

# Virginia Rock:

*'Our college has one special thrust  
...toward what we call creativity.'*

The following is an edited transcript of an interview with College E master Virginia Rock. Miss Rock has been teaching at York for five years. She is the first woman to be appointed head of a college at York.

By MIKE SAVAGE

Excalibur Staff

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you feel that you should have a college with students before the physical structure has been erected?

**MISS ROCK:** That wouldn't have been my choice, but having no alternative I can see that there may be some advantages to not having a physical building.

For one thing, if ever a college is going to develop a spirit it will be developed under these adverse circumstances. I think it is happening in College E. I've never been depressed if I've gone to a meeting with students. I've been very much cheered up. They're fantastic. There is a real spirit there. At our first general meeting we had well over a hundred students, and we had an enrollment of 400. That's a fantastic turnout when they are all commuter students, no resident students at all. I think this is an advantage, but it can turn the other way very easily.

**EXCALIBUR:** What are your feelings about the physical locations of the different parts of the college?

**MISS ROCK:** I'm not completely happy with it because I feel definitely the separation between the staff and the students is unfortunate. There was no alternative. The space we had offered to us before was the section which is now occupied by the YSF. We need much more office space. If you've been in those YSF offices, you know, they're sort of like a rabbit warren. They're very inadequate, and there would be no privacy if a student wanted to talk to me or anything of this sort, because the walls are just paper-thin.

As it turned out we started off with the idea that we could get along with four offices, and now we have 11. It isn't really enough space because we've given one over to students for their newspaper.

We have a number of associate fellows who are teaching just one course, and when they come to the campus they have no office space. There are four or five sharing an office here. That's the reason for the separation, but I'm not happy about it.

**EXCALIBUR:** The students have a budget of about \$2,500.

**MISS ROCK:** No, it's more than that. They get \$17 per student, and there are about 550 students in the college.

**EXCALIBUR:** At the first general meeting it was disclosed that the college had spent \$2,000 on orientation week. They had about \$2,500 left of the budget.

**MISS ROCK:** That was because we thought we had 350 students.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is the budget satisfactory?

**MISS ROCK:** The budget is still a little bit short, but it is not nearly as drastic as it appeared to be at the beginning.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you have enough fellows to conduct the college tutorials?

**MISS ROCK:** We have enough fellows, but we don't have enough people in the sense of academic fellows to take care of all the advising that comes at the beginning of the year for students who are enrolling in their courses.

I changed the conception of fellow for the college because I felt we want this college to be a community, and not simply an academic institution. Therefore, I have invited people who are out in the community, who have nothing whatever to do with York University, to be associate fellows.

We have fellows who are not giving courses but who come to meetings, and by their presence contribute something to the college — like Robert Fulford.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you have the physical space in which to conduct these tutorials?

**MISS ROCK:** We were given one room for every day of the week from nine till six. Some of these tutorials are meeting in people's homes, or in some cases a film tutorial has to have an auditorium which can show films. I think we're managing alright with space.

It was rather complicated at first, but I think it's getting sorted out.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is there any particular orientation this college will take in the future?

**MISS ROCK:** We don't contemplate any. In fact, I think it would be very difficult to do that at the outset, because the university makes a point of not allowing it to happen. They simply assign students rather arbitrarily, but they try to keep a proportion between commuter and resident students, so that there is roughly one-quarter resident and three-quarters commuter. They try to keep a proportion between men and women. Apart from that it's a completely random choice. The only way a college will develop a kind of character is in the students who choose to join it later, because they see us going in a certain direction.

I would say our college has one special thrust, but not academic. The thrust is toward what we call creativity.

Now, that can be interpreted in many ways. We do have a number of fine arts students in the college, but then so do the others. There can be a focus and a direction developing, but not in subject matter. I conceive of mathematics and science students as being creative as well. Whatever form of character we develop will grow out of the environment that we provide, the fellows who lend a certain kind of enthusiasm to the college.

