



By PAULETTE PEIROL

Supplied with desks, chairs, a telephone, and coathooks, a large cloakroom in Founders College was the incubator for "The Student Weekly of York University," *Excalibur*. Founding Editor Ron Graham, "an ideological type who wanted a forum to editorialize," according to his managing editor Mannie Zeller, posted notices in the Founders Common Room to recruit newspaper staff. "We figured that anyone who had time to spend in the common room also had time for the paper," Zeller said.

With an initial staff count of 10, a meeting was held to determine the name of the paper. While no one is sure who first suggested *Excalibur*, Zeller claims that there were seven English Literature majors at the meeting, who presumably had great respect for the legend of King Arthur, or at least for Alfred Tennyson, whose poem made *Excalibur*'s first front page on October 7, 1966.

"The paper was incredibly Mickey Mouse the first year," said Ross Howard, who later became Editor of *Excalibur* (in 1968) and now works for the *Globe & Mail*. Few original staff members, with the exception of Zeller, had experience with producing a newspaper. A two-hour training seminar at Glendon's *Pro Tem* office and a subsequent session at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute provided *Excalibur* staff with ground rules for layout.

The University of Toronto's Student Activity Council (SAC) agreed to typeset, paste-up and print *Excalibur* for a reduced fee, since it was able to include *Excalibur* with its other college newspapers, all on one bill. While *Excalibur* had about 1,000 readers in 1966, Zeller said they had to publish 3,000 copies of each issue in order to gain badly-needed national advertising subscriptions. "It was a Catch-22," Zeller noted, that *Excalibur* had to either throw out excess papers or sacrifice advertising revenue.

Excalibur staff proceeded to learn by trial and error; it wasn't until the December 9 issue that page numbers were included in the paper, and the masthead had changed three times in the interim. Columns were also introduced, such as "Student's Say" and "Opinion," which *Excalibur* still features 20 years later. ("Student's Say" is now "The Question Engine.")

According to Zeller, news was often sparse, since York's student population in 1966 was only 5,000. "We had to cannibalize stories from other campus papers in order to get national news," he said. Yet *Excalibur* did more than reprint stories; it also fabricated them.

"Once we were so desperate to publish eight (instead of four pages), that we wrote a story about a panty raid at Glendon," Zeller said. "We then took the paper to Glendon, before it was published, and paragraph by paragraph, staged the raid. It was all in a pioneer spirit," he added.

Excalibur's "pioneer spirit" also manifested itself in benevolent activities, such as arranging for the Red Cross to set up blood donor clinics on campus, and starting a United Way campaign at York. "Slave auctions" were the fund-raising method concocted by *Excalibur* staff for the United Way. Students volunteered to be auctioned off, usually for small tasks, in the Founders' "Barn" (cafeteria). *Excalibur* publicized the annual event profusely (until 1971, when it suddenly criticized the United Appeal for being "York's pimp in Toronto").

During the late '60s, *Excalibur* walked a fine line between fabricating news for filler and sponsoring real events, such as homecoming, on its own initiative. Pressing issues were often propagandized, usually using outrageous photographs or graphics. In 1969, for example, *Excalibur* photographer Dave Cooper (now with the *Toronto Star*) and Ross Howard (a *Globe* reporter) drove their Minis through Central Square at 2 a.m. one morning, unnoticed. (To this day, neither Cooper nor Howard will disclose the mechanics of such a feat.) They parked the cars in an empty store, now Dr. Labib's Sports and

The gills and guts of quality fishwrap

Politricks and cannibalism: Our fundamentalist roots

Fashion, and hung a banner reading "Excalibur Motors" above the site. The photograph was published October 9, with "Excalibur expands" as the headline, followed by "The Excalibur Staff has been forced to sell their company fleet due to lack of ad revenue. . . ." Cooper claims that potential buyers called both of them weeks afterward.

The most outrageous hoax ever pulled by *Excalibur* was the tunnel scam of 1967. On the front page of the December 15 issue, the lead story proclaimed "Five students 'rats' living in York tunnel." The story, written by Ross Howard, outlined how five registered students, calling themselves the "Tunnel Rats" were rejected student loans, forcing them to live in York's steam tunnels. (At that time, the pedestrian tunnel was not yet opened.)

With this tale ran a photograph of two "Tunnels Rats" (disguised Excal staffers) lying in the tunnel, surrounded by essential equipment: a candle, sleeping bag, blanket, typewriter, books, ashtray and cigarettes, a kettle, and—a telephone. Few people noticed the inconsistency of a telephone in a steam tunnel, not even the Canadian Press (CP) wire service, who immediately picked up on the story and came to *Excalibur* to cover it.



