

BYFIELD DREAMS

Who frittered away the once-mighty Alberta Report?

by Jeremy Lott

Report editor and publisher Link Byfield picked me up at the hotel and we stopped for breakfast at a local greasy spoon. It doesn't come through in his faux-caveman columns, but there's a certain charm about the guy. He smiles easily, with his eyes and whiskers, and he isn't exactly the moral fussy budget one might expect. As we talked about the future of the magazine over bacon and eggs, he solicited my ideas and tossed in a few of his own. If readers would let him get away with it, for instance, Byfield would title one department of the magazine "Oh, fer fuck's sake."

This was back in October of 2002. I was interested in the magazine, and Link was interested in my ideas about its future, because I had just been hired and shipped in as the new production manager. For the next six weeks, I would learn the job and then change it, make it portable, take it with me to my hometown of Lynden, Washington, and manage the magazine from there. With more than three dozen mostly conservative and libertarian magazines on my résumé, I knew why Link had noticed me. But I'm still baffled why he hired me—probably because I was mean, I reckon; because I don't mind savaging people in print.

When we entered the office in west Edmonton, Link introduced me to his assistant Victor Olivier, an amiable Franco-Manitoban, as well as the person I'd be temporarily replacing, Carla

Smithson. We said a few final words in Link's office—a "Please Smoke" sign was taped to one wall in defiance of the city's asinine non-smoking bylaws—and then I was released to settle into what people still nostalgically called "the newsroom."

Staffers drifted in at the pace of those accustomed to setting their own

I quickly saw that the people wielding the sharp sticks were not left-wingers with a grudge but ex-employees with mostly legitimate grievances.

hours. I met Kevin Steel (web editor, art director), Dave Stevens (layout), Colby Cosh (columnist, senior editor), Link's brother Mike Byfield (senior editor, professional nepotist) and others. Over the next few weeks, I would spend many late nights learning the job, trying to whip a disorganized team of editors and writers into line. Often, at middays near the end of a production cycle, the whole team would decamp to the nearby West Edmonton Mall to blow off steam and talk about

the glory days of the magazine. In short, it was six weeks of nicotine, caffeine, booze, fast food, gossip and massive sleep deprivation. My idea of a good time.

WHEN THE REPORT FOLDED in June 2003, the touching obits poured in immediately. Left and right, east and west, figures in Canadian media proved reluctant to trash a magazine that, during its 30-year run, had never flinched from calling down fire from heaven upon anyone who fell outside a narrow list of solid citizens. The provincial media said nice things about the irascible founder, Link's and Mike's father Ted Byfield, swallowing his pious explanation for the publication's failure with little challenge. "Nothing's permanent on this side of paradise," Ted told the *Calgary Herald*. In the *National Post*, he wrote that Christianity in Canada had lost a potent voice.

Even scandal-mongering *Frank* magazine was suspiciously silent. Few media outlets in Canada are free of staffers who started at *The Report* in one of its many shape-shifting incarnations and this likely played a role in the kid-gloves treatment. If a newspaper condemned the magazine in bracing terms, then what would the editor say to so-and-so who started there? "Yeah, but you're okay"?

By the time of its demise, I had drifted out of *The Report's* atmosphere

but hadn't entirely escaped its orbit. I relinquished my duties as production manager at the end of 2002 and then held on until March 2003, staying in close touch with friends there after I quit. Because of this, I had a sort of insider-outsider status. I broke the story of the magazine's suspension of publication before the *Edmonton Journal*, and my website, jeremiads.blogspot.com, over the next month became, in *Reason* associate editor Matt Welch's words, "Ground Zero for the impressively bitter carcass-poking."

The thing was, I didn't have to poke all that hard. I quickly saw that the people wielding the sharp sticks were not left-wingers with a grudge but ex-employees with mostly legitimate grievances. Former *Report* reporter Marnie Ko published a long piece on her own website (www.marnieko.com) looking at her tenure at the magazine. She wrote of one editor who told her she should celebrate a particularly good cover story by making nice with her estranged husband. The same editor also told Ko, a work-at-home mom, that if she continued to write for the magazine, she would be neglecting her children. So he forced her out.

