

Glendon myth shattered

Last fragments of Whole Man uncovered



Jim Wilson graphic

By OAKLAND ROSS

"We at York must give special emphasis to the humanizing of man, freeing him from those pressures which mechanize the mind, which make for routine thinking, which divorce thinking from feeling, which permit custom to dominate intelligence, which freeze awareness of the human spirit and its possibilities."

—Murray G. Ross

The Whole Man is dead, but not forgotten.

Somewhere between Glendon College in the 60s and Keele and Steeles today, the renaissance ideal that guided York through its early years has been laid to rest. Yet a vague memory of the old dream still haunts the high-rise glass and concrete of York University.

The Whole Man was York's unofficial motto in the early 60s, when the Glendon campus was all York had. The York Act (1959) dedicated the university to the "intellectual, social, moral and physical development" of its students. But that dedication seems to have gone by the boards.

According to David Bell, an associate professor of political science and a member of one of York's first graduating classes, York now has "a watered-down, compromised, sold-out version of the Whole Man".

Paradise lost

To hear Bell tell it, one would think that Glendon in the early 60s was paradise before the fall.

"York was a small, new university then, living in the shadow of U of T. There were only about 300 students, and you had to take a chance on the school. But the risk was worth it, because you realized that the faculty and students were real people and that the scholarship programme was the best in Ontario.

"We took the Whole Man very seriously. In its early years, York really was a whole community striving for wholeness within itself. Of course, we couldn't do everything, but the desire was there."

By dedicating itself to the Whole Man, York was intended to become the centre of a cultural renaissance. It sounds naive and pretentious today, but Bell explained that "you had to be kind of weird to go to York in those days, because the whole situation was so weird".

Champion model

The champion of the Whole Man cause at Glendon was George Tatham. In fact, said Bell, "many students and faculty looked upon George as the model of the Whole Man". A concert pianist, a superb athlete, an amateur dramatist and a professor of geography, Tatham was also York's first dean of arts, and a member of the original curriculum committee. He was a radical even by York's progressive standards.

While serving on the curriculum committee, Tatham fought hard for three elements: a physical education component which would have established physical standards for students; a workshop component involving visual arts, crafts, music and dance which would have exposed students "to the joy and relaxation available in the arts"; and a humanities component which would have involved studies in reality and would have dealt with science, art and mysticism. None of these proposals was accepted by the committee.

Tatham, now master at McLaughlin College, is disappointed but not bitter about the rejection of his proposals. In fact, he is rather amused by what he considers the reason for the rejection of his plan.

Guilty votes

"I think guilt had a lot to do with it," he said. "You know, I truly think that the other members of the curriculum committee were afraid that they themselves couldn't live up to my plan."

Murray Ross, York's first president and now a professor of education administration at Glendon, explained that the "academic climate" in the late 50s was completely different from today.

"The great scholarship at that time was the Rhodes, which stressed the all-round person; that image was popular. Oxford and Cambridge were the model universities. They stressed an intimate, integrated college life. But the whole student culture has changed since then; it isn't realistic to talk about university life in the same way that we used to."

"Universities today are huge and commuter-oriented. The interests of students have diversified to areas outside the university."

York's original curriculum was designed to provide a general, rather than a specialized, education. More

than anything else, said Ross, "we wanted to prevent York from becoming an intellectual shopping centre".

Big compromise

"There is no question that the general education programme which York now offers in first year is a compromise," he said, "but you have to view it in perspective; the whole climate has changed."

York's present dean of arts, Sid Eisen, doesn't completely agree. In his opinion, "the present curriculum hasn't watered down the concept (of the Whole Man); it has simply faced new realities".

Among these "new realities" are the sheer bulk of York today and dim economic picture. Eisen explained that the curriculum and the administrative and academic policies of the university have become entrenched.

"It is much harder to start anything new now than it was seven or eight years ago," he said, citing the difficulties that have been encountered in trying to establish a programme of Canadian studies at York.

Eisen also pointed out that in the early years York was not only fresh and small, but well-funded. This is not so today, however, and for a moment, Eisen verged on gloominess. He said that "if you get your wings clipped every year, you tend to fly a lot less; there is some danger of York becoming a depressed area".

But David Bell felt that the emphasis on general education at York was weakened not by reduced finances, but by interdepartmental conflicts over the relative importance each department should have in the curriculum, and by an increasing tendency for professors to encourage promising students to specialize early.

Just add water

"The spirit of general education weakened," said Bell, "and consequently the curriculum became watered-down."

In Bell's opinion, the Whole Man concept was killed not by curriculum changes, but by the 1964 move of the university to Keele and Steeles.

"The new campus was isolated and desolate," he said. "There was



Murray G. Ross

no infrastructure of activities and services".

The community spirit and energy of the university vanished almost immediately, said Bell. And for several reasons, the development of the university over the past 10 years has not really changed anything. The high proportion of commuter students coupled with what Bell sees as "a basic architectural failing" have prevented York from becoming "a truly integrated community".

Bell explained that in all buildings on campus, "main thoroughfares go past the common rooms; students are actually discouraged from gathering in quiet surroundings to drink coffee and talk".

Joseph Green, York's dean of fine arts, sees another, perhaps even more serious failing in York's architecture.

