

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Murray Ross, first president of York University

First president of York University, Dr. Murray G. Ross, left more of a mark at York than his name on the Humanities building.

Dr. Ross was president during the creation of the college system, and the compulsory first-year core curriculum, since subject of some controversy.

Presently teaching one course at York, Dr. Ross discusses these and other issues of university life.

By KEITH NICKSON

EXCALIBUR: You have been quoted as saying "we wanted to prevent York from becoming an intellectual shopping centre". Recently a professor at York stated that a B.A. today is worth less than a pre-war high school diploma. Has York become an intellectual shopping centre where anybody with the money can buy?

ROSS: I wouldn't agree with that. It is true that with larger and larger numbers you lose something and an impersonality develops on campus, but at the same time it is very exciting. There are many advantages to be gained in terms of academic facilities that would not exist in a smaller university. This expansion has enabled many more people to attend university who previously would never have had the chance. Many of York's first graduates were the first members of their families to go to university.

At a party after the first convocation at York I spoke to two students who were going on to do their doctorates at Columbia and Oxford. Now 25 years ago that opportunity to go to university would not have been open to them, so that's a great advantage of opening the university to some extent.

As to quality, I'm not sure that it's less now than it was. There have always been students who were really not interested intellectually in university and were only there to put in time. But for the serious student the opportunities are just as great and the standards are high.

EXCALIBUR: But do you not think there are a greater overall percentage of students at university interested in non-academic pursuits?

ROSS: Well I think that's very questionable. If you read the literature of the thirties and twenties or if you've seen any of the Hollywood movies about the 'fun culture' at universities, you'd see that the percentages are not that much higher. Even way back at Oxford and Cambridge there were always some students who went for one or two years but who never graduated.

There's a book by Martin Proe who did a study and divided students into four types. There are the pleasure-seekers, the academically oriented, the vocationally motivated and the bohemians who are interested in ideas but reject the formal study program of the university. We've always had these four types but the question is the balance. I would say that the majority of students at York and certainly here (Glendon) are either academically oriented or vocationally oriented.

EXCALIBUR: Do you think that York should institute a basic exam for all first year students as many other universities have done?

ROSS: This is why we started the general education program at York and included certain basic courses from all areas. Even if a student was not going to be a scientist we felt that to live in the modern world he needs to know something about science. So we had courses for non-science students and likewise for those who were to become scientists we felt it necessary that they know a little about developments in the field of Humanities.

EXCALIBUR: But if a student was exceptionally brilliant in science and forced to take a literature course might this not jeopardize their academic record and alienate them from York's first year program?

ROSS: It would if the students were forced to take the regular courses with the scientists, but our science courses were designed for non-science students so they would learn about certain basic concepts without being overwhelmed by the sophistication found in pure science courses.

And as for this alleged incompetence in English I'm not sure it really exists. Most of the papers done for me this year have been excellent. When I taught on the York campus last year over 50 per cent of my students did not speak English when they were six years of age. That's quite a handicap which they will eventually overcome, so I don't think you can expect the same level of competence from them. Here at Glendon there are fewer such students and their competence in writing is very good.

EXCALIBUR: What do you think the future of the university is going to be? In your book you suggest that the future will be "less expansive, more conservative in defining its functions ... and provide more opportunity for the disadvantaged but talented student to attend university." Are you suggesting a return to some of the more traditional concepts of the university?

ROSS: Yes. Students may in the future be selected less according to family background or financial ability than their academic competence. I say that because now there are many opportunities for the less academically oriented to go into community colleges. So now the university does not have to take those students and can define its role precisely.

It may be that we will become more restrictive as the universities' population become more stable. It's likely the more able academic students will gain admission while there will be more opportunities for the disadvantaged.

EXCALIBUR: For the economically disadvantaged the government of Ontario has raised the ceilings on loans and grants which isn't going to help the situation in the future.

ROSS: That's unfortunate because in many respects that is discriminatory. Giving \$4,000 dollars to a student whose father earns \$8,000 is one thing but giving that amount to a student whose father earns \$20,000 is quite different. Britain is quite a poor country and they manage to give more help to their students than we do.

I'm not adverse to a means test so we make those pay who can afford to pay. To some extent this is the way it works now because if your parents are in a certain high income group you receive less.