Ko wasn't the only person to fall during Mike Byfield's brief and undistinguished tenure. Kevin Michael

Grace, already demoted to a production job from national reporter/senior editor, was put back on the reporting beat and then fired. Universally beloved Victor Olivier was forced into early retirement, generating more resentment than management knew what to do with. When Link announced, after initially denying it, that the magazine would cease publication, many conservative Canadians—Albertans and otherwise—no doubt agreed with the assessment of many former loyal employees. That is, a trust had been betrayed.

A LOOK AT THE MAGAZINE'S shrouded origins reveals the nature of this trust. Although *Alberta Report* is the name most commonly associated with the magazine, that wasn't the title on its birth certificate. That would be *Saint John's Edmonton Report*, a weekly regional newsmagazine launched in 1973, formatted like *Time*. Saint John's was and is a hard-knocks boys school founded by a conservative Anglican lay order called the Companions of the Cross in 1962.

The Companions of the Cross have gotten a lot of bad press and been compared, more than once, to a cult. That's an exaggeration but it contains a glint of truth. It began as a Christian colony that offered teachers and, later,

The Life and Death of Alberta Report

1945

Toronto-born 17-year-old Ted Byfield moves to Washington, DC with his parents and lands a job as a copy boy at the *Washington Post* in an era when every desk drawer hides a bottle of booze and every reporter smokes in the newsroom.

1948

Byfield moves back to Canada and reports for the *Ottawa Journal* and *Timmins Daily Press* before moving on to the *Winnipeg Free Press* in 1952. (He married Virginia, another reporter, in 1949; the couple would eventually have six children.)

1962

Byfield trades reporting for a job teaching history at the St. John's boys school, which he had helped create with fellow parishioners of Saint John's Cathedral in Winnipeg.

1968

Byfield moves to Edmonton to open a second Saint John's school.

1973

Byfield launches the *Saint John's Edmonton Report*, which *Maclean's* magazine looks back upon as "a curious mix of the pious and the profane. The magazine rarely missed an opportunity to rail against homosexuals, abortionists, human rights commissions and the public education system. But it also displayed an unholy fascination with prostitution and particularly sordid murder cases."

1979

Saint John's Edmonton Report merges with the sister publication based in Calgary to become *Alberta Report*. "We were somewhat conservative in 1973," Byfield told the *Calgary Herald* last year, "but society changed and we refused to change."

1980

"If adultery or homosexuality is wrong in the sight of God, then all the task forces in Christendom aren't going to

continued on page 57



reporters room, board and a dollar a day. Moreover, reporters lived in a communal apartment block and were expected to attend both morning and evening chapel services. Despite that regimen, the Companions of the Cross did not avoid scandal. One member was prosecuted for bigamy, and included among necessities was the purchase (and consumption) of copious amounts of alcohol. In the newsroom, I'd often hear repeated a phrase Ted Byfield made famous: "Whisky—it's not just for breakfast."

Many people have criticized Saint John's for being too rigid and unyielding. It's a criticism that the founders would have turned on its head. "Of course the school was tough," one can hear them say. "Its job was to take problem case boys and break them, re-educate them through a combination of rigorous academic requirements and strenuous physical activity." Originally, there were three Saint John's, now reduced to one, just west of Edmonton in Stony Plain. The Manitoba branch petered out and the Ontario branch eventually folded in the wake of the Lake Timiskaming canoeing tragedy of 1978, which left 12 boys and one adult leader dead of hypothermia.

It's odd to think that Saint John's and *The Report* shared a common

paternity but it's true. In fact, they essentially grew out of the same impulse: to try to remake society by taking back institutions (such as the academy and the press) that had supposedly been ceded to the godless secularists with daffy theories about how the world works. Of course, both insti-

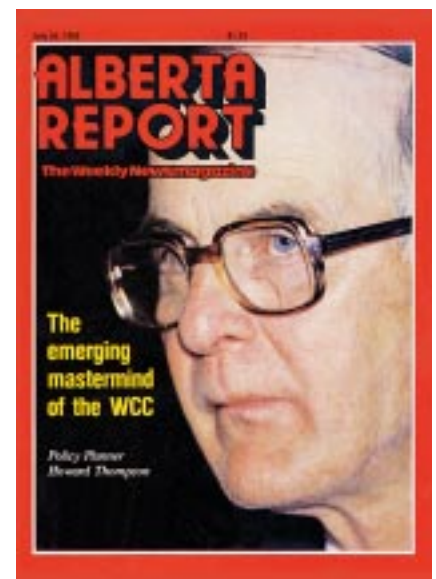
Although *Alberta Report* observed the trappings of news journalism, the writers made no bones about the fact that they would be spinning as they saw fit.

tutions became more secular over time, but *The Report* seemed to go there almost from day one. The dollar-a-day model completely broke down and the magazine was forced to shell out for real reporters. Established as a way to raise money for the school in 1973, it failed miserably. By '78, it was in such a cash crisis that the school threatened to shut it down before it

shut down the school.