FESTIVITIES: Order your York Festival buttons made to measure. We hear the ploy was successful.

October 17, 1968

"You have to remember that student housing was a big issue provincially," Howard noted, in retrospect. Frank Liebeck, an *Excalibur* staff member from 1967-69, cautioned: "It taught us that you have to watch what you write because people believe everything in print."

The issue of Americanization in the early '70s prompted *Excalibur* to launch a full-scale propaganda-against-American-propaganda campaign, in 1970-71 under the editorship of Bob Roth. Full-page advertisements sponsored by "The American Empire © Canada Ltd." featured scathing, satirical commentary alluding to York as a branch plant of American (Empire) Imperialists (see page 5).

For a feature article on Americanization, Liebeck went to the American Consulate and requested to borrow an American flag for a week. "I was amazed that I got in," Liebeck recalled. "I told them the truth, that we wanted to recreate the Iwo Jima scene (of when Americans landed on Iwo Jima in the South Pacific)." *Excalibur* staff pulled the Canadian flag down from York's flagpole and hoisted the Consulate's flag in its place, managing to get a rare photo of stars and stripes flying high above the Ross Building, before York security arrived on the scene. *Excalibur* "really believed it was trying to be an agent of social change," said Howard. "It reflected more than just the

campus and believed it had a sense of purpose."

Editorial meetings in the late '60s were open to all staff members, which consisted of up to 40 people. Howard described the meetings as "chaotically democratic," with weekly fights. "We didn't have the political sophistication, but we *did* have the energy," he stated.

Brian Milner, *Excalibur* editor in 1973-74 and now a *Globe & Mail* reporter, supports Howard's claim. "To put out a good paper, you need an enthusiastic core and a democratic environment," he said, adding that clear debating issues must be presented to staff members.

In its first five years of publication, *Excalibur* not only expounded its views but also substantiated them through action. Staff members Gayle Campbell, Judy Pendrith, and Bill Lucas interviewed over 100 York students in November 1967 to find out if they wanted birth control information. Every student polled was in favour of access to such information, and in March 1969 *Excalibur* risked prosecution by illegally distributing *The Birth Control Handbook* (published at McGill University) from its office (see story on page 14).

In 1968, *Excalibur* initiated and organized York's first homecoming, then called the York Festival, which featured Gordon Lightfoot in the Tait Mackenzie gym. The paper designed and made York Festival buttons (strategically photographed by Dave Cooper and printed on the front page of *Excalibur*, October 17, 1968), and also set aside many promotional pages for the event which cost over \$7,000. The York Festival was a critical success and even made a profit of close to \$1,000.

Another social issue that concerned *Excalibur* in 1969 was the lack of a licensed premise. After discovering the historic Green Bush Inn at the Steeles and Yonge Street intersection, Dave Cooper suggested that it be relocated to York campus and become our first pub. A Green Bush Inn (GBI) Committee was established, which included *Excalibur* members Pete Reeder, David Blain, and Anne Wright. In May of 1968 the GBI became incorporated, but eventually dissolved in 1974 due to mismanagement. (The original pub itself was also later demolished.)

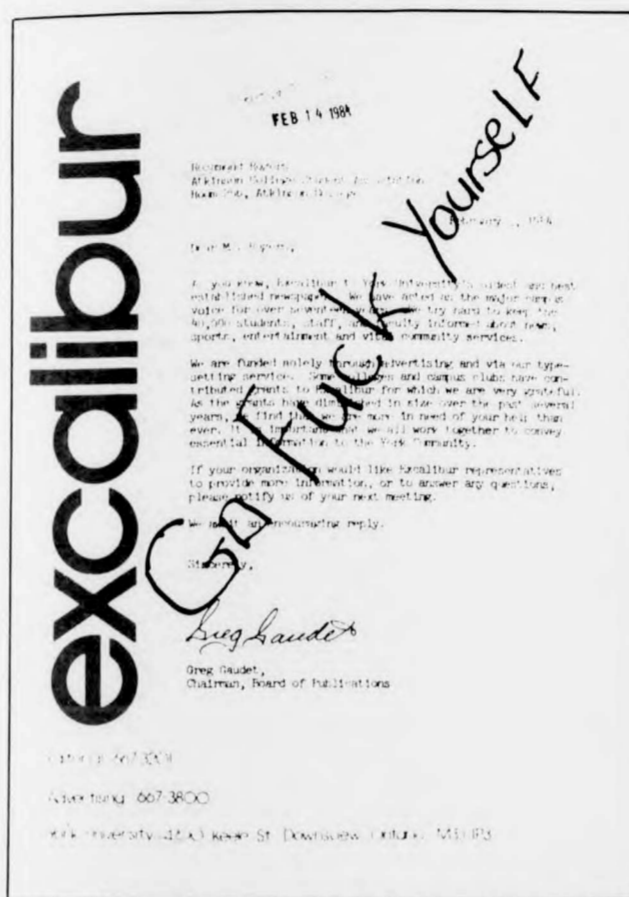
The turn of the decade, *Excalibur*'s fourth year of publication, witnessed the paper's first major growth spurt in terms of professionalism. Editors Bob Wall and John King were given full-time paid positions. Previously, editors had taken full course loads with their *Excalibur* posts.