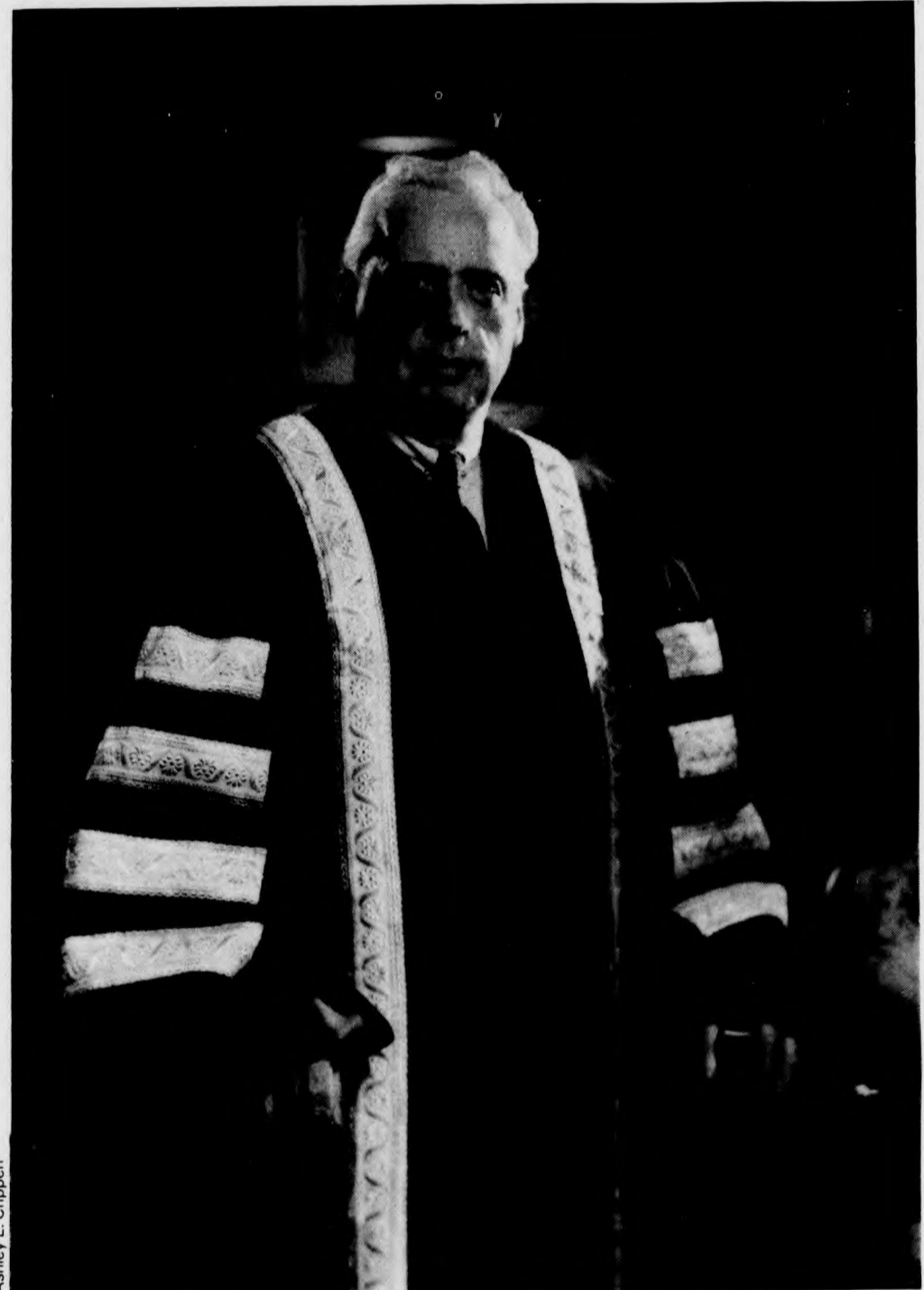
EXCALIBUR: You suggest in your book that the major problems the university will be facing in the future will be "defining its role in society and finding a structure of government that will permit it to function effectively". Do you think York is moving in the proper direction to solve these problems?

ROSS: It's very difficult to say now because of the union situation. Traditionally the senate decided academic policy but who decides the policy if there is a union? Is it the union or management or the two groups working together? This creates an entirely new situation which we are unfamiliar with.

EXCALIBUR: It's a little difficult to envision a merger of the traditional concepts you mentioned earlier with the more modern predicaments the university finds itself in. For example, traditionally professors used to be loyal to their universities while now they are employees represented by unions. How can these positions be compromised?

ROSS: Faculty members fought for centuries to be members of the university and not employees. Now the minute they've become union members they become employees. So perhaps now their loyalty goes to the union and their discipline and not the university.

But it's not inconceivable that the union as



Ashley L. Crippen

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a whole would be loyal to the institution with which it is associated. For example I would think of the union workers of Volvo in Sweden. They have representation on the Board of Directors of Volvo and I would think that union is as much concerned about the advancement of Volvo as management. It's conceivable that the union could be very concerned about the status and development of the university. But again at this time it's hard to judge.

Up until the sixties, loyalty to the institution was crucial. We'd always worked on internal agreement, loyalty to each other, and the toleration of eccentricity. But in the sixties the whole thing disintegrated. There were so many people on so many different sides that the organization fell apart.

EXCALIBUR: I've heard stories that you were continually prepared for a student siege of the ninth floor in the sixties.

ROSS: Every university was. You never knew when it could happen. I had many groups in the office who would come and talk for hours and hours. The most important was when the Dow Chemical Company came to recruit and 40 students came and sat in my office and we talked for four or five hours. They came to tell me they were going to prevent by force any body seeing the recruiters but by the time they left decided only to picket and not use force. We had fewer

confrontations at York partly because members of faculty often sat and talked with students. The closer student - professor relationship and the fact that we were not in Viet Nam decreased tension on campus.

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EXCALIBUR: Since you left York, have you been pleased with the direction in which the university is moving?

ROSS: Yes I think so. The general education programs we began in the sixties are still working well. We were the first university to begin a specialization program in general education which has provided a greater variety for students who were not happy with the rigid programs of other universities. All of those ideas that were innovative at the time are accepted now and functioning fairly well. I'm not sure the colleges have fulfilled the hopes we had for them but the culture has really changed.

When we were planning them, students were organizationally minded. There were all kinds of clubs and we assumed that the colleges would become the cultural centre for very many students. Well the sixties wiped out that kind of organizational student so I think the colleges have to find a new function.