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Leacock and the Ladies of R.V.C.

In an historic perspective dating back to the second half of the 19th century, the author recalls how woman's role was viewed in educated circles in England, the United States, Canada and more specifically at McGill University. After noting that women were admitted to the McGill Arts degree program, for the first time in 1884, she briefly describes the origin of Royal Victoria College and the image projected by the lady students attending it. This image was highlighted in the writings of humorist Stephen Leacock — one of McGill's most famous professors. The author comments on a few selected passages that illustrate Leacock's attitude towards educated women.

Before I tackle the ticklish matter of how Stephen Leacock, one of McGill's most famous professors, seemed to see the women of the Royal Victoria College, I shall try to put R.V.C. into historic perspective. In particular, I shall look at the way in which educated women were regarded in the early days of McGill.

R.V.C. accepted its first students in the fall of 1899. The first Warden was Miss Hilda Oakley, a scholar of philosophy from Sommerville College, Oxford, and its first student was a red-haired young woman called Caroline Hitchcock, B.A. McGill '03. R.V.C. was established as a part of McGill, yet separate. It was a teaching college, not merely a residence, and all the women of McGill belonged. This was a rather complicated and unusual arrangement, and is still the cause for some confusion about function and administrative jurisdiction.

There has also been some confusion about the students. Some people think that women first came to McGill when R.V.C. opened. That is not the case. The first class of female undergraduates had set foot on campus in 1884, fifteen years before. Furthermore, as far back as 1871, McGill professors had given non-credit courses to the members of the Montreal Ladies Educational Association (M.L.E.A.).

The M.L.E.A. was a kind of continuing education program with courses in literature, geology, mathematics and so forth, as well as some more domestic subjects like cooking. It is important to note that the ladies did very well in their academic subjects and proved themselves very diligent students. A typical examiner's comment went like this:

My report would be incomplete were it to end without an expression of surprise from me at the high degree of excellence exhibited in many of the answers. Several of them were so perfect as to receive the full number of marks, and others so close to those as to fall short by a very small deficiency.

On one occasion, an exam paper was just so good the examiner had to award it *more than* the maximum! Report after report expressed amazement at the women's performance. These professors were not hostile male chauvinists, but kindly, agreeable men of McGill who, for some small financial consideration, gave up their time to the education of the ladies. They were not antagonistic, merely a shade patronizing, for somehow or other they were loath to accept women as fully intellectual beings.

Yet in the second half of the 19th century, the idea of higher education for women was not particularly strange. In the United States, women had been admitted to some State colleges in the 1830's, and the famous Eastern women's colleges — the "Seven Sisters" — began to flourish with the opening of Vassar in 1865. In England, Bedford College for Women — ultimately to become part of the University of London — was founded in 1848, and the colleges for women at Cambridge and Oxford were started in the 1870's. In Canada, the first degree to a woman was awarded by Mt Alison in 1875. From this sketchy evidence, it is apparent that McGill was far from being a pioneer in the higher education of women. Both in Europe and other parts of North America the doors had been opening. Nevertheless, when the successful women of the MLEA, like Oliver Twist, asked for more, they were rejected. When they asked to be admitted to McGill as regular students they were not dismissed out of hand, but were politely told that they deserved "something better" than McGill.²

This was flattering but it did not quite satisfy. So, in 1884 when some graduates of the Montreal High School for girls scored the highest marks ever obtained on the matriculation examinations, a bold little deputation called upon Principal William Dawson and asked for admission to McGill's Arts degree programme. They might also have been unsuccessful if, later that summer, Donald Smith had not providentially come along and offered McGill \$50,000 for the higher education of women. The money worked the miracle, and so some of the girls from Montreal High and some of the women from the MLEA were admitted that fall. Apart from the small honours courses, the first women at McGill had separate classes and, though their exam results were announced separately, their grades were ranked with the men's. At the end of the first year, the McGill *Gazette* reported:

“Beside the ladies who were partial of occasional, nine have been successful in the sessional examinations: Misses Cross, Evans, Foster, McFee, McLea, Murray, Reid, Ritchie and Simpson.”

