

Mysterious East to fold

Alternate press in "disastrous" state

By JEFF DAVIES

It all started back in October 1969 when a group of Fredericton academics became so disgusted with the journalistic situation in New Brunswick that they decided to do something about it. It will all end very shortly.

The Mysterious East is to fold.

The demise of the Mysterious East can hardly come as a surprise to those who have been watching the newsstands the last year or so, for during that period it has published sporadically, to say the least. One more issue of the Fredericton magazine will be published this winter — the twentieth and last.

The Mysterious East is what is known as an alternate paper — one which attempts to provide an alternative to the commercial media and provide the readers with information which they would not otherwise receive.

It was not really intended as a permanent venture; when the magazine was started, the editors merely expressed a desire to publish 12 issues. As it was, they eventually "burned themselves out", according to one staff member. The people who started the paper merely exhausted their energies.

They don't consider the Mysterious East to be a failure, however. In the letter which is being sent out to subscribers, Russell Hunt, one of the editors, expresses the belief that such a magazine was "both possible and necessary".

"We think that alternatives have been more real through having been proposed in the Mysterious East", says Hunt, "and we think its spirit will live on even if no one produces another alternate press in the region. We think so because the Irving press monopoly has been damaged irreparably, and because all the papers have been shocked into being slightly better than they were in November of 1969 — and we feel at least partly responsible for these developments."

The Mysterious East attempted to serve as an agent of social change. According to Janice Oliver, the paper was "not necessarily offering solutions all the time but nevertheless pointing out problems that the public wasn't used to having presented."

Their experience with the Mysterious East has enabled some of the staffers to go on to greater things. Two of the editors have written a book on K.C. Irving which is to be published shortly. Donald Cameron, the prime moving force behind the magazine and a former English professor at UNB, is "working his ass off" as a freelance journalist in Nova Scotia, contributing to such publications as the Fourth Estate

and Saturday Night. Bob Campbell, another editor, is working for the CBC and writing features for the Toronto Globe and Mail.

"They're doing things they wouldn't have done without the magazine," explains Jon Oliver, a former staff member. Oliver said that Cameron had been carrying the idea of an alternate paper around in his head for some time before the magazine was started. It got off the ground when he found other people in the university community who had the interest and the ability to put the paper out. Oliver said, however, that the "magical mixture" was now gone.

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The Beaver Express was intended to be an informative, easy to read paper, an alternative to the Gleaner, but Constantine admits that it never even came close to fulfilling this role; "It didn't come off what we intended at all."

Constantine attributed part of the failure to the paper's association with Insight, the Fredericton drug crisis centre, which served as the offices for the paper. He felt that Fredericton residents had a conception of Insight as being staffed by freaks, subversives, and other undesirable characters.

had not appealed to the working people.

McCurdy said that the Alternate Press tried to provide in-depth coverage on subjects that were covered superficially or ignored by the commercial media.

"The material that was written was fairly faithful to what they were trying to do," said McCurdy, "but it wasn't read enough to be a viable alternative. The end finally came for the Alternate Press in the fall when many of the staff left to go back to college or to pursue other pastimes. No one was willing to devote the money to keep it going."

McCurdy, who is also the Atlantic Region Field Secretary for the Canadian University Press, said that the alternate press in Atlantic Canada was "pretty disastrous - there hardly is an alternate press in the Atlantic Provinces any more."

Although McCurdy isn't entirely sure whether it deserves the title "alternate", at least one such paper is surviving and apparently doing well. The 4th Estate, a Halifax weekly, has been publishing for nearly four years and has a circulation of over 13,000.

Like the other alternate papers, the 4th Estate was started as the result of discontent with the established media. Ann Sansom, a staff member, told us that many complaints were being voiced by people who had moved to Halifax from larger centres and had been exposed to better newspapers. The Chronicle-Herald, considered one of the worst dailies in Canada, had a monopoly in Halifax. A group of young journalists banded together to form an alternate voice.

Sansom agrees that the 4th Estate attempts to function as an agent of social change; "We can certainly provide people with enough information to help them make up their minds on issues they hadn't thought of." She added, however, that for such a venture to be a success, the people in the community should "already be beginning to question things."

One reason why the 4th Estate has managed to survive, according to Sansom, is the fact that the staff is well organized, and the staff members are able to reinforce each other on their jobs. There isn't any danger of the paper folding merely because some of the staff loses interest.

The main obligation of the 4th Estate, according to Sansom, is to stay in business. And staying in business, judging from the experiences of alternate papers in the Atlantic region and elsewhere, is quite a feat.



Actually, readership, finances, and production weren't problems with the Mysterious East. According to Oliver, the magazine was reaching a broad range of people, as was intended. It just became increasingly difficult to find people who were willing to devote their time to the Mysterious East. "What we need is a renewed enthusiasm", said Oliver.

Meanwhile, some other alternate papers in the Atlantic region have folded due to problems similar to those incurred by the Mysterious East. One year ago, a paper called the Beaver Express started in Fredericton and folded after two issues. The major hassles at the Beaver Express were a lack of interest and organization. According to Gary Constantine, who worked for the paper, "everyone wanted to talk politics but no one wanted to put

out a newspaper". There was also a general lack of experience among the staff; "Everything lacked," said Constantine.

Another alternate paper which didn't survive was the St. John's Alternate Press, which folded in September after publishing for a year and a half. The Alternate Press was a community magazine, somewhat similar in format to the Mysterious East. It survived two summers on Opportunities for Youth grants, and published spasmodically throughout the winter.

The Alternate Press apparently did not reach the people it was intended to. "I don't think the format was ever accepted by the constituency," Earle McCurdy, a former staff member, told us. He felt that the magazine has been too dry and academic in its tone, and