

Frank Underhill: The Historian as Essayist

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FEW PEOPLE TODAY under the age of fifty are likely to have heard of Frank Underhill, unless they have studied Canadian history or politics. The same goes for the political party with which he was long associated, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (Farmer, Labour, Socialist), and its founding platform document, the Regina Manifesto, which he drafted in 1933. Members of the New Democratic Party, which grew out of the CCF in its last days in 1961, might in this case be among the exceptions. When I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto in the late 1960s, where Underhill had made his name as a thinker and historian, his reputation had already begun to fade in the years since his departure in 1955.

It didn't help that, in the latter decades of his life (he died in 1971 at the age of 81), he abandoned his socialist principles, or so it seemed, and embraced the Liberalism of William Lyon MacKenzie King and Lester Pearson, and that he stood firmly on the side of the United States during the Cold War. This was not a posture that won much sympathy in the late sixties, especially among those of my generation, and since then we have entered an entirely new era. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

Nevertheless, Underhill was unquestionably the leading public intellectual of English-speaking Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing almost to the time of his death, he wrote hundreds of essays and reviews, primarily in the *Canadian Forum*, of which he was editor briefly in the 1930s, but also in the *New Statesman*, the *Nation*, and *Saturday Night*, in the university quarterlies, in the daily press, and in other journals of opinion — journals, in other words, very like this one, but in the medium of print. He reviewed books on the CBC and, in 1963, delivered the Massey Lectures, later published as *The Image of Confederation*.

All this was in addition to the work he published in academic journals like the *Canadian Historical Review*, in essay collections, and as introductions and forewords to reprints, anthologies, and other books. A constant of his thought and writing — perhaps their single most consistent theme — was his contention that Canadian public life had been diminished and constrained by the absence of an indigenous intellectual tradition. No one did more to remedy the deficiency. If writers from Hilda Neatby and George Grant to Mark Kingwell and Naomi Klein have since found a wide audience it is at least partly because Underhill paved the way.

The chief medium of his intellectual engagement was the essay, a form that in Underhill's time had lost some of the dynamism and authority it had achieved in its nineteenth-century heyday. It experienced something of a revival in the late twentieth century and, after a long hiatus, has recently attracted the attention of literary critics. Books have appeared studying the essay, as have essays — “essays on the essay,” to quote the title of one collection — while in 1997 Fitzroy Dearborn, the British publisher of dictionaries and encyclopedias of just about everything under the sun, brought out an *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, a title perhaps verging on the oxymoron. Everyone interested in how writing works should be pleased by this. It was somewhat odd that a genre so widely used in so many different forums and over so long a period — the sixteenth-century French humanist Michel de Montaigne was its inventor — should have been so little studied during the era of the New Criticism in literary studies.

Underhill's attraction to the essay was rooted in his pre-World War I origins, which also shaped much of his thought. Born in 1889, he grew up in Stouffville, north of Toronto, and attended University College in the University of Toronto from 1907 to 1911 and Balliol College, Oxford, from 1911 to 1914. He was in his first academic post, at the University of Saskatchewan, as the war began and left it a year later to enlist for service overseas. He was then twenty-five years old, fundamental elements of his habits and outlook having been formed in the refined milieu of middle-class Edwardian Ontario and England. Much later, he reminisced, with characteristic gentle irony, that “he or she who was not born soon enough to grow up in that delectable quarter century before 1914 can never know what the sweetness of life is.”

It is hard not to think that beneath the irony lay an experience of the twentieth century — of warfare, depression, and social upheaval; of fascism, communism, and the cult of the masses — as a kind of Fall. “Most history,” the American critic George Steiner has written, “seems to carry on its back vestiges of paradise,” and this would seem to have been true for Underhill.

