

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

with Wilson Head on racism

The problem of racism in Toronto has turned "Toronto the Good" into Toronto the Feared. Reports of racial assaults and harassments in the subways and against Pakistani and Asian immigrants have shed a negative light on the city in national and international news.

One such report was a 90-minute documentary on NBC's Saturday night Weekend Report which described Toronto as a racial time bomb. Unfortunately, it may only be a matter of time until the bomb explodes.

Not everyone in Toronto is accepting the city's plight without a fight. One such resident is Wilson Head, a professor of social work at York. Head, who holds a BA, a Master of Social Work, and a PhD, wrote a report for the Ontario Human Rights' Commission and created a group known as the Urban Alliance on Race Relations.

The following is an interview **Excalibur** conducted with professor Head concerning racism in Toronto.

By MAXINE KOPEL

EXCALIBUR — You grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. What was your first personal encounter with racial prejudice?

HEAD — The day I was walking down the street and I was around ten years of age. A little girl who was crippled and was on crutches fell down in front of me. I stopped to help her up. Then people gathered around and they were hostile. And I remember talking to my uncle at home and he said, "was it a white girl?" and I said yes. And he said, "Don't you touch a white girl. No black man or black boy in Atlanta, Georgia touches a white girl." That was my first shock and encounter with racism in the South.

EXCALIBUR — How do you react to that?

HEAD — With anger to some extent because I didn't like them telling me that. I thought I was doing something that was nice, that I was offering help to someone that needed help. Not with fear but with anger. I still remember that very clearly, almost as if it happened yesterday.

EXCALIBUR — When and why did you come to Canada?

HEAD — I felt that I wanted to get away from that sort of climate. I lived down there a good bit of my life I've been active in a number of organizations, I've done sit-ins in restaurants and theatres and things like that. Sit-ins are when black people go into restaurants where they don't serve blacks and demand service and often times suffer consequences as a result of it. Often times black people's food would be uncooked or with too much salt put into it.

EXCALIBUR — Did that ever happen to you?

HEAD — Oh yes, not only in the south but in Indianapolis, Chicago, and Indiana. This is back in the 40's and 50's of course. After so many years of this, I thought I might go to a climate and country where I wouldn't have to continually spend my time fighting discrimination and other aspects of racism.

EXCALIBUR — When did you come?

HEAD — I came in 1959.

EXCALIBUR — Do you think that a recent NBC program focussing on Toronto's racial problems was accurate in describing Toronto as a racial timebomb?

HEAD — I don't think it was accurate I think it was a bit exaggerated. On the other hand I think it did touch upon something that was very important. I think Toronto is far better than any American city I've ever lived in or visited. On the other hand the recent incidents that we've been having in the past few months suggests what's happened there could happen here. So in that sense it could be a timebomb. I think that at the moment to say it is a timebomb is a bit premature. I think we still have time from preventing it becoming a time bomb.

EXCALIBUR — What would detonate this timebomb?

HEAD — I think two things. I think the first is an increasing number of Asians and Blacks

who have come to the city have frightened a lot of people. Toronto and Canada have not been better than the US, it's just that they have fewer visible minorities. Certainly when you look at the history of Chinese in Canada back in the 1800's when they helped build the Canadian Pacific railroad. It's been very bad and we've discriminated against the Chinese.

The only law we ever had that openly discriminated against the Chinese was when we had a head tax on Chinese coming into Canada. Now, if this large number continues to come, and the population makes the normal and the appropriate adjustments then of course there could be more hostility and more and more prejudice.

The other I would say is the fact we have right now a period of high unemployment. The people are frightened. Not only do they not want to see any more immigrants whatsoever. They are worrying about their jobs.

EXCALIBUR — You mentioned the fact that Canadians are afraid of unemployment. Do you think they're using the Asians as scapegoats for their fears?

HEAD — I think they'd use anybody who happens to be an obvious or an appropriate scapegoat. It just happens that Asians and Blacks are visible and can't hide. The Italians the Portugese, they can stay here a generation or two and merge into the population as whole. The Blacks cannot, the Asians cannot.

EXCALIBUR — Is that why the brunt of discrimination has fallen on Asian immigrants?

HEAD — Well it hasn't fallen entirely on the Asians. This has just been a more recent manifestation. Certainly as I indicated earlier, the Chinese have had their share and certainly the Canadian-born blacks had their share. Now what we're getting today is an increasing number of West Indian born Blacks, and not Canadian-born Blacks. This and an increasing number of Asians have changed the picture. I think as far as the Asians are concerned, most of the focus seems to be on what they call "the Pakis". And of course no one knows what a Paki is. How can you tell who is a Pakistani from another East Indian. So you just call all of them Pakis.

EXCALIBUR — According to the New York Times, there are approximately 90,000 Pakistanis in Toronto. They mostly hold business and professional positions as a result of having to meet immigration restrictions. How does this tie in with the current problem?

