

# Perils and Pitfalls of College Journalism

By Stephen Leacock



HAVE BEEN one of those who have been the first to extend to the proposed Arts Magazine an enthusiastic, I might say, an exuberant welcome. College Journalism has always seemed to me one of the best things in college life,—one of the most interesting, one of the most useful.

In every good circus the side-shows excell in interest the attractions of the main tent. So it is with college. College journalism, amateur acting, college dances and college sports are more interesting,—I say it fearless of contradiction,—than many of the college lectures. But of these activities, one at least, college journalism, is more useful, if rightly undertaken, than half a dozen lecture courses.

But having said that much of the advantages of being occupied with a college magazine, let me also sound a warning as to its potential dangers. So absorbing a pursuit must not be allowed to dominate the mind in an exclusive fashion. If it does so, serious consequences may ensue.

It is always well to point a moral by introducing actual individual cases as terrible examples. It supplies what is called in the newer language of newspapers and syndicates, the "personal touch". Without this all writing sinks into the class of high-brow moralizing. It was my good fortune to be associated with college newspapers from my school-days up. In my last year at the University of Toronto I was appointed to be one of the Editors of the literary weekly then called *The Varsity*. I realised in time the danger involved in such flattering and fascinating work. I had the good sense to resign before the year was half through.

But others, my associates, were not so shrewd. It is no exaggeration to say that college journalism turned aside and warped their careers from what they might have been.

Among my colleagues was a boy called G. Howard Ferguson, a bright, innocent young fellow from Kemptville, Ontario. Up to that time he had kept his mind keen to a razor edge with the study of economics and philosophy. He read easily. I have often seen him sit over Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, to others a difficult book, roaring with laughter.

Unconscious of what we were doing, we gave to Howard Ferguson the position of "manager". It was a fatal mistake. From that time on the boy seemed to change; a restless activity took hold of him: he attended meetings, made speeches, and was heard to speak of German philosophy as "bunk". It was an open secret that Howard Ferguson's name was mentioned for a lectureship in Comparative Etymology, a position that he might have held till today. But he had grown too restless. After a feverish year or so at law, he sank into the Ontario legislature. The rest

everybody knows. But I have always maintained that Howard Ferguson had real ability.

Then there was Charlie Mitchell. In spite of all that has been said about General Mitchell since they made him Head of the School of Applied Science, I can only say that I never knew a straighter, decenter boy than Charlie up to the end of his third year at college, and for a month or so into his fourth. It was then that he became one of the Corresponding Editors of *The Varsity*. This position seems to have dazzled him. I noticed the change in him for the first time on the day when we all went as Editors to have our picture taken: it was all I could do, with Ferguson's help, to shove Charlie behind us into the back line. Another good student had been lost. I have that picture still on the wall of my study,—Howard Ferguson, Charlie Mitchell and the rest. Among them stood "Doc" McLay, the present head of the Arts Faculty of McMaster University; he *really* could have succeeded. The fellow had a genuine gift. And Judge Stuart, too, on the left of the picture; college journalism literally ruined him; it bred in him a restless wandering that led him into the west, and settled him in Calgary. The moralist might say that it served him right, but the fault lay surely with college journalism. Stuart died a few years ago as a Judge of the Supreme Court of Alberta, a wasted life.

Compensations of course there were. I must not exaggerate the case. It was certainly gratifying to us all as editors to be able to lord it over the other students, to reject their feeble attempts at composition, to tell them just what we thought of them.

There was, I recollect a young freshman named William Lyon Mackenzie King who sent us in a poem. The boy's name somehow has stuck in my mind all these years. He sent us in a poem called, *Why I like the Winter* or *The Futility of Human Greatness*. I remember that Doc McLay said it was one of the worst poems we had received that week. We sent it back to King with a smart rebuke as a warning. Perhaps we were wrong. Without our rebuke King might be an established poet today. As it was he abandoned literature. Nor did I ever hear that he ever had any career beyond a little temporary employment at Ottawa.

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There: I needn't labour the point, even if it is an allegory.

All that I want to say is that every time you start a literary journal in a college, all the brightest and best students will flock to its service,—in fact just like my friends and myself.