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Stephen Leacock:

The humourist as educator

Abstract

Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) needs no introduction to Canadians. He is a firm fixture in Canadian Letters. While humour brought Leacock world-wide renown, his long and devoted tenure at McGill University brought him distinction as an economist and political scientist. This paper draws attention to Leacock as an educator first, while acknowledging that humour cannot be far behind.

Resumé

Point n'est besoin de présenter Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) aux Canadiens tant sa renommée littéraire est bien établie. Alors que l'humour lui a valu sa célébrité, les années qu'il a passées à l'Université McGill l'ont fait connaître comme un économiste talentueux et un grand spécialiste des sciences politiques. Cet article parle essentiellement du pédagogue qu'était Leacock sans pour autant négliger son sens de l'humour.

Mark Twain once wrote that a writer who writes for the "Belly and the Members" ought to be judged not for the narrow range his writing is accepted for but for the full extent of his subject. So it may be said of Stephen Leacock who is, if recalled at all today, known instantly and possibly solely for what he wrote for the "Belly and the Members" - namely, humour. Of his more serious writing (and who would deny that humour is not serious) on education, history, especially of Canada, political science, economics, literature, and biography there is little, if any, mention. It would



be hard to imagine another figure as unique in education as Stephen Leacock, or in humour, two of a number of hats he had worn comfortably. It is as a humourist that Stephen Leacock's fame and immortality rests. Immortality the more in the manner of a mountain peak named in his honour in the Yukon, or a likeness engraved on a Canadian postal stamp, or a university hall named after him at McGill University, or his Ontario summer home maintained as a public museum. Canadian school children grow up with excerpts of his works in anthologies in their English curriculum so that it may be safe to say that Leacock is about as well known to Canadians as is Mark Twain to Americans. And no doubt Stephen Leacock would consent to an immortality resting on the foundations of humour. It would have been entirely in keeping with the author of over fifty books of funny pieces to be remembered this way.

Truth is, however, that behind the twinkle in his playful eyes, one could readily find the serious Leacock. He could write with insight and understanding on such subjects as the gold standard, Dickens, Mark Twain, economics, Canadian history, and higher education. His efforts at literary criticism, and extensive they were, were not without merit if only as the parodist he was himself, to point out another writer's shortcoming. Indeed, the humourist in Leacock sat like a monkey on his shoulder, always ready and alert to see beneath the surface of life and the obvious - the foibles and follies, the rough edges, and the imperfections that were there. It is equally fair to add here that Leacock's humour was not the sharp stabbing kind of a dagger, the kind that hurts but, rather, of a whimsical, slap-stick gentler kind. He recognized a strict dualism in nature, in life, and applied this to his

writing. Given any human situation, Leacock would find something funny in it, something to laugh at, something to expose, be it philosophy, religion, commerce, education, or science. Of the nearly sixty books that bear his authorship, either as single volumes or as collections, only a very small number could be listed under the category, "serious." Here we would find works on literature, criticism, government, economics, history, and education. It is to the latter that attention is drawn in this paper but even here one must be a wary reader to discern the fine line that Leacock draws between serious and light.

He was born Stephen Butler Leacock on December 30, 1869, in Victorian England at Swanmore, Hampshire, a town reputed to have been the birthplace of the British national pastime, cricket. His parents came to Canada and settled on a farm in Ontario near Toronto in 1876. Leacock wrote of this tongue-in-cheek:

I enjoy the distinction, until recently a sort of unrecognized title of nobility in Canada and the United States, of having been "raised on the old farm". Till recently, I say, this was the acknowledged path towards future greatness, the only way to begin. The biographies of virtually all our great men for three or four generations show them as coming from the farm. The location of the old home farm was anywhere from Nova Scotia to out beyond Iowa, but in its essence and ideas it was always the same place. (Leacock, 1947, p. 47)

And to underscore the significance of such a background, he would add:

... I admit that within the last generation or so, in softer times of multiplying luxury, men of eminence have been raised in a sickly sort of way in the cities themselves, have got their strength from high school athletics, instead of at the woodpile and behind the harrows, and their mental culture by reading a hundred books once instead of one book a hundred times. But I am talking of an earlier day. (Leacock, 1947, p. 48)

His early schooling included attendance at Upper Canada College in Toronto whither his mother had moved so that her children, all seven of them, could receive a proper education. Stephen was an honour student and outside the classroom his most significant work was done on the school's newspaper, *The College Times*, in which his first signed articles appeared.

