Leacock and the Media

RALPH L. CURRY

Born in 1869, "the middle of Queen Victoria's reign," Stephen Leacock saw nearly all of the modern media introduced before his death in 1944. Even journalism changed to its modern mode, as he noted in more than one instance. But it is the newer media of radio, television, and the cinema that are the focus of this study. Stephen Leacock was much more heavily involved in these endeavours than is generally supposed. As Mark Twain was the first significant author to employ the typewriter, Leacock may well have been the first significant author for whom these media were important.

Radio came to Leacock's attention first. His 1923 book Over the Footlights contained an essay entitled "Radio. A New Form of Trouble." In the beginning, like the rest of the world, he wants to know:

What is radio? I shall be only too glad if any reader of this book will write and tell me, simply and in words I can understand, what Radio is.

Let him understand at the outset that it is no use telling me that by means of Radio, I would be able, seated comfortably in my own armchair, to hear the Pittsburgh orchestra. I know it. I don't want to. Nor need he inform me that, seated comfortably in my own armchair, I can hear a speech by W. J. Bryan. I don't need to. I heard one.

Nor do I wish for information involving the use of such words as "receiving circuit," "rheostat," and "Variometer." These words are no help to me. I have tried them out and I don't get them. I have already read a little book called "Radio for the Beginner" and it has beaten me. I have sent away for another that is called "Radio for Infants" but I have very little hope from it. I know already that it will tell me that any infant nowadays, seated comfortably in his high chair, can hear the Pittsburgh orchestra. And of course it will contain what are called "directions" telling me to "insert my antennae in my ears." But I refuse to. It sounds like insults, that we used to use when I was young.
The narrator here is one of Leacock’s favourite poses; he is the same little man who says, “when I go into a bank I get rattled,” in his most famous sketch, “My Financial Career.” The piece itself clearly acknowledges radio, and five years later in Short Circuits, Leacock turned to the content of radio. “If We Had Only Had the Radio Sooner” parodies a broadcast of the Norman Conquest:

Announcer: Now, folks, this is Senlac Hill, and we’re going to put a real battle on the air for you, and it’s going to be some battle. The principals are Harold, King of England—lift your helmet, Harold—and William, the Dook, or as some call him, the Duck, of Normandy. Both the boys are much of a size, both trained down to weight, and each has got with him as nice a little bunch of knights and archers as you’d see east of Pittsburgh. Umpires are: for Harold, the Reverend Allbold of the Soft Head, Archbishop of Canterbury; for William, Odo the Ten-Spot, Bishop of Bayeux. Side lines, Shorty Sigismund and Count Felix Marie du Pâte de Foie Gras. Referee, King Sweatoff of Sweden, ex-Champion of the Scandinavian League. Battle called at exactly 10 a.m. They’re off. The Norman boys make a rush for the hill. Harold’s centre forwards shoot arrows at them. William leads a rush at the right center. Attaboy, William! That’s the stuff! Harold’s boys block the rush. Two Norman knights ruled off for interference. William hurls his mace. Forward pass. Ten-year penalty. Quarter time.

Leacock’s attack is clearly more direct here. He copies the arch enthusiasm of the sportscaster, pointing out that the radio newsmen frequently tries to get the same “rah, rah” effect into his broadcast.

Shortly after, Leacock became personally interested in radio. In 1931 he received an inquiry about the cost of using material from Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town in adaptations for radio drama. Three months later W. N. DeFoe proposed that Leacock himself do a broadcast. He suggested a half-hour format, the centre of which would be a ten-minute “talk” by Leacock. Interested in the idea, Leacock scribbled on the bottom of the letter, “new flap Radio.” Leacock’s signal to his niece Barbara Ulrichsen to start a new file. His response to DeFoe was a quick affirmative one in which he proposed to do some old material as well as some written particularly for the program. We may only presume that Mr. DeFoe had trouble finding a sponsor, because the show never went on the air.

