

# The myth of York

## University

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The article is entitled *Love, Life And Reality at York University*, and it begins by identifying York as the happiest campus in Canada. To prove this flawless thesis *Toronto Life Magazine* (October 1970) points to such unique and popular institutions at York as the Green Bush Inn, where an accompanying photograph shows President Slater chugging a beer along with a group of notably impressed, giggling students; it quotes firebrand radical Arts and Science Dean John Saywell boasting that he came to York in 1964 "to start a revolution," it then ironically lauds York's administration for so successfully "taking all the steam out of student protest," and finally, no doubt in order to impress its groovy readers as to how morally liberated this campus is, the article refers to Peeping Master Tatham's profound observation that "Undoubtedly a certain amount of sexual intercourse takes place" in the residence rooms of the college complex.

The *Toronto Life* article continues on this same childish vein and captures the mood of York University about as perceptively as could be expected from a couple of cheap journalists attempting to sell a *Toronto* jet set flash sheet by exploiting some myths about life at the cool neighbourhood college.

But then myths are what York is all about, and the *Toronto Life* article is significant, and only worth reading, in that it proves this point.

Ten years ago York was conceived in myths and today these same myths and along with some new ones are what the Board of Governors and the administration use to sell this place to the unwitting members of the outside community, of which we as students used to be a part.

### The demon

I remember when representatives from York came to my former high school and

argued convincingly that York unlike any other educational institution in North America (and perhaps in the world) had conquered the demon of the Multiversity — we would not be attending the impersonal university where students never communicate with their professors; where lectures are huge and boring; and where course content is irrelevant and unstimulating — the possibility of encountering such an existence would be eliminated through the institution of the sacrosanct college system. These last words more than anything else have lured students and some faculty to York, because the college system in theory embodies everything that an ideal university should be. Of course, *Toronto Life* praised this infamous drawing card as one of York's prized possessions, and so in 1971 when the day student population rapidly approaches 10,000 where lecture halls have been built to seat over 500 people enrolled in overcrowded courses, and where some students' only contact with their college is often nothing more than the depositing of an empty coffee cup on a common room floor, the myth prevails. The reality, as everyone knows, but some have refused to admit, is that the college system has not accomplished what Murray Ross (York's founding president) claimed it would, one reason being that students have found it difficult to gain a sense of identity and fulfillment by intimately relating to mere physical structures built upon various assortments of classy carpets. Furthermore the college system has simply become too expensive; the people of Ontario can no longer afford to finance York's myth. Yet in order to maintain the university's image, the authors of York's preliminary 1970 brief to the Committee on University Affairs, bragged in a totally uncritical account, that "evidence supports the wisdom of the early planning decisions to establish a College system."

### Myth of happiness

This sterile stability on campus; this lack of "student unrest" has been used by the administration to further the myth that York is a happy university; that students here are fulfilled, content and continually turned on by their environment as they are on no other North American campus. Recall the letter to the *Globe and Mail* editor on June 15, 1970 signed by Stan Fisher of the Information Department. It read "The university has never had a major demonstration, a sit-in, a strike or a disruption of its normal academic "activities in the past ten years." This is a record, he states, of which "few other universities can say the same!" (Few people are aware by the way that this letter, which goes on to praise the efforts of Dr. Murray Ross, was really written by the former president himself. Mr. Fisher only put his name to it when asked to do so by his boss. Perhaps this incident helps break down the myth about the absolute integrity of university administrators.) Through the Ross-Fisher letter we can see that the administration at York defines progress to the public not in terms of what the university has positively accomplished

(with respect to the quality of education) but rather in terms of what the university has managed to avoid (i.e. student unrest). University life on this continent has degenerated to the point where a successful and respected college president is one who can do nothing more than keep order on the campus.

### Presidential threat

The presidential search of last year which involved numerous instances of behind the back name calling; a threatened firing by Dr. Ross of a York department head who happened to be on the search committee and disagreed with the former president's favourite choice for his successor (see *Excalibur*, Jan. 22, 1970 and *Manus*, the university handbook for details); and a number of drunken outbursts at parties by top members of the administration and faculty, should do a great deal in destroying the myth that York is a non-political institution devoted solely to the pursuit of educational excellence.

The contention that students are involved in the important decision making processes in the university holds little water in the light of fact that the previous student council raised, as yet, unanswered questions about the investment of university finances in companies which are headed by members of York's Board of Governors; and that students have been consistently refused the right to attend Board meetings in order to determine how important university decisions are made.

