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STEPHEN LEACOCK

(By David M. Legate, author of
Stephen Leacock: A Biography.)

Because the ridiculous is a timeless element of human nature, Stephen Leacock is a humorist for all seasons. The current celebration of the centenary of his birth has established the enduring quality of some of his work. If today it is now, at long last, being openly admitted that he never was much of a political economist, the continuing sale of his witty compositions attests his permanent place in the field of humorous literature. Interest in him knows no boundaries. In certain cases he has been required reading in the high schools of Moscow; he has often been quoted by Peking; and many of his 35 amusing collections have been translated into 17 languages.

This somewhat complex personality came into the world in the village of Swanmore, Hampshire, England, on December 30, 1869. For years he had been confused about this vital statistic. Until his old age, Leacock was convinced he had been born in Swanmore on the Isle of Wight. The latter, however, was the birthplace of his grandfather, whose family had for 100 years owned vineyards in Madeira and had become wealthy in the British wine trade.

Stephen's pleasure-loving father Peter eloped when he was 18 with the descendant of a long line of Church of English clergy and academicians of distinction. This Agnes Butler, four years his senior, was to prove an overwhelming influence on her subsequent brood of 11 sons and daughters.

At the outset of the marriage, Peter's father, having disapproved of his son's aversion to work, took a course common to many affluent Victorian families. He shipped the young man and his bride to South Africa, where a farming property had been bought for the purpose. Peter failed there as a farmer and soon reappeared on his father's doorstep. The determined senior Leacock then sent his son off to farm in Kansas, where Peter again failed. Back he came to the Isle of Wight. After Peter had pattered about the south of England doing various menial jobs (and Stephen had arrived on the scene), his father once again laid down the law. He would send Peter and family off to Canada where 100 acres of farmland had been purchased near Lake Simcoe in Ontario.

