

Entertainment Tip-Toes Through the Archives

by Shawn Malley

Oscar Wilde arrived in Fredericton to give a lecture on Wednesday, October 4, 1882, at a time when Canada's first literary movement led by G.D. Roberts had not yet gained recognition. The large audience nearly filled the hall: all the reserved seats were taken. Five minutes after his lecture began, twenty-five unwanted converts to the Aesthetic movement, students of the University of New Brunswick, marched in procession into the hall and down the main aisle to their seats reserved near the platform. In a letter to the editor of the *Fredericton Evening Capitol*, a town woman, upset by the students who "must not expect that they are at liberty to take possession of the whole town when they come to Fredericton to learn the rudiments of A.B.C. in manners," described them thus: "some of them had sunflowers in their button holes, others were also ridiculously garnished."

They carried canes and bouquets, and periodically broke out in uproarious applause, stamping of feet, and mock plaudits as they neepled Wilde on his main points. The observer did not appreciate this enthusiasm, especially of "that chap with the large umbrella, who, every time the others stamped, would bring it down upon the floor with the bang of a ten pounder."

The editor of the *University Monthly* denied malicious intent: "By their frequent and animated applause they showed that their sentiments were entirely in accord with those of the eloquent lecturer" (NO. 3, 1, 1882).

In the salutory of the same issue, the literary editor professes: "We shall strictly eschew all controversial matter relating to politics or religion, but the wide field of literature will be open to us."

Mauling through the *Brunswickan* middens, through the 125 years of archival strata which bears the ensign "The Voice of the Students," one embarks on a atavistic voyage through primordial mists to a primitive age, is transported to a savage place ignorant of the prophetic howl of the electric guitar's piercing of the bewitching black night, to a strange and godless Dantonian tenth level where "entertainment" is (gasp!) synonymous with "reading."

I have taken this journey, and like the mariner must tell the tale.

In this archival exploration to the dawn of *Brunswickan* history, I have unearthed a university community of such a different ilk in comparison to contemporary student life that it seems absolutely foreign, a university community which, as the *Monthly* professed, was invested with, and invigorated by, a profound interest in the liberal arts.

But this is to be expected of a student body whose mettle was tempered by the likes of G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carmen. The *University Monthly* of the last century was a student rag devoted to the artistic interests of the university community.

It was a literary magazine, an amalgam of poetry, fiction, and a diverse range of prose springing from all realms of humanistic fields. Disquisitions on Robert Burns, Thackeray, and "Passion and Fancy;" historical

biographies; or accounts of delicious hours spent wandering through the St. John River Valley "gathering large, ripe nuts that first frosts showered down in plenty," are virtually unheard of today.

Oh here's to the paddle
To the dogs with the saddle!

The indelible impression of ole C.G.D.R.

One infers from these early days a great hunger for learning among the students, a laudable passion for knowledge, and an active and insatiable interest in culture and its articulate expression. One may nowadays be shocked to learn that people in the dark back and beyond of the not too distant past actually derived pleasure and satisfaction from translating Sappho and Horace.

And yes, as the above concerned citizen unwittingly relates, there was a lively spirit here, a mental and physical energy fuelled by study.

The paper is a testament to the vitality of these students, as in this effusion from one modest "Errato":

We have roamed the marshes;
Keen with expectation,

Lain at eve in ambush, where the
ducks are wont to fly;

Felt the feverish fervour, the
thrilling full pulsation,

As the flocks came whirling,
from the rosy western sky.

Today such stuff is relegated to the ranks of "Distraction." From what?

The dawn of the twentieth century sees a larger *Monthly*, but one which was virtually unchanged in outlook and in form—the notion of humanistic study continued to guide the paper. In fact the poetic content proliferates.

The 1920's, while adhering to the literary tradition instituted by the forefathers, sees a movement to a more diversified paper, one which, in the spirit of the students it represents, reflects the growth of the university in terms of population, interest, and field of study.

There is now sections for athletics, engineering, a women's page, and, risking imprecations from the ghost of *Monthly* past, politics. In 1922 the editorial

section precedes the literary component (perhaps the proliferation of war poetry is responsible). This gesture anticipates the growing and imminent orientation towards a news-paper. Methinks I see some consequence hanging in the stars....

The October issue of 1922 is a milestone in the life of the *Monthly*: its death. Long live the *Brunswickan*. "It is a hard struggle," relates the editor-in-chief, "for many to get away from the old conservative ideas respecting college life and to some extent we can appreciate the feelings of our parents."