On completing his studies at Upper Canada College, Leacock was enrolled in the University of Toronto where his first year was spent on

serious study devoid of extra-curricular activities. He completed his first year with brilliant results, notably in foreign languages. In the meantime Leacock's father, who seemed to have gained the reputation of a ne'er do well, separated from his mother, leaving the family in very dire straits. This unexpected turn of events impacted rather quickly on Leacock's school plans. As there was no aid by way of a scholarship in those days, Leacock was forced to leave the university and accept a job as a high school teacher, a prospect that was looked upon with the greatest foreboding by one whose own academic career looked so promising. In his later and frequent writings Leacock viewed his high school teaching career as a hateful experience. This, however, was tempered slightly by an unexpected happening. After a brief stint teaching languages at Uxbridge High School, dubbed by Leacock as "dull as ditchwater but quite unaware of it", a fortuitous turn of events occurred when a position opened up at his former school, Upper Canada College, in Toronto. Leacock readily accepted this new post inasmuch as it meant that he would be able to complete his college degree work at the University of Toronto while teaching. In 1891, the Bachelor of Arts degree was conferred on Leacock.

In his essay, *My Memories and Miseries as a School Master*, Leacock had this to say about his early high school teaching career:

For ten years I was a schoolmaster. Just thirty years ago I was appointed to the staff of a great Canadian school. It took me ten years to get off it. Being appointed to the position of a teacher is just as if Fate passed a hook through one's braces and hung one up against the wall. It is hard to get down again. . . . From those ten years I carried away nothing in money and little in experience; indeed, no other asset whatever, unless it be, here and there, a pleasant memory or two and gratitude of my former pupils. There was nothing really in my case for them to be grateful about. They got nothing from me in the way of intellectual food, but a lean and perfunctory banquet; and anything that I gave them in the way of sound moral benefit I gave gladly and never missed. (Leacock, 1923, p. 9)

From his high school teaching experience a number of impressions were left which later featured prominently in his humorous writings, that is, impressions of the boarding house, the "Old Boy" alumnus, caning, Latin, the classics, among them. In a kinder mood Leacock would write in retrospect of his experience at Upper Canada College:

But schoolboys have a way of being grateful. It is the decent thing about them. A school boy, while he is at school, regards his masters as a mixed assortment of tyrants and freaks. . . but

somehow a schoolboy is no sooner done with his school and out in the business of life, than a soft haze of retrospect suffuses a new color over all that he has left behind. There is a mellow sound in the tones of the school bell that he never heard in his six years of attendance. There is a warmth in the color of the old red bricks that he never saw before; and such a charm and such a sadness in the brook or in the elm trees beside the pool and playground that he will stand beside them with a bowed and reverent head as in the silence of a cathedral. . . (Leacock, 1923, p. 10)

Leacock taught at Upper Canada College for ten years. In 1896, at 26 years of age, he sent a piece entitled, *My Financial Career*, to a New York magazine called *Life*, an account of a young man's first brush with a bank. The story became the most widely read of any of the hundreds of his brief pieces on human nature. The story was to be preserved by Canada's National Film Board on film, in 1962, as a prize-winning animated cartoon. This same story also became the feature story in what was to become Leacock's stepping stone to success as a writer of humour, *Literary Lapses*, published in 1910.

As the century drew to a close, Stephen Leacock decided not only to quit his job at Upper Canada College and seek a higher degree but to get married as well. The girl was Beatrix Hamilton. It was love at first sight for Leacock. It was also a way to get the doctorate he longed for since his bride-to-be's family was well-to-do and would support the young couple during Stephen's years as a doctoral candidate. Thus, in the fall of 1899, Leacock matriculated at the University of Chicago and studied political science and economics. The force that attracted him to Chicago was Thorsten Veblen, whose book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Leacock had read, and decided on the spot to study under him.

While still at Chicago and in his third year, Leacock was able to make arrangements to serve as a special lecturer in history and political science at McGill University in Montreal, commuting to and from the Windy City until he earned his doctorate. In May, 1903, Leacock defended his dissertation. During the oral portion he was asked by the examining committee to discuss the tax system of the state of Illinois, to which the candidate replied: "Gentlemen, let me say that I know nothing of the tax system of the state of Illinois, but, if you will allow me, I will speak on the theory of values." He spoke for hours, with his examiners taking turn to listen to him. He passed and treasured his Ph.D. forever after, both because it represented the fruit of much hard work and because of the financial strain placed on him at the time.