Then it went on rather gleefully:

“Miss McLea stood first in Greek and Chemistry, and along with one of the opposite sex, had the highest mark in Latin, Geometry and Arithmetic, and French. Miss Ritchie was first in English and German, while in Trigonometry and Algebra, the most that a gentleman could do was to be equal with her. From this it can be seen how admirably the ladies have done.”³

Obviously, the experiment in higher education for women was a success, and later, Donald Smith — now become Lord Strathcona — gave still more money for a separate college that was clearly meant to be a superior place. A separate college for women was in line with Principal Dawson’s thinking on the subject. Dawson, probably McGill’s most effective and powerful Principal, maintained that “a college for women should stand on a higher plane than one for men, because it could be emancipated from some of those traditional and professional hindrances which embarrass our ordinary colleges because it should aim not merely to fit professional and business persons for the struggle of life, but to form the minds and characters of the mothers of a cultivated and progressive people.” So R.V.C. was set up as part of McGill — with McGill professors, its graduates receiving McGill degrees — but it was to have its own Board of Governors (who happened to be the same individuals as the McGill Board of Governors) and, ultimately its own Charter. It was something separate and something special.

The separateness and specialness related to the then current ideas about the nature of Woman, her intellect, her educability, her role in society. It must be acknowledged that these were — and still are — lively, emotion-charged issues on both sides of the Atlantic. As I noted earlier, in the second half of the 19th century the possibility of higher education for women was becoming a reality; however, it was not greeted with universal enthusiasm. Indeed, opposition, incredulity, and derision were common responses to the very idea. There was a good deal of antagonism and antipathy toward the “strong-minded women” who, heedless of their “exposed positions,” insisted on pursuing education. One American woman who was determined to have a formal education reported that her parents were ostracized by Philadelphia society because she had been so “unnatural” as to go to college. It was considered as awful and as much a disgrace as if she had run away with the coachman.

That may seem funny to us and we may laugh, but one of the cruel and unexpected facts of life is that laughter has been one of the instruments used to deny education to women. I am not sure where it first started; perhaps with that old rascal, Dr. Johnson, and his witticism about the female preacher and the dancing dog. Remember that he said, “Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog walking on its hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised it is done at all.” Dr.

Johnson also remarked that “Jests break no bones” — but they can break hearts, and educated women have been the butt of many of them.

Sheridan’s Mrs. Malaprop and her great speech on “What would you have a woman know?”; Molière’s “Les précieuses ridicules”; Daumier’s lampoons of the “Blue Stockings”; Gilbert and Sullivan — you might recall “Princess Ida,” recently performed on campus, and Florian’s words:

“A woman’s college! maddest folly going!
What can girls learn within its walls worth knowing?”

even *Punch* laughed at the learned lady and cast up the dreadful bogey of the inevitable celibacy for her. A “Nursery Rhymes for the Times” (1875) went like this:

Sally was a pretty girl
Fanny was her sister;
Sally read all night and day
Fanny sighed and kissed her.

Sally won some school degrees
Fanny won a lover!
Sally soundly rated her,
And thought herself above her.

Fanny had a happy home,
And urged that plea only;
Sally she was learned — and
Also she was lonely.

And so, at last, enter Stephen Leacock.

We all know that Stevie Leacock was one of McGill’s most famous and most popular professors. His classes were always very well attended and reputedly were both stimulating and enjoyable — though quite a number of people have told me that they were not always entertaining. I did not know him, myself, and far be it from me to challenge the recollections of those who did. I merely want to point out that Leacock endorsed prevailing stereotypes of women, quite blatantly, and that he took a lot of cheap shots at intellectual females. I admit he was often very funny and I know perfectly well that he often laughed at himself, that he laughed at anyone or anything he found laughable. But the laughter was not always kindly. It could be genuinely belittling and it could never be challenged without running the risk of being labelled “sour puss”, “frustrated old maid” or “humourless hag.” I think I am about to take those risks.

Let’s take a look at Professor Leacock.

Leacock came to McGill as a Lecturer in Economics and Political Science in 1903 — when R.V.C. was in its infancy. He remained at McGill until his retirement in 1936, so that his entire academic career was here. His acquaintance with students was derived from McGill for the most part and the women students he knew best were the ladies of R.V.C. He was a popular and fairly frequent speaker at the College. On one occasion he spoke to Delta Sigma, the women's society and purported to defend attacks on women in the press. He read apocryphal extracts from newspapers stating that the American girl was without manners, that no American girl knew how to enter a room correctly, much less how to leave it. This shortcoming was said to be due to her constant chewing of tobacco. The English girl also had her problems. While she was not wholly without grace, her movements were inferior to those of a horse, she moved like an alligator and could not sit down. The alleged reason for this was her continual drinking of gin. It was a great roast, and the ladies of R.V.C. seemed to love it. The *McGill Daily* reported that the meeting took place "amid uproar." There was much laughter and no harm done.

Leacock was also fairly generous in accepting invitations to contribute to campus publications sponsored by R.V.C. students and graduates. For example, in 1924 he complied with a request from Elizabeth Hammond (B.A. '96, M.A. '00) and gave her a paper for *The Teacher's Magazine*, which she edited. He pieced together something on "Teaching the Unteachable."⁴ In this he happened to notice a newspaper report in which "three women professors threw up their jobs because the girls under their charge were not allowed to study the theory of nutrition without being compelled to take an elementary course in chemistry." Here, (without any attempt at humour), women were singled out as an example of the new "soft" education.