Through massive fundraising on his part, Ted Byfield was able to save the magazine and put it on less shaky financial footing under the title *Alberta Report* in 1979. More important, it was pulled out of the school's orbit and given the freedom to develop as its own cause. The Byfields' sense of stubborn determination helped to weather quite a few crises, including the death of a publisher and backer, and the potentially debilitating postal strike of July 1981.

When Canada Post workers struck, Ted refused to accept that the magazine wouldn't be delivered. His solution was to set up a province-wide "postal emergency service" to get it to subscribers, along with anything else that people wanted to ship. They printed non-postage stamps and shipped letters and parcels all over Alberta. In the pattern of every stamp was a series of microscopic middle fingers, directed, *Report* staff assured when asked, right at the federal government. This, of course, would not be the last time *The Report* gave the government the finger. When Trudeau rammed through the National Energy Policy, the magazine was the loudest, angriest voice out there, damning Ottawa for the naked power grab and the provincial government for timidity flirting with western separatism.



Albertans ate it up. For a time, the *Report* was arguably the most widely read magazine in the province. If Ted had borrowed the communal ethos of the 1960s, he also took a page from philosophers Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, declaring objectivity bunk. It was a myth, he felt, created and perpetuated by an elite to impose their version of events on viewers and readers. Although *Alberta Report* observed the trappings of news journalism, its writers made no bones about the fact that they would be spinning as they saw fit. As Ronald Reagan once said, “These facts contradict what I’m trying to say, so get me new facts.”

HEAP AS MUCH SCORN as you want on this model of journalism, but there’s something liberating about embracing the inner partisan. Tens of thousands of subscribers (and hundreds of thousands of readers) found the *Alberta Report* of the ’80s to be a riveting read. Under the editorship of Ken Whyte, who would later edit the *National Post*, they covered provincial and national politics with more enthusiasm than anyone else could muster. (Other notable neo-conservative alumni include the *Edmonton Journal*’s Lorne Gunter and John Robson of the *Ottawa Citizen*.) What’s more, there was a sense of fun that comes through

when one reads these old issues. In a country that prizes consensus, they were pranksters, merry hecklers, the nail that wears hammers out, refusing to yield.

All good things, they say, come to a bad end. But it’s hard to put a finger on exactly where and when the *Report* went wrong. Into the ’90s, it branched out into three editions, the *B.C.*, *Alberta* and *Western Reports*, with a combined circulation (according to the *Report*’s own figures) of well over 50,000 and roughly 215,000 readers. But under the leadership of Link Byfield, the magazines also became more strident and more political, and the readership continued to age. All editions of the magazine clearly sided with the Reform and then the Alliance parties to the exclusion of other political movements, which put many people off.

Worse, the management developed a tin ear for the concerns of readers. The magazine hammered on abortion and gay issues with a zeal and a lack of humour that are the mark of true obsessives. One infamous cover asked “Can Gays be Cured?” Asked about the *National Post* by CBC, Link compared it to British lad magazines. He blamed the gradual drying up of *Report*’s national advertising not on a poor sales department but on gays and

make it right,” Byfield writes in a column, republished in the 1998 collection *The Book of Ted: Epistles from an Unrepentant Redneck*. “If God is timeless and changeless, then human conduct considered wrong in the eighth century is just as wrong in the twentieth.”

1986

Byfield recruits four crews of *Alberta Report* staff for a voyage from B.C. to Europe on his 42-foot sailboat, *The Credimus* (the name means “we believe” in Latin). After making it through the Panama Canal, *The Credimus* is thrashed by an Atlantic Ocean storm and docks in the Grand Cayman port of Georgetown for repairs. The voyage is never completed.