In 1934, Leacock made what was perhaps his heaviest commitment to radio. Joe McDougall, first befriended by Leacock when he was editor of Goblin, had gone into advertising. Putting together a radio show for Pompeian Hand Cream, he approached Leacock about broadcasting his own show. After some bargaining, they finally came to terms. Leacock was to receive thirteen hundred dollars for twenty-six broadcasts, to be done in thirteen weeks. The shows would be done at station CFCF, at his home on Côte des Neiges, or at Old Brewery Bay in Orillia, wherever Leacock chose. Leacock was entitled to have a dinner party and bring his dinner guests as his audience to the broadcast. “I don’t like talking to a box on a stick,” said Leacock. Beginning on March 27 in Montreal, the
first four broadcasts were done from Montreal; the last twenty-two originated from Orillia.

Joe McDougall remembers that this was not a very happy experience for Leacock or for radio. "Had it been television," said Joe, "and the audience could have seen Dr. Leacock's genial face as he spoke, he would have been a great success. As it was, he sounded conceited, like a man simply laughing at his own jokes." At any rate, at the end of the thirteen weeks Pompeian Hand Cream and Stephen Leacock were happy to part company.

Radio, however, still wanted Leacock's services. The next year the BBC broadcast an adaptation of "Winsome Winnie," and the following year Hans Christian Rude negotiated for the rights to translate "Soaked in Seaweed" for use on Copenhagen radio. Gladstone Murray, formerly a student of Leacock's and then head of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, urged Leacock:

I have not abandoned hope that you might change your mind about the microphone some day. . . . How would you like to experiment with reading some of your own shorter stories and sketches; why not revive "Literary Lapses" and "Nonsense Novels"?

Indeed, Leacock had some other offers which he did consider for a short time. Barbara Whitley, a radio actress, approached him in 1938, and he wrote radio monologues for her. The manuscript of "Miss Rush Leaps at Leap Year" has noted on its title page "written for Barbara Whitley." He commented the same year in a letter to his agent, Paul Reynolds, that the manuscript which he enclosed, "Mrs. Easy Has Her fortune Told," was intended as a monologue for radio. Tommy Tweed corresponded with Leacock in 1940, arranging permission to adapt Sunshine Sketches for radio drama. And in 1941 Howard Reinheimer signed an agreement to pay Leacock a hundred dollars per week while his adaptation of Sunshine Sketches was being broadcast.

From the beginning of radio, then, Leacock kept up with what was going on in the medium, tried to do some broadcasting himself, and was writing for radio. Less than a year before Leacock died, Jacques Chambrun, another of his agents, was still urging him to write more material for broadcast.

A more surprising side of Leacock's involvement in broadcasting is the production of his work on television. There was not, of course, much television going on during Leacock's lifetime, but in 1937 Clinton-Baddeley wrote Leacock that his adaptation of "Behind the Beyond" had been done by BBC television and had been very well received. In the next year the publishing firm of John Lane, in its semi-annual statement to Leacock, reported royalties due him of two pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence for a television performance of "The Raft" and a similar amount for a broadcast of "Behind the Beyond." World War II, of course, very shortly stopped any further playing with so expensive a toy as television.
Leacock's involvement in the motion picture industry was a more active one than the results would indicate. He could never quite seem to make the right connections, but he was early quite interested in movies. Family legend says that Mary Pickford, formerly of Toronto, tried to have Leacock come to Hollywood to write for Pickfair Productions in the twenties. Certainly, earlier than that, in 1915, a communication from John Lane noted, “amount received from Messrs. Hughes Massie and Company on a/c against royalties for Dramatic Movie Picture rights of ‘Sunshine Sketches’ 44 pounds, 16 shillings.”

The next year Leacock wrote in “Madeline of the Movies”:

In writing this I ought to explain that I am a tottering old man of forty-six. I was born too soon to understand moving pictures. They go too fast. I can't keep up. In my young days we used a magic lantern. It showed Robinson Crusoe in six scenes. It took all evening to show them. When it was done the hall was filled full with black smoke and the audience was quite unstrung with excitement. What I set down here represents my thoughts as I sit in front of a moving picture photoplay and interpret it as best I can.

