

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

with Isaac Bar-Lewaw on Canadian education

Dr. Isaac Bar-Lewaw literary critic and philologist, is a Professor of Hispanic and Latin American literature and civilization at York. He received his M.A. in Romance Languages from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and his Ph.D. from the National University of Mexico.

A recipient of several Canada Council Grants, he is the author of six books, several articles and scientific papers. Prof. Bar-Lewaw masters twelve languages, and is familiar with eight more.

Professor Bar-Lewaw has studied and taught at seven universities in four countries, and has been a visiting lecturer at nine other campuses. He came to York from the University of Saskatchewan, and has lectured at several Canadian universities: Laval, McGill, Carleton, Calgary, and from 1972 to 1975, he served as supervisor at McMaster in order to direct and supervise a Ph.D. thesis in the Dept. of Religion.

Prof. Bar-Lewaw is very concerned at what he feels are very low standards of excellence in the Canadian educational system, including the university level.

By SUSAN GRANT

Excalibur: There's been a lot of publicity lately on this problem, especially in the newspapers, and you, yourself have written a similar article to this effect for the *Globe and Mail* in February this year. Tests such as those given at Waterloo and at Calgary, which showed over half of the first year students to be illiterate, have justifiably created concern with the state of education in Canada at the present time. What do you think the state of education is today, and how did this situation come into being?

Bar-Lewaw: To begin with, one should start with the elementary and high school systems, for it is here that the problems students now face began and still exist.

Somehow, without perhaps knowing it, the Canadian educational policies have imitated the US Constitution, where the pursuit of happiness is guaranteed. Canadians try to make sure that the students have a good time, from kindergarten up. Perhaps this has some value for the well-being of an individual — and even this is doubtful — but in the field of education, it is disastrous. Inevitably the child finds out later on, that life is not a picnic, and that, he or she, must work hard to achieve any goal. It is not easy to change, or invent better work habits if they haven't been taught right at the beginning of a child's education.

Students spend twelve to thirteen years in schools, and when they finish, they still do not have the basics in any discipline, nor have they acquired the work habits necessary for university. How can a person of eighteen or nineteen, already beset with social, sexual, and sometimes economic problems begin to study when he or she is not accustomed to it?

I blame all these problems on the abolition of the "Three R's" in the last ten to thirteen years, which are reading, writing and arithmetic. Also, the failure of the elementary and high schools to instill good work habits. I know of high schools in Ontario and other provinces where there is no home work. Ten years ago I have been against abolishing those 3 r's, but I was then attacked by the so-called progressive educators whose ideas and actions are now totally bankrupt.

As a person educated in Europe, I had to do more school work at home than in school, and we had a greater course load. At the high school level students learned at least four languages as well as other subjects like philosophy, history, science and mathematics. Now students graduate from Canadian high schools without being able to write properly in English, which is their native tongue, to say nothing of the failed attempt at French as a second language. No wonder they have problems at the university level and later on in life. How can a student master another language if he is incompetent in his mother tongue?

In other words, to improve the situation, the schools must become more disciplined, and by this I do not mean physical punishment. Children must be taught how to work hard, have home work, and the standards of passing grades must be made stricter.

Traditional teaching of subjects must return; we got carried away with the "progressive" teaching system, but there is only one correct way of teaching. That is, where the teacher has a sound knowledge of the subject, and somehow is capable of creating interest in his students, passing on to them his or her knowledge of the learned topic. There is no other way.

Excalibur: Do you see the large numbers of students in Canadian universities as contributing to the decline of their standards?

Bar-Lewaw: Most parents of students lived through the depression and the Second World War. As such, very few of them had the opportunity to study at university, and because of this, and other factors, many people wanted university diplomas for their children. Since Canada has had a relatively high standard of living during the 1950's, and because of government subsidies, this goal became feasible to many families. Since universities, like York, accept people with an average of 60 or 65 per cent, the result is quite a number of mediocre students who waste their own time, the professor's time, other students' time and the tax payers' money.

