Leacock and Understanding Canada

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This essay should begin with an explanation. I came to read Stephen Leacock late, beyond the bounds of a university, and thus without benefit of supervision. Therefore, whatever I write cannot be attributed to bad teaching. Nor can I pretend to be familiar with more than nine or ten of his books. As you may already suspect, this is an apology for what follows.

The first book of Leacock's which I read was *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, easily the best of the ones I know. This, I hope, entitles me to call it his masterpiece. What I discovered in its pages was that strange and exotic place, Mariposa, a town like no other I have encountered in Canadian fiction. Since I have lived all my life in the West, I am driven to wonder if in commenting on the strangeness of Mariposa I might not be raising the spectre of regionalism which so often haunts discussion of our literature, sowing confusion and dismay. Yet I am convinced that what travels under the name of regionalism is really only the result of looking at the same thing, Canada, from different angles. And I would like to suggest that we might learn something by taking a walk around the monument which Stephen Leacock has become and taking a look at him from a slightly different angle too.

In suggesting this I am not attempting to diminish that monument. No one who wants to understand our literature or our nation can disregard or dismiss Leacock. It seems to me that Leacock is central to an appreciation of both our literature and our nation. His prominent position in Canadian letters could be assured on any number of grounds. His virtues as a stylist alone would cause him to be remembered. No other Canadian has written such elegant, lucid, yet intimate prose. But Leacock is a great deal more than a stylist. He is one of the great interpreters of this country.
It was through Leacock that I came to understand a grandfather who had always succeeded in bewildering me. In turn, what I knew of my grandfather made Leacock seem more familiar and less peculiar than he might otherwise have been to someone who had spent his entire life on the prairies.

Growing up in a small town in Saskatchewan I was fortunate enough to have the benefit of the company of both my grandfathers. Each was an immigrant. One came from Belgium, the other from Ontario. It is the grandfather who seemed most foreign to me—the one who came from Ontario—that Leacock has helped me to understand.

What I perceived as his foreignness, his bizarreness, was a result of context. In a town which was almost entirely populated by men and women of Eastern and Central European stock he belonged to a tiny minority group. He had a British name. He was a Protestant. And he was animated and ruled by all the vices and virtues of old Ontario. Amid those representatives of the wretched and huddled masses of Europe, he was the only bona fide refugee from Mariposa.

What made him so odd, even in the eyes of his children and grandchildren, was that he lived by a set of assumptions that were very different from those of his neighbours. In a society which has often been loosely described as “progressive,” where politics were inclined to be liberal or radical, and most people had little notion of, or interest in, ancestors and antecedents, my grandfather was one of the few people who was a loyal Tory and proud of a family tree he could trace back to what he felt were distant horizons.

In a political society my grandfather clung to his politics because they distinguished him from his fellow citizens. His politics were the tip of an iceberg of submerged values. They were a way of standing fast to his race, his religion, and everything he had been taught as a child.

Everyone else in my home town seemed to regard the vote as a way of asserting self-interest or expressing gratitude. Most Eastern Europeans supported Liberals because they were grateful for Clifford Sifton’s immigration policies, while the more fiery and radical were partisans of the CCF and Social Credit. These people were not burdened by family notions of political tradition or loyalty. After all, they had not been in the habit of voting. They were the kind of citizens Leacock describes as “people whose aim is to be broad-minded and judicious and who vote Liberal or Conservative according to their judgment of the questions of the day. If their judgment of these questions tells them there is something in it for them in voting Liberal, then they do so.”

Nevertheless, after reading Sunshine Sketches I came away with the distinct impression that the body politic of Mariposa was leavened by voters of sterner principles, those who were, to quote Leacock, “Liberals or Conservatives all their lives and are called dyed-in-the-wool Grits or old-time Tories and things of that sort.”

What differentiated my grandfather from so many of his fellow townsmen was that he followed this fine old Ontario tradition of being born with one’s politics decided. Any change in allegiance dictated by a
consideration of self-interest would have been an apostasy too horrible to be contemplated. His motivation was not really political, but tribal. My other grandfather, my Belgian grandfather, approached voting with an alacrity that stupefied my British grandfather. My Belgian grandfather had been, in rapid succession, a CCFer, a Liberal, and even once a Conservative. When he had run through all the parties he went back to the beginning and started all over again. That is not to say that he did not demonstrate a passionate commitment to whatever party temporarily harboured him, but then it would adopt some misguided policy such as an increase in the tax on pipe tobacco and he would be forced to withdraw his support.

My British grandfather had no difficulties in this respect. He knew he was a Conservative because he had been born a Conservative. He liked things to be settled this way. In his mind it was a noble arrangement which had served well his father, his father's father, his father's father's father, and so on, back into the mists of time that presumably shrouded that neolithic Conservative from whose loins they had all proceeded. Nor was he blind to the defects in this system. He recognized and felt them. Particularly when he didn't agree with the party's policies, or hated the man nominated to carry the colours in his riding, or thought the party leader was an imbecile. But putting those things aside my grandfather was always proud to be a Conservative.

As far as I could see he got nothing from this loyalty, except a sense of who he was. He was like Leacock who wrote, "I belong to the Conservative party, but as yet I have failed entirely in Canadian politics, never having received a contract to build a bridge, or make a wharf, nor to construct even the smallest section of the Transcontinental Railway." At one point in his life such political success appeared to be within his grasp. After a Conservative electoral triumph my grandfather had hopes of obtaining a clerkship in the local Liquor Board store, but the party, swayed by higher considerations, gave the job to somebody's cousin. Thirty years after the fact Grandfather was still grumbling about the injustice of it all. What the poor innocent did not see was that the party knew he was a Mariposan Conservative and, like Judge Pepperleigh, no more capable of switching party allegiances than a leopard is of changing its spots. So why would anyone be dumb enough to buy support that did not need to be bought?