Flick, flick, flick! I guess it must be going to begin now, but it's queer the people don't stop talking: how can they expect to hear the pictures if they go on talking? Now it's off. PASSED BY THE BOARD OF—. Ah, this looks interesting—passed by the board of—wait till I adjust my spectacles and read what it—

It's gone. Never mind, here's something else, let me see—CAST OF CHARACTERS—Oh, yes—let's see who they are—MADELINE MEADOWLARK, a young something—EDWARD DANGERFIELD, a—what? Ah, yes, a room—at least, it's spelt r-o-o-m, that must be a room all right—but wait till I see what that is that's written across the top—MADELINE MEADOWLARK; OR, ALONE IN A GREAT CITY. I see, that's the title of it. I wonder which of the characters is alone. I guess not Madeline: she'd hardly be alone in a place like that. I imagine it's more likely Edward Dangerous the Room. A room would probably be alone a great deal. I should think. Let's see what the other characters are—JOHN HOLDFAST, a something. FARMER MEADOWLARK, MRS. MEADOWLARK, his something—

Pshaw, I missed the others, but never mind; flick, flick, it's beginning—What's this? A bedroom, eh? Looks like a girl's bedroom—pretty poor sort of place. I wish the picture would keep still a minute—in Robinson Crusoe it all stayed still and one could sit and look at it, the blue sea and the green palm trees and the black footprints in the yellow sand—but this blamed thing keeps rippling and flickering all the time—Ha! there's the girl herself—come into her bedroom. My! I hope she doesn't start to undress in it—that would be fearfully uncomfortable with all these people here. No, she's not undressing—she's gone and opened the cupboard. What's that she's doing—taking out a milk jug and a glass—empty, eh? I guess it must be, because she seemed to hold it upside down. Now she's picked up a sugar bowl—empty, too, eh?—and a cake tin, and that's empty—What on earth does she take them all out for if they're empty? Why can't she speak? I think—hullo—who's this coming in? Pretty hard-looking sort of woman—what's she got in her hand?—some sort of paper, I guess—
she looks like a landlady, I shouldn't wonder if—
Flick, flick! Say! Look there on the screen:

"YOU OWE ME
THREE WEEKS' RENT."

Oh, I catch on! That's what the landlady says, eh? Say! That's a mighty smart way to indicate it isn't it? I was on to that in a minute—flick, flick—hullo, the landlady's vanished—what's the girl doing now—say, she's praying! Look at her face! Doesn't she look religious, eh?

Flick, flick!
Oh, look, they've put her face, all by itself, on the screen. My! what a big face she's got when you see it like that.
She's in her room again—she's taking off her jacket—by Gee! She is going to bed! Here, stop the machine; it doesn't seem—Flick, flick!

Well, look at that! She's in bed, all in one flick, and fast asleep! Something must have broken in the machine and missed out a chunk. There! She's asleep all right—looks as if she was dreaming. Now it's sort of fading. I wonder how they make it do that? I guess they turn the wick of the lamp down low: that was the way in Robinson Crusoe—Flick, flick!

In this piece, as in his introduction to radio, Leacock played the unsophisticated viewer who does not understand movies. But in 1919 he gives us a much more knowing movie treatment of Christopher Columbus:

Let us make the scenario together. First idea to be expressed:

Christopher Columbus was the son of poor but honest parents.

This might seem difficult to a beginner, but to those of us who frequent the movies it is nothing.

The reel spins and we see—a narrow room—(it is always narrow in the movies)—to indicate straitened circumstances—cardboard furniture—high chairs with carved backs—two cardboard beams across the ceiling (all this means the Middle Ages)—a long dinner table—all the little Colombuses seated at it—Teresa Colombo cutting bread at one end of it—gives a slice to each, one slice (that means poverty in the movies)—Teresa rolls her eyes up—all the little children put their hands together and say grace (this registers honesty). The thing is done. Let us turn back to the history book and see what is to be put in next.

"...The father of Christopher, Bartolomeo Colombo was a man of no especial talent of whom nothing is recorded."