In that sweet Edwardian Indian summer, political disputation, social commentary, and even history itself were the province of gentlemen scholars, sages, and moralists, and one of their chief instruments of discourse was the essay, whose diffusion had been made possible by the rise and proliferation of periodical journals and magazines. Underhill read widely, not to say voraciously, in the

literature and commentary of the day. As a high school student, he was much taken with Leslie Stephen, now better known as the father of Virginia Woolf than as one of the pre-eminent essayists and 'men-of-letters' of late Victorian England. At university, his studies — honours classics, English and history at Toronto, 'Greats' and modern history at Oxford — provided him as fine a liberal arts education as he might have received anywhere in the English-speaking world, but it was an education as a generalist and quite unlike the specialized professional training in historical research that was then taking over at Princeton and Harvard, and was established at Berlin and the Sorbonne. It was also an education that stimulated his interest in political ideas and cultivated his prose style. Douglas Francis, Underhill's biographer, tells us that one of his Oxford tutors admired his weekly papers for their "witty prose and epigrammatic remarks."

Wit and a well-turned phrase were to become the hallmarks of an Underhill essay. They were especially evident in the short pieces he wrote for *Canadian Forum* in a column entitled "O Canada," which ran from 1929 to 1932. "All these European troubles," he wrote in July 1929, referring particularly to Canadian involvement in the League of Nations and what it implied for the nation's foreign commitments, "until we have more investments there, are not worth the bones of a Toronto grenadier." This was typical Underhill: provocative, a bit flip, and killing two birds with one stone. There was nothing idealistic, he was saying, about Canada's membership in the League, since Canadian politicians would never act unless there were domestic political advantages to be had, and foreign relations, in any case, were driven by business interests. Undercutting the idea of any involvement at all was the sentence's buried lead, "the bones of a Toronto grenadier," evoking the lives of young men wasted in the last European war only a dozen years earlier.

The column then deftly segued into another favorite subject, the baffling (to him) resistance of Canadians to acknowledging their close kinship with Americans: "On the subject of Americanism the ordinary Canadian behaves like a fundamentalist discussing modernism." Underhill's isolationism and his North Americanism (and their corollary, anti-British imperialism) were controversial positions, and the sharpness with which he laid them out infuriated his enemies and delighted his friends, though they occasionally aroused concern that he needlessly exposed himself (and his friends) to criticism.

His longer, more formal pieces had the same light touch. In 1927, he made his first serious foray into Canadian political history with a paper for the Canadian Historical Association on the radicalism of the Toronto *Globe* in the decade before Confederation. He lost no time in establishing his iconoclastic purpose. Historians, he began, paid too much attention to the machinations of politicians and not enough to ideas and 'atmosphere.' The result was a widespread perception that "our Canadian History is as dull as ditchwater and our politics is full of it,"

a dictum that he came frequently to quote and that he later claimed to have first heard as an undergraduate from Maurice Hutton, one of his classics professors. Even then, he told his readers, he had felt a thrill of appreciation.

He proceeded to argue that the *Globe* (and its editor, George Brown) had been the voice, not primarily of anti-Catholic bigotry, as was then widely believed, but of Upper Canadian agrarian democracy. Editorials criticized big business, in the form of the Grand Trunk Railway, extolled the virtues of the yeoman farmer standing foursquare on the soil, called for the opening of the North West to settlement, and saw better than most the national potential of Confederation. All of this had relevance for the present. "We of the modern West," he concluded (he was then still at Saskatchewan, though about to move to Toronto), "have a natural affinity" with George Brown's Upper Canada: "It is our spiritual home."

Leaving aside whatever might be made of this purported regional affinity for our own present, what strikes the modern reader of this academic paper is its discursive qualities: its personal voice, its relative informality, its manner of directly addressing the reader. These are among the distinguishing qualities of the essay mode, though the line between personal and impersonal is not easily drawn, nor is it obvious in just what an essay's informality consists or where relative informality shades into relative formality.

