

books

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FEAST OF STEPHEN
McClelland and Stewart,
1970, 154 Pg., \$5.95

- a review by **Prof. Donald Cameron**

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Feast of Stephen: An anthology of some of the less familiar writings of Stephen Leacock, with a critical introduction by Robertson Davies Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970. Pg. 154, \$5.95. Introduction available separately in paperback as Stephen Leacock, by Robertson Davies.

Canadian literature, as a field of study, is suffering from dropsy. Suddenly the subject has become fashionable: undergraduate enrolments are soaring; theses pour out of our graduate schools; Canadian Literature corpulent in the middle age, can no longer be read each time it arrives, but only sampled, like PMLA. Even Mordecai Richler has recently committed an anthology. There are twenty poets in the town where I live -- one per thousand of population -- and each of them has twenty critics, like the man going to St. Ives. But they are not going to St. Ives: indeed, rumour has it that Norman Levine is coming back.

Well, it's all groovy, but there's growth, and then there's dropsy. Canadian publishers, aware of a sudden new market for monographs, are rushing ones series of studies after another into print. Books no longer find themselves presented modestly, to publishers; publishers commission them. Has George Woodcock written a fine essay on Hugh MacLennan? Splendid: commission a book. We need a book on Leacock: didn't Robertson Davies do a wonderful lecture? Yes, just the job: commission a short critical monograph.

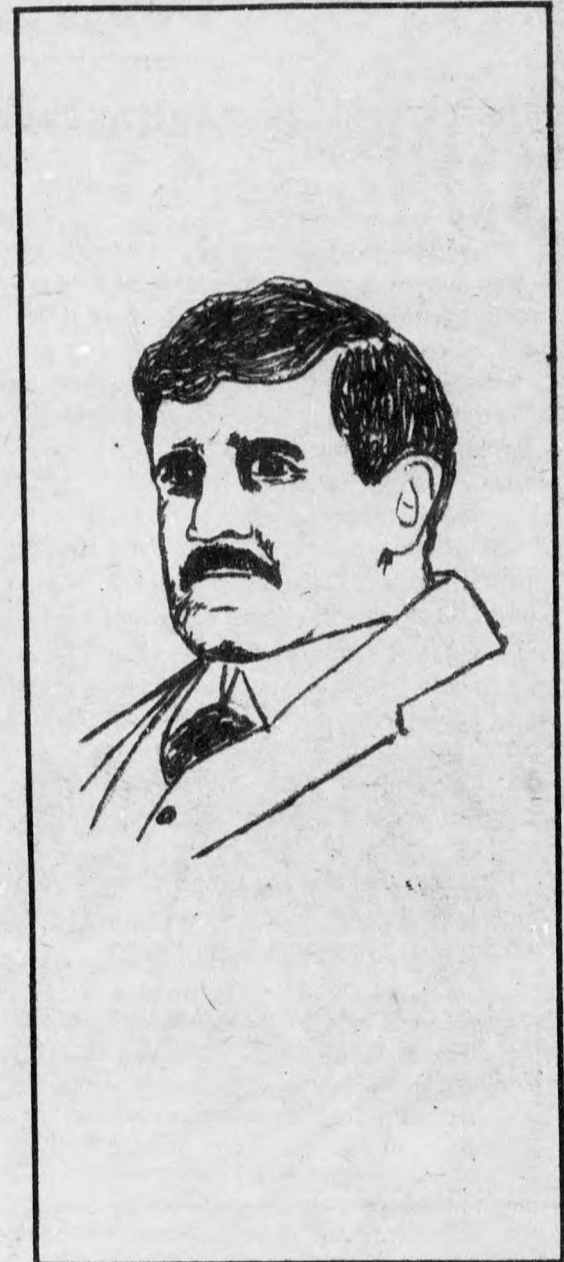
But alas. Woodcock had said what he wanted to say, and the book, though competent and readable -- these men are professionals, after all, and never fall below a certain level -- is little more than a gloss on the essay. Robertson Davies' new study is workmanlike, but not in a class with his essay. Cutting the pie another way, McClelland and Stewart released the study on October 3 as the introduction to a new Leacock anthology, just in time for the Christmas trade. Good merchandising -- but in the same spirit I am bound to advise the reader that he can get the introduction separately for \$0.95, and a better anthology, *Laugh with Leacock*, for another \$0.95. That leaves him with four dollars to buy two or three more volumes of Leacock, or, if he prefers, *Masks of Fiction*, which contains Davies' original essay.

There's no reason for this book. It is pleasant to have these out-of-the-way selections handily available, but the reader who is going to read only a little Leacock wants the cream, not the crannies; the reader who is going to read a lot of Leacock wants the books from which the selections are taken: most of them are, after all, readily available in libraries and many are even in reprints. Feast of Stephen is not a book: it's a Christmas gift.

And Davies himself is caught between two stools. Cheap paperback monographs have to be short, to keep costs down. Davies does not face the discipline of the essay, which yielded such brilliant results in 1957; on the other hand, he doesn't have space for an extended critical study. The result is a kind of bloated essay, neither one thing nor the other. And I don't blame Davies -- I blame McClelland and Stewart, Copp Clark, and all the others who are commissioning the masses of potted, low-priced critical monographs which have poured out in the last year or so.

Even in this awkward situation, Davies is interesting. He no longer regards Leacock as an incipient novelist: now he finds Leacock's talent unsuited to the novel form, while before he bemoaned the unwritten novels. (I still think he was right the first time.) The strong sense of kinship which has always marked Davies' writing about Leacock serves him well again in consistently implying, beneath his sharpest criticism, a profound love and admiration for Leacock and his work. The obverse of this sense of kinship also appears. Here is Davies on Leacock's attitude to co-education:

...he did not deny the right of women to education, but he could see no sense in educating them as if they were men. Such an attitude, heretical in his own day, is thought merely laughable now; it may be another century before we recognize that Leacock was right, and that a woman's intellect, at its best, is not the same as a man's, and that its differences make it fascinating but inferior; the world needs both.



Feminists will retort that separate-but-equal facilities somehow never turn out to be equal when the two parties are not equally powerful. And those with an eye for irony will be amused at the way Davies, in praising Leacock, somehow implies praise for his own lonely Toryism. It is not just that Davies is somewhat like Leacock; it is that Davies' Leacock bears a remarkable resemblance to Davies. Which is hardly ground for complaint: critics, like other writers, are sensitive to the themes that concern them personally. Those with a feeling for further irony will no doubt reflect that Donald Cameron's book on Leacock is heavily influenced by Donald Cameron.

Together, Leacock and Davies are capable of making a non-book, but not a dull non-book. And that is why, despite their crochets, we treasure them both.