Introduction

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"Personally," Stephen Leacock declared in his preface to Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town (1912), "I would sooner have written Alice in Wonderland than the whole Encyclopedia Britannica." Yet the worlds represented by Alice and the Encyclopedia, seemingly light years apart, are central to an understanding, appreciation, and assessment of the many worlds that commanded the attention of Stephen Butler Leacock (1869-1944).

Humorist and humanist, economist and educator, professor and pundit, Leacock devoted his life to education, first through his classrooms (at Upper Canada College in Toronto and later at McGill University in Montreal), then through his writings on history, economics, and political science, and finally, and perhaps most enduringly, through his volumes of humour. "Humour is essentially a comforter," he maintained, "reconciling us to things as they are in contrast to things as they might be."

In his own time, Leacock was the most famous Canadian author both at home and abroad. Sales of his books of humour, as well as his textbooks, were phenomenal. In 1906, for example, he published Elements of Political Science, which was translated into nineteen languages; this single textbook remained its author's greatest moneymaker.

Leacock has been the subject of biographical studies. His niece and secretary, Barbara Nimmo, wrote an affectionate reminiscence of her uncle shortly after his death in 1944, and another niece, Elizabeth Kimball, published her recollections, The Man in the Panama Hat.


*Stephen Leacock: A Reappraisal* addresses the multifaceted career of this complex individual. The collection of essays originated in the Leacock Symposium, which was held under the auspices of the Department of English at the University of Ottawa on April 26-27, 1985. The University of Ottawa initiated its symposium series in 1973 as a means of directing attention to Canadian authors meriting reassessment. The Leacock Symposium was designed to approach its subject from the variety of perspectives demanded by his many careers. Although Leacock’s lasting fame rests on his humorous writings, the other dimensions of his long and distinguished life are central to an understanding of his place in Canadian history. The following essays begin to sketch a portrait of a remarkable individual who left his distinctive mark in many areas of national and international concern.

Fifteen years ago, Mordecai Richler reflected on the enviable position of Canadian writers:

> Myth-makers are urgently needed; and, furthermore, applicants needn’t be unduly inhibited. The young writer, for instance, who is settling down to a novel in the Maritimes, hasn’t the ghost of Faulkner peering over his shoulder. Henry James didn’t come before. Or Twain. Or Fitzgerald. If the literary house is haunted, it’s only by the amiable Leacock, the dispensable de la Roche. For the rest, the tradition has yet to be made. It’s virgin land. Up for grabs.

In the opening essays of this collection, three distinguished Canadian writers, Timothy Findley, Erika Ritter, and Guy Vanderhaeghe, look back at the figure of “the amiable Leacock,” paying homage, with affection and laughter, to Leacock the humorist. In “Riding Off in All Directions: A Few Wild Words in Search of Stephen Leacock,” Findley returns to his years as an actor to examine the theatrical dimensions of Leacock’s written language. Wit, parody, and perhaps even flattery, if imitation is indeed a form of flattery, are central to Ritter’s
"Leacock and Leahen: The Feminine Influence on Stephen Leacock." And in "Leacock and Understanding Canada," Vanderhaeghe invokes his western Canadian background to explore the particular nature of Leacock's fictional universe.

The next four essays turn from Leacock the humorist to other professional commitments that occupied his teaching and his writing. In "Leacock and the Media," Ralph L. Curry describes, through Leacock's own words, the author's involvement in the relatively new media of radio, film, and television. Leacock as an historian of Canada is the focus of Ian Ross Robertson's essay on "The Historical Leacock." Myron J. Frankman studies "Stephen Leacock, Economist: An Owl Among the Parrots," placing him in his historical context and evaluating his influence in the world of economics.

In his literary essays, Leacock could present himself as a Canadian, an American, an Englishman, or even as a combination of two or three of these nationalities. In "Imperial Cosmopolitanism, or the Partly Solved Riddle of Leacock's Multi-National Persona," James Steele investigates the implications of Leacock's multi-national literary persona, which is, he discovers, consistent with Leacock's political and historical doctrine of imperial cosmopolitanism.

The multi-national persona that Steele discusses provides a natural transition to Beverly Rasporich's study of "Stephen Leacock, Humorist: American by Association." Her essay places Leacock's humorous writings in the tradition of American humour, yet concludes that Leacock's humour is British by heredity, American by association, and, at the very least, Canadian by experience.

Among Leacock's many volumes of humour, Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town is universally acknowledged to be his masterpiece. The little town of Mariposa has captured the attention, the affection, and the laughter of generations of readers. A trio of essays approach the book from different and differing angles. In "Religion and Romance in Mariposa," Gerald Lynch begins with an examination of Leacock's structural revisions and discovers a more highly organized and complex work than is usually acknowledged; for Lynch, the centre of the book is the opposition between the virtues of romance and love and the failure of the town's institutionalized religion. In "The Roads Back: Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town and George Elliott's The Kissing Man," Clara Thomas explores Mariposa through a comparison with the later small Ontario town of Elliott's book. And Ed
Jewinski brings the vocabulary and vision of post-structuralism to his reading, "Untestable Inferences: Post-Structuralism and Leacock's Achievement in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town.*"

"The Achievement of Stephen Leacock" presents the final reflections of four senior scholars of Canadian literature. Alec Lucas places Leacock in the context of McGill University, while Malcolm Ross suggests Leacock's importance to the New Canadian Library and, as a consequence, to the introduction of Canadian literature courses in schools and colleges. Glenn Clever and R. L. McDougall return to the irony, the laughter, and the humanity that inform Leacock's vision.

*Stephen Leacock: A Reappraisal,* the first collection of essays devoted to Leacock, closes, appropriately, with Ralph L. Curry's "Stephen Leacock: The Writer and His Writings," the first complete bibliography of Leacock's publications. Its length is a final testimony to the range of Leacock's knowledge and interests.