

The following year witnessed the publication of one of his most popular collections of short essays. This was called, after the opening piece, Behind the Beyond, itself a kind of play, which was subsequently profitably dramatized. The book also contained one of the most delightful spoofs he ever contrived, Homer and Humbug in which he expressed scepticism about the classics and those who taught the classics. Of the latter he said: "In my opinion some of these men would have been what they are, no matter what they were." Yet he himself was a classical scholar of the first water.

Leacock had been quick to concede that it was not in his power to concoct plots or sustain a long narrative, though it pleased him to believe that he could create characters. Thus he put paid to any speculation (which nonetheless persists) that he had within him the makings of a novelist. The only two books of humour that came anywhere near an overall unity were Sunshine Sketches and, in 1914, Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich. The latter constitutes perhaps his most pungent irony, doing to the big city what Sunshine Sketches did to the little town. However, Arcadian Adventures failed to attract a wide public despite the author's effort to make the centre of his scorn an unidentified American metropolis. In fact, he had Montreal very much in mind, lambasting civic corruption, decrying religious pretence and bemoaning educational superficialities. His attitude towards the moneyed élite was plain for all to see. Though he liked to mix with the rich ("because I like what they mix"), though he was a die-hard Tory, he harboured a genuine concern about the imbalance of wealth in modern society. Short of a socialist state (the very thought of which he abominated), he regularly addressed himself to propounding corrective economic measures.

Few today defend Stephen Leacock as an economist. In this sphere he never managed to keep himself abreast of the times. But his great historical sense made him a formidable political scientist and an inspiring teacher. History was, in fact, his real forte. In 1914 he turned out such works as The Dawn of Canadian History, Adventures of the Far North, The Mariner of St. Malo. Late in life he produced Montreal, Seaport and City, and the lively and accurate story of his adopted land, Canada: The Foundations of its Future. Commissioned by the House of Seagram, this handsome volume was illustrated by outstanding Canadian painters.

This prodigious worker (he continued to rise at 5:00 a.m., as in his early days on the farm) took on all kinds of extramural responsibilities, without allowing his academic duties to be affected -- extensive public lecturing, among other things. For a while he became actively embroiled in politics. During the Reciprocity election of 1911, he held forth on the hustings in two separate constituencies on behalf of two Conservative candidates, both of whom were elected. In addition, he served as chief Tory propagandist throughout the campaign. In the 1930s, the then Prime Minister R.B. Bennett pleaded with Leacock to run for Parliament, but the professor politely declined.

Whether he liked it or not (he complained that he did not), as a public figure Leacock was in constant demand. For two years during the First World War, he stumped both Canada and the United States on behalf of the Belgian Relief Fund. His success in this field shaped a good deal of his future, for he found the speaker's platform as rewarding in the penunicary sense as it was a means of gauging public taste in humour. The tricks he developed in such engagements were transferred to and adapted for his classroom performance, thereby enriching his teaching technique.