



The Legacy of Leacock

Stephen Leacock may well have been the most famous Canadian of his time, and for the best of reasons. He made people laugh lest they cry. He brought joy to the world, and a man could have no higher calling. Let us celebrate the memory of a very funny man . . .

□ His face tells you a lot about him. Caught in the blink of a camera's shutter many years ago when he was in his fifties, it is richly etched with character lines. On either side of the mouth are deep creases that accentuate an easy, open smile. Crow's feet radiate out from eyes that glow with geniality. Between the bushy eyebrows and the unruly thatch of greying hair are two pronounced squiggles that evince a sceptical outlook on humanity. It is a benign yet rugged face — rugged from the effects of butting up against life.

Stephen Leacock: He was Canada's first internationally-renowned — and in many ways its finest — writer. In his heyday from 1910 to 1925 he was the best-selling English-language humorist in the world.

Quite possibly the most famous Canadian of his day, he spread the word that there was grace, verve and originality in this seemingly bleak and frigid country. His compatriots should cherish his memory for that feat alone. Our nation justly honours the great statesmen, soldiers and explorers of its past, but it is unfortunately true that, as A. P. Herbert noted, "there is no reference to fun in any Act of Parliament." To give this funny man the place he deserves in our national pantheon, it may be necessary to classify him as an explorer — an explorer of the bright side of the soul.

And Stephen Butler Leacock did make many hard journeys through life, beginning with the one in 1876 that brought him to Canada from his native England as a boy of six. After two disastrous



attempts to make a go of it as a farmer, his feckless father was ready to try again. The Leacock brood — there were six at the time; later there would be eleven — settled in a rambling, ramshackle farmhouse near Sutton, Ontario — "the damndest place I've ever seen," recalled Stephen. Luckily a thin trickle of family money came in from England to ward off bankruptcy as Peter Leacock proceeded to fail once more.

The third oldest boy in the family, Stephen took a hand in scratching out a living from the scrubby farm as he grew up, milking the cows, mucking out the barn, weeding the garden. His father sank deeply into alcoholism. He was frequently absent for long periods. When he was present, his famous son later recorded, he "lay about the farm, too tired to work, and we thought it was the sun."

Debts and mortgages piled up as Peter Leacock drank and otherwise frittered away every penny he could get his hands on. He treated his wife and children brutally in his drunken rages, and made passes at the maid. Things finally came to a head when he somehow acquired a small bundle of cash and boozily announced that he was leaving to try his luck elsewhere. The 17-year-old Stephen drove him in a sleigh to the railway station. As his father boarded the train, Stephen shook a horsewhip at him. "If you ever come back I'll kill you," he warned. He never saw his father again.

A childhood like that might have soured and stunted a person for life, but not Stephen Leacock. He had the spirit, drive and intelligence to pass out

of high school with top marks. But he could not go straight on to university; instead he had to take a job teaching school to help support his hard-pressed family. For long years he studied at the University of Toronto at night, graduating in 1891 as a Bachelor of Arts.

He spent the next few years as a schoolmaster. To stretch his meagre income, he capitalized on his ebullient wit to write short sketches for the humour magazines which then abounded in the United States and Canada. In 1896 *Life* published "My Financial Career," all about a bashful young man's first brush with the intimidating world of banking. Here was the typical Leacock hero, ingenuous, perplexed and flustered — much like all the rest of us at one time or another. "Since then I bank no more," the story concludes. "I keep my money in cash in my trouser pockets and my savings in silver dollars in a sock."

In real life Leacock salted away the proceeds of this and other writings in a bank account. He soon found good reason to save. He read a book and met a girl. The book was *The Theory of the Leisure Class* by Thorstein Bunde Veblen. The girl was Beatrix Hamilton. Veblen was a professor of political economy of somewhat radical views. Leacock was inspired by the book to want to study under Veblen at the University of Chicago. He enrolled there, and at about the same time proposed to the comely Miss Hamilton. A Toronto girl with theatrical aspirations, "Trix" had managed to land a bit part in a Broadway production. She took time out from acting to marry Leacock in New York in August 1900.

