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## STEPHEN LEACOCK

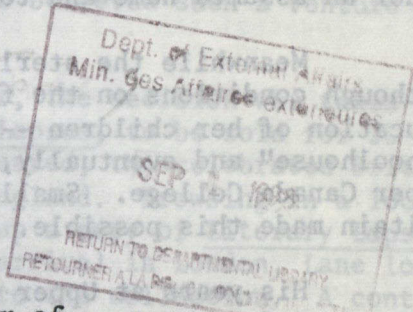
(By David M. Legate, author of  
Stephen Leacock: A Biography.)

Because the ridiculous is a timeless element of human nature, Stephen Leacock is a humorist for all seasons. The current celebration of the centenary of his birth has established the enduring quality of some of his work. If today it is now, at long last, being openly admitted that he never was much of a political economist, the continuing sale of his witty compositions attests his permanent place in the field of humorous literature. Interest in him knows no boundaries. In certain cases he has been required reading in the high schools of Moscow; he has often been quoted by Peking; and many of his 35 amusing collections have been translated into 17 languages.

This somewhat complex personality came into the world in the village of Swanmore, Hampshire, England, on December 30, 1869. For years he had been confused about this vital statistic. Until his old age, Leacock was convinced he had been born in Swanmore on the Isle of Wight. The latter, however, was the birthplace of his grandfather, whose family had for 100 years owned vineyards in Madeira and had become wealthy in the British wine trade.

Stephen's pleasure-loving father Peter eloped when he was 18 with the descendant of a long line of Church of English clergy and academicians of distinction. This Agnes Butler, four years his senior, was to prove an overwhelming influence on her subsequent brood of 11 sons and daughters.

At the outset of the marriage, Peter's father, having disapproved of his son's aversion to work, took a course common to many affluent Victorian families. He shipped the young man and his bride to South Africa, where a farming property had been bought for the purpose. Peter failed there as a farmer and soon reappeared on his father's doorstep. The determined senior Leacock then sent his son off to farm in Kansas, where Peter again failed. Back he came to the Isle of Wight. After Peter had pattered about the south of England doing various menial jobs (and Stephen had arrived on the scene), his father once again laid down the law. He would send Peter and family off to Canada where 100 acres of farmland had been purchased near Lake Simcoe in Ontario.





Young Stephen hated every minute of the growing-up process in the backwoods and wrote at length about these experiences in later life. Clearly unfit for the tasks imposed upon him, Peter sold part of the farm machinery and stock and hied himself to the Winnipeg of the 1880 boom days. There he hoped to make his fortune. He returned home broke, dispirited and addicted to the bottle. In no time he abandoned the family for good, settled in Nova Scotia under an assumed name and took to himself a common-law wife.

Meanwhile the sterling character of Agnes Leacock began to assert itself. Although conditions on the farm went from bad to worse, she saw to the proper education of her children -- lessons in the home, sessions at the "little red schoolhouse" and eventually, for three of the boys (including Stephen), at Upper Canada College. Small and intermittent legacies from the families in Britain made this possible.

His years at Upper Canada established Stephen's intrinsic worth. He demonstrated an aptitude for both the classics and modern languages. He carried off prize after prize and became head boy in his final year. All the time, however, he was supremely conscious of his responsibilities at home, since his elder brothers had headed West. It became necessary, therefore, to earn money, in pursuance of which he attended a training-school for teachers and eventually got a job as instructor in a secondary school. In the future he would record how he detested this period of his career.

Then his old school, Upper Canada College, came to the rescue and hired him as an assistant master of modern languages. He liked the work no better, but it provided the opportunity to study, simultaneously, for his B.A. degree at the University of Toronto. In addition, he continued his childhood practice of rising every morning at five, this time to study the subject of economics on his own hook. The evenings were devoted to writing diverting little essays which he sold to magazines and newspapers for princely sums of anything from \$2.00 to \$5.00 apiece.

Leacock had acquired enough academic know-how to suggest he might settle successfully on the staff of a university. At the same time, he realized that to do so he ought to have a doctorate. With a bank loan added to what little money he had saved, he headed for the then new University of Chicago. His goal was a Ph.D. in economics. He took with him a bride -- Beatrix Hamilton, daughter of a socially-prominent Toronto family.

By giving him a position as a term lecturer, McGill University in Montreal had made it possible for the 30-year-old teacher to complete his Chicago thesis. Accordingly, afterwards, Leacock joined McGill's Faculty of Arts as an assistant professor of history and economics. Shortly thereafter he was given a year's leave of absence to tour the Empire on behalf of the Cecil Rhodes Trust. On his return from speaking engagements in five countries, Leacock had not only been promoted to full professorship but had been given charge of the department of economics and political science.

