

Once-a-Month Devoted to the Human Interest of Canadian Literature Producers

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Leacock is Probably Twins

I HAVE never met Leacock. I have never even seen him. Therefore, anything I may say about him here is unprejudiced by his personality. I am sure Leacock has a personality. How else could he be a professor? Being a professor, how does he presume to be a litterateur? Here we come upon a paradox.

An old school book definition assured us solemnly that literature is life. If Leacock is a litterateur, he must have something to do with life. If he is not, therefore, according to well-known principles of boarding-house geometry, he must be a dead one, which is absurd. Leacock may be a professor. But he is not dead.

This is merely a matter of deduction. Existence is the first principle of life. That which does not exist does not live. It will do no good to quote that old professorial dictum, Cogito ergo sum. We do not admit as yet for purposes of argument that Leacock thinks. But he certainly exists. How do we prove this? A first condition of existence is, that which exists must occupy space. As a space-filler, Leacock is simply immense. At space rates alone he should be well enough off to maintain himself as an honorary colonel—which he is not.

But a stone exists. And a stone does not live. To predicate life about that which exists we must give it also the attribute of cells. Leacock is one of our very best sellers. Go a grade higher from point to point and we grant that the cellular organism which lays claim to any of the higher forms of life must be conscious of the passing of time. Leacock scores heavily here. He is one of the best time-killers in the literary life of Canada.

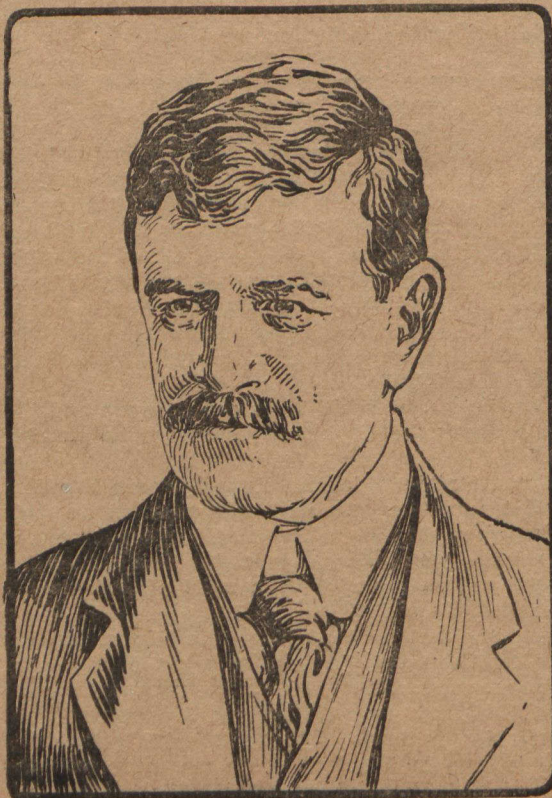
HAVING paid the Professor these compliments as a mere entity, let us consider him as a man. For all personal purposes we trace him no further back than his immediate parentage. He was the son of an English minister who, as soon as he discovered that his son Stephen was predestined to make himself unpopular in England by breaking literary canons, rules and precedents, migrated with him to Canada. The coldly dispassionate brevities of Morgan do not inform us as to what neck of the woods the Leacocks chose for their habitation. But we learn that somewhere in his youth Stephen Leacock found himself a resident of a county in which Orillia is one of the chief centres of enlightenment. Those who know allege that "Sunshine Sketches in a Small Town" was born in Orillia. That is not important. Leacock would have been just as true to the life if he had written about the far simpler inhabitants of Timbuctoo.

Realizing that there was a far bigger world than Orillia and all around there the youth went to Upper Canada College, afterwards to Toronto University. In this he showed due regard for conventionality. Had he gone to Toronto University first, it would have been much more like Leacock as we know him in his books. However, he did his best to put boots

on his ears by going back to U. C. C.—this time as an expounder of modern languages, which we presume were French and German. I think he had already written Boarding-House Geometry, so that he was known to possess a working knowledge of English.

Circumstances and a quixotic passion for discourses upon the cost of living led him to McGill as lecturer in political economy, of which he is now William Dow, professor in that institution.

Now, there are a good many people who marvel that a man who has become such a master of levity in literature ever should have gone into political economy for a living. To admit that living has anything to do with political economy was in itself a commonplace. Leacock knew what he was up to. He would show other people that the science of getting rich quick was something of which no professor was ever known to be capable. Having demonstrated that he could be a parson's son just as successfully as Max Aitken, he deliberately refrained from becoming a financial magnate by remaining a professor. Having shown in the course of his lectures on political economy that the Wealth of Nations is always accompanied by the poverty of individuals, including professors, he proved the paradox of political economy by showing that he could make more money when he wasn't working than he could when he was. I don't know what his salary is at McGill. But any publisher knows that any new levity of Leacock is likely to bring him in more cash than six months' lectures on how to remain poor though the father of a large family.



An author with two brains.

In fact, Leacock has shown clearly that the solemn-brow business of daily grind is not necessarily the vocation that keeps a man alive. Literature in the hands of Leacock is a bigger producer than political economy. Levity beats lectures. In his lighter moments Leacock is most thoroughly alive. When he is done with the serious business of demonstrating how dividends differ from day's wages he writes a fresh chapter of levities and makes another hundred or so.

Leacock's literary art ranges over pretty much everything in the world. In all his world-wide travels nobody ever heard of his spending a week in search of a fact. If facts don't blithely hop into Leacock's lap and beg him to record them, he invents fictions instead.

But in most of his literary levities we observe no traces of making light of political economy. There must be a reason. Some day, when this indiscreet master of literary amenities decides to quit being a professor, we may find him writing the humorous psychology of the tragedy of Andrew Carnegie working like a slave to get rid of his money.

ON rethinking over this I have decided that Leacock is a biological curiosity. If anything should happen to put one lobe of his brain out of business, the other would not be able to carry on as it does in other people. Each is absolutely and uncompromisingly different. One is a commonly constructive thinking-machine which turns out such a predication as this—concerning the future of the British Empire written about the time of the Boer War, on the subject of a change to a Federal Parliament, etc.:

The dead weight of inertia to be encountered before such a change could be effected will be realized by all who are acquainted with the British political temperament.

The other lobe of Leacock's brain was entirely disconnected from the power house when he wrote that.

Years before he began to think in terms of political economy Leacock's other brain-lobe created this (Boarding-house Geometry):

If there be two boarders on the same flat, and the amount of side of the one be equal to the amount of side of the other, each to each, and the wrangle between one boarder and the landlady be equal to the wrangle between the landlady and the other, then shall the weekly bills of the two boarders be equal also, each to each. For, if not, let one bill be the greater. Then the other bill is less than it might have been, which is absurd.

At the time of writing only two other examples stick out as parallels to this intellectual duality—Mark Twain and Bacon. An old friend of mine always said that Mark Twain would yet produce serious books. The posthumous pessimism of the great humorist, recently published, is a proof that he was right. Bacon is still supposed by some otherwise intelligent people to have written both the Novum Organum and Midsummer Night's Dream. Is Leacock a 20th century Bacon? Or is he a Canadian Mark Twain?

This is a problem for biological experts, and the consideration of individual, non-identical brain lobes. It will probably be found that Leacock is twins.