Stephen Leacock

Staines, David

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Staines, David.
Stephen Leacock: A Reappraisal.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6592

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=148742
Imperial Cosmopolitanism, or the Partly Solved Riddle of Leacock's Multi-National Persona

JAMES STEELE

Leacock's peculiar habit of altering the national character of his literary persona may be explained, at least in part, by a consideration of some of his work as a political theorist. On the one hand, his literary essays provide ample evidence that he could present himself as a Canadian, an American, an Englishman, or even as a combination of two or three of these nationalities. On the other hand, his political writings offer an account of the evolution of the state as a political form and an appreciation of the historic role of nations and empires in its development. A significant connection between these two fields of discourse—between Leacock's literary essays and his professional work as a political scientist—has not been established by either Leacock's critics or his biographers. Yet Leacock's multi-national literary persona was consistent with his political and historical doctrine of imperial cosmopolitanism and even shared some of its paradoxical properties.

That Stephen Leacock frequently changed the national identity of his literary voice is a literary fact that cannot be denied. Sometimes he writes as a Canadian, for a Canadian audience, and about a distinctly Canadian community. His best-known work in this voice is *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, which begins with the following words: "I don't know whether you know Mariposa. If not, it is of no consequence, for if you know Canada at all, you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns just like it." Although Leacock the narrator can easily contrast the width of Mariposa's Main Street with that of Wall Street or Piccadilly, Mariposa remains a distinctly Canadian place. It is situated, to be sure, on Lake Wissanott in the Third Concession of Tecumseh Township in the county of Missinabie in the Province of Ontario in the Dominion of Canada within the British Empire. Its inhabitants are more or less aware of Canadian history, Canadian politics, and Canadian religion; they also sing "O Canada" at frequent intervals. Their numbers include at least one
person of fourth-generation, Loyalist stock—Peter Pupkin—and at least one specimen of a Canadian nationalist—the antiquated Liberal who, in a letter to the Mariposa newspaper protesting Judge Pepperleigh’s Conservatively partisan picnic speech, signs himself “Patriotus Canadiensis.” Leacock could thus identify himself with the Canadian community from, as it were, the inside.

At other times, Leacock writes just as unequivocally as if he were an American, writing for an American audience from an American point of view. Consider, for example, Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich. Although this work reflects certain aspects of Montreal and was originally published in serial form in the Montreal Star, its urban setting is distinctly American. Its unnamed “City” is situated somewhere east and south of Wisconsin, not far from Lake Erie, near Cohoga County in an unnamed state of the United States. Members of this community refer to American history, American political parties (both Republican and Democratic), American churches (both Presbyterian and Episcopalian), American companies, American cities (including New York, Boston, and Chicago), American benefactors (such as Carnegie), and American institutions. Some of them name their clubs after Jefferson and Washington, and one inhabitant, Mrs. Everleigh-Spillikins, has affairs with men who serve in the United States Navy, the United States Army, and the state militia. Dr. Boomer, as an archaeologist, has a specialist’s knowledge of the stone age and bronze age “in America”; and even the slow-witted characters can quote phrases from the American constitution at election time. The author identifies himself explicitly with this community, mentioning Canada only as a remote holiday resort of unsatisfactory quality.