Most people would agree that the articles that appear in academic journals today are not essays, generally speaking, even though they are similar in length and some of them have essayistic qualities. Two of their most common features make them something else, perhaps cognate forms of the essay: one is their elaborate scholarly apparatus and the other is their scientific or quasi-scientific detachment. The two are closely related, of course, since scientific (or science-like) credibility rests above all on the quality of an author's study and research, and footnotes (or endnotes) enable the reader to check the author's sources, at least in theory, and to judge whether he or she has used them honestly and drawn legitimate conclusions. In Underhill's day, scholarly papers in general had many fewer notes than today, a mark of their embeddedness in an earlier humanist tradition, and of the limited degree to which historical study had yet been professionalized. Academic journals were themselves in their infancy.

The academic article of today also tends to suppress the personal voice, whereas the essay is an expression of voice more than anything else. Underhill's academic work was almost all manifestly *his*, no less than was his social commentary. There were exceptions, among them his articles on the personal and political relations between Edward Blake, the brilliant and temperamental leader of the federal Liberal party in the 1880s, and Wilfrid Laurier, Blake's close associate before he became his successor. These were essentially reports on Underhill's research for a biography of Blake — a

biography he long wrestled with, but failed to complete – and comprised, in large part, long quotations from the correspondence between the two men.

Otherwise, there was usually no mistaking Underhill's opinionated presence in everything he wrote. Offering an assessment of the liberal nationalist writer John S. Ewart, in another paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, this time in 1933, he acknowledged Ewart's reputation as a purveyor of deathless prose in his numerous analyses of Canada's constitutional evolution. The *Ottawa Journal* had written, on the occasion of Ewart's death a few months earlier, that only pedants and professors had read him. "Perhaps one like myself," Underhill slyly responded, "who is both a pedant and a professor, is apt, therefore, to overestimate his influence." By passages such as this – and they are scattered throughout his work – he signalled that what he wrote was not to be taken as standing separate from himself, a contribution to knowledge resting on an evidential base, but as the expression of his personal point of view.

It was also a point of view self-consciously sceptical of authority and offered from the margins of the very academic structures of which he was himself a member. Ewart, in fact, had *not* found favour among "the professors," who had either ignored him or attacked him; meanwhile, Canadian constitutional development, as shown by the recent passage of the Statute of Westminster, had followed a course that he had traced out, rather than that recommended by his more imperially-minded critics. "In the ultimate analysis," Underhill concluded, "it is because Mr. Ewart, like the great bulk of his fellow-countrymen, was so sturdy a North American in his outlook upon life, whereas most of his academic critics have felt themselves as mere sojourners in an outpost of European civilization, that he and the professors have never been able to appreciate one another." Underhill thus aligned himself, not only with Ewart, but with the bulk of Canadians, as he saw them, and against "the professors," who were clearly less in touch with their fellow citizens than the drily pedantic Ottawa lawyer.

In taking such a position in relation to Ewart, or in similarly adopting the *Globe's* 'radicalism' of the 1850s as his own, he was not rejecting objectivity as a methodological principle so much as not considering it at all. His subjects – Ewart only recently having died, the *Globe* as a lineal ancestor of the western farmers' movements, Goldwin Smith, the Victorian essayist and historian in whom he was also interested, and even Blake, the closest thing to an intellectual to be found among Canadian political leaders – were all contemporary in some sense, and their histories living and present to Underhill in only a slightly lesser degree than the League of Nations.

This sense of the past in the present was nowhere more skillfully communicated than in an essay he published in *Queen's Quarterly* in 1932 on the ideas and influence of the English thinker and reformer Jeremy Bentham. Throughout the nineteenth century and well

into the twentieth, Bentham's philosophy of utilitarianism was closely identified with a cold and narrow individualism and unremitting hostility to any form of state intervention. Using the one hundredth anniversary of his death as an occasion, Underhill began by wondering whether the received version was really the last word. He showed how Bentham's principles and underlying assumptions, and their internal tensions, had led him to a belief in both egalitarian democracy and the administration of experts, and he surveyed the reforms in poor relief, public health, and education that Benthamites had helped to enact.