In a moment of false modesty he had something to say about the acquisition of a doctorate of philosophy:

'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 can be imparted to him.' (Legate, 1970, p. 35)

And so, the turn of the century found Leacock jubilant and happy; he had earned the Ph. D., a bride, a happy marriage, and clear sights on what he wanted to do — to be a university professor. His doctorate, incidentally, was in political science because economics, as such, was scarcely a field, let alone a subject taught in universities around the turn of the century. For all that, Leacock made much ado about his training and qualifications in economics. Admittedly, his dissertation topic dealt with *laissez-faire* and there was, and curiously so because of his own pronounced conservative views, his espousal of Thorsten Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and founder of institutional economics. Throughout his university teaching career which lasted from 1901 until his retirement (mandatory at age 65 and much to Leacock's consternation and disappointment) in 1936, a span of 35 years and all of it at McGill University in the department of economics and political science, Leacock considered himself an economist. While in tenure as such he wrote possibly the first college text of its kind, *Elements of Political Science*, a basic introduction to the subject. The book not only was well received, becoming required reading in three dozen American universities but eventually earned its author more royalties than the best of Leacock's best selling fiction of the future.

His goal of becoming a university professor realized, Leacock set about entrenching himself in the affairs of his university. If he had a pronounced passion for his farm in Orillia, Ontario, and to which he sped after the last spring class was over to spend the summer months playing seriously at being a gentleman farmer, Leacock had an equal passion for McGill University. Over the course of his long tenure there he became something of a notoriety, beloved by his students and colleagues alike, concerned that McGill should be, if not one of, then the best university around. He thrust himself actively in university matters, advising on the student newspaper, promoting the cause of economics, organizing the Political Science Club, and serving as department of economics chairperson, among others, always and everywhere espousing the cause and mission of McGill. From all accounts he was one of the most popular lecturers, witty, fresh, and informal. A natural performer, Leacock held to his theory of teaching, doubtless originating while still a high school teacher in Upper Canada College years earlier. According to biographer, David Legate, ". . . he did not believe in chasing students 'over a prescribed pace like a flock

of sheep'. That system contained in it the seeds of destruction. Reluctantly he adhered to the rules which insisted upon tests and recitations and marks and attendance sheets. He abided by the regulations though they were more often than not perfunctorily observed" (Legate, 1970, p. 40).

One student from that time, Murray G. Brooks, of Easthampton, Massachusetts (one of the composers of the McGill anthem, *Hail Alma Mater*), wrote of Leacock in a journal of his campus days:

... when we entered the classroom for political science, we were agog with curiosity. Up to the Professor's desk shuffled an untidy, disheveled figure, apparently just risen from a night on a park bench, none other than Stephen Leacock, known to us students as "Leaky Steamcock." Before he said a word, we all wanted to laugh. Sometimes brilliant and scintillating; often, perhaps after a bad night, serious and deadly dull, his flow of words was as tangled as his mussy hair. Occasionally his humour would break through and he would have the class in a roar. A born actor, at his best he could hold the class spellbound. No one ever skipped one of his lectures. The risk of missing one of his bright days was too great. A tricky examiner, he never gave high marks as one hoped for. (Legate, 1970, pp. 39-40)

The university serves as a topic of many of Leacock's funny pieces in which he lampooned professors, academics, students, campus life, alumnae, exams, and so on. It is enough to cite some titles of these pieces to get a good idea of their content: "Winnowed Wisdom", "The Oldest Living Graduate", "The Unintelligence Test", "Education Eating Up Life", "Homer the Humbug, An Academic Discussion", "The End of the Senility Gang", and "Recovery After Graduation". If, as it is often spoken, humour is a cover-up for weightier, more deeply-seated emotions, then behind the facade of Leacock's fun-poking at academic life lay a quite opposite and deeply felt appreciation. In her evocative recollection of her uncle, written as a preface to the last published book of Leacock pieces, Barbara Nimmo, who served as Leacock's personal secretary and aide for many years, described his attachment to McGill and to university work:

He would rather have been a professor than anything else, and especially at McGill. He thought it a position of great respect, not humbleness. McGill he liked as a cosmopolitan seat of knowledge, not bound by religious sects or narrow policies. . . . He valued above all else "brains" and was quick to realize latent ability in his students. He did a great deal for many of his honour students, either getting them started out

in the business world by sending them down to friends of his, heads of various Canadian companies and themselves often students of his, or urging them on to further degrees in outside colleges. (Nimmo, 1946, p. ix)

