



Mad Chemist

Dave McCaskill, a graduate student from Calgary, Canada, examines readouts to determine the makeup of various chemical compounds. McCaskill is searching for an enzyme synthesis which is used in pro-

duction of anti-leukemia drugs. Texas A&M University is one of only five institutions worldwide which are involved in this type of research.

Photo by DAVID MORROW

Two recent books imply King Arthur actually existed

Associated Press

LONDON — Two recent books suggest that the legendary King Arthur and his wizard Merlin actually existed, though much earlier and in far different form than in medieval romances about Camelot and the Round Table.

"The Discovery of King Arthur," by Geoffrey Ashe, contends Arthur was in reality a king called Riothamus, who is known to have ruled the British and campaigned on the European continent in the middle of the fifth century A.D., some 50 years after the Romans left the British Isles.

"The Quest for Merlin," by Nikolai Tolstoy, argues that Merlin was a pagan bard and shaman of the latter sixth century who mixed prophecy with his poetry and eventually went mad. It's doubtful he ever knew Riothamus.

The evidence of Arthur's existence was so compelling to Debrett's Peerage, the handbook of British nobility, that it has accorded him formal recognition as a sovereign of Britain. It also has published Ashe's work in Britain.

Neither book claims to have uncovered any new documentation — rather, they offer a new reading of what's already available that supports the idea of real men behind the myths.

Both myths have their roots in the work of a giant of 12th-century English letters, a teacher and cleric named Geoffrey of Monmouth.

In Geoffrey's "History of the Kings of Britain," Arthur was a youthful Celtic ruler leading the post-Roman Britons against Saxon barbarians who invaded from Europe. He rolled the Saxons back and restored Britain to peace, stable government and Christian worship.

Later, according to Geoffrey, Arthur conquered what are now Iceland, Norway and Denmark and went on to fight in Gaul — now France — defeating the remnants of the Roman Empire there.

He was at the Alps preparing to march toward Rome when he heard

his nephew Modred, ruling in Britain, had turned traitor and slept with his queen, Guinevere. Arthur returned, killed Modred and routed his legions but was mortally wounded himself.

Over the centuries, writers from Sir Thomas Malory ("Le Mort d'Arthur") to Alfred Lord Tennyson ("Idylls of the King") have embellished the story, transforming it into an epic romance, shining with chivalry and crusades.

Most historians have regarded Geoffrey of Monmouth as merely the first of the fiction writers, since much of what he wrote is fantasy or provably false. "Practically everything about King Arthur is legend," acknowledges Ashe, a Cambridge-educated writer, lecturer and Arthuriana buff. "All I'm suggesting is that I have succeeded in laying my finger on a real man at the origin of the story."

Again it is Geoffrey of Monmouth who provides the "official" history. In his "Kings," Merlin foretells Arthur's birth.

In "Vita Merlini" (Life of Merlin), an epic poem, Geoffrey elaborates on the story, describing Merlin as a prophet active in southwest Wales about a century after Arthur. He helps one Celtic king against another in battle, retires to the woods in grief when three of his brothers are killed, but goes on prophesying, teetering always on the brink of insanity.

How could Merlin consort with kings more than a century apart? "All Geoffrey could do was explain away the inconsistency ... by attributing supernatural longevity to the prophet," Tolstoy says.

Tolstoy's approach was to dismiss the references in "Kings" as fictional but treat "Vita Merlini" seriously.

He reports finding historical evidence of the Merlin story in a series of Welsh poems dating back to the sixth century — the texts refer to him as Myrddin.

But the arguments that both Arthur and Merlin really lived have been greeted with a healthy dollop of skepticism by experts in the field.

La Familia Club reaches out to lonely, needy

Associated Press

McALLEN — While most people are sleeping late on Sunday or still eating breakfast and reading the newspaper, a little known group called "La Familia Club" is bringing joy to lonely residents of the Rio Grande Valley.

