

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Robert Fulford, editor of Saturday Night

The editor of Saturday Night, Canada's leading arts and culture magazine which has, from time to time, suffered financial insecurity spoke to Excalibur reporter Keith Nickson recently.

Robert Fulford has been editor of Saturday Night since 1968.

By KEITH NICKSON
and GRAHAM BEATTIE

EXCALIBUR: The CRTC Canadian content rulings have certainly helped artists in the music field. Do you think a similar ruling would help writers in Canada?

FULFORD: No. I think it would be very bad. The only place where the content rule would be called for, would be in the bookstores. But the bookstores would hate it. First of all, it would make the administration of a bookstore more of a nightmare than it is now. Secondly it would create a tremendous animosity towards Canadian materials among the booksellers. Thirdly and most important, it would be a grievous infringement on civil rights. I think I should be allowed to open a bookstore in Toronto and sell nothing but Russian books if I want, and I don't think it's any business of the government to be telling me whether I should be selling more or less of Canadian books or anything else. I don't think we should encourage the government to come into a field like that. Furthermore I don't think there's any danger of them doing it because they're not that crazy.

EXCALIBUR: What about the Canadian content on radio stations? Do you think it's right that they are forced to play a certain percentage of Canadian music?

FULFORD: I do, because radio and television are an entirely different sphere so far as civil liberties are concerned. In this country and every other country in the world they are and cannot get on the air without a license. Furthermore they are limited because there only a certain number of places on the band. So having a television or radio station is a privilege granted by the state. Having a bookstore is not a privilege it's a right. If you told me how to run my bookstore you'd be infringing on my rights whereas if you told me how to run my radio station you'd be merely altering the terms of the privilege that you have already granted.

EXCALIBUR: Despite protests in the media, The Coles bookstore is still selling American editions of Canadian novels at ridiculously low prices. Recently I bought an American hardcover edition of the Diviners for \$2.99 at Coles. Why can't the government stop this practice?

FULFORD: There is a law against that but I don't know if the government can enforce it. Margaret Laurence owns the copyright on that book in Canada and she sold it to McClelland and Stewart who are the only people allowed to publish it in Canada. The law is already there so you can't go to the government and ask them to pass a law. The question is, will people live by it or openly reject it and be sued. But suing is a hell of a difficult problem, so how they can enforce the law I don't know.

It's a tremendously unfair practice and it does indicate a lack of faith on Coles part and indicate that the bookselling trade isn't all that it might be.

EXCALIBUR: In your Notebook column of May '76 entitled 'Crisis in the Arts' you said that 'the wider the arts base of funding the greater their freedom is. They should never depend entirely on government support because that eventually means some degree of government control'. Later you support the government's decision to build the National Arts Centre because this has the effect of fitting the arts into the structure of government permanently. What exactly do you think the relationship between the government and the arts should be?

FULFORD: There are contradictions there when you put those things together but these contradictions are natural reflections of the scene. I think it's very good that we have a National Arts Centre and that the government has made the arts a part of the national capital. But I would hate to think that one government was running all the theatres in Canada and all were directed by the same policy maker. That would be bad.

But if one government has one here and another government one there then that's fine. A government is a natural source of funds for the arts because it's a natural replacement for the aristocratic patrons of a few centuries ago. But the government should be seen as one part of a mix for the arts, just as the ticket buyer and the big corporations such as Imperial Oil are also a part. It's the duty of editors, publishers and artistic directors to put the mix together and manipulate it to ensure that they are in the driver's seat as much as they can be. The point is to have many masters to that way you have none.

EXCALIBUR: How do you feel about a Canadian magazine such as Saturday Night being funded by the large American corporation Imperial Oil?

FULFORD: I felt great about it. I might have felt a little better if Eatons, the Hudson's Bay or CPR had called me up but none of them did. Imperial Oil wanted to offer this grant so I went over and talked to them and we considered it in the following context. One, they would have no ownership of the magazine for their \$100,000. Two, they would have no say at any time in the editorial policy or business policy of the magazine. Three, they would only be one quarter of our funding since our funding was to be \$400,000. So nobody can say they were responsible for us.

On that basis I felt fine about the grant. I felt it was in the tradition of Imperial Oil which goes back through many decades of aid to the arts in Canada. They've helped everyone from the National Ballet, the Stratford Festival to painters, and sculptors. They've also put out the Imperial Revue, which is the best magazine of its kind in this country.