Far from blindly opposing state action, Benthamism had eased – had perhaps made possible – the transition to collectivism in late nineteenth-century England, without sacrificing belief also in individualism. Thus – and here was the lesson to which the reader has been led in the gentlest possible manner – Benthamism, suitably adapted to the needs of the present, might serve as a bulwark against the insidious worship of the state manifest in contemporary Italian fascism and Russian communism.

An Underhill essay, then, and the essay form in general, differs from the academic article in its internal rhetorical practices as well as in its lack (or lower level) of scholarly apparatus. A final distinguishing feature lies in their different ordering principles. The academic article typically follows what one modern critic, Paul Heilker, calls the "thesis/support form." It presents an argument, marshals the evidence for and confronts the evidence against, and arrives at a conclusion, the whole constituting a coherent, internally consistent linear unit. It assumes a more-or-less positivist epistemology, in which the subject 'out there' is revealed and explained by the author, according to principles implicit in the scientific or quasi-scientific procedures I referred to above. The 'essays' that university professors assign their students are, in fact, organized in this way – at least, so their students are instructed – which has confused discussion of the essay form in some small degree. The form that student essays actually imitate is that of the scholarly article and they, too, are expected to stand independently of their authors.

The essay form as it has been practised since Montaigne is much more open-ended and free-flowing, one thought leading to another, not haphazardly, but in the way we mean when we talk about following (or losing) our train of thought, as in Underhill's segue from the League of Nations to Canadian attitudes towards the United States, or in his coming to the main point of "Bentham and Benthamism" only on the last page. The same thing happens in many of his historical papers and is reflected in their titles – "Some Aspects of Upper Canadian Radical Opinion in the Decade before Confederation," "Political Ideas of the Upper Canadian Reformers 1867-1878," "Some Reflections on the Liberal Tradition in Canada." In some cases he ends rather abruptly, as if his thinking had simply run out its string,

and winds up with a quotation from what was evidently his latest reading, usually an American historian writing about the United States (Carl Becker, Charles Beard, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.). These are all typically essayistic textual orderings — irregular, inconclusive, lateral, and fluid — the effect of which is to represent a personal and provisional understanding of its subject, even to imply that the author was a part of its subject.

The ease of Underhill's prose is not to be exaggerated or misconstrued. He did not write 'familiar' essays, a mode which had flowered in the nineteenth century but run its course by the inter-war period, when its leisurely manner and self-consciously artful style had become ends in themselves. Virginia Woolf, who contributed substantially to the essay's renewal, believed that it had deteriorated in the Edwardian period, becoming more a vehicle of self-display than self-expression. One imagines its ideal reader to have been a gentleman in a smoking jacket, sitting in his library and sucking on his pipe. This was certainly not the reader of an Underhill essay, which was designed to disturb complacency, not to reinforce it. Woolf, in imagining her own audience, and that of essays in general, resurrected the idea of the 'common reader' first put forward by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, in part to affirm the professional writer's independence of old forms of patronage and his preferred reliance on a commercial market.

Woolf's common reader, as described by Elena Gualtieri, a critic of her essay-writing, was an idealized reading public composed of interested amateurs rather than either professionals, on the one hand, or the penny-dreadful masses, on the other. Similarly, the reading public that Underhill addressed was educated, or willing to be so, and singular: the readers of *Canadian Forum*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and the *CHR* were not all that different from each other. Today, when observers (especially critics of academic writing) lament the passing of scholars who 'could write' and whom 'everyone' could read, forget that the definition of 'everyone' has changed in the past fifty years.