That's easy. First we announce him on the screen:

BARTOLOMEO COLOMBO ................... Mr. Henderson

Then we stick him on the film on a corner of the room, leaning up against the cardboard clock and looking at the children. This attitude in the movies always indicates a secondary character of no importance. His business is to look at the others and to indicate forgetfulness of self, incompetence, unimportance, vacuity, simplicity. Note how this differs
from the attitude of important characters. If a movie character—one of importance—is plotting or scheming, he seats himself at a little round table, drums on it with his fingers, and half closes one eye. If he is being talked to, or having a letter or document or telegram read to him, he stands "facing full" and working his features up and down to indicate emotion sweeping over them. If he is being "exposed" (which is done by pointing fingers at him), he hunches up like a snake in an angle of the room with both eyes half shut and his mouth set as if he just eaten a lemon. But if he has none of these things to express and is only in the scene as a background for the others, then he goes over and leans in an easy attitude against the tall cardboard clock.

That then is the place for Bartolomeo Colombo. To the clock with him.

Leacock has begun to understand the idiom of film.

Leacock wrote of what was perhaps his first real encounter with a motion picture camera:

This picture was taken with a high power (for the time) moving picture camera, by a Mr. Alexander, who came to Orillia (1920) to take pictures of me. I said to him, "Let's drive up and fish in the Black River (about fifteen miles away) where there is real scenery." To be sure of having a fish to be photographed in the act of being caught, I bought one at the butcher's store before we left. On the river at first Alexander was very careful of his camera. "This thing," he said, "cost 1000 dollars." Later when he got excited having never fished before, I called out, "Look out for your camera," and he answered, "To hell with it."

In the same year in an interview in the Vancouver Daily Province, the interviewer commented that Leacock was modest, and he replied, "if I am modest . . . it's because I realize all too well the many things I cannot do. That keeps me humble. For instance, I cannot write a movie." The production of movies was clearly on his mind. He continued to receive movie offers, and he said to one of his publishers, who passed on a request for rights, that to make a movie of "My Financial Career" all one had to do was "take the text and illustrate it."

In Over the Footlights he parodies the captions and jump-cuts of movies, and the femme fatale character so frequently portrayed:

I believe I first noticed her in the moving pictures. In these she wears a shimmering, snaky kind of dress that fits her like an onion peel. Personally I know nothing of dress. In fact, my wife says I never observe it. That is an error. At the right moment, I do. And I must say that onion peel effect commands my warmest approval. The Vampire Woman wears nothing on her arms and shoulders. She doesn't need to. And her dress is generally slit up the side a good deal. This allows her freedom of movement. In my opinion she ought to have it. Freedom of movement is a splendid thing.

In "One Crowded Quarter Second" he makes fun of the way movies handle time:

The hero, for example, gets sent to the penitentiary for ten years. You see him arrested, you watch the trial (four seconds), the fruitless appeal
to the governor (two seconds), and then you see him put behind the kind of prison bars, the toast rack pattern, that they use in the movies for penitentiary.

A turnkey with a sad face and slow mournful steps (he takes over five seconds) has locked the hero in. Great Heavens! Ten years! to think that his young life—he is only twenty-eight—is to waste away for ten years behind those stone walls; and then, just as you have hardly had time to finish thinking it—he's out! And quite simple the way they do it! Just a legend or title, or whatever they call it, thrown on the screen:

**AND SO THIS TRIED SOUL LEARNS IN SORROW A NEW PEACE**

Yes, learns it and is out! Clear out of the penitentiary in a quarter of a second. Just by learning peace! I must say if I ever go in, I'll learn pretty quickly.27

And in "Done into Movies" he satirizes what happens to stories once the movies get hold of them:

**THE STORY OF ADAM AND EVE**

*Technical Report of Its Adaptation for the Film*

We have looked over this MS. with reference to the question of adapting it to a scenario. We find the two principal characters finely and boldly drawn and both well up to the standard of the moving picture. The man Adam—Christian name only given in the MS.—appeals to us very strongly as a primitive but lovable nature. Adam has "pep" and we think that we could give him an act among the animals, involving the very best class of menagerie and trapeze work which would go over big.

But we consider that Adam himself would get over better if he represented a more educated type and we wish therefore to make Adam a college man, preferably from a western university.

We think similarly that the principal female character, Eve, would appeal more directly to the public if it was made clear that she was an independent woman with an avocation of her own. We propose to make her a college teacher of the out-of-door woodland dances now so popular in the leading women's universities.

It is better that Adam and Eve should not be married at the opening of the scenario but at the end after they have first found themselves and then found one another.