If Sunshine Sketches and Arcadian Adventures suggest, when taken together, that Leacock must have been a North American with a dual nationality, another collection of essays, My Discovery of England, suggests a third national identity. In the Preface to this work, the reader is informed by Sir Owen Seaman that Leacock is “all British, being English by birth and Canadian by residence” and that “England and the Empire are very proud to claim him for their own.” Sir Owen goes on to explain that he does not want Leacock’s “nationality to be confused with that of his neighbours on the other side,” for “English and American humorists have not always seen eye to eye.” He further remarks that “Mr. Leacock’s humour is British by heredity,” but that Leacock has caught something of the spirit of American humour by force of association. Leacock quietly accepts this characterization yet refers in that same work to our North American Continent and to the fact that “we do things differently over in America.” He makes it clear, in fact, that he is as familiar with Youngstown, Ohio, and with Richmond, Virginia, as he is with Peterborough, Ontario, and that he knows as much about Toledo as he does about Toronto. He likewise refers more generally to “the larger culture of our side of the Atlantic,” suggesting that it subsumes the educational system of both Canada and the United States. The reader of My Discovery of England could thus reasonably infer that Leacock’s nationality was not merely double but triple.
All three national voices, or various mixtures of them, can be found in *My Remarkable Uncle, and Other Sketches*. The narrator's persona in the title essay is distinctly Canadian, as his references to Winnipeg, the old Ontario farm, the uncle from abroad, and the settlement of the Canadian West indicate. A similar voice can be heard in about half a dozen other essays in this volume, including “The Old Farm and the New Farm,” “The Struggle to Make us Gentlemen,” and “The Passing of the Kitchen.” Yet what could be more British than the Leacock persona in “The British Soldier,” eulogizing England’s vanishing professional serviceman as “the nation’s defender and the nation’s hero” and implicitly identifying himself as a member of that same English nation. The essay entitled “War and Humour” is likewise primarily about how “we” British have regarded war in the past and about the changing fashions of “our” war memoirs, particularly those concerning such Englishmen as Lord Kitchener and General Roberts. In “Cricket for Americans,” on the other hand, the voice is British-Canadian, and its professed mission is “to cultivate cordial relations with the United States.” Then, again, in “Migration in English Literature: A Study of England and America,” the persona is clearly that of an Anglo-American-Canadian. The speaker explicitly identifies himself as one of the “uncounted millions” who served England by settling in one of her new overseas dominions. Yet he also proudly refers to “John Galt, the moving spirit of the Canada Land Company [and] founder of our City of Guelph.” In a subsequent passage, his possessive “our” also lays claim to works of American literature, particularly *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the poetry of Longfellow. Leacock’s historical thesis in this essay is consistent with his tri-national persona. His argument is that the British emigrants who were initially expelled by Britain as refugees or convicts have re-created the greatness of Britain by establishing colonies and dominions overseas. Literature thus recognizes the “American uncle” as an empire-builder who has in turn helped to re-create the greatness of imperial Britain. As England, Canada, and the United States are thus united not only by a single national origin but also by family ties (both real and metaphorical), a common culture, and shared imperial interests, Leacock can readily identify himself with the peoples of all three states.

Leacock’s articulation of this multi-national literary voice cannot be adequately explained on grounds of biographical circumstance. The fact that he was English by birth, Canadian by upbringing, and American by empathy is, of course, not inconsistent with this cosmopolitan habit. Nor is the fact that he was, as a youngster, educated in Ontario yet stamped with the mentality of Victorian England and inspired by the ideal of American democratic republicanism. Leacock, it may be recalled, informs us in *The Boy I Left Behind Me* that after reading Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s *Young Folks’ (or People’s) History of the United States*, he developed a sense of “the burning injustice of [British] tyranny” and that “forthwith the theory of a republic, and the theory of equality, and the condemnation of hereditary rights seemed obvious and self-evident truths, as clear to me as they were to Thomas Jefferson.” Nevertheless, it
should be evident that a person with such a heterogeneous background could just as easily have become a nationalist of the Canadian, American, or English variety, or, for that matter, an anti-nationalist or non-nationalist.

Likewise, the fact that he wrote for audiences in these three countries, with syndicated columns in both Canadian and American newspapers and book-publishing contracts with houses in both New York and London, may seem to provide a plausible motive. There is nothing, however, in either Leacock's published writings or in Vishnu Chopra's edition of his letters to suggest that he ever adopted one nationality or another for reasons of financial gain or popular appeal. Even Leacock's professional activities as a political scientist seem to offer contradictory clues about the riddle of his national identity. As Head of McGill's Department of Economics and Political Science, he encouraged his students and colleagues to study Canadian problems and strongly advocated the employment of Canadian scholars. Moreover, several of his popular books on Canadian history and politics, particularly Canada: The Foundations of its Future and All Right, Mr. Roosevelt (Canada and the United States), are much concerned with the development and security of this country. Yet Leacock also studied under the American political theorist Thorstein Veblen, earned a Ph.D. degree at The University of Chicago, and served on the executive of the Political Science Association of America. His Elements of Political Science was adopted, according to Ralph L. Curry, "as the standard text by thirty-five universities in the United States," and certain of his polemical writings were admired by Theodore Roosevelt. His links with Britain were likewise maintained not only by his talks at the Royal Colonial Institute and several British universities but also by such books as Economic Prosperity in the British Empire (1930) and Our British Empire: Its Structure, Its History, Its Strength (1940). (The American edition of the latter work, it can be noted, was published with Leacock's usual shift in voice: Our British Empire was re-titled The British Empire.) Such biographical facts as these seem to raise more questions than they answer about his attitude towards nationality; they certainly fail to solve the mystery of his multi-national voice.

