

When, in 1921, Leacock undertook a lecture tour of Britain, his career stood at its zenith. Erroneously, he had been hailed as another Mark Twain. About their only similarity was their productiveness. Following Arcadian Adventures, Leacock published a steady annual stream, including Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy, Further Foolishness, Frenzied Fiction, The Hohenzollerns in America, and Winsome Winnie (all collections of short pieces). In 1923 alone, his royalties totalled \$40,000, then an astronomical figure for this specific medium.

The appearances in England won him further renown and, on his return to Canada, resulted in My Discovery of England. This book included one of his subsequently most widely-quoted essays -- his account of his Oxford visit, in which he stated his philosophy of higher education. Here he envisaged a university as an indispensable caravanserai in a long and weary pilgrimage, a view he later expressed in another oft-cited paragraph:

"If I were founding a university, and I say it with all the seriousness of which I am capable (just think of that!), I would found first a smoking room; then when I had a little more money in hand I would found a dormitory; then after that, or more properly with that, a decent reading room and a library. After that, if I still had money over that I couldn't use, I would hire a professor and get some text books."

Well ahead of his time, he recognized the weaknesses of the written examination system, of mass production of university graduates, of the impersonal note creeping into the art of teaching. And he inveighed against women in higher education. By all means, he said, give women a taste of the humanities, "but the wretched creatures are only going to get married, and they know it" -- therefore why waste space and time and money in training them, for the professions particularly?

Like many a humorist before and after him, Leacock was essentially a melancholy man. Though he presented a front of easy persiflage, fate had dealt him blows from childhood. A listless father had abandoned the family of 11 children. In the mid-20s his wife died of cancer. His one son had suffered arrested growth. For years Leacock dedicated himself to anti-cancer campaigns, raising money and giving money in the cause.

Superimposed on these sad events, the Great Depression arrived. Contrary to a persistent rumour at the time, Leacock did not "lose his shirt", as others did. But the general suffering which the severe economic conditions brought left its mark on his work. Such publications as The Iron Man and the Tin Woman and Wet Wit and Dry Humour were indicative of a low spirit which was forcing its wit. Indeed, his spontaneous sense of fun seemed to have deserted him.

However, when he turned to more serious subjects, Leacock's writing began to reveal a maturity of authorship hitherto only spasmodically displayed. He wrote an appreciation of Mark Twain, a biography of Charles Dickens (both of whom he worshipped) and a study called Lincoln Frees the Slaves. He constantly asserted his deep belief in the future of the British Empire. As one colleague was to write: "He, before Winston Churchill, saved the British Empire every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 3 o'clock in Room 30."