

One evening late in 1909, he came to his small Montreal apartment to find his wife and his younger brother George (who was said to be wittier than Stephen and whose yarns Stephen ultimately made his own) idly going through old scrapbooks of Upper Canada College days. These contained clippings of Stephen's published parodies of a decade and more earlier. Wife and brother pressed the professor to consider putting them all together and publishing them in one book. Advice to the contrary came from other friends, who believed such a venture would harm Leacock's professorial standing.

After consultation with a Montreal printer, the decision was taken to put out a small volume bearing the title Literary Lapses, to be sold for 35 cents. In May 1910, six weeks after the modest volume appeared, the celebrated British publisher John Lane came to Montreal en route to England. Browsing in a local bookshop, looking for antique bindings, he picked up a copy of Literary Lapses and purchased it for light shipboard reading. On arrival in London, Lane lost no time in cabling Leacock for the English rights to the collection. A contract was signed forthwith. Almost as quickly Leacock began to enjoy a world-wide reputation as a possible successor to Mark Twain, who had just died. Requests poured in from newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic requesting contributions from his pen.

Leacock had never dreamed of becoming a professional writer, much less a humorous one. But he set about trying to meet the sudden demand. Within a twelvemonth Nonsense Novels, in which he took off popular fictional trends of the day, was on the market and widely welcomed.

This book's reception -- edition followed edition in quick succession -- posed a problem. Assuming that his two almost overnight "hits" were no freaks, what to do? Abandon his already consolidated position at McGill and devote himself to commercial humour? Or, somehow or other, combine two vocations? He decided on the latter. In the event, the one aided the other, philosophically and financially.

Leacock was 40 when he won instant recognition as a literary wit. He now determined to take seriously the business of being funny. Parody and satire in short doses poured from him and found ready markets. He hit upon the idea of producing an annual book collection of short pieces. With two exceptions he adhered to this plan to the end of his life.

In 1912 Sir Hugh Graham (later Lord Atholstan), proprietor of the Montreal Star, commissioned Leacock to do a series of sketches on a Canadian theme. These were published serially each Saturday over a period of months. They bore the title Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town. There was little that was fictional about this account of the people and mores of a small town (either Canadian or American, let it be noted). Leacock may not have been a creative writer in the largest sense of the term, but he was an acute observer of the passing scene at all times. He had observed his fellow townsmen in Orillia, Ontario (where the Leacocks had summered since the turn of the century), over a long period. In these sketches he did not spare them, although he insisted his was a purely sympathetic treatment. Following their popular run in the Star, the sketches were put out as a book. Though, naturally, he made some enemies, the world was now his oyster. Leacock always maintained that his aim in this work -- indeed, his literary goal generally -- was kindly humour. The sharpness of his satire belied this pose.