

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF LA ROTONDE (1932-2012)**

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The 80th anniversary of *La Rotonde* is an important date for both the University of Ottawa's student newspapers and French-speaking Canada. Indeed, *La Rotonde* has made its name as the oldest French-language student paper outside Quebec. It holds a special place in campus student life. This anniversary is an opportunity to take a brief look at its history.

The first issue of *La Rotonde* was published November 21, 1932 by the Société des débats français. It was the first University of Ottawa student paper written entirely in French — a previous paper, the *V.A.R.*, published from 1926 to 1928, was bilingual. The paper, published twice a month, was four pages long, and a one year subscription cost 50 cents. In 1936, the paper became a monthly. Starting in the 1950s, it was again published twice a month, and, starting in 1964, weekly during the school year.

In its early years, *La Rotonde* focused on the activities of the French debating club and other student associations, as well as on events affecting the University, its administration and its professors. The paper was also interested in issues concerning Catholic youth and vigorously condemned communism and atheism. In fact, *La Rotonde* was highly respectful of the established order.

### **Student demands**

In 1943, *La Rotonde* became the voice of the University's French-language student association. From 1947, it was under the direction of the Students' Federation. However, the central administration, led by the Oblate Fathers, continued to keep an eye on its activities. In the paper's initial decades, interference by the University administration did not create problems. However, by the mid-1950s, society had begun to change and students were demanding more autonomy. Indeed, the 1956 Canadian University Press conference named the paper the most censored in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Following this, *La Rotonde's* editor began demanding freedom of the press.<sup>2</sup>

These demands led to increasing friction between University and the paper's editors. *La Rotonde* was prevented from publishing several times. Tensions peaked in October 1958, when three members of the paper's editorial team were dismissed for publishing a report that strongly displeased the administration. The paper stopped publishing. This spectacular dismissal created anger in student circles, where it was considered a violation of freedom of the press.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *La Rotonde*, January 13, 1956, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> ii. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Devoir*, October 27, 1958, p.iii

The Students' Federation asked the University administration to reverse its decision. However, the administration rejected this request, which led to the resignation of the federation's president, Marcel Prud'homme. Ultimately, the conflict confirmed beyond any doubt the central administration's control over the student papers. *La Rotonde* resumed publication, with a new editorial board, January 30, 1959. The crisis was over.

An interesting fact: relations between the Oblate administration and the editors of the English-language newspaper, *The Fulcrum*, were considerably more harmonious. It appears that anglophone students were much more respectful of authority and of the University administration's decisions.

### **1965 restructuring**

After the 1965 University restructuring, the student body had full control over its newspapers. However, by the end of the 1960s, the papers were no longer managing to attract student interest. In February 1969, the Students' Union eliminated *La Rotonde* and *The Fulcrum* and replaced them with a bilingual publication, *Id*. The monthly was not as successful as hoped for and quickly disappeared. In September 1970, after an absence of several months, *La Rotonde* returned.

*La Rotonde's* content has changed considerably since 1965. Of course, the paper continues to look closely at the Student Federation, and more recently, at the Graduate Students' Association (GSAED). But it pays less attention to the University administration and faculty. *La Rotonde* now deals with all sorts of topics, such as Quebec nationalism, the status of women, homosexuality, the environment, tuition fees and AIDS. Cultural activities on campus and in the National Capital Region, as well as the exploits of University sports teams, also have greater prominence.

As well, there have been many articles on bilingualism and Franco-Ontarian rights. Moreover, the paper feels free to strongly criticize not only the decisions and direction of the University administration, but also those of the student associations. In fact, *La Rotonde* enjoys total independence, even if part of its funding comes from the SFUO and the GSAED.

To sum up, for nearly a century, *La Rotonde*, now with a circulation of 2,000, has kept the student body and the University community informed. What's more, the paper makes a real contribution to raising the profile of French at the University of Ottawa.

In closing, we wish to thank all those who have volunteered over the years to help this unique newspaper grow, not only at the University of Ottawa but in French-speaking Ontario. It's thanks to your outstanding commitment that *La Rotonde* has been on campus for so long. Long live *La Rotonde*. May you have a smooth ride to your centennial.