The lucid use of language was to become his hallmark

To carry him financially through his post graduate studies, Leacock formed an association which would profoundly influence his future. He became a special lecturer in history and political science at McGill University, shuttling between Chicago and Montreal until he graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy at the age of 34. He was proud of his hard-earned Ph.D., but not so proud of it, or anything

else about himself, that he could not make light of it. "The meaning of this degree," he wrote, "is that the recipient of instruction is examined for the last time in his life, and is pronounced completely full. After this, no new ideas may be imparted to him."

That is pure Leacock — the jauntiness, the studied exaggeration, the self-deprecation, the refusal to take seriously things that are generally held in reverence. Still, he was serious enough about his work at McGill, where he had become an associate professor of political economy. As a scholar he was deep and diligent. He spent four years working on his first book, *Elements of Political Science*. It was written with all the lucidity that was to become his hallmark — "a non-nonsense, crystal-clear survey of the subject," according to his biographer, David Legate. It was translated into 18 languages, became required reading in universities everywhere, and brought Leacock academic prestige and a satisfying flow of royalties for years to come.

He was happy among the bright young minds of the students, and his marriage and career went smoothly. But the money problems of his youth continued to dog him into his mature years. Applying for a raise when he was 36, he wrote: "My private life has been an uninterrupted succession of overdue accounts, protested notes and legal proceedings for debt."

It was not so much his writing that first drew him to public attention as his dramatic flair for delivering engrossing public lectures. An ardent imperialist ("He, before Winston Churchill, saved the British Empire every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, at 3 o'clock in room 20," a former student recalled), he gave a lecture on imperial unity in 1907 which was attended by the Governor-General of Canada, Earl Grey. So impressed was the earl that he arranged a year-long lecture tour of Britain, South Africa, Australia and other parts of Canada for the 37-year-old professor. It was a *tour de force*.

On his return to Montreal, Leacock hatched a scheme for making money, a pursuit which he had always followed unabashedly if ineffectually. ("Find out how much money they have and don't take a penny more," he once advised a fellow writer

dickering for a commission.) He would publish a collection of his early humorous magazine pieces in a book. The publisher of *Elements of Political Science* rejected his manuscript. He dug into his own pocket to have it privately printed. He called it *Literary Lapses*. The initial printing of 3,000 swiftly sold out in the Montreal area alone.

Laughing at the follies and vicissitudes of life

Among the buyers was a visiting London publisher who picked it up to read on his voyage back to England. He found himself chortling over the topsyturvy extravagances of "My Banking Career," "Hoodoo McFiggin's Christmas," and the other comic gems in Leacock's book. No sooner had he landed home than he cabled the author an offer to publish it. The result was a runaway best-seller in edition after edition. A troubled world, it seemed, was thirsting for the refreshing laughter at the follies and vicissitudes of life that Leacock could serve up.

A spate of favourable reviews pushed him into keen demand. Magazines appealed for fresh samples of his inspired tomfoolery. His publishers pressed him for further books. He took to getting up before dawn to put in a few hours of writing before he took his daily ritual walk to the university. With his literary earnings he built a gracious summer house near his old home town of Orillia, Ontario.

His next book was a zany send-off of the literary fashions of the day entitled *Nonsense Novels*. In one of the stories in this collection, "Gertrude the Governess," he inscribed his most memorable line. He wrote of a headstrong hero who "flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse, and rode off madly in all directions." The book drew a glowing critical reception.

With tremendous energy and fertility he continued to write funny books as well as historical books, magazine articles, and scholarly papers. He

also continued to teach at McGill, make far-flung speaking tours, and serve as a director of the University Club of Montreal, which he helped to found. And all the time he imbibed with legendary relish and capacity. When the University Club was moving to new quarters, he was placed in charge of transferring the bar operations. His approach to the task was in character. "Let's save on expenses by drinking all the liquor here and now," he proposed.

The greater public service was in making people chuckle

As he became more and more well-known, approaches were made to have him enter politics. It was not for him; he had always viewed political machinations with a wary eye. He observed that the fight for clean government had been going on for a long, long time — and so had the fight for dirty government.