On another occasion in 1927, he gave Isabel Sommer, B.A. '25, a paper entitled "The Truth About the College Girl." He was then 57, and began by saying, "*I am old enough in college life to have seen from its very beginning the experiment of giving what is called higher education to women. And I declare quite frankly that I do not believe that it does them any harm. Indeed as I shall try to show, I don't think it makes any difference.*" He explained, with a good deal of acumen, "*The first lot of college girls took themselves very seriously. They had all come to college with a mission. They thought they had an aim in life. They put on spectacles, lowered their skirts two inches and wore boots with big leather soles.*

"As a result of this, three out of the first ten married professors. It served them right. But the timely warning was not in vain. College girls gradually altered their point of view in regard to dress, sedateness, sobriety, propriety, propinquity and things of that sort. At present, I am sure they compare quite favorably with girls outside. Many of my young undergraduate friends tell me that they would just as soon take a college girl out as any other girl . . .

“At first, education sat heavily on the girls. One thing that put them to the bad was the silly habit, in the colleges, of calling them ‘women’ — the ‘women’ of the first year, for instance . . . This same tendency to seriousness led a lot of girls to take up such studies as physics, mathematics, and even political economy. It took them often two or three years to recover from these courses. Now all girls know enough to take such sources as Romance Languages, Religion (Comparative and Superlative), Social and Domestic Science and so on . . . One thing that for a long time worked against the college girls was the foolish idea which they at first entertained that they must not fail in their examinations. They had a silly notion that the honour of the whole race of women was at stake and that no college girl must ever be “ploughed” or “flunked” or “sent down” or “dropped out” as the men are. This lent to their studies a kind of sustained agony.

“Presently, however, the brilliant discovery was made that a girl could be “ploughed” just as well as a man. Indeed it was soon found that to get “ploughed” was a rather saucy, sporting thing to do. This brought a great change and added enormously to the attractiveness and to the outlook of the college girl.”

Leacock allowed that “boys will be boys” and that girls *should be* girls. In this opinion, *“The essential point is that the college man and the college girl are not at college in the same way of for the same purpose. They look out upon their coming life very differently. The one faces a career; the other an adventure. One plans. The other dreams. The man makes his fate. The woman gets her handed to her. Which outlook is the more attractive need not be discussed. But at least there is a singular charm in the vague uncertain outlook of the woman. Perhaps she will marry an Italian count . . . or perhaps she won’t. There is also the gloomy perhaps that she won’t marry at all. In that case she will have to adopt a life work and career. But no girl really expects this..”*

“I hope I shall not be misunderstood in what I am saying. It would be as stupid as it is untrue to say that girls ought to come to college merely with the idea of getting married. A girl ought to come to college as if she were not going to get married and then keep one eye open sideways . . .

“Girls who go to college ought not to ogle and angle for marriage. And they don’t. But they ought to remain girls, with a girl’s outlook, in spite of going to college. And they do. They didn’t at first, but they do now. And that is why the college girl of today in not afraid to be gay and even saucy, is so far ahead of her solemn sister of a generation ago.”

There were other occasions when Leacock unburdened himself on the subject of higher education of women at home and abroad. In his essay on Oxford he noted “the crowding of women into the colleges originally designed for men”, and he remarked: “To a profound scholar like myself, the presence of these young women, many of them most attractive, flittering up and down the streets

of Oxford in their caps and gowns, is very distressing.” In December 1921 an article of his appeared in the old U.S. national weekly, *Colliers*, provocatively entitled “We are Teaching Women All Wrong.” Here he said:

“I spent three years in the Graduate School of the University of Chicago, where co-educational girls were as thick as autumn leaves — and some thicker. And as a college professor at McGill University in Montreal, I have taught mingled classes of men and women for twenty years.

“On the basis of which experience I say with assurance that the thing is a mistake and has nothing to recommend it but its relative cheapness

“The fundamental trouble is that the men and women are different creatures, with different minds and different aptitudes and different paths in life. There is no need to raise here the question of which is inferior (though, I think, Lord help me, that I know the answer to that too.)

“The point lies in the fact that they are different.