The solution to this problem may lie in a consideration of certain doctrines of Leacock's political writings, especially his Elements of Political Science. In this work, Leacock makes fundamental distinctions between such key terms as "state," "society," "government," and "nation." Specifically, he describes a "state" as an entity having a territory, a population, a governmental organization, and an autonomous unity. "Society" is then defined by Leacock in a much broader way:

The term society has no reference to territorial occupation; it refers to man alone and not to his environment. But in dealing with man its significance is much wider than that of state. It applies to all human communities, whether organized or unorganized. It suggests not only the political relations by which men are bound together, but the whole range of human relations and collective activities. The study of society
involves the study of man's religion, of domestic institutions, industrial activities, education, crime, etc.

"Government," however, is a term with a much narrower scope:

It refers to the person or group of persons in whose hands the organization of the state places for the time being the function of political control. The word is sometimes used to indicate the persons themselves, sometimes abstractly to indicate the kind and composition of the controlling group. The ordinary citizens of a community are part of the state, but are not part of the government. The term has moreover no reference to territory.

As for "nationality," Leacock makes the following observation:

The term nation, though often loosely used, is properly to be thought of as having a racial or ethnographical significance. It indicates a body of people—the Germans, the French, the Hungarians, etc.—united by common descent and a common language. But such divisions by no means coincide with the political divisions of the civilized world into states. Austria-Hungary constitutes a single state, but its population is made up of members of a great many different races. The political division of the civilized world into states freely intersects with the division into races, although sometimes the political units—as in the case of modern France—are almost coincident with the ethnographic.

Using the term "race" as a synonym for "nation," Leacock then points out (in the present-perfect tense) that "the historical relation between the nationality and the political organization of the state has been a changing one":

In the political thought of classical Greece the conception of the state is limited to a small area occupied by persons of the same race. In the Roman world, the original conception of a city state with a common nationality was transformed by the process of absorption and conquest into the larger conception of a world-wide state and universal sovereignty. Nationality is here lost from sight. The foreign nations occupying the subjugated provinces were recognized by virtue of the Emperor Caracalla's act of general enfranchisement (A.D. 212) as citizens of the universal empire.

Although "such a conception [of empire] long served as a basis of European policy," Leacock argues that it was eventually displaced by feudalism, a system which linked territorial sovereignty to dynastic supremacy regardless of the nationality of the subject peoples. In more recent times, "nationality as the paramount basis of state organization strongly asserted itself." Leacock cites as evidence for this claim not only the American and French revolutions but also the formation of national states by Italy and Germany, and the attempts to form such states by Hungary and Ireland.

In a subsequent section of his text, under the heading "The Ideal State," Leacock observes that "in our own day the national state has served as the embodiment of perfect political organization." Nevertheless, he also insists that a "wider ideal is conceivable in the form of a world state or
state universal" and that the establishing of such a political organization was long "the haunting ideal of European policy."

We see . . . [this ideal] reflected in the claims of the Roman emperor, in the less substantial claims of the Eastern emperor at Constantinople after the fall of Rome, in the resuscitation of the empire by Charles the Great (A.D. 800), and in the vague sovereignty of the Holy Roman Emperor from that date until the abolition of the titular dignity (1806) through the power of Napoleon. The same ideal hovers before us as offering the goal of the political organization of the future.12

Leacock, in other words, regarded the nation-state, like the feudal domain, as a temporary stage in the realization of a much broader form of world political organization.

It may be inferred from Leacock's remarks on the general direction of mankind's political development that a world organization of this kind would have several distinctive features. It would be based on territory whose bounds would be ever more widely set. While respecting the separation of church and state, it would foster the development of democracy where appropriate. Through an ever widening application of enforceable law, it would also offer its citizens a greater certainty and regularity in civil affairs than could be assured by any single nation-state. A further attribute would be a higher form of world political consciousness among its citizens, a cosmopolitan outlook that could transcend merely national modes of thought.

Leacock believed that the British Empire offered mankind a strong and well-developed basis for advancing towards this state universal. With a population of about five hundred million distributed over some fifty-eight states, the British Empire, he pointed out, comprised a quarter of the world's territory and constituted a great reservoir of human and natural resources.13 Throughout this domain there prevailed the rule of enforceable law, a sine qua non of economic and social development. In the more advanced dominions, the Empire had proven its ability to foster the development of democracy. Its autonomous unity, whether achieved through formal federation or through free association, was already evoking, in his view, a higher form of cosmopolitan consciousness.

Yet Leacock seems to have always assumed that the quest for world dominion was an enterprise to