We find the "Garden" lonely and the lack of subordinate characters mystifying; we also find the multiplicity of animals difficult to explain without a special setting.

We therefore propose to remove the scene to the Panama Canal Zone, where the animals are being recruited for a circus troupe. This will allow for mass scenes of Panaminos, Mesquito and other Indians, tourists, bootleggers and the United States navy, offering an environment of greater variety and more distinctive character than an empty garden.

The snake we do not like. It is an animal difficult to train and lacking in docility. We propose instead to use a goat.28

That Leacock considered movies a serious part of his culture is attested by a public relations brochure put out by the Graduate School of
Economics and Political Science for the 1930-31 term. On the back of the leaflet Leacock wrote, "The department is anxious to enlist the attention of incoming graduate students for the following topics as subjects for thesis work and publication," and one of the topics he mentions is "Moving Pictures in Canada (social, political and legislative aspect)." It was shortly after this, of course, that Leacock tried his own hand at directing silent movies with a home movie camera. Title cards indicate at least three such films were attempted. And there were negotiations for Robert Benchley to play the lead in a movie made from "My Financial Career" as well as an offer, which Leacock found attractive, to write the English sub-titles for a French movie, under the English title of "They Were Nine Bachelors."

But Leacock's closest brush with the movies came in 1942 with his publication of "My Remarkable Uncle." Appearing first in Reader's Digest, the flamboyant character of the remarkable uncle, E. P. Leacock, drew great attention from film makers. First Paramount and then Twentieth Century Fox asked for galley proofs of the book so they might be passed on to story editors even before publication. To one of them Leacock replied,

I am afraid it will not interest you as it is only a piece—not a book. I have always thought the Winnipeg boom of 1880-82 would make a new setting for a book set up with a character like my uncle as a central figure.

If you thought of expanding the sketch to a story, I could be of use.

In less than a month, Leacock wrote "Boom Times" and submitted it to Dorothy Purdell, who had first approached him from Twentieth Century Fox. She sent the story to Lubitsch and when no interest was expressed, she requested permission to submit it to MGM as a vehicle for Frank Morgan. Still later she had negotiations with another film maker.

Leacock never wasted anything he wrote, and so in 1943 in Happy Stories, he went ahead and published "Boom Times," which he introduced as follows:

Some readers may be kind enough to recall a sketch which I published in a magazine two or three years ago called My Remarkable Uncle, which afterwards became the title piece of a book of sketches. I now take the same distinguished actual person and remove him from the cramped environment of truth to the larger company of fiction. After the opening page he parts company with his origin, and the people who surround him are, individually, fiction, although, I hope, living pictures of the time and place.

But in writing to Dodd Mead about the rights, he agreed that the publisher would receive the usual percentage should any pieces be taken for further publication or use in movies. In the cryptic notes for his answer he had written, "But [not] for Happy Stories: longest story written specially for movie pictures—has met fine reception at Hollywood—agents say certain sooner or later."
All in all, the Leacock archives contain more than a hundred and fifty letters on the subjects of dramatic rights, movie rights, and radio permissions. Leacock continued to be interested in all of them. Certainly, since his death some splendid use has been made of Leacock materials. Mavor Moore adapted *Sunshine Sketches* into *Sunshine Town* which played the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto and on television. John Drainie in the early fifties did a series from *Sunshine Sketches*, in 1959 starred in “Baron of Brewery Bay” directed by Norman Campbell, and in the sixties did extensive recordings for radio of Leacock stories and the whole of *Sunshine Sketches*. Tommy Tweed did at least two television shows based on *Sunshine Sketches* in 1963 and four shows in 1970. And, of course, there was the Harry Rasky production in 1976 of “Travels Through Life With Leacock,” starring Christopher Plummer and done by the CBC. The National Film Board has animated both “My Financial Career” and “The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones.” There has been then a considerable media involvement in materials using Leacock’s words or characters. It is hard to believe that there is a more significant Canadian writer who might be used by the media, and even harder to believe that there is a more significant author who is easier to adapt to radio, television, or film. There is an eminently dramatic quality about Leacock’s writings. John Drainie used to say, “Leacock lines are so easy to learn because they are so sayable.”

A great many people are still saying them.