The musical group, composed mostly of young people and friends

of, as well as members of the Eloy Aguilar family, has been playing for nursing homes, hospitals, Amigos del Valle and other organizations for the past two and a half years.

"When we first get to the nursing homes, the residents are for the most part sad," Aguilar said. "But after we start playing, they get a glitter in their eye; they start clapping their

hands and stomping their feet to the beat. That really makes it all worthwhile.

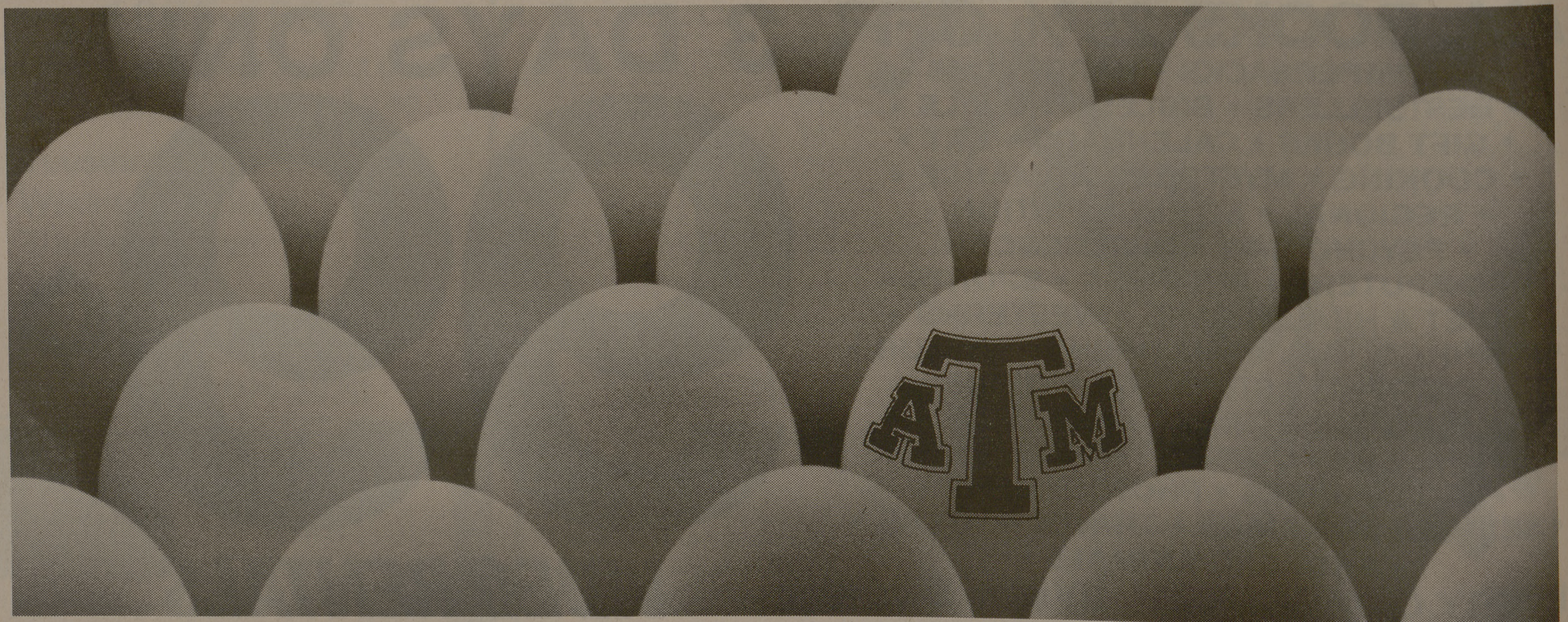
None of the musical group has had any formal training.

When asked what prompted them to help the elderly, to cheer them up, Aguilar responded, "There are

older people here, and in all Valley nursing homes, who never get a visit, not from relatives and not from anybody."

La Familia Club also helps any person in need. They've painted houses, done home repairs and even provided things like fans and stoves for those who need them.

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