lists, MapQuest directions to different locations, a test for autism (Coupland, whose approach tends toward what he calls “pathography,” thinks McLuhan may have been borderline autistic) and listings of McLuhan’s books taken from online booksellers, complete with customer reviews.

Given that we can all “hopscotch from link to link to link” through the internet today anyway, “why write a biography?” Coupland is unsure, and even more unclear about why we would want to read one, at least in this Gutenbergian form.

None of this makes *Marshall McLuhan* a bad book. In fact, I think it's the best of the Extraordinary Canadians series thus far, both for its readability and for its meditations on writing biography in the 21st century.

There is also a near-perfect fit between biographer and subject, Coupland being one of that group of people whose "thought patterns" seem to map Marshall's own (Coupland stays on a first-name basis with McLuhan throughout). One recognizes the same verbal dexterity, formal experimentation, and uncanny insight into a wide range of topics ... as well as, on the other side of the ledger, the same randomness, inconsistency and intellectual laziness. That most of it works so well is due in large part to this shared mental map, which Coupland is not afraid to further explore through personal anecdotes.

This brings us back again to the present Internet environment, our own culture's version of what McLuhan called Narcissus narcosis. Seeing in McLuhan a "genetic and ancestral" mirror, Coupland finally transforms the story of his life into chapters of autobiography — the user becoming the content, once again.

Alex Good's website of book reviews and views is www.goodreports.net