Having exchanged the drudgery of teaching youngsters and coping with their coddling parents for the relaxed atmosphere of ivy-covered halls, Leacock became attached to the life. The small stipend didn't worry him. He had written a textbook called Elements of Political Science, which was quickly taken up by numerous colleges in the United States and ultimately accepted by educationists round the world. But writing of any kind, he felt, must take second place to his academic duties. Or so he thought.



One evening late in 1909, he came to his small Montreal apartment to find his wife and his younger brother George (who was said to be wittier than Stephen and whose yarns Stephen ultimately made his own) idly going through old scrapbooks of Upper Canada College days. These contained clippings of Stephen's published parodies of a decade and more earlier. Wife and brother pressed the professor to consider putting them all together and publishing them in one book. Advice to the contrary came from other friends, who believed such a venture would harm Leacock's professorial standing.

After consultation with a Montreal printer, the decision was taken to put out a small volume bearing the title Literary Lapses, to be sold for 35 cents. In May 1910, six weeks after the modest volume appeared, the celebrated British publisher John Lane came to Montreal en route to England. Browsing in a local bookshop, looking for antique bindings, he picked up a copy of Literary Lapses and purchased it for light shipboard reading. On arrival in London, Lane lost no time in cabling Leacock for the English rights to the collection. A contract was signed forthwith. Almost as quickly Leacock began to enjoy a world-wide reputation as a possible successor to Mark Twain, who had just died. Requests poured in from newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic requesting contributions from his pen.

Leacock had never dreamed of becoming a professional writer, much less a humorous one. But he set about trying to meet the sudden demand. Within a twelvemonth Nonsense Novels, in which he took off popular fictional trends of the day, was on the market and widely welcomed.

This book's reception -- edition followed edition in quick succession -- posed a problem. Assuming that his two almost overnight "hits" were no freaks, what to do? Abandon his already consolidated position at McGill and devote himself to commercial humour? Or, somehow or other, combine two vocations? He decided on the latter. In the event, the one aided the other, philosophically and financially.

Leacock was 40 when he won instant recognition as a literary wit. He now determined to take seriously the business of being funny. Parody and satire in short doses poured from him and found ready markets. He hit upon the idea of producing an annual book collection of short pieces. With two exceptions he adhered to this plan to the end of his life.

In 1912 Sir Hugh Graham (later Lord Atholstan), proprietor of the Montreal Star, commissioned Leacock to do a series of sketches on a Canadian theme. These were published serially each Saturday over a period of months. They bore the title Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town. There was little that was fictional about this account of the people and mores of a small town (either Canadian or American, let it be noted). Leacock may not have been a creative writer in the largest sense of the term, but he was an acute observer of the passing scene at all times. He had observed his fellow townsmen in Orillia, Ontario (where the Leacocks had summered since the turn of the century), over a long period. In these sketches he did not spare them, although he insisted his was a purely sympathetic treatment. Following their popular run in the Star, the sketches were put out as a book. Though, naturally, he made some enemies, the world was now his oyster. Leacock always maintained that his aim in this work -- indeed, his literary goal generally -- was kindly humour. The sharpness of his satire belied this pose.



The following year witnessed the publication of one of his most popular collections of short essays. This was called, after the opening piece, Behind the Beyond, itself a kind of play, which was subsequently profitably dramatized. The book also contained one of the most delightful spoofs he ever contrived, Homer and Humbug in which he expressed scepticism about the classics and those who taught the classics. Of the latter he said: "In my opinion some of these men would have been what they are, no matter what they were." Yet he himself was a classical scholar of the first water.

Leacock had been quick to concede that it was not in his power to concoct plots or sustain a long narrative, though it pleased him to believe that he could create characters. Thus he put paid to any speculation (which nonetheless persists) that he had within him the makings of a novelist. The only two books of humour that came anywhere near an overall unity were Sunshine Sketches and, in 1914, Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich. The latter constitutes perhaps his most pungent irony, doing to the big city what Sunshine Sketches did to the little town. However, Arcadian Adventures failed to attract a wide public despite the author's effort to make the centre of his scorn an unidentified American metropolis. In fact, he had Montreal very much in mind, lambasting civic corruption, decrying religious pretence and bemoaning educational superficialities. His attitude towards the moneyed élite was plain for all to see. Though he liked to mix with the rich ("because I like what they mix"), though he was a die-hard Tory, he harboured a genuine concern about the imbalance of wealth in modern society. Short of a socialist state (the very thought of which he abominated), he regularly addressed himself to propounding corrective economic measures.

