

# Threat of Americanization triggered search for Canadian identity in Excalibur's pages

By REBECCA CANN

The issue of Americanization scorched the pages of *Excalibur* in the academic year 1970-71 as the paper became a major forum for heated debate. The academic ramifications of a national quandary led students and faculty alike to protest the lack of Canadian courses, Canadian content and Canadian professors and graduate students at York. *Excalibur's* five editorials, six features and countless articles and letters throughout the year focusing on Americanization helped fan the flames beneath the already sensitive administrative toes.

Canada's search for national identity found its way onto York's agenda in 1969. In September of that year *Excalibur* ran an article reporting on the Canadian Union of Students Congress in which the Americanization of universities was summed up in four main points:

- Course content was heavily loaded in favour of US textbooks, concepts and history.
- Many courses deliberately devalued Canadian content (University of Toronto graduates were frequently unable to devote their Ph.D.s to only one Canadian author).
- Canadian universities were doing research for American corporations and military departments.
- The prestigious position of American universities in certain disciplines affected Canadian teaching methodology in those subjects.

While the congress chose to reject a quota system restricting the number of American professors teaching in Canada, three resolutions concluded the meeting. These included a demand that all academic openings in Canadian universities be advertised in Canada, a suggestion that Canadian graduate schools emphasizing the Canadian perspective be established to orient faculty towards Canadian problems, and a resolution that students participate in hiring, promotion and tenure of pro-

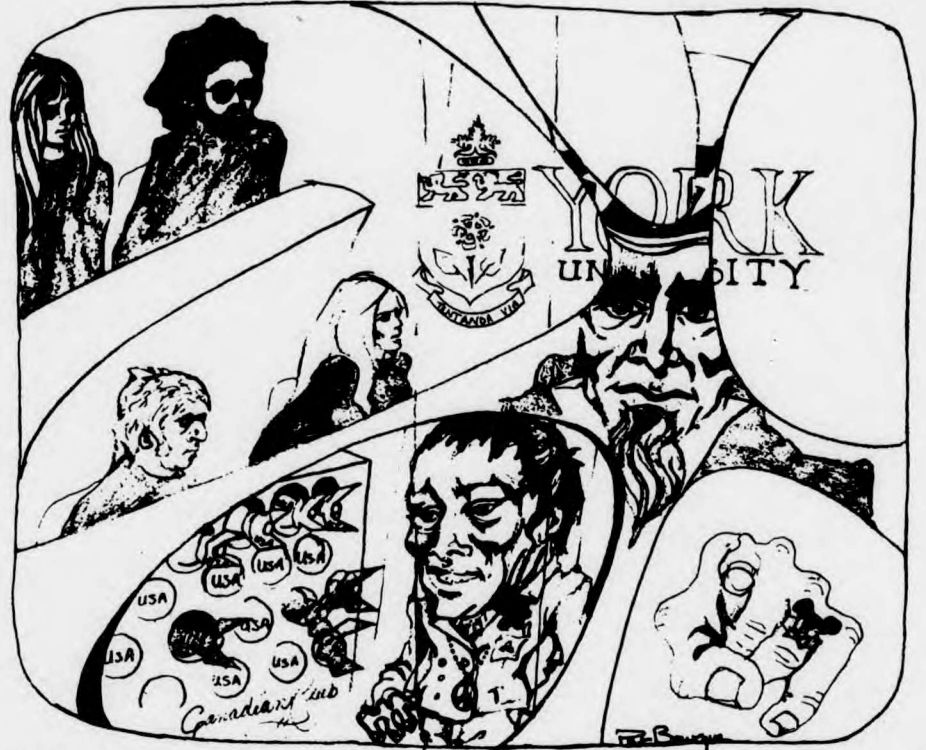
fessors as well as participate in curriculum committees. This final point emphasized the hiring criterion as a professor's "concern with the needs of the Canadian people, rather than strictly his nationality."

It was not until September 1970, however, that *Excalibur* staff began to focus its attention on the Americanization problem specific to York. In the first issue of that year they published a speech made by student Mike Blumenthal at spring convocation, that had been cut short by administration. In the speech Blumenthal accused many of York's directors with conflict of interest, declaring that while they sat on the Board of Governors, many of them were also involved with the boards of various American corporations.

At the same time Blumenthal provided revealing statistics from the past year on the Faculty of Arts. Out of 15 departments, only three had 50% Canadian faculty or better. Eight departments had more American professors than Canadian, while there were more British than Canadian.