1987

Byfield delivers the keynote address at the Reform Party’s founding convention. “They were instrumental in the Reform Party getting going,” former Reform leader Preston Manning said to the *Herald* about the Byfield family last year.

1990

John Scrymgeour and Donald Graves, two veteran players in the Calgary oil-patch, each purchase a third of *Alberta Report*; the Byfield family retains the final third. “We don’t see it as a big money-maker,” Graves tells the *Herald*. “The main idea is to keep things operating and ownership in the West.”

1993

Ted’s son Link assumes control over the magazine’s management as his father starts focusing on a series of books on the history of Christianity. The January 18 issue features a six-page spread—with a bestiality photo as its main art—that Alberta lesbians and gays argue promotes hatred of homosexuals. “It is grossly distorted, unfactual and borders on hate mongering, at the very least.... It’s somewhat similar to saying that Jews are Christ killers,” George Davison of the Edmonton-based Gay and Lesbian Awareness group tells the *Edmonton Journal*. “We’re not homophobic,” publisher Link Byfield responds. “We

continued on page 59



feminists, who had periodically encouraged boycotts of advertisers.

A misfired attempt at an initial public offering in 1999 forced the three magazines to contract into one “national” edition late in the year, with a fortnightly rather than a weekly schedule. Most of the reporters were laid off and the editors became writers with an absurd amount of copy due each issue. (The staff was cut down from more than 100 to 33.) Most cultural coverage was scrapped as unnecessary. The range of what was available for stories—cover and otherwise—was reduced considerably as Mike Byfield began playing an increasing role in the magazine. He would regularly shoot down the ideas of others and substitute his own bizarre notions of sex, economic development and race. Mike seemed to love talking about the Chinese affinity for education, I recall, and questioning why Jews are always so successful.

The editorial standards of the magazine were noticeably dumbed down: provincial coverage mostly evaporated; writers wrote “to page” so all but the most minimal editing ceased; two and even three reporters would quote from the same source in the same issue. And the magazine—no surprise here—started to hemorrhage subscribers. Between 1999 and the fall of 2002, it shed well

over 10,000 paid subscriptions, and, given the high median age of the readers, would likely shrink further unless something changed. When I arrived in October 2002, I also learned that the magazine was facing a cash crunch and that the previous bailers-out refused to do so again.

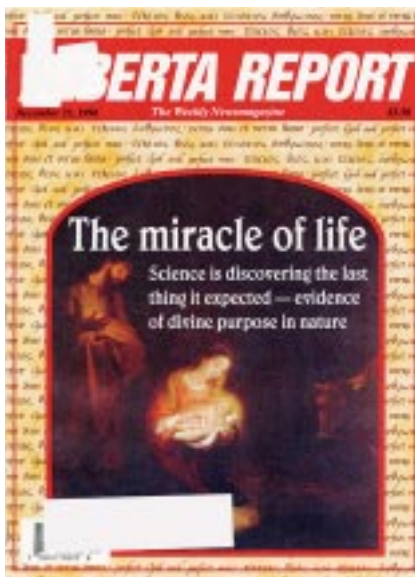
The bottom line was that the magazine had been railing against taxation, abortion, homosexuality and other evils for the past 30 years and hadn’t made a discernible impression in the broader Canadian culture.

THE REPORT’S DEATH didn’t come as a shock to most insiders, but it did manage to catch a few of them flat-footed. The magazine had survived for so long

against such great odds that they thought it must be receiving protection from on high. In fact, only with the Byfields’ horrible business acumen could the fortnightly manage to get itself into such trouble. Even at its lowest point, it had about 40,000 subscribers paying \$93 plus GST to receive 24 issues a year—or about \$4 an issue. When I tell people in the magazine business about these numbers, their response is Pavlovian.

The planned rescue vehicle this time was a non-profit exclusively set up to save the magazine called the Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy (my preferred title, the Free Canada Foundation, was nixed on the grounds that it was “too libertarian”). Subscribers donated more than \$500,000 to keep the enterprise afloat, but the actions of the Byfields seemed almost calculated to make sure that it wouldn’t survive. Mike was placed in charge. The CCFD piously rejected a \$360,000 federal magazine subsidy. They fired the telemarketers, turned the magazine (now the *Citizens Centre Report*) into a monthly and halved the subscription price, effectively more than halving the income of the magazine. They cut down on printing costs but not much else.