1969-70 also marked the first full-time advertising and business position, by former Managing Editor Rolly Stroeter. "I made them (*Excalibur*) a deal they couldn't refuse, by offering full-time advertising attention," Stroeter said, "and our advertising revenue almost tripled that year." In 1972, after difficulties with the Council of the York Student Federation (CYSF), Stroeter and Brian Milner were afraid the CYSF might try to start its own paper, as had previously happened at the University of Waterloo. Stroeter and Milner then "went to the department of Consumer Relations, paid \$10, and registered *Excalibur* as a partnership."

In the beginning of the 1970-71 year editors Bob Roth and Delores Broten channeled most of their energy towards informing the York community about the infiltration of American professors and bias against equally trained Canadian professors, on campus. Their attention was quickly diverted however by the October Front de Liberation Quebecoise (FLQ) crisis and the War Measures Act. Approximately 1,500 students rallied in front of York's flagpole in support of the War Measures Act; *Excalibur* expediently published a special supplement, "Quebec and the Quebecois," in the October 22 issue. The three-page feature outlined both the historic and recent chain of events leading to the Quebec crisis. Campus nationalism hit its sharpest peak in this year, but *Excalibur* also gave space for dissenting opinions, often from York professors.

Yet all claims to public accountability were shattered for *Excalibur* when in October 1971 editor-in-chief Andy Michalski falsely charged a prominent human rights advocate, Walter Tarnopolsky, with anti-semitism. Tarnopolsky, Dean of Law at the University of Windsor, was nominated by York President David Slater for the position of Academic Vice-President of York, and was scheduled to meet with the Board of Governors four days after Michalski's libelous article was published. Michalski charged Tarnopolsky with discrimination against Jewish students.

In the following week's paper, October 14, 1971,



NOW, NOW: An anonymous response to *Excalibur*'s request for funding. This was printed one week after our "Atkinson Evils" editorial February 9, 1984, with regards to questionable money management, specifically a \$9000 personal loan granted to the President of the ACSA, Ms. Rogers.

February 23, 1984

Michalski published a front-page retraction. He had apparently obtained his information from a singled, biased source, a disgruntled student, and had not confirmed the allegations he received.

Excalibur staff members were unsuccessful in their attempt to impeach Michalski, although he won by only a narrow vote. "Excalibur lost some of its professional glitter," according to Stroeter. "It was embarrassing," said Milner. "The paper's name was downsized at least 15 points."

To worsen matters, or perhaps because he felt he had nothing more to possibly lose, Michalski then decided to try publishing *Excalibur* twice a week. Since the paper had received an unprecedented \$27,000 from the CYSF, almost 30 per cent of the council's budget, funds were of no major concern for Michalski.

On November 15, 1971, *Excalibur* doubled the size of its flag, which now read "the York University bi-weekly." The eight-page paper was followed four days later by a 12-page paper, and continued to run eight pages each Monday and 12 pages on Thursdays until December 13. The issues were sparse and contained much filler such as comics and restaurant reviews. News Beat advertisements (by the Department of Communications), made up one sixth of the paper's volume.

In January 6 edition, a front page headline announced: "No Money—*Excalibur* goes back to weekly." Business Manager Stroeter had said that the paper couldn't afford to publish bi-weekly because there wasn't enough advertising revenue.

While *Excalibur* struggled to recoup its reputation in 1972, York itself suffered a near-fatal blow when President Slater announced on October 12 that the university had incurred a \$4.1 million deficit as a direct result of an enrolment shortfall. Slater later planned to cut expenditures by \$2.7 million and was prepared to dismiss 200 instructors to achieve this cut.