Few today defend Stephen Leacock as an economist. In this sphere he never managed to keep himself abreast of the times. But his great historical sense made him a formidable political scientist and an inspiring teacher. History was, in fact, his real forte. In 1914 he turned out such works as The Dawn of Canadian History, Adventures of the Far North, The Mariner of St. Malo. Late in life he produced Montreal, Seaport and City, and the lively and accurate story of his adopted land, Canada: The Foundations of its Future. Commissioned by the House of Seagram, this handsome volume was illustrated by outstanding Canadian painters.

This prodigious worker (he continued to rise at 5:00 a.m., as in his early days on the farm) took on all kinds of extramural responsibilities, without allowing his academic duties to be affected -- extensive public lecturing, among other things. For a while he became actively embroiled in politics. During the Reciprocity election of 1911, he held forth on the hustings in two separate constituencies on behalf of two Conservative candidates, both of whom were elected. In addition, he served as chief Tory propagandist throughout the campaign. In the 1930s, the then Prime Minister R.B. Bennett pleaded with Leacock to run for Parliament, but the professor politely declined.

Whether he liked it or not (he complained that he did not), as a public figure Leacock was in constant demand. For two years during the First World War, he stumped both Canada and the United States on behalf of the Belgian Relief Fund. His success in this field shaped a good deal of his future, for he found the speaker's platform as rewarding in the penunicary sense as it was a means of gauging public taste in humour. The tricks he developed in such engagements were transferred to and adapted for his classroom performance, thereby enriching his teaching technique.



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."



One of his most moving compositions was occasioned by the death in 1933 of General Sir Arthur Currie, McGill's principal and vice-chancellor for 13 years and one of Canada's greatest soldiers. Leacock had once taught Currie in a small rural Ontario school. Decades later, at the university, they became firm friends. They heartily hated the same things -- misuse of power, greed, cruelty, disloyalty.

If, as has already been noted, Leacock was no great shakes as an economist, often he exhibited some advanced thinking in this field. In The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice (1920), he saw a great need for social security, minimum wage laws and legislation guaranteeing the shortening of working hours. At the same time, he stood adamant against socialism in any form. His attitude was summed up thus: "In my opinion, with perfect citizens any government is good. In a population of angels a socialistic commonwealth would work to perfection."

In retrospect it seems wholly naive, but Leacock's enforced retirement from his professorial post left him an embittered man. Early in 1935 he had privately circulated a pamphlet in which he felt he had found solutions to the financial crisis which the university was then experiencing. These suggestions included a recommendation that senior staff members should be retired to make way for younger men. When, a few months later, he and 12 others were placed on pension, he raised a howl which really never subsided.

To prove that he was not "as senile as the McGill board of governors apparently consider me", Leacock forthwith set a terrific pace in his accelerated writing schedule. He continued to contribute articles to the Encyclopaedia Britannica ("I would sooner have written Alice in Wonderland than the whole of the Encyclopaedia Britannica," he once said). His comic pieces took on a freshness which they had lacked for a long while. He addressed himself to problems, national and international, discussing the world's muddle over gold, the labour situation in the depression, emigration, and Canada's relationship to the British monarchy.

Shortly after he had protestingly assumed the status of professor emeritus, Leacock looked to the Canadian West. To put it more accurately, he was pressed by some of his influential friends in business and industry to go West and write and speak about the state of the economy there and about certain political movements. Out of this triumphal progress, while it very nearly exhausted him, emerged My Discovery of the West, a volume well-salted with humour that did much to inform the citizens of Central and Eastern Canada. It won him the country's top literary award, the Governor-General's prize. Almost at the same time, he received the highest honour of the Royal Society of Canada -- the Lorne Pierce Medal.

Meanwhile there had been no relaxation in the production of amusing fiction. Funny Pieces, Model Memoirs, Too Much College (a good deal of which dealt with his philosophy of education), Laugh Parade, Hellements of Hickonomics (which he regarded as his best work of humour, though few agreed with him), and My Remarkable Uncle all appeared in his post-McGill period. For over half a century, he hadn't given a thought to an uncle who had impressed him tremendously in his childhood. Only when The Reader's Digest, in 1941, asked Leacock to contribute to a series called "My Most Unforgettable Character" did he enshrine E.P. Leacock in print - an astonishing fellow, who posed well beyond his means,



became an overnight figure in Western Canadian politics, made himself president of a non-existent railroad, and charmed everyone in sight. As a matter of fact some of the qualities of "E.P." were detectable in Stephen.

