

## FEATURE

## Sunshine Sketches of a scumbag

BY PATRICIA GENTILE

Canadian University Press

MONTREAL — Stephen Leacock was a professor of political science and economics at McGill University and a well-known humorist. But digging a little deeper reveals that these things do not a great man make.

Leacock was a redneck Tory as well as a blatant racist, an anti-semitic and a misogynist. Throughout his extensive literary and academic career, Leacock proudly wrote and spoke about the "superior" Anglo-Saxon white race and "inferiority" of women.

According to biographer Alan Bower, Leacock thought Anglo-Saxons had the ever-popular holy mission to civilize "backward races... by force if necessary." Leacock's racial intolerance was a common theme in many of his writings and speeches. In 1908, he described world history as "the question of the Aryan civilization of the West and the uncivilized... people of the Orient."

In a 1910 article, he encouraged the South African whites "to shoot (native blacks) into marmalade with machine guns" if they revolted. In "Humour and Humanity," Leacock wrote he would "not shrink from using the word niggers."

## MISOGYNY IN PRINT

Leacock's views on women were both appalling and neolithic.

He called women who strove to be financially independent "the civilized white woman." But Leacock believed that her sister "the gay savage in her jungle, attired in a coconut leaf" was better off and lived a more fulfilling life. He insisted women did not have the mental capacity to have careers. He explained that "they can't do it" and that "nature has forbidden it."

Moreover, he believed the "average woman must necessarily have... about three and a quarter children." And if women did get jobs then "low wages are all they are worth."

According to Leacock, a woman's place was at home, cooking and clean-

ing. To put it in his words, "my own strong personal predilection is and remains in favour of a woman who can cook, mend clothes, talk when I want her to, and give me the kind of admiration to which I am accustomed." Did I forget that he was an arrogant, egoistic and pompous little worm?

For a woman-hater like Leacock, co-education was a horror of another kind. He thought women would take

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the spaces that belonged to more deserving men. He believed women who attended university were wasting their time, since they would get married when they found husbands.

But some women did end up in his economics and political science classes. One of them was Eileen Flanagan, who went on to get a Doctor of Laws from McGill.

"There were only two or three girls in our class and he wasn't very

keen on having girls in his class," she says.

"He would come up the aisle behind a girl and he would shoot a question at her quickly. Frighten the life out of her."

Leacock also believed women shouldn't get the vote. According to Albert Moritz, Leacock challenged the premise that women and men were equal. He believed women were wrong to think their status in society would change once they got the vote, insisting women would simply elect men for fear of the ills that would accompany "mixed government." Canadian women proved him wrong when Agnes Macphail was elected to Parliament in 1921.

Leacock also took issue with women's emancipation. "Women need not more freedom, but less," he wrote. "Social policy should proceed from the fundamental truth that women are and must be dependent." Leacock described allowing women to work and have careers as a "social crime." He longed for the Victorian days when "the men did everything... and women represented the ornamental side of life."

## A MAN OF HIS TIME?

There really is no excuse for his philosophy. Leacock was surrounded by remarkable women, especially in his private life.

His sister Dot was a distinguished pathologist at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. His mother Agnes was a well-educated woman consider-

ing the standards of her times. It was due to her determination that Leacock himself received an education. His wife Beatrix was also a well-educated woman who contemplated having a career.

The argument that Leacock was a

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if necessary"**

man of his time doesn't hold much water. He had plenty of personal examples of women's capabilities to discount his anti-feminism.

Nevertheless, Leacock flaunted his

racist and misogynist views in his articles and books. The people who named McGill's Leacock building undoubtedly knew about his opinion of people of colour and women. The only explanation for having a building named after him is that McGill is still a sick and pathetic place.

There are many better names to choose from, such as Agnes Macphail or Hilda Oakley, the first woman lecturer in Mental and Moral Philosophy.

It's about time we stopped paying homage to a racist, misogynist pig. Leacock was famous for making people laugh, even when he was talking about racism and "meddlesome feminists." For some reason, I'm not laughing.



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