Fortunately, the deficit turned out to be greatly exaggerated and employees were not dismissed. Students, however, were affected: the monetary squeeze coupled with increased course fees generated action amongst the student body. On November 23, 1972, about 120 York students and President Slater joined close to 400 others in a march at Queen's Park to protest fee hikes. Two months later, students at both Glendon and York's main campus occupied their respective admissions offices to discuss withholding second term fees.

Yet they would no longer garner President Slater's support: "Upstairs shuffle, Slater quits post" was the front page headline January 25, 1973. Slater or no Slater (the general consensus was that his resignation was an admission of the earlier budgetary error), students were already riled and on February 11, close to 6,000 of them withheld fees in support of the Ontario Federation of Students' (OFS) strike, which in part protested inequitable OSAP procedures. Meanwhile Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) workers also threatened to strike, and later that term there were fears that residence fees would be raised.

By spring of '73, both York students and *Excalibur* staff were in precarious positions. Students could not estimate the full extent which provincial cutbacks would later affect them, and the university administration and the CYSF were "not happy with *Excalibur*'s coverage of the campus," according to Brian Milner whose election by *Excalibur* staff members for 1973-74 editor-in-chief was contested (for the first time in *Excalibur* history) by newly elected CYSF president Michael Mouritsen.

"It was us against them," Milner said of that year's *Excalibur*/CYSF relationship. Milner made peace by giving Mouritsen a regular column in *Excalibur*, but describes this move as "a determined action . . . he (Mouritsen) screwed himself."

During his year as editor with Warren Clements, now also with the *Globe & Mail*, Milner made *Excalibur* more accountable by changing the masthead to read "York University's Community Newspaper," by helping to establish a Board of Publications to pull the paper away from CYSF interference; and by "selling" *Excalibur* "as the only journalism course on campus," he said. Milner and Clements also shortened production time in order to get the paper on the stands earlier and thereby double circulation.

"There was a commitment to craftsmanship," Milner stressed. "We were more concerned with craft rather than politics. *Excalibur* was one of the most professional papers among student papers with a volunteer staff."

In an *Excalibur* article titled "Uptight in the '70s, From demonstrations to disco," James Carlisle wrote, "If *Excalibur* is assumed to reflect student thought and opinion, then it is evident that the only event which aroused vehemence and indignation in the York student of the late

'70s was his dinner." While this is a rather gross exaggeration, it does obliquely allude to the fact that large-scale political concerns gave way to more cultural matters. It is no coincidence that one of the most contentious issues in the mid-'70s was Vice President John Becker's eviction of student clubs in 1974 with only 24 hours notice and no formal alibi.

Throughout the past decade of *Excalibur*, it has been the paper's unofficial mandate to make campus issues and events a priority. From 1974 onward, *Excalibur* took a more humorous editorial slant, allowing more columns and cartoons, and also making "Nocaliburs," "Localiburs," "Cosmicalibur" et al a regular annual feature (the changing name is dependent upon editors' whims).

The paper's Entertainment/Arts sections expanded and in the '80s, the Sports section followed suit. Perhaps the greatest asset of *Excalibur* during the late 1970s was its irregular interviews. In 1976-77, *Excalibur* staff interviewed such people as William Davis, John Saul, and Henry Morgentaler; in 1979-80, Margaret Atwood, Jean Cretien, and Barbara Amiel were among those interviewed.

With the expertise and sound financial judgement of *Excalibur*'s new Business Manager, Merle Menzies, advancements such as the advent of typesetting equipment in 1979, a stat camera in 1981, and new light tables (made by 1983-84 editor Roman Pawlynshyn) enabled the staff to improve the newspaper's look. Layout changed and became more regulated, making *Excalibur* appear more like a newsmagazine than a newspaper tabloid.

In 1984, *Excalibur* took first place for General Excellence among college and university newspapers in the Ontario Community Newspaper Association Awards Contest. The paper also won three Special Awards: Editorial, News and Features, and Advertising.

Today's *Excalibur* is a far cry from that of October 7, 1966, with its Miss United Appeal front page focus, complete with missing headlines and bylines. Yet York University and its present constituency would also likely shock someone returning after a 20-year interval.

Excalibur is a testament to all that happened and failed to happen in the past 20 years of York University's development. While attempting to be "an agent of social change," York's Community Newspaper is foremost a reflection of those who have made its news, and those who have cared enough to print it.



TUNNEL 'EXCALI' RATS: Ever wonder where those rumours of people living in the tunnels originated? A subsequent rumour has it that renovations imprisoned these two faithful reporters for 2 weeks without their phone books.

December 15, 1987