In 1939, as a professor emeritus, Stephen Leacock published the only book he wrote exclusively, and seriously, on education. It is entitled, *Too Much College*, subtitled, *Education Eating Up Life*. In it the essays serve to let one become familiar with the serious side — and there was this aplenty of Leacock. Here he touches upon a theme that concerned him deeply as a college professor — how much and what kind of education served the student best. The very title of his short work indicates what he thought and felt. In the preface he wrote:

This book is based on an experience of nearly twenty years of school and college training, ten years of school-teaching, thirty-six years of college lecturing, and three years of retirement, to think it over. The opinion I have reached is that education, in the narrow sense of school and college attendance, is taking too heavy a toll of the years of life and that the curriculum should be shortened. But, in the wider sense, what I want to advocate is not to make education shorter, but to make it much longer — indeed to make it last as long as life itself. . . . Education has become to a great extent a mere acquirement of a legal qualification to enter a closed profession, in place of being a process undertaken for its own sake. All that is best in education can only be acquired by spontaneous interest; thus gained it lasts and goes on. Education, merely imposed as a compulsory prerequisite to something else, finishes and withers when its task is done. Real education should mean a wonderful beginning, a marvelous initiation, a thorough “smattering”, and life will carry it on. (Leacock, 1945, p. vii)

For Leacock environment counted more than anything else in the learning process, thought above fact, experience in place of examination. He fulminated against “mass” education and the multiplication of courses, and an ever-multiplying curriculum. While the essays in *Too Much College* appeared as a clarion call for more concentrated education, and education that was stripped of all but the barest essentials, cleansed of superfluous repetition in swollen university catalogues, recommending that less time be spent at higher education, he underscored an appeal for the mind full of thought, as opposed to the bellyful of fact, for a university where students really wanted to learn and professors really have something to teach. His

own recommendation on the kind of school he would construct, while written in typical Leacock whimsy, sums up his views on higher education:

If I were founding a university — and I say it with all the seriousness of which I am capable — 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 probably with it, a decent reading room and a library. After that, if I still had money over I couldn't use, I would hire a professor and get some textbooks. (Quoted in Legate, 1970, p. 123)

The professor, it would appear, and in spite of all serious attempts to write otherwise, turned out to be someone, by virtue of his removal from the action of life, his fulminating on the other worldly, who was always destined to be joked about, laughed about and even pitied. This idea, whether in a funny piece, a parody, or a serious essay always managed to surface. Since his early high school teaching days and his three-month crash course in preparing for it, all of which he "hated", through his tenure as a university professor, Leacock held that education, if not coupled with experience, the practical, did not amount to much. The proof of one's education rested with the success of the student beyond the university. In a way, this describes Leacock as he himself was — both a very practical man who could run a farm for profit, construct things, succeed as a husbandman and that pipe-puffing, star-gazing lecturer who could spin a yarn on just about any subject, get weighty over a trifle, a split hair, and discuss well into the night on subjects that only an absent-minded professor could lose sight of. In short, Leacock, had he not chosen to become a university professor, could have succeeded at any endeavour he set his mind to.

If Leacock's humour today sounds a bit dated, his views on education may not be far behind. The changed conditions of today have no room for either the gentle satire or whimsical parodies or the notions of a school that taught only the subject of life. Yet, there is the legacy of characters that can still be found today even in the transistorized and micro-chipped world of work and study, characters who remind us as Leacock tried to express it: "The light the humorist seeks to shed is nothing less than the light of truth" (Davies, 1970, p. 41).

In closing, one episode that seems fitting here in this brief treatment of Leacock, the educator/humourist, and one that invokes both the recognition and affection he earned through his words, must be noted. On November 12, 1969, the Canadian Government marked the centenary of the humorist's birth by issuing a special six-cent postage stamp. With the active cooperation of the Canadian Post Office Department, the Graduates' Society of McGill University mailed in a "first-day cover" to some sixty thou-

sand graduates all over the world a biographical brochure along with selected quotations from Leacock's humorous works.

One former honors student and close friend of the great man remarked on the occasion of this stamp issue: "Wouldn't Stephen Leacock have loved it if he knew that twenty-two million Canadians were licking his backside!" (Quoted in Legate, 1970, p. 252).

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