HEAD — I think that in the first place the number is exaggerated. There might be 80 to 90,000 East Indians and Pakistanis combined. But that does not mean that there is 90,000 Pakistanis alone. There might be 15 - 20,000 Pakistanis alone. But that doesn't really matter. People who discriminate don't distinguish between the two.

They make no distinction whatsoever. So in that sense, we're talking about 90,000 Indians and Pakistanis probably.

EXCALIBUR — You wrote a report for the Ontario Human Rights Commission. When and why was it written?

HEAD — Actually this report was written in September 1975, and that report was written because the kind of thing I'm talking about now was beginning to be seen as a new trend. The attack in those days were not only on Indians or Pakistani as they are today, they were more on Blacks. There were shootings and beatings. In fact a young black was shot in a shopping plaza. Two black musicians were shot at the Generator. A number of blacks were attacked on a City TV programme some time back in 1975. As a result, of these kind of overt incidents that were taking place, I decided that the time had come to do a study on the situation because nobody knew the real facts. The only thing we had to go on before was the record of the Ontario Human Rights Commission which showed an increasing number of complaints at that time. These complaints were about this discrimination.

However, one is never sure about complaints because that is only the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot more events that take



Maxine Kopel photo

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place that are never reported. As a matter of fact, a study showed that one out of ten blacks who felt they had been discriminated against ever bothered to complain to any official source.

EXCALIBUR — According to Macleans, East Indians interviewed complained that their reports of assaults and harassment to the police go ignored. Last year you were reported in **Excalibur** as saying that "Blacks are often stopped by police who are looking for illegal immigrants and many blacks are alleged to have been stopped and hassled because they drive big cars." How do you explain this action taken by the police?

HEAD — I think you have to admit whether you like it or not, there are some racists in the police force. I think that this is not policy, it is not directed from the top, but there are racists in the police force. These are the people who see themselves as making life tough on blacks and Asians in the city. Now, what percentage that may be, I have no idea. I don't know if it's five per cent or one per cent or 10 per cent, but there are obviously racists. And they are continuing reports of this kind of thing happening, including one man who teaches at York. I wouldn't want to give his name. Let's put it this way, he teaches in the social science department and he's an African.

EXCALIBUR — He was assaulted and the police didn't do anything about it?

HEAD — He was alleged to be assaulted by the police themselves. And the matter is now before the courts.

EXCALIBUR — Can action be taken against the police force, or individual police officers by complainant if his charges go unheeded?

HEAD — See you have an interesting situation. You have a police complaint bureau which is staffed by policemen. Part of this difficulty is that this bureau, as far as the public is concerned, tends to protect the policemen. And therefore it's very difficult for that group to come out and admit that if a policeman has done something the policeman's word rather than the citizen's complaint.

EXCALIBUR — So this force would rather basically support the policeman's word rather than the complainant?

HEAD — That's the impression we have. The suggestion has been made therefore that we should have a strong independent citizen's complaint bureau outside of the police to investigate beatings and police harassments, etc., etc.

EXCALIBUR — In **Excalibur** last year you also said that the mass media is slanted against minority groups. Can you give any examples of this, and why do you think this exists?

HEAD — I think the mass media is slanted against minority groups basically because it doesn't know anything about them. We have had some contact with the media about this and they admit so. They know very little about what happens in the Black community, they have no reporters who are by and large Black; there are very rare exceptions to this. They have no input into the black community whatsoever so as a result they don't know what goes on. Basically what they tend to report of course is crime against blacks or attacks against Blacks or when blacks commit crimes themselves. They almost invariably are reporting what reflects some negative criminal kind of activity rather than the normal day-to-day activities of people. The press states that good news is no news and that the public wants to read bad news and there's certainly some truth to that. But it seems to us that we have to have the press at least present a balance in the news whatever balance is and I suppose that's one of those things that are hard to define. You could read the press everyday and not know there's a single Black person in Toronto, unless it's someone who's reported a crime. The vast majority of happenings in the black community never get reported. For that reason we have the Black press you see. The Black press exists because the daily press does not cover the black community.

EXCALIBUR — Do reports in the media such as the one concerning the 49 year old Tanzanian immigrant pushed onto subway tracks more than a year ago, and the two New Year's eve subway incidents spark more violence? In other words, is it possible that the large amounts of violence in the papers and the idea of repeating the same thing are responsible for some of the assaults, rather than actual bigotry?

HEAD — I think they would be responsible to some extent but I don't think it would be a substitute for actual bigotry. I think that there are a few people that, after once having heard of something happening tend to want to do it themselves. But I think that the bigotry in Toronto is already there and all the reporting does is stimulate what's there. Given this type of situation, some people go out and try and do what they've seen or heard of other people doing. But that would not happen unless the latent bigotry was already there.

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