What is usually less known is the fact that a present university B.A. is worth less than a pre-war high school diploma. With the relaxation of grading, and the mediocrity of many students, even some of the excellent professors and teachers that we have at York cannot create miracles. What many students don't realize, or are just now beginning to realize, is that their B.A. diploma is almost worthless, for the economic market is very tight. We all know of the high number of secretaries, waitresses, taxi drivers, etc. with B.A.'s in their pockets.

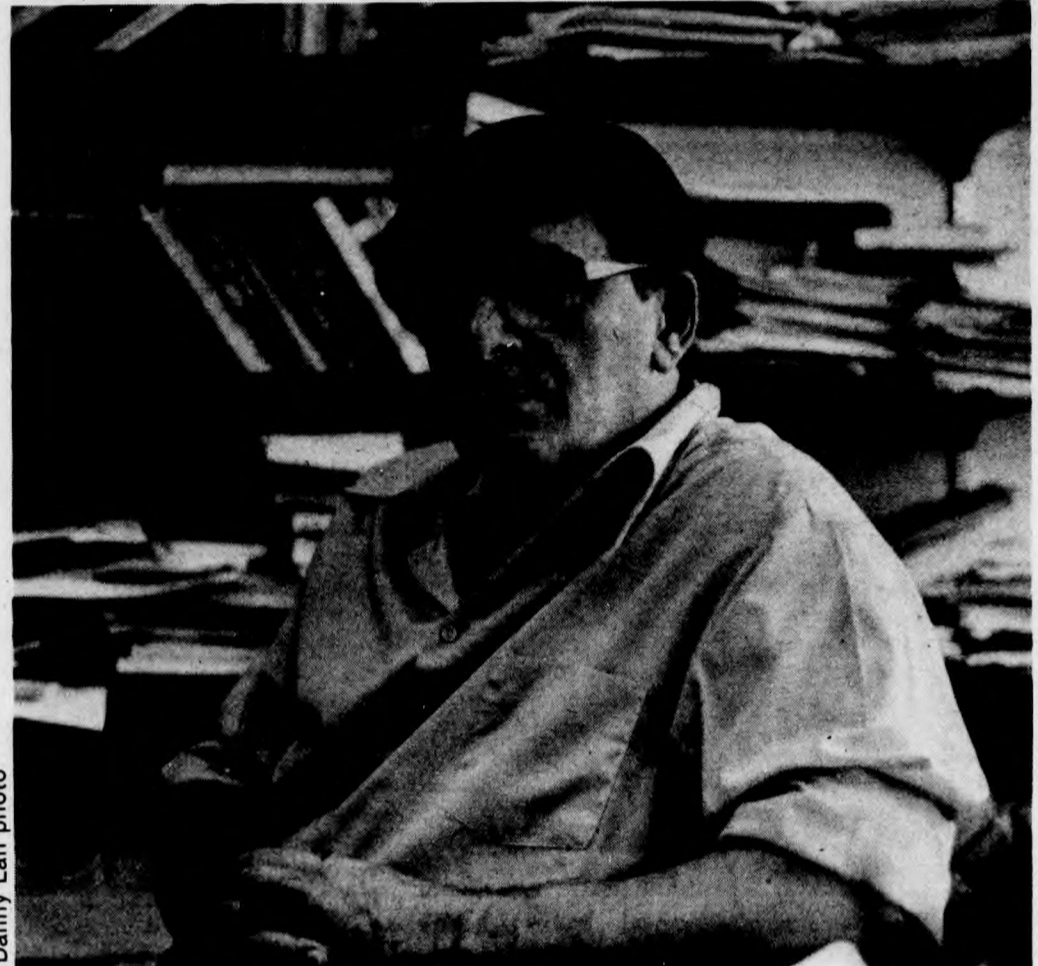
Statistics Canada have indicated that from 1973 through to 1980, there will be 2,460,000 graduates from Canadian universities, and for those people there will be only 600,000 jobs. This means that only one in four will find suitable employment, where their diploma will be of some use. Thus, the university is unable to ensure employment or higher standards of living. Lately universities have become something of a matrimonial agency, as many men and women come here to have a good time, or to find a husband or wife, which per se isn't bad at all, but this shouldn't be the main purpose of a university.

