

RESPONSE FROM A MOUSE

On a visit to Ottawa in 1986, I decided to look at Frank Underhill's papers. I wanted to see if he had kept any of the letters I wrote to him in 1952 from Dublin, where I was doing research for my Ph.D. thesis on Edward Blake's Irish career. An M. Banks file contained at least some of these letters, but also a copy of a letter about me that he had written in 1954 to the American College Bureau, which helped qualified people to find teaching positions in post-secondary institutions and with which I had registered. The first paragraph spoke very highly of my intellectual ability, but the second described me as shy and quiet, implying that I would find it difficult to cope with teaching. At first I was a bit startled, but soon I saw the amusing side of this assessment. I had just finished reading Douglas Francis's biography of Frank Underhill, published earlier that year. From it I had learned that, as a young man, Underhill was painfully shy and quiet. Recalling that, from an early age, I enjoyed public speaking and that, in Grade 10 at Quebec High School, I won the school's Tope award for debating, I thought it unlikely that I had ever been as shy and quiet as Frank Underhill.

It was now obvious why I had been unsuccessful in obtaining a teaching position in history. Underhill must have written many similar letters about me, but not until 1997, when a researcher told me about his work on women historians, did I learn that other Underhill letters containing remarks about me had been preserved. One such letter, written in 1952, commented on various University of Toronto graduate history students who might be interested in a position that was available at the University of New Brunswick. Underhill highly recommended Lovell Clark for the position. He also commented on other male students, always referred to as men. Almost as an afterthought (added, I know, because I had told him that I was applying for the position), he noted that the department also had a girl student, Miss Margaret Banks. He described her as "very mousy and quiet", though he admitted that she would probably write a better thesis than any of the male students! (She had written her M.A. thesis under his supervision.) Lovell Clark was appointed to the position, after which he took his comprehensive examinations, the written and oral ones on various fields of history which one had to pass before beginning work on the thesis. I had passed mine in the spring of 1951, whereas Clark failed the oral portion of his in the spring of 1952. However, he already had the position at UNB, so it didn't matter. (He later passed his comprehensives and went on to complete his Ph.D.)

How times change! Can you imagine a male professor today calling a female graduate student a girl and describing her as mousy? Oh well, I have to admit that I once impersonated a mouse. During my childhood, my aunt, an accomplished dressmaker, made me several Hallowe'en costumes. The first, when I was six years old, was a Minnie Mouse outfit. I recall a short red and white print skirt over frilly white panties, out of which protruded a long black tail. The only problem was that the mousy headpiece was rather hot to wear.

Underhill expected me to be satisfied to be an archivist for my entire working life, but I was determined to try something different. As a law librarian, I learned much that has been useful to me in my research, as well as helping me to meet the needs of law library users. I'm sure that I have had and continue to have a more interesting life than I would have had as a history professor. Unintentionally, Frank Underhill did me a favour by discriminating against me.

This, however, does not justify discrimination and I believe there is a lesson to be learned by young scholars, male and female, from my experience. Do your M.A. and Ph.D. research under different supervisors and preferably at different institutions. If one supervisor, for whatever reason, misrepresents your abilities, there is a good chance that the other will give a more accurate assessment.

Margaret A. Banks, alias Minnie Mouse