### Myths dissolve

Some of us on the CYSF had other myths about the operation of the university dissolve before our innocent eyes. Last year the university administration assured us that extensive discussion on the Laskin Report which was released in November 1969, would be sought before any decisions on the matter of discipline were taken. We were therefore surprised when in the academic calendar of this year, which went to press in December of 1969, (long before anyone in the university had expressed their views on the work of Justice Laskin), students were told that the Laskin Report had already been adopted by the administration as the discipline code of the campus. Mr. Becker (the administrator in charge of the folly) said that he took full responsibility for the mistake and that Dr. Ross knew nothing about the content of the calendar.

### Guided by spirit

Dr. Ross on the other hand, in a discussions with the executive of the CYSF said that he in fact he was aware of the content and contended he was "being guided by the spirit of the Laskin Report until the university has made up its mind on the matter of discipline." This series of events seems to explain Mr. Becker's frantic attempts early last year to have the student council approve the proposed court system. The tactic was clear, and somewhat typical of the way in which students participate in decision making at York. In spite of the rhetoric, what the administration needs is a weak, naive, uniformed CYSF to legitimize major decisions that are usually made before students are ever approached.

From an academic perspective, the public must be convinced by now that York is a revolutionary institution where everything and anything is taught. Note for example, how the daily papers have given the gambling course at York more publicity than could possibly be worth of any single subject. Yet how seriously have the inadequacies of the general education program been examined — especially the

Nat. Sci. department. Students last year in Nat. Sci. 176, in their struggle to reform the course must have ultimately been convinced that the charming John Saywell (the revolutionary?) who promised everything (thereby "taking the steam out of student protest") and granted nothing, was guilty of deceit and dishonesty. How much attention has been paid by the myth makers to the generally sterile, un-inspiring quality of the classroom environment both in the lecture hall and in the tutorial, where active participation by students is the exception rather than the rule.

### University guilty

Yet when we as students attempt to force these issues in the open, the taxpayer, whose vision of the university has been moulded by such obnoxious articles as the one in *Toronto Life*, accuse us of being pampered, spoiled and immature. We therefore face the problem of trying to convince our sceptical benefactors that not only does the university fail to satisfy us, but it is guilty in its role as a social institution of failing to address itself to the daily problems confronted by ordinary working people in the community outside. Should York not be dealing more sincerely and critically with the realities of poverty in Toronto (rather than as it tends to now in a somewhat superficial way with poverty in the United States?) Is it wrong for us to argue that American social science, which was developed in and for the purposes of serving American society has not for the most part proven useful to the study of life in this country? Are we misguided in our demands that the university should be accessible to members of the lower economic classes of Canada? Why is it that these issues are not considered important and relevant by those who have painted an unreal picture of York for the public.

In this article I am not attempting to spout unoriginal rhetoric of people who have written and spoken before me. Rather, in reflecting upon my experiences, I am seriously trying to understand two things; one how we can approach the situation where university administrators and officers can stop playing the role of hacks and lackeys of the vested interests at York, whose major purposes are to do everything possible to keep York peaceful and subdued, and simultaneously increase the institution's popularity by feeding myths to such magazines as *Toronto Life*. Will the consciences of these people ever drive them to express themselves openly to students and members of the public about the true nature of York without having to continually think about who is looking over their shoulders.

### Life disappeared

Secondly and more importantly, I am trying to discover how it is that students at York have been controlled and manipulated so subtly, but so masterfully, to the extent that all life seems to have disappeared from the classrooms of the campus; and that all meaningful spontaneous action has been deadened or dissipated to such a degree that one of the few events that can evoke any mass response to an alienating and rapidly deteriorating educational system is something demoralizing and degrading as a strip show. The sense of powerlessness, the absence of meaning in an individual's daily existence at York is at times overwhelming.

But I believe York will not remain so static for long. When unemployment for university graduates increases; and when the population of this institution grows to such a level that there will no longer be any distinction between York and the multiversity we were never to become, then the disenchantment with the quality of life here will not be so effectively submerged by smug liberal administrators who talk out of both sides of their mouths at the same time.

### Myth shattered

Perhaps a taste of things to come was previewed at registration last September. A first year student left the gym, obviously disturbed at what he had experienced in the previous two hours of attempting to become an official member of York. As he approached the exit, he stopped, took a breath and smashed the glass door with his left foot. This frustrated student had just shattered his first myth about York University.