But I think that companies that are in this country making money should be doing this. When the grant was being considered, I phoned up a very important nationalist economist, one of the two or three people who spearheaded the whole nationalist drive. And I said what if I get a grant of a \$100,000 from a multi-national. He said 'Take it! Take it'. They should be giving it. Get some of that money they're making in this country and let it go into an interesting cause'.

EXCALIBUR: That raises the whole question of why a traditional magazine such as Saturday Night would suddenly fold.

FULFORD: It wasn't sudden, it was coming over a long period. We were terribly undercapitalized and had been for at least eight years. When I came to the magazine in 1968 I had no idea how badly capitalized it was. We were scratching along from day to day, just paying the phone bill was a problem. We had no money to pay the writers properly, we had no money for a circulation campaign, no money to put out a thick enough magazine to be really attractive. And then one day we didn't have any money at all. We had a few rich men on the board of directors but their patience ran out. They signed a few loans for us at the bank and a few more and a few more and then they didn't sign any more. September 1974 came and we prepared the magazine in proof and the printer said 'I'm not printing that until I get some money'.

EXCALIBUR: Who bailed you out? Did the Canada Council help?

FULFORD: No. The Canada Council didn't provide any substantial money. It was made up of several elements including the \$100,000 from Imperial Oil. Then a whole bunch of new shareholders came in, each putting in \$25,000. We had a circulation campaign among our readers which brought



Graham Beattie photo

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us in \$64,000 and then we got a little investment from the bank. Altogether it miraculously came to \$400,000.

I was terribly surprised by the tremendous response from the readers. We asked for \$50,000 and thought we'd be very pleased if we got \$35,000 and I was a little afraid we'd get \$15,000. When we got \$64,000. I was in a state of shock for weeks. It was the most astonishing thing that ever happened to me!

EXCALIBUR: In what ways has Saturday Night changed since its revival?

FULFORD: It's becoming the magazine I always wanted to have. It's much more professional. It's more pleasant, has lots of colour plates, much better researched articles. It pays its writers and photographers well and has marvellous photography. The staff is still tiny but we've upgraded it enormously. Those are all the things I wanted to do and I've done them.

EXCALIBUR: Who are the readers of Saturday Night?

FULFORD: First of all, they all make \$80,000. Secondly, they buy a new car every two weeks and fourth, they spend every second week on a holiday in the Bahamas. Has that cleared it up for you?

According to the Print Measurement Bureau study, there are more than five people who look at every copy of Saturday Night. Which means our readership is about half a million, which is terrific. Another study we did on our own asked people what they read in the magazine and we were astounded and delighted that half of them read the fiction. If you believe the PMB study and our own little survey, then that means that 250,000 people are reading those stories, which is bloody marvellous! None of our writers have an audience like that except a very few like Davies who get into paperback on an international level. So this is really the best place to publish fiction.

EXCALIBUR: Saturday Night is probably one magazine that has benefitted from Time Canada and Readers Digest being forced to increase Canadian content or cease to function. Do you think you have gained advertising revenue from their demise?

FULFORD: Ah ha! Topic A. You know we don't talk about sex around Canadian

magazines. Topic A is Time and Readers Digest and Bill C58. We've lost all interest in sex, we've found something more fascinating. Time and Readers Digest gave us some purpose in life when everything else seemed pointless.

Actually it was very sad in a way because, many man hours and woman hours had been spent in that campaign. Much more than we should have had to devote to it. In fact, the whole thing should have been cleaned up twenty years ago and the fact that it wasn't indicates how gentle, meek and mild we are as a country and how we like to be walked over.

I think if the national news magazine of the United States were owned by foreigners the Americans would put up with it for about fifteen minutes. We've put up with it for about thirty years.

EXCALIBUR: You're considered by many to be the number one literary critic in Canada and basically you're a self-taught person whose formal education only goes to grade 12. Is higher education in terms of career opportunities worth the time and effort?

FULFORD: It's an intensely personal matter. You should get the education you feel like getting and you should stop getting it when you stop wanting it. You should go to a university or college where they have something to teach you that you want to learn.

That's my idea of education. Learning something in order to please your parents, your teacher or in order to have a document at the end of it, that's not education, that's just fooling around. Of course there are professions that demand a piece of paper to get into them and personally I think that's unfair. A lot of education is delivered to people when they don't want it or need it.

EXCALIBUR: How does the future look for Saturday Night magazine?

FULFORD: At the moment it looks terrific. I don't want to bring on the evil eye by saying everything's rosy, it's not. The books are closed on 1976 and we lost money on the year. In 1977 we will come close to breaking even and we might even make a dollar.

How do we survive? We survive because in 1978 we're going to make money. Optimism!