Leacock knew that he was performing a much greater public service by getting people to chuckle over the solemn fatuities around them. He placed a high value on so-called nonsense. "I would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the entire *Encyclopædia Britannica*," he said. His own nonsense had an invisible thread of common sense running through it; he had a gift to presenting essential truths in such a funny way that they were imprinted in his readers' memories. "Leacock translated his philosophy into laughter, but it was philosophy nevertheless," British critic St. John Adcock Brown wrote. "His irrepressible feeling for the ridiculous keeps him from treating absurdities as if they were not really absurd."

He deflated pomposity and pointed out emperors who had no clothes with such nimble skill that his subjects often were not aware of it. But if his satire was usually sympathetic — as in the classic *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* in 1913 — he could also turn tough, as in his next book, *Arcadian Adventures With the Idle Rich*. In the latter he neatly skewered the hypocrisy, apostasy, materialism and social snobbery that characterized the prevailing attitude towards religion among North American high society. When two gilt-edged churches of different denominations entered into a businesslike merger, the combined elders resolved

that "the process of creation shall be held, and is hereby held to be, such and such only as it is acceptable to a majority of the holders of preferred and common stock voting *pro rata* . . . All other points of doctrine, belief or religious principle may be freely altered, amended, reversed or entirely abolished at any annual general meeting."

As he produced book after book his appeal became universal. He won a vast readership worldwide, as well as sell-out audiences for his humorous lectures wherever he went. With fame came affluence. He did not let his money go to his head, however. "I mix a good deal with millionaires. I like the way they live. I like the things they eat. The more we mix together, the more I like the things we mix," he joked.

At the zenith of his success he was to come in for more than his share of personal unhappiness. Both his wife and his only child, Stephen Junior, were ill. His beloved Trix died of cancer in England in 1925 just after he had frantically rushed her there to see a famous specialist. She was 45. They had been happily married for 25 years. A family friend remarked: "When Trix died, a little of Stephen died too."

After that he plunged into work more than ever — plunged too deeply. His humorous output during the late 1920s and early '30s was not up to his old mark. He produced serious works on Mark Twain, Thomas Dickens, and the essence of humour which were of no great distinction. His political and economic writings were as provocative as ever, but in general all his writing in this period was disappointing to varying degrees.

In 1936 another personal blow fell. Throughout the years of writing and lecturing, Leacock had found perhaps his greatest satisfaction in teaching and being among young people. "Give me the murky month of February, with snow blowing on the windowpane of the classroom, the early darkness falling and the gaslight bright in the classroom," he mused. "That and a blackboard, and a theorem, and a professor — the right kind, absorbed, ecstatic and a little silly." Leacock was the right kind of professor. But now he was told that, at the age of 65, he was through with McGill.

When the news came out that the great humorist was at liberty, he had to turn down several offers of

other appointments. A London newspaper suggested that he return to his native land. He replied: "My predilection is for the soil and the Canadian bush . . . No, I don't think I can leave this country. There is something in its distances, its isolation, and its climate that appeal forever . . . Thank you, Mother England, I don't think I'll 'come home.' I'm 'home' now."

Tipping the scales of a mingled heritage of laughter and tears

Leacock's love of his country shone through in some of his finest later historical work: *Canada, Its Foundations and Its Future* (written on a commission from the Seagram distilling company), and *Montreal, Seaport and City*. It is pleasant to report that his last humorous book ranked among his very best. It was *My Remarkable Uncle*, taking its title from a memoir of his real-life uncle who was president of a bank (that never opened), head of a brewery (for brewing the Red River), and secretary-treasurer of a railway from Winnipeg to the Arctic Ocean (that never got built). Leacock was basking in the well-deserved critical acclaim of this excellent collection when he died in March 1944 at the age of 75.

He might have been writing about himself — though he wasn't — when, several years before, he described the making of humour as "hard, meritorious and dignified." By doing this difficult work he succeeded in exposing one of the basic secrets of life. It is that too much should not be expected of life, and that it must not be taken too seriously. In the long run, he wrote, "all ends with a cancellation of forces and comes to nothing; and our universe thus ends in one vast, silent, unappreciated joke."

Maybe so; but in the meantime, Leacock brought a large measure of joy to a world that badly needs it. As a man who had experienced private anguish, he was keenly conscious of what he called "the mingled heritage of tears and laughter that is our lot on earth." Leacock tipped the emotional scales in favour of laughter. No one could have done more for his fellow human beings than that.