“But the mad passion for equality has masked this obvious fact. When women began to demand, quite rightly, a share of higher education, they took for granted that they wanted the same curriculum as the men. They never stopped to ask whether perhaps their aptitudes were not in various directions higher and better than those of men, and whether it might not be better for their sex to cultivate the things which were best suited to their minds. Let me be more explicit. In all that goes with physical and mathematical science, women on the average are far below the standard of men. There are of course, exceptions. But they prove nothing. It is no use to quote to me the case of some brilliant girl who stood first in physics at Cornell. That’s nothing. There is an elephant in the zoo that can count up to ten, yet I refuse to reckon myself his inferior.

“Tabulated results spread over years, and the actual experience of those who teach show that in the whole domain of mathematics and physics women are outclassed. At McGill the girls of our first year have wept over their failures in elementary physics these twenty-five years. It is time that some one dried their tears and took away the subject.

“But in any case, examination tests are never the whole story. To those who know, a written examination is far from being a true criterion of capacity. It demands too much mere memory, imitativeness, and the assiduous willingness to absorb other people’s ideas. Parrots and crows would do admirably in examinations. Indeed, the colleges are full of them.”⁵

This part about parrots and crows means that women would be damned if they did do well in the examinations or damned if they did not. It was also a protection against the unlikely possibility that anyone would challenge the

stereotype of non-scientific women and actually check the record. If they did, they would discover that the women of McGill who took science in the early days did very well indeed — remember Rosalie McLea and Octavia Grace Ritchie. The record would also show that women had been among the earliest to earn graduate degrees in the sciences at McGill — Harriet Brooks earned an MA in Physics in 1901 and Annie L. McLeod was awarded McGill's first Ph.D. in Chemistry in 1910. Leacock himself knew that one of McGill's most distinguished scientific professors was Carrie Derick of Botany, and that in 1912 she became the first woman to be appointed a full Professor in all Canada. Leacock may *not* have known that an article, "Of Girls in a Canadian College," published by another man in the *Atlantic* in 1903, had claimed that "More of our girls have taken honours in mathematics than in any other department: but this may be due to the climate."⁶

Neither this last comment nor Leacock's commentary had much to do with the truth. As some contemporary student graffiti says: "Who wants the truth if it's boring?" I can concede that Leacock might have been excused in the *Collier's* article because he might simply have been trying to be deliberately provocative in a journalistic sort of way. In any event, *Collers* took advantage of his piece and offered \$100 in prizes (\$50 and ten \$5) for appropriate responses to Leacock's "image-breaking attack on modern education."

Six replies to "We are Teaching Our Women all Wrong" were published in *Collier's*, February 18, 1922 issue under the sturdily determined title, "Now Listen, Professor Leacock!" I don't really know whether any of the women of R.V.C. knew about the competition or whether they were among those who attempted to take him to task, but the winner was one Marth Dolman Loux from Pocatello, Idaho. She confessed to being a college graduate who had married but had not wasted her education as he implied women did. She claimed that she was "a mental whetstone for the family" and noted that "however fundamental sex may be in the reproduction of the race, it halts where mental developments begins."

I hardly think Leacock would have been abashed by the rebuttals to his article, nor by the defenders of co-education at large. He included the "We Are

Teaching Women All Wrong” material verbatim in his essay “Oxford As I See It” and, as far as I know, continued his unregenerate, stereotypical ways for the rest of his days. No amount of proof, no number of exceptions, no respect or affection for individual students would make much difference. The educated woman was safe as a target for any humorist’s barbs. She was still good for a laugh. The sad part is that so many people automatically accept the put-down. Leacock’s arguments about women in science, for example, are often invoked without the slightest trace of a smile. Indeed, people may note a curious similarity between what Leacock said in *Collier’s* in 1921 and what Chancellor Donald Hebb said in Senate fifty years later when he was speaking against a report that showed discrimination against women at McGill.⁷ Even in the 70’s there were still some reservations about women’s capabilities in all intellectual realms, and these may still be in the 80’s.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the Spring 1980 meeting of the James McGill Society. This session took place at the Royal Victoria College of McGill University and was the last of a series of events celebrating the 80th anniversary of the College.

² Montreal Ladies Education Association, *Report*, 1873-74, p. 8.

³ *McGill University Gazette*, Vol. VIII, No. 10 (May 10, 1885), p. 11.

⁴ His pieced together manuscript is reproduced in facsimile in *McGill Journal of Education* Vol. VI, No. 1 (Spring 1971), pp. 67-76.

⁵ Stephen Leacock, “We are Teaching Women All Wrong,” *Colliers*, December 31, 1921, pp. 15, 26.

⁶ Archibald MacMechan, “Of Girls in a Canadian College,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XCII (Sept. 1903), p. 402.

⁷ For a pertinent extract of Chancellor Hebb’s statement, see Olgar Favreau, “Sex Differences in Behaviour,” *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. X, No. 1 (Spring 1975), p. 21.