Internal tension

"Architecturally, the university is fighting against itself," he said.

The colleges, which were to be the social and activity centres, are all located on the periphery of the campus, while the library and Central Square area are at the centre. In Green's opinion, the tension which this has created has severely weakened the colleges.

"You end up serving no-one when you try to serve everyone," he said.

According to Green, the demise of the Whole Man may have been a direct result of the failure of the

colleges to "do their job".

"The aim (of the colleges) was to flush out that part of a student's life which lay outside his academic specialty," he said. "That is why they have an interdisciplinary population."

But Green feels that the interdisciplinary nature of the colleges has never been shown to be essential.

"New approaches should be experimented with. The college system needs a new ethos, a more viable base."

And, in fact, there has been some talk in the past year of filling McLaughlin college with a student population taken exclusively from the faculty of fine arts, a proposal which has Green's support.

Blood boils

George Tatham grows hot under the collar when this proposal is mentioned. "I am vigorously opposed to this advocacy of the monolithic college system," he snapped.

In Tatham's view, the freedom of the student to choose between "a specialized spiritual home in one of the departments and a diverse spiritual home in a college" may be York's last vestige of the Whole Man.

If York students no longer have the energy or sense of purpose they once had, then it is the fault of the administrators and the faculty, said Tatham.

"It is we," he said, "who must set undergraduates on fire".

But one has the feeling that the blame cannot be meted out easily. Murray Ross, who more than any other individual was instrumental in the establishment and early growth of York University, now spends each weekday morning in his large, oak-panelled study at Glendon. When he looks back over York's brief history, he admits that the original expectations have not been realized and perhaps never will be.

Winds of change

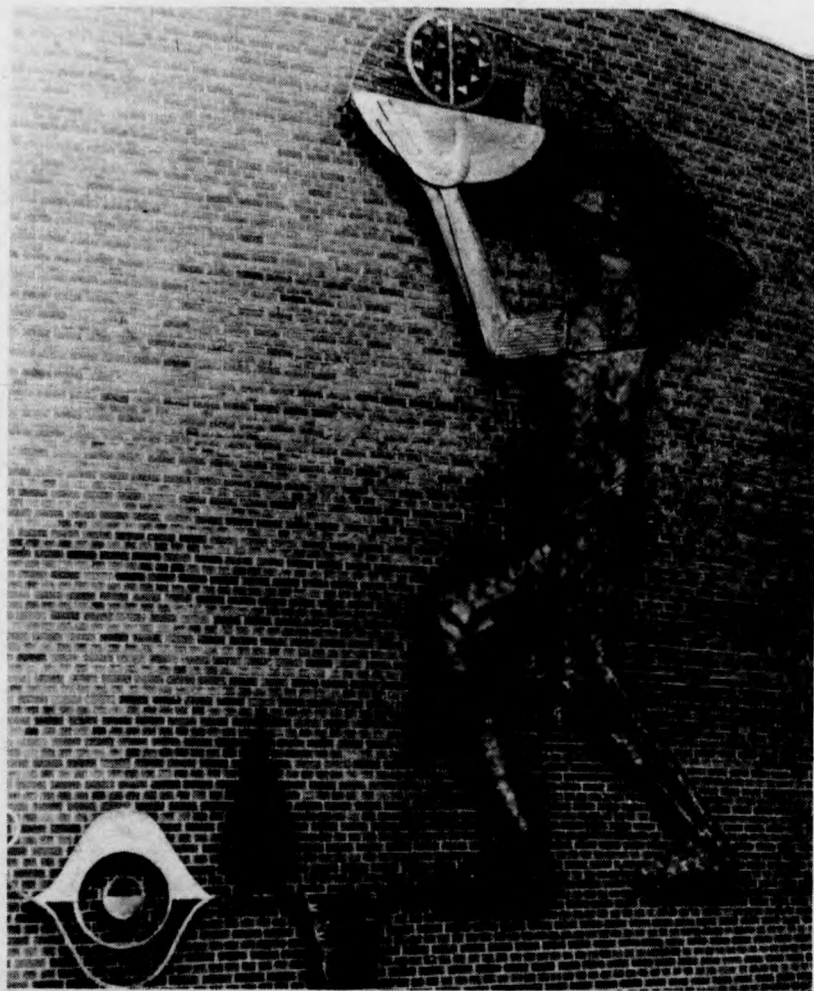
"But it was probably inevitable. More and more, we are seeing the influx of the involuntary student, the student who is not only uninterested in his studies, but is often actively hostile.

"This isn't the fault of the university any more than it is the fault of the student. It is a reflection of changes in our whole society."

In fact, the Whole Man always had a precarious existence. Ross explained that the term was coined by "some artist from Vancouver" who was commissioned to design a mural at Glendon Hall in 1961. "He entitled his work The Whole Man," said Ross, "and the concept fed on itself and a kind of mythology developed."

But Ross quickly added that, for a time, the myth seemed real. "Oh yes, definitely, the feeling was there."

And now, for whatever reason, it's gone.



Agnes Kruchio photo

The original artist's conception of the Whole Man, renaissance master of art, sport and science, as immortalized on a brick wall on the Glendon campus.