Excalibur: You mentioned in an earlier newspaper article the idea of a federal or central university.

Bar-Lewaw: Yes, I did. In Ontario, we have 15 universities in addition to Ryerson, OISE and OCA, and the resources were stretched very thin. In the past, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent for building of universities alone, and this does not include the continuing cost of maintenance, secretaries, heating, landscaping, etc. This is very costly.

In Toronto we needed two universities because the city is a major metropolitan area, but why, for heaven's sake, does the taxpayer have to maintain two universities in Waterloo-Kitchener, where the total population is about 100,000? Do we really need a university in Sudbury or in St. Catharines? Some of these universities were built more for political reasons and purposes of the government's ministers and other politicians, than for the population's real needs. The result of spreading the educational resources too thinly is reflected in the poor quality or standards of Canadian graduates, especially if they have to compete with foreign graduates from better universities.

Another symptom or proof of Canadian university standards is the fact that only three Nobel prizes were awarded to Canadians from 1901 to 1976. The USA has received in the same period more than a hundred, or 20 per cent of the total prizes. Switzerland, Holland, Denmark and other countries, much smaller in size and poorer in resources than Canada, have won more Nobel prizes. Even countries like Chile and Guatemala, dwarfed by Canada in population and wealth, have produced Nobel winners in literature: Gabriela Mistral and



Danny Lan photo

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Pablo Neruda from Chile, and Miguel Angel Asturias from Guatemala. Canada has none in the field of literature.

Science and Technology Minister C.M. Drury has refused any additional funding to the National Research Council despite its proven needs. Canadian millionaires — and there are many of them — keep their fortunes for themselves. They are greedy, they are provincial, and they don't understand that research is not a luxury. No wonder that Canada is dominated by the USA; Canadians are compelled to use their technology and apply their scientific discoveries. And Canada must pay a fee for the use of their facilities, because nothing in this world is free. For example, our cars may be built in Oshawa or in Oakville, but the design is made in Detroit. We watch American TV, read their books, watch their movies, etc., and we pay for it.

If we want excellence in Canada, and in order to be able to hold our own with the US, we must have a university, where research would be stressed, and funds not cutback. Otherwise, we will remain colonials. True independence is a result of strength and not weakness. At such a university the gifted student would benefit greatly, by his or her direct involvement in research, and by working with the best people in their field, as well as up to date equipment.

Excalibur: Do you see the high number of foreign professors in Canadian universities as a problem?

Bar-Lewaw: Canada is a land of immigrants, and the lack of Canadian-born professors is not a problem. What is more important are the credentials that all teachers — regardless of their birthplace — have or have not. New universities, built in the last 15 years, couldn't fill large numbers of vacant faculty positions. In some fields,

sociology and others, there were very few Canadian Ph.D.'s and therefore foreigners, mostly Americans, were hired. But lately, the problem is being alleviated by the small number of new vacancies being open, and now that there is more competition for jobs, we are getting better qualified people.

Excalibur: If a federal university could not be established, how do you think Canadian universities could raise their standards?

Bar-Lewaw: The best Canadian universities need Institutes for Advanced studies, where the accent would be on research. Eminent Canadian scholars and researchers should be encouraged to remain in Canada, and the best brains in science elsewhere should be enticed to settle here.

Entrance standards should be raised to 70 per cent, provided the government doesn't cut back the already meagre existent funds.

In certain circumstances, entrance exams should be administered, but they don't need to follow the old style of just math and English, although English should be mandatory. Students might write exams in the area they wish to study in, such as art, biology, geography, etc. This would necessitate the raising of high school standards, as well as weeding out the mediocre students.

Universities should also specialize in specific areas of research. At the present time, we witness all the universities trying to be good in all the areas, which given today's sad realities of cutbacks and lack of funds, is virtually impossible, and has not been successful either. By concentrating our efforts and resources, we could reach high levels of excellence in an international context, and we could produce good graduate students, who later on, would bring honor and prestige to themselves and to Canada as well.