

Interview: Oakland Ross



Oakland Ross sharing a few journalistic thoughts with a Ryerson student on his experiences in Latin America. Ross, a one-time *Excal* editor, told reporter Dave Byrnes that after what he has witnessed in Latin America, he can see how the Marxist ideology can look attractive.

Oakland Ross, the *Globe* and *Mail's* Latin American correspondent and a former *Excalibur* editor, spoke at Ryerson recently about his work as a journalist. *Excalibur's* Dave Byrnes did this interview with Ross after the talk. Ross was home for a holiday and has since returned to work in Nicaragua.

Q. Has your view of Canada changed much after having worked in Latin America for four years?

A. I think at minimum what you do, to some extent anyway, is have the ability to look at your country at least partially with the eyes of a foreigner and to make the kinds of judgements about your country that you make about other countries when you travel as a foreigner.

For example, you come back and walk along the street in Toronto and there's just a shading of difference. Before I left it might have occurred to me that, "Oh, the people are very well dressed." Now when I come back what occurs to me is not, "Oh, the people are well dressed." It's that, "My gosh, there are a lot of well dressed people in Canada." It's a slight but, I think, significant shift in the perspective you use—you're consciously and subconsciously defining people as Canadians; defining the nation as a nation rather than just as your natural surroundings.

Q. I get a sense of how fair and humane you try to be in your writing. What do you think the ultimate role of journalism should be?

A. I think that it's a very fluid thing. I don't think that you can crystalize a certain set of goals, a certain set of standards or a certain set of objectives that journalism ought to subscribe to or serve. And I think that's the great value of journalism—that it does remain fluid in that way, and that you do, as a journalist, try to confront things open-mindedly and without a lot of preconceived notions.

In the end, what you are as a journalist is a transfer point for reality, between those who create it and those who perceive it. And you try to be, one, the most accurate transfer point that you can be, and two, the most humane. I think that you try to combine these two things without letting them contradict each other.

Q. In your talk today you mentioned that as a result of observing humanely, and trying to understand both sides of conflicts, you can see how the Marxist ideology can look attractive. Could you expand on that?

A. I think here in Canada we live in a society that is essentially a middle class society, a society in which the vast majority of people by and large share a common economic interest. There aren't the kinds of direct confrontations between classes, between the rich and the poor for example. The huge middle class acts as a sort of shock absorber between the rich and the poor in the country.

That's not true in the majority of Latin American countries. you get these direct confrontations—very palpable, very immediate, very visible confrontations of economic interests and political interests. And you can see very clearly, at least relative to Canada, see what social injustice is and what it does to people, how it propogates itself, how it continues, and how the existing political, economic and social institutions of those countries are *not* designed to address, let alone resolve, those kinds of conflicts.

And I think that if you do confront the area with any kind of humane perspective, it doesn't take you too long to at least be able to synthesize or imagine or appreciate

the kinds of frustrations that other people—who also take a humanitarian perspective on the society—must feel. And sooner or later that frustration turning into just loss of patience, with attempts, usually futile, to change systems through gradual reform and therefore turning to revolution and to radical solutions. You may not agree, but you can understand.

Q. What did you take at York?

A. I was an English student at York and then I worked for *Excalibur* during my final two years and was managing editor in 1975/76, my final year. But I didn't ever study journalism.

Q. How did you get involved with the *Globe* and *Mail*?

A. I just applied. I'd worked at *Excalibur*, plus I'd done some freelance work for magazines, like *Toronto Life*, while I was at York, so I had a portfolio that was not bad. There was an opening on the editorial board at the time, and they hired me, which worked out well.



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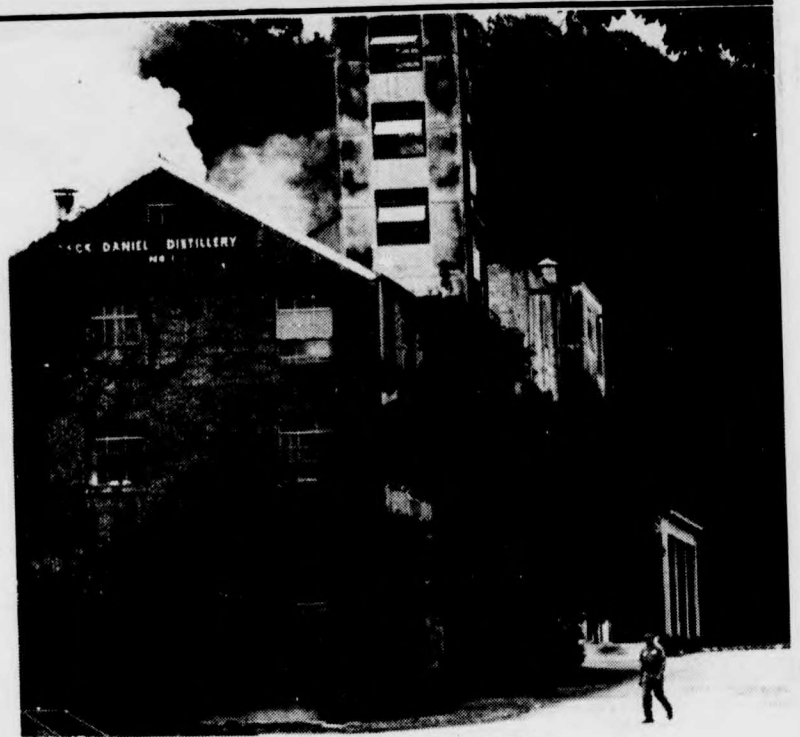
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