And yet this gesture seems a harbinger of transition, of a shift in student interests away from those held by their forbearers.

"The students receive their copy of the magazine, gazed over the joke column, and if a strong bit of humour tickles their funny bones or if one of the literary articles proves not too dry in their estimations, they toss the "Monthly" into a corner yawn, stretch, and mutter "not too bad."

1932 strikes a crippling blow to the old school in the unlikely guise of the long pined for *Brunswickan* office. So what does a proper office, complete with "filing cabinets instead of pockets" and desks upon which to compose instead of "in the elements of nature," have to do with this change? The institution of office life paralleled a change in format from monthly magazine "Devoted to Literature, Science, and General Information" to "Weekly News and Literary Journal of the University of New Brunswick." Entertainment, in its literary guise, becomes relegated to a few meagre columns. The literary essay dies off in the process of natural selection; the climatic change of a smaller paper could not accommodate sustained narrative....

The 30's and 40's in my estimation seems rather a pedestrian period: no doubt a reflection of the rather appalling quality and genuine lack of "distraction" in Fredericton. But an interesting trend (to the sociologist, if not to this ardent "traditionalist") appears to develop. The reduction in newsprint allows for only small

articles, these tending towards a type of non-literary review.

In short, the notion of entertainment becomes distinguishable.

This is the heyday of the pink-tea, the Bushman's Ball, Residence Hops, and a propagation of the word "Fest."

Picobac—What a Tobacco!

Picobac—The pick of the Frat House!

And let us not forget the burning popularity within the Frat House of the sweater bra advertisements.

"Literary" vanishes from the masthead in the 1950's, hailing a more enlightened and democratic age of "Features." Football becomes immensely popular.

An interesting article by one Peter Kent, concerned with the lack of entertainment in Fredericton, may shed light upon its sparse treatment in the *Brun*s at this time. "Fredericton Lacks Variety," proclaims the headline, but Kent does, however, vindicate this wound to Fredericton's renowned and sophisticated cultural milieu (let us not forget Mr. Wilde's visit) with an informative discourse on YMCA dances and closed season hunting of caribou.

The Red and Black Review seeps into UNB legend; that and the Drama Society seem to have saved the university's extra-curricular life from complete cultural destitution.

And, of course, Hammerfest.

In the 60's things begin to move again. Intimations of dissent are manifest in the figure of folk singer Roy Davis, who, in the 1960 Winter Carnival "sang many numbers dressed in an opened necked sports shirt, adding to the atmosphere of the occasion."

This era is one of tremendous influx of folk singers into the music "scene," a bunch of angry young men with guitars (like the new folk trio). Along with musical (in)surgence is a revivification of student concern for culture, though delineated under the auspices of "social issues."

Poetry returns to the *Brun*s.

Interestingly, the mean length of undergraduate hair is directly proportional to the propagation of the written word. Poetry flourishes. A new age dawns, a Renaissance!

Pubescents scolded by close-cropped instructors is a discernable theme. Entertainment begins to ally itself once again to art.

An avalanche of interest in popular music ensues. In 1965 an article on the poetics of Bob Dylan's lyrics, whose "vision," the author posits, engenders the magnitude of Blake and Shakespeare, reminds one of the glory days of the *University Monthly*.

In 1967 the hallowed folk sensation, Simon and Garfunkle, "the new youth of the Rock and Roll Generation" of whom it is said "music is given to new poets," were received with a raving review, quoted here in its entirety: "Simon and Garfunkle won the audience. This was no mean feat. This required a lot of sophistication and talent."

Improved roads and larger audiences sees a growth of rock and roll bands on the "University Tour." Of note, Bo Diddly (Hey, BO-DIDDLE-AY) hit town in 1971. Yessir, "Entertainment," with its finger on the pulse of "pop" and recently "alternative" culture, was there, has met the challenge, has striven to record, much in the spirit of 1882, the spirit and aspirations of university life, like a *Rolling Stone*.

Of honourable mention in the annals of Entertainment is certainly Uncle Stevie, who of anyone known to living memory, was a man of letters committed to the amelioration of thought-starved, pop-cultured junkies, a man whose scintillating wit and vast word-hoard I fancy has made Bliss smile in his grave. Here's to Uncle Stevie, the man who taught me "scatology."



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