When election time rolled around my grandfather would breathlessly report that the Lawyer Mackenzie and the Doctor Mackenzie had told him they were voting Conservative, as if this news assured a Conservative sweep of the town. What he could not seem to comprehend was that he and my grandmother, the Mackenzies and their wives, the British element as it were, only accounted for six votes. What about all those Liberal Hungarians, Czechs, and Ukrainians? The truth was that my grandfather could not see them. Not really. Or if he did, he assumed they could be appealed to and touched in the ways he was, and of course they could not. They had been shaped by different circumstances.
All of this is, of course, merely a long preamble to the point that what one is capable of seeing depends a good deal on the angle of one's vision. Perhaps reflecting on my grandfather's unique perspective helped me explain something about Leacock that has always puzzled me. I had wondered why it was that a man who had lived as many years as Leacock had in Montreal never, to my knowledge, introduced a French-Canadian into his fiction. And why were there plenty of Anglican rector and English peers but no Catholics or Jews? Montreal could certainly boast significant numbers of these last two communities.

In raising these points I do not wish to make a criticism of Leacock but to raise a point. I am not saying that we ought to find in Leacock's books French-Canadians, Catholics, or Jews, only that we do not. After all, a writer defines his fictional universe as much by what he excludes as by what he includes. It is not an original remark to say that writers who are contemporaries and who share a common citizenship produce very different work. Henry James is one kind of American writer and Mark Twain another. Writing at roughly the same time, these writers produced their finest work when their talents and imagination discovered what, for want of a better word, I will call their subjects. Their masterpieces proclaim to the world a part of what it meant to be American then and, by extension, a part of what it means to be American now.

The same, I think, can be said of Leacock.

What was his subject? Mariposa. And what is Mariposa? I do not think it is what the back cover of the New Canadian Library edition of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* proclaims it to be in announcing that "although Mariposa can be identified as Orillia, Ontario, it is also true that it represents any small town anywhere in Canada." An orthodox opinion, I suspect.

But I don't believe it for a minute. To claim that Leacock's Mariposa is the Canadian small town, a generic village that can be plopped down anywhere in the country to do duty like a Hollywood set, is to misrepresent what the rest of English-speaking Canada is and to diminish what Leacock achieved in his portrait. What Leacock drew with such love and conviction is not necessarily common to us all. Leacock's small town is not Alice Munro's small town, nor Margaret Laurence's small town, nor Sinclair Ross's small town. Nor should we expect it to be. To ignore differences is to diminish Mariposa in all its glorious particularity. As Czeslaw Milosz has written in *The Witness of Poetry*, "we apprehend the human condition with pity and terror not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time, in one particular province, one particular country."

Mariposa is a small town of a particular time, place, and people. It is important not to forget that this is a picture of a lost world, an Edwardian town basking in a bright sunshine of confidence, peace, and stability; a town that has no inkling that it will soon send its sons to perish in the bloody mud of Flanders. We also ought not to forget that it is an Ontario town and a British town.
In some sense Mariposa is also the closest thing to a utopia that the small "c" conservative who denies the notion of human perfectibility will permit himself to dream. Here is the organic society so much applauded, a society whose members are bound to one another by common values, traditions, a longing for stability, and a belief in a deity. For a writer of Leacock's convictions and temperament this was a subject he both loved and understood. In no other of his works does his gentle humour illuminate human idiosyncrasy with a steadier light, or does the pathos he evokes seem so much a natural outcome of our common human journey.

Of course, perhaps this Mariposa he created was never more than a dream. But Leacock's dream tells me something about my country as Twain's and James's dreams tell me something about America. In Sunshine Sketches I am allowed to glimpse what people of a certain time and place wanted life to be. And such dreams, projected by the force of desire, have consequences far into the future.

Yet how can I, an admitted foreigner to Mariposa, offer these speculations, separated from it as I am by time, region, and perhaps even sympathy? I could offer the suggestion that the love and skill with which Leacock writes lead me to perceive these things. But I have recourse to something else. After all, I knew my grandfather. One test of the dream is to imagine him in Mariposa. I have no difficulty in doing so.

I have no doubt that my grandfather would have been completely at home in Jeff Thorpe's barber shop, as he would have been at his ease promenading the deck of the Mariposa Belle. And how gladly he would have raised his voice in a Mariposa church or a glass in Smith's hostelry. Best of all, I see him as a Knight of Pythias. His Eastern European neighbours were not given to joining fraternal organizations. And what pleasure he would have taken in fighting a real election, the kind they fought in Missinaba County.

It is in this fictional landscape that my grandfather appears at home to me, rather than the one he inhabited for most of his life. Perhaps this is some kind of testament to the strange reciprocity which exists between Life and Art. If it is, it suggests another way of looking at Sunshine Sketches, not as the embodiment of some kind of vague "Canadianism," but as a distinct and local expression. Perhaps even, to press a point, as a regional and ethnic work. Looked at in this way Sunshine Sketches can lay claim to being not only a fine, funny, sad book, but also a book which possesses the power to reveal one Canadian to another, even across the daunting gulfs of space and time.
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