

The Other Side of Leacock

[SOME LESS THAN SUNNY QUOTES FROM A MAJOR FIGURE]

Stephen Leacock once advised a young friend: "Do not ever try to be funny; it is a terrible curse." Between 1910 and 1930 Leacock was the best selling humorist in the English language, but this destiny overtook him rather late in life. His first book of humor, *Literary Lapses*, was published in 1910, when he was 40, and at his own expense. He was first a teacher — a Doctor of Philosophy and for more than three decades a lecturer on political economy at McGill University. He was an established author and essayist by the turn of the century, and by 1908 he was producing serious, but informal essays on subjects such as education, modern morality, the "women question", prohibition and the "Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice." An uncompromising individualist, he was profoundly suspicious of our accepted leaders and institutions and seldom optimistic. Yet even his "serious but informal" essays often had a humourous edge — though seldom a joyful one; perhaps all humour is gallows humour in the end. Alan Bowker and the University of Toronto Press have now published a collection of his early pieces

in *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*. It is available for \$3.95 in the paperback edition. We offer some excerpts of his considered opinions below. They are not, necessarily, our opinions or yours. They are, at the very least, somewhat dated. They were original. Mr. Leacock was essentially a conservative, but in the essay on Social Justice (from which we quote the beginning), he advocated social security, minimum wage laws and legislation shortening working hours more than a decade before they appeared on the North American Continent.

[ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA]

". . . Some years ago I resided for a month or two with a group of men who were specialists . . . most of them in pursuit of their degree of Doctor of Philosophy, some of them — easily distinguished by their air of complete vacuity — already in possession of it. The first night I dined with them, I addressed to the man opposite me some harmless question about a recent book I