**EXCALIBUR:** Have you noticed any prejudice against you as a female college master?

**MISS ROCK:** I feel I've had a very good life. I haven't sensed any prejudice against me. It may have been covert. I may be getting a much less salary, or may have in the past received much less money for the work I did than a man would.

I've never experienced at York any sense of discrimination against me as a woman. I think there are some women who would not feel this way, but they're not in my department. I think the very fact that I was appointed is an indication that York is not drawing a line. This is a very open community. I'm quite optimistic, but I'm subject to modifications of my opinions every day.

**EXCALIBUR:** What do you do in your spare time?

**MISS ROCK:** I enjoy hiking. I sew, and I'm hoping to get curtains made for my house which I've rented recently. I like listening to music, and I like to cook. I like talking with people. I write a bit, but that takes a lot of energy and time to think, and I haven't got it right now. I'm teaching a very heavy load this year too.

**EXCALIBUR:** What particular subject do you teach?

**MISS ROCK:** My strongest interest is in what I call American studies, which is a study of the culture of the United States, and its various ramifications. This involves not just a discipline in one field, although my main field is English, but involves studies in history, political theory, art, music, philosophy, education and so forth. My academic training is in this area. I got my PhD from the university of Minnesota in American Studies.

**EXCALIBUR:** Are you a Canadian citizen?

**MISS ROCK:** No I'm not. I came from Michigan. I left Michigan very happily. I was terribly depressed by the educational experience I was having at Michigan State University. I happened to be in a situation which seemed to me to personify everything that I think is horrible about American education. That's why I'm so happy at York.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you feel there's more academic freedom up here in Canada?

**MISS ROCK:** Yes. I don't know whether academic freedom is the way to put it. There is a greater opportunity for me, at any rate, to realize what I think is inherent in education — the values of teaching and studying and having human contact with students. My teaching situation at Michigan State was incredible. I was in a one-course department, and it was a superb course or I wouldn't have stayed there as long as I did. It was a

course called American Thought and Language. It was general education, first year.

Michigan State has a three-quarter system, so one saw one's students for about 10 weeks, and then they disappeared. The human contact was very limited. The course had an enrollment of 7,000 students with a full faculty of 60 people, and a final examination — machine graded.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you have any views on the impact of American culture on the Canadian way of life?

**MISS ROCK:** Yes. Generally I wish they could export the good qualities and leave the bad ones behind, because there are some very unfortunate aspects of American culture that have come across the border. There's really no way to stop them.

**EXCALIBUR:** Could you elaborate?

**MISS ROCK:** It's not an easy question to deal with. In the appearance of Canadian cities I see too many of the terrible things of American cities being imitated, and just carried over without any thought at all. I'm thinking, for example, of Toronto with these tremendous numbers of high-rises just going up all over the place. It's very depressing. I would say Toronto has more parks than a great many American cities. That's a cheerful sign, but on the whole the push is toward more and more automobiles, toward more super-highways. These are the qualities that create the depression of living in the city.

Air pollution is going to get worse, crowding is going to get worse, people are going to get more and more crowded into large apartment buildings. The opportunity just to be on the earth, and to expand, and to feel some relationship of a person to a person, is going to have a harder time of functioning in a city which is going to look very much more alike American cities, if this is the trend that continues.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you think American business interests really control Canadian businesses?

**MISS ROCK:** This is not my field of expertise, but I would say from what I've read that it seems very difficult for the Canadian economy to operate independently of the American economy. I'm only going by a few of the things I've picked up from reading the Melville Watkins Report. The constant reference to it which keeps coming back to this point that the American economy is very powerful, in fact, a dominant influence on Canadian experience.

One of the things that depresses me is that there doesn't seem to be any real way out, given the situation now. I would like to see Canada just be itself and stand up and say "we are what we are, and go hang yourself." In order for any society to function there has to be an economic strength to it. When you look at a country of 20-million against the size of the United States, it isn't any wonder that it's overshadowed in this fashion.

You have to take into account that there isn't the wherewithal to operate in the Canadian economy, if you start to compare it with the economy of the United States with its tremendous wealth and tentacles going all over the place.



Excalibur ... Harry Kitz