Underhill's essays, regardless of venue, were serious in purpose if also contentious and frequently sardonic in tone. His rhetorical models were George Bernard Shaw and H.L. Mencken. He did not offer up problems to explore so much as conventionalities and myths to puncture. In first writing (in 1935) about the history of political parties in Canada — a subject he made his own over the course of his career — he set out to clear away pretension and obfuscation. There were two possible views of party, he said: one was materialist (parties represented interests), and the other was idealist (parties embodied contesting principles). The first had been clearly expressed by James Madison at the time of the making of the American constitution in 1787, in the tenth Federalist Paper, the second murkily articulated by Mackenzie King at a Liberal party gathering in 1928. Underhill adopted the Madisonian approach, arguing,

among other things, that while Canadian parties had adopted British names, Canadians fooled themselves if they thought their two main parties anything but fundamentally North American in nature.

While in some measure all historical study characteristically proceeds by seeking to reveal something of a subject previously misunderstood, unnoticed, or obscured by accumulated detritus (rather than, say, to theorize about a general phenomenon), Underhill did so always with an eye on present conditions and circumstances, and the force of his argument about the past was heightened by its relevance to the present.

In this he was not unique, of course, and other historians, especially those who disagreed, responded in kind. The practice of Canadian history as a whole was then deeply engaged with the fate of the nation, to an extent that precluded the pursuit of objectivity that later became a professional ideal. A.R.M. Lower, an exact contemporary of Underhill's, introduced his Governor General's Award-winning survey of Canadian history, *Colony to Nation* (1946), with the hope that it would lead Canadians to the "self-knowledge" required for maturity and contentment. "Certainly on no one," he declaimed in the high diction of patriotic exhortation, "is the duty of revealing to the people reasons for the faith that is in them more directly laid than on the historian, for by its history a people lives." This was already a conception of the historian's calling that was widely shared, with the result that arguments such as Underhill's evoked responses at scholarly and political levels alike.

Donald Creighton, for example, much less engaged in public issues than Underhill, was nevertheless fully aware of what was at stake. His biography of Sir John A. Macdonald was partly an answer to the proposition that political ideas and actions were driven by material interests. Macdonald, for him, was a romantic and an idealist. And in the freedom offered by the essay form, Creighton could be every bit as direct as Underhill, with whom his relations were never easy. Both men participated in a series of lectures at Carleton University in 1956, which were subsequently published (essays having something of the nature of lectures in prose, as the editor, Claude Bissell, noted).

Underhill began the series with a talk on Blake, elaborating on Blake's liberalism and on the tragedy (as he saw it) of a political leader of such views fated to live in an era really governed by "business men on the make." Creighton followed two lectures later, on Macdonald, with a lecture that began with a full five pages of withering sarcasm directed at the dominance of what he called the "authorized version" — that is, the "Liberal or Grit interpretation" and, unmistakably, Underhill's interpretation — of Canadian history. He portrayed himself as a serious historian who based his understanding of the past on the hard work of archival research, and was courageous enough to stand up to those who merely parroted received truths. At the same time, his main point was

that, in an age when Canada was threatened by the domination of the United States, Macdonald's more truly nationalist conception of the nation as the North American ally of Great Britain had taken on new meaning. There can be no doubt, reading Creighton, that Underhill's take on Canadian political history had an impact; nor can one think that he had any monopoly on sarcasm as an instrument of rhetoric.

The combativeness and present-mindedness of Underhill's essays carried costs. There was seldom much distance, detachment, or disinterestedness in his accounts of things past; he was more devoted to extracting lessons for the present than to reconstructing what the past was *like*. His concern was always to make an argument rather than to tell a story. Carl Berger, in his history of Canadian historical thought in the twentieth century, judges him more journalist than historian, and others have done so as well. This is perhaps to construe too narrowly the legitimate modes of historical inquiry, which has often been driven by a desire to uncover roots and to trace antecedents, to remember forgotten heroes and to right present wrongs.