During the 1930s Leacock was moved to set down his theories on writing in general and humour in particular. Both his Humour: Its Theory and Technique and Humour and Humanity stressed the desirability of kindness in humour.

"...humour goes upon its way, moving from lower to higher forms, from cruelty to horseplay, from horseplay to wit, from wit to the high 'humour of character', and beyond that to its highest stage as the humour of life itself. Here tears and laughter are joined, and our little life, incongruous and vain, is rounded with a smile."

A touch of the Bard of Avon in that -- and, like the Bard, Leacock was not without his contradictions. His Sunshine Sketches could not be said to have been unmarked by malice. He could be merciless, as in Arcadian Adventures, outrageous as with his attitude towards women in My Discovery of England, patronisingly piqued when dealing with the classics and the professors thereof.

But of one thing he was certain: "Humour is not the lower level of the field of literature, but lies around the summit of its highest range." Time and again he rued with anguish the tendency of both academe and the public-at-large to consider the humorist a lonely and often disreputable figure merely on the fringe of true literature. In truth, he had an inferiority complex about his brand of humour.

Stephen Leacock devoted the last two years of his life to blocking out what was to be his autobiography, a project he had frequently thought about and as frequently put off doing. In the end, he only managed four informally-organized, chatty chapters which were brought out posthumously under the title of The Boy I Left Behind Me. It is now out of print. In addition, he had been collecting material for a book to be entitled Last Leaves, which he had asked his niece, Mrs. Donald Nimmo, to publish after his death. As Barbara Ulrichsen, Mrs. Nimmo had served her uncle faithfully as secretary, manager, adviser and chatelaine for ten years following Mrs. Leacock's death. In Last Leaves, which appeared in 1945, Mrs. Nimmo contributed a nostalgic and at times deeply-moving preface.

Towards the end of 1943, Stephen Leacock became ill. In a matter of weeks cancer of the throat had been diagnosed and he was taken from his country retreat at Old Brewery Bay to Toronto. There he died in hospital on March 28, 1944. Following cremation in Toronto, burial took place in the family plot in St. George's Churchyard, Sibbald's Point, not far from the scenes of his childhood and a stone's throw from Orillia, on which he had based his Sunshine Sketches.

Despite the fact that it was wartime and the eve of the allied invasion of Hitler's Fortress Europe, the press of the world found space to pay tribute to the Canadian humorist's genius as parodist and satirist, whose ebullient sense of the ridiculous brought laughter to troubled mankind. But there were among his legion of admirers those who knew him more specifically as a great humanist,



a teacher who stirred the minds of his students for over three decades, who encouraged independence of enquiry and who leavened the process with fun.

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Honours and Awards:

Five universities conferred honorary degrees on Stephen Leacock: McGill, Brown, Dartmouth, Queen's and the University of Toronto.

In 1935 he was the recipient of the Mark Twain Medal, awarded by the International Mark Twain Society.

In 1937 he received the Lorne Pierce Medal from the Royal Society of Canada.

In 1938 Lord Tweedsmuir (the author John Buchan) presented the Governor-General's Prize to Leacock for his book My Discovery of the West.

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Memorials:

(1) Perpetuating the name of the scholar, teacher and humorist, the Stephen Leacock Building, an eight-storey structure devoted to the humanities and social sciences, was opened on October 7, 1965, at McGill University by Major-General Georges P. Vanier, Governor-General of Canada.

(2) The Leacock Room in the McLennan Library at McGill contains original Leacock manuscripts and a complete set of Leacock first editions, in addition to other memorabilia.

(3) A Russian-produced 40-volume set of Leacock's works, in English, is included in the Lenin Library, Moscow.

(4) On July 5, 1958, Stephen Leacock's estate at Old Brewery Bay, near Orillia, Ontario, was declared by the Canadian Government a national historic site. The property has become known as the Stephen Leacock Memorial Home, and is maintained and operated by a board of eight members elected annually by the City of Orillia. The original committee, which was largely responsible for bringing the Home into being, was renamed the Stephen Leacock Associates. It has drawn its membership from Leacock fans throughout Canada, the United States and Britain. The Associates supervise the annual award of the Leacock Medal of Humour, struck in 1947, which is presented each year at a dinner held in Orillia in June.

(5) In November 1969, on the occasion of the centenary of Leacock's birth, the Canada Post Office issued a special commemorative six-cent stamp.



(6) On May 9, 1970, the government of Ontario, through the Stephen Leacock Centennial Committee, arranged a commemoration ceremony at Swanmore, Hampshire, England, at which time a plaque was unveiled on the cottage in which Leacock was born.

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POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

The Leacock Roundabout (1945)

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