One week later the university senate voted to withhold statistics on the citizenship and educational background of faculty and graduate students, information that, in the past, had been made public as a matter of course. This news ran concurrently with a two-page spread on "How the Multinational Corporation Hurts Canada," the first in a series of features on the implications of Americanization. This stunning 'coincidence' appropriately marked the beginning of some of *Excalibur's* most effective and powerful coverage in its 20-year history.

*Excalibur* became the community's mouthpiece through editorials, articles and letters. All angles of the issue were tackled and both students and faculty were provided with the space to voice opinions. In one issue alone three letters filled one and a half pages: *Excalibur* staff provided a picture and a blazing headline and turned the event into a feature. The first sentence referred to "... the unadulterated tripe which *Excalibur* served up ... relating to the



Americanization issue ..."

While *Excalibur's* editorials demanded action against the senate's decision, the paper avoided a witchhunt not only by opening its pages for the community's use but also by keeping the issue clear; "there is increasing evidence to show that the influx of American professors and content into York has diverted the university's energies from examining Canadian problems and hence finding solutions to these problems ... If the senate persists in ignoring these needs—the need to deal with Canadian content in classes and the need for Canadian professors to teach them—and if it continues to openly work against the interests of the Canadian people, then it may be forcing people at York into a position where the only alternative left is to shut this institution down."

The senate's reasoning that the privacy of individuals should be protected was quickly shot down as one *Excalibur* editorial pointed out that citizenship was a matter of legal status and public record, not a private matter. The community strongly backed this stance; the senate didn't stand a chance.

Within the first two weeks of October the Council of York Student Federation had called for and held a demonstration. *Excalibur*, meanwhile, had published its second feature on Americanization, two editorials and, as brandy for the flaming pudding, statistics disclosing the fact that over 60% of Atkinson College's new faculty appointments for the year were non-Canadian.

By October 15th York president David Slater was calling a special senate meeting to request the release of the controversial statistics. That same week *Excalibur* made sure the university community knew of the *Toronto Star's* editorial, which had insisted "on the public's right to know such facts" and suggested York was "trying to cover up the number of Americans recently hired to its teaching faculty." One week later the senate succumbed to these overwhelming demands.

The statistics were made public but this singular triumph was just the beginning of *Excalibur's* exposure of Americanization at York. In the midst of the senate furor Gwen Matheson, a part-time professor at Atkinson College, resigned in frustration from her post. Her repeated attempts to teach Canadian courses had consistently met with refusal by the college administration. In a full-page feature *Excalibur* published Matheson's letter of resignation, providing readers with a specific example of York administration's participation in the Americanization of the university.

Stories of frustration and anger experienced by students and faculty continued to fill the pages of *Excalibur* throughout the year. Professors thwarted in their attempts to teach Canadian courses, and students protesting the lack of Canadian content in their courses, were events that frequently found their way onto the pages of *Excalibur*.

At the same time the paper maintained interest in the issue of Americanization on a national level with several features. Included in these were "Specifics of US Domination," a digging into the past of Canada's political relationship with the US, and "An Academic Bay of Pigs," a full page attack on *The Canadian Review of American Studies*.

In February of 1971 *Excalibur's* centre-spread was given over to a report on *Encounter Canada*, a full day of seminars, discussions and presentations devoted to the question of Canada's identity. Speakers included Hugh MacLennan, Farley Mowat and Jack McClelland.



**THE 51st STATE:** To drive home the threat of Americanization of Canadian universities, Excal staffs raised the star-spangled banner in front of the Ross building.

*Excalibur* summed up the event by stating, "our challenge is to build a North American nation according to our own designs, not those imported from the neighbouring nation which has foregone its opportunities." But the article concluded with the question, "Where do we go from here?"

*Excalibur* seemed to answer its own question in its final Americanization editorial published that year. After yet another professor was refused permission to teach Canadian content at York *Excalibur's* editors tossed aside the waffle.

"Just how much do those 'struggle for Canada' and 'keep it Canadian' buttons some of us wear really mean to us? A Canadian professor has just put her career on the line. We at *Excalibur* plead with our fellow students—our fellow Canadians—to rally beside her. No Canadian should have to stand alone in this struggle. And if we don't help her, who the hell will? ... *Excalibur* is backing Roma all the way, but despite our apparent big mouth, we're only a handful of individuals; it's not enough, but if we do have to go it alone, we will. And if that means we get smashed right along-side her, then so be it. We couldn't go down in better company."

As a newspaper, *Excalibur's* past has the occasional faux pas but the coverage it provided on the issue of Americanization has nothing to be ashamed of. Forceful and consistent, *Excalibur* staff stimulated and maintained pressure on the university administration to the breaking point. By providing support and an opportunity for expression to the community, York University's Community Newspaper experienced one of the most exciting and powerful periods of its 20-year life.



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