Lord Acton, the eminent English liberal historian of the late nineteenth century, best known today for pronouncing on the necessary conjuncture of corruption and power, believed in the inseparability of politics and history. Delivering his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University in 1895, he quoted his predecessor, Sir John Seeley: "Politics are vulgar when they are not liberalised by history, and history fades into mere literature [*mere literature*] when it loses sight of its relation to practical politics." This was not an invitation to special pleading, but a statement of the moral purpose of historical study and the wellspring of historical curiosity. Still, Berger's judgement points up a weakness in Underhill's history: political activism is bound to limit one's capacity for empathy with ideas and actions in the past, which are so often grounded in motivations, circumstances, and intellectual assumptions foreign to the present, even when they appear to be similar in kind.

Underhill's understanding of George Brown and the Toronto *Globe*, for example, was shaped as much by his sympathy for the western farmers' movements of the 1920s as it was by the content and structure of newspaper editorials published sixty years earlier. Modern scholarship has moderated the radicalism of Brown's political opinions, situated them more in the context of transatlantic Victorian liberalism than of grassroots farmers seeking radical democratic reform, and made Brown as much a sectional businessman promoting Toronto as a tribune of political reform. We must be careful, ourselves, of course, not to project the findings of modern scholarship into the past. Underhill was working without the benefit of much in the way of previous research, which affected the conclusions he reached, and he was influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" — the idea that American democracy was the product of

the westward-moving frontier of trade and settlement — which was a proposition that many historians thought could be adapted to Canadian conditions and circumstances. That having been said, the contemporary pertinence of his argument, rendering the Clear Grits of Upper Canada the spiritual forebears of the contemporary prairie Progressives, undoubtedly helped to determine what he saw in his evidence.

If present-mindedness undermined Underhill's history, it probably enhanced his authority — that quality which gives one licence to engage publicly and which moves one's readers to pay attention. Authority takes different forms. Underhill's was moral, even when he was writing history, which further distinguished him from historians of succeeding generations, whether they were writing for the public or for students and their professional colleagues; for example, from Ramsay Cook, whose authority even in the public sphere is professional and scholarly. It is true that in Cook's case, as he has recently written, he was led to become an expert on Quebec and nationalism — the chief focuses of his public interventions — by sheer fascination and by the demands of citizenship, but his public standing has rested on his professional *bona fides*. He is a historian who is also an intellectual. Underhill, by contrast, was an intellectual who was also a historian. He wrote in the tradition of the public moralist, stretching back to John Stuart Mill in England or Charles Clarke and Goldwin Smith in Canada, confident in his role as a guide to the rest of society and in the good that would result if only they followed his lead. His mode and posture linked mid-twentieth-century Canada to the Victorian era.

The essay form suited Underhill's ends and his cast of mind, as, indeed, it suited Lord Acton's. He was ill-disposed to entering another time and place for purposes of comprehension and re-creation, and may have been incapable of doing so. Critics have faulted him for his failure to produce a book — that is, a monograph — in his entire career, and it is certainly a striking absence, in view of his voluminous output of shorter writings. It is also true that he was defeated by the biggest project he ever took on, the biography of Blake. Yet, his shorter forays into aspects of Blake's leadership, and his numerous other studies of nineteenth-century Canadian liberalism (always focused on Ontario) influenced a generation of scholars. His contention that Liberals more or less abandoned their ideological roots in the Clear Grit movement of mid-century and gradually adopted a brokerage model of politics under the leadership of Blake and Laurier continues to carry weight among historians.

The essay enabled him to argue and re-evaluate, to follow a single theme independent of the larger set of events and conditions of which it was a part. This was its disadvantage, as well. Larger studies — narratives that reconstructed a rounded representation of time and place, or extended studies that analyzed a subject such as the political system as a whole — offered more opportunity for

nuance and qualification, and for the play of background and foreground. Essays are all foreground, or Underhill's were. They followed their theme, in a sometimes meandering course, to a conclusion of one kind or another.