Oh, and they did all of this before a substantial “sales force” was even



trained to sell memberships in the organization. Most of the ex-employees I interviewed weren't willing to write off the possibility of gross stupidity, but they tended to believe something more was at play here, and I leaned toward the "she was pushed" choice myself. Mike Byfield had said that he personally would like to kill the magazine and replace it with an eight- or 12-page newsletter. When the name of the magazine was changed, we were told that we would be shifting more toward advocacy journalism, though there was endless argument about what exactly that meant. The bottom line, we were told, was that the magazine had been railing against taxation, abortion, homosexuality and other evils for the past 30 years and hadn't made a discernible impression in the broader Canadian culture. So we would have to find another way to re-educate them.

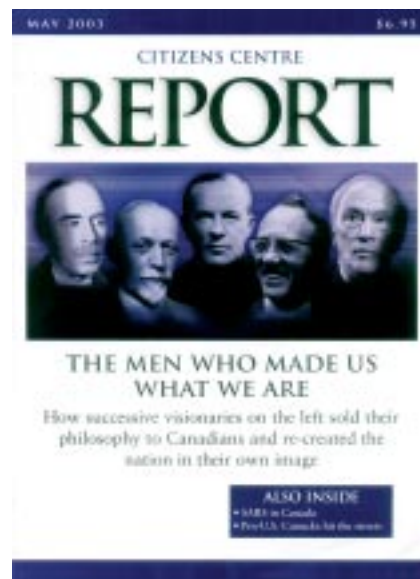
Whatever it was called, whatever you say about it, *Alberta Report* did serve as a clearinghouse for the socially conservative right-wingers of the province. It reflected their ideas, however politically incorrect or prejudiced, and often took them a couple of steps further. Given the loudness of the magazine's rallying cry, it managed to influence perceptions of Alberta in the rest of Canada—like

the one loudmouth who phones radio call-in shows while the silent majority remains quiet.

The magazine may have been Ted Byfield's brainchild, but over the decades it became a quasi-public trust, albeit a trust run like a dysfunctional family business. Time and again, readers bailed the clueless management out: with advice, with donations, with a fanatical loyalty when it came to subscribing to a magazine that really was not what it had once been. I think Ted recognized this but his children seemed unable to grasp the idea. Mike and Link in particular treated the magazine like a chore, like something that was dragging them down. When they did get involved, it was largely to pursue their own narrow agendas.

I don't think that the death of Canada's oldest conservative magazine is a refutation of social conservatism; it seems to me a stretch to say that the fall of one magazine in one place at one time could invalidate these arguments. But now that it's dead and the plaudits have faded, *Alberta Report* will likely go down as a bizarre footnote in the province's media history, not the definitive chapter the Byfields hoped to write. 📖

Jeremy Lott is assistant managing editor of *The American Spectator*.



just don't happen to take the story in the direction that they happen to like.... In any socially conservative analysis of this whole question, all forms of sexual perversion have one thing in common—namely that they are perverted—from homosexuality right on through."

1999

An Alberta Court of Queen's Bench judge in Calgary orders *Alberta Report* to stop printing stories about late-term abortions at a Calgary hospital, because the stories are endangering the lives of hospital staff. "I think they're frightened of publicity," Link Byfield says to the *National Post* about the Calgary Regional Health Authority, "because some attorney general somewhere is going to feel obliged to enforce the Criminal Code."

2001

The November 19 cover links terrorism and immigration, depicting a dark-skinned man wearing a bomb vest.

2002

The July 27 cover vows that Westerners won't be intimidated by "Indian militants and eco-radicals."

2003

Report publishes its final issue. "The country's in a state of tremendous uncertainty; all our moral underpinnings have been undone," Ted Byfield tells the *Herald*. "The one-quarter of Canadians who are truly religious are under attack from the government, schools, courts and media. With the *Report* gone, no one will defend them." Preston Manning eulogizes that "the Byfields have made a tremendous contribution and I suspect this isn't the last of them."

2004

Ezra Levant, a former *Report* reporter and current *Sun* columnist, announces the birth of the *Western Standard* as "a new company, but we will appeal to Westerners who read the old *Alberta Report* for its pro-Western viewpoint. Ted Byfield, the founder of the *Alberta Report* family of magazines, will be a regular columnist with the *Western Standard*."