



Recent Publications and Documents

FRANK UNDERHILL: INTELLECTUAL PROVOCATEUR by R. Douglas Francis, University of Toronto Press, 1986, 219 p.

Frank Underhill would have liked the sub-title. Intellectual provocateur – those two words capture the essence and the limitations of this northern Socrates who spent some fifty years trying to “stir the flaccid mind of Canada” with his teaching and writing.

Oxford scholar, Fabian socialist, historian, political scientist, drafter of the CCF's Regina Manifesto, nationalist, liberal, curator of Laurier House, whatever his station in life Underhill felt that the only way to make himself useful was to be constantly critical.

Professor Francis of Calgary University has chosen a worthy subject for his biography but the question is whether this book tells us anything about Underhill that is not readily available in his classic *In Search of Canadian Liberalism*, in the book of essays in honour of Underhill by Norman Penlington or in various other

speeches and articles by or about Underhill. The answer is yes but not a great deal.

We do catch a glimpse of someone whose feelings of insecurity and inadequacy at Oxford perhaps contributed more than he would admit to subsequent views toward this country's relations with the British. We detect strains of self righteousness as Underhill dabbled in real estate during his years at the University of Saskatchewan while, at the same time, castigating the capitalist mentality of western Canadians.

The chapter on his near firing by the University of Toronto gives splendid insight into how that institution and some of its leading scholars reacted when a member of the legislature called Underhill “one of the rats trying to scuttle the ship of state” for daring to question Canadian aid to the mother country during the 1930s.

Underhill produced no definitive study of any important theme in Canadian history. He was never completely accepted by any political party because he found it so delightful to poke holes in all their arguments. Francis does cover, in workmanlike if rather colourless style, many of the causes for which Underhill fought – to get more Canadian and American history on the curriculum, to demonstrate the true nature of Confederation as a business

proposition which favoured certain interests, to convince socialist politicians to be more pragmatic and less dogmatic, and to uphold individual freedom as the hallmark of liberal democracy.

Both the introduction and conclusion to this revised doctoral thesis argue convincingly, if somewhat repetitively, that Underhill penetrated Canadian politics to its very depths. The reactions he provoked were to be expected by anyone telling the Emperor he has no clothes.

The book is less enjoyable than a few hours spent studying Underhill himself. However, if it stimulates people to read or reread Underhill it will have served a valuable purpose. Whereas Underhill tended to leave his students sadder but wiser, this book makes us wonder whether the present generation of political commentators – infatuated by single issue politics, personalities, collective rights and public opinion polls – is capable of producing intellectual successors to Underhill. If not, our political life will be poorer and more confused than it already is.

Gary Levy