It has also not helped Underhill's reputation that the essay, for all its ubiquity, is primarily regarded as a literary form, devoted to literary ends. In present-day terms, it is a species of literary, or creative, non-fiction. Critics tend to ignore the historical essay in favour of other non-fiction modes that seem to offer more latitude to the expression of a personal voice — the travel essay, for example, or the moral essay. The historical essay, however strong its personal tone and however evident its personal point of view, must be grounded in its sources, whatever these may be and whether or not they are acknowledged in citations, which in some way vitiates its literary status. Many of the leading essayists in the English language have nevertheless been historians: Thomas Babington Macaulay, Lord Acton, and Isaiah Berlin in Great Britain; Frederick Jackson Turner, Carl Becker, and J.H. Hexter in the United States; Underhill, W.L. Morton, and Ramsay Cook in Canada. All of these authors succeed in combining voice and authority in a mutually reinforcing manner, while still writing history. But when critics think of essayists, they think of George Orwell, E.B. White, and George Woodcock.

Even as a literary form, the essay has an ambiguous standing, arising from the fact that it is so often a writer's secondary activity. Margaret Atwood writes essays, but she is *really* a novelist; Mark Kingwell writes essays, but he is *really* a philosophy professor. The same was often true in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — poets and novelists supplemented their *real* activity (and their income) by essay-writing. Essays, in fact, take so many forms, address so many different subjects, and appear in so many venues that critics sometimes wonder whether 'the essay' is a genre at all, much less one worth devoting a lifetime to exploiting. Underhill was an essayist, period, and the absence of some prior core activity left him vulnerable to the accusation of never having adopted a serious writing or scholarly vocation.

Yet the essay's flexibility and its revival in the last decade or so suggest that it might usefully merit the renewed attention of historians, other humanists, and social scientists today. I would not recommend a wholesale return either to Underhill's history or to his methods, which revolved around the close study of successive political speeches, debates, pamphlets, and other public documents — Blake's Aurora speech of 1874, his 'famous Malvern speech' in the 1887 election campaign, his West Durham letter of 1891. (These were not his methods

alone, it should be said. Donald Creighton's graduate seminar at the University of Toronto was organized around similar political, legal, and constitutional texts and an assessment of their value as well as their historical significance.) These methods were what proponents of the new social history had in mind when they criticized the narrowness and superficiality of traditional political history, even though, as we have seen, Underhill himself had thought they added to it a new and necessary intellectual dimension.

If what he did offers us uncertain guidance, however, the way he did it nevertheless contains some lessons for current intellectual practice. Underhill was not a journalist. He was a historian of wide learning whose classical background often surfaced in his essays. The literary critic Desmond Pacey once told him that Northrop Frye had, in his younger days, in 1937, regarded Underhill's *Forum* essays as "the best Canadian prose being produced." Pacey himself agreed, admiring especially the "crisp, idiomatic and epigrammatic quality" in Underhill's writing. History today — to stay only with Underhill's own discipline — suffers from a radical breach between an abstract and professionalized academic discourse that often descends into arid sectarian controversy or the marginal modification of interpretative theory, and a practice of popular history that often judges its success by its fictive creativity and by the size of its audience, rather than by its fidelity to the past. The openness of the essay form and its capacity for direct engagement with its readers, as well as its historic role in bridging the gap between science and art, offers a potential means of resolving some of the tensions arising from the so-called 'history wars,' which have pitted academics against journalists and professionals against amateurs.

The essay originated, as Graham Good has argued, in Montaigne's search for a mode of thought and communication that bypassed the ossified rules and conventions of late medieval scholasticism, whose practitioners applied themselves to the analysis and interpretation of authorized texts once or twice removed from the secular and spiritual problems that were their original concern. Sceptical of dogma, system, and authority, he found in the essay an instrument of open-ended reflection upon the messy, multifarious, and changing quotidian reality of the world around him. Ever since, essayists have followed his example, inviting their readers to participate in a shared experience of critical engagement. Success has always entailed a certain measure of rhetorical skill, and is predicated on the existence of effective media of communication, but it first requires a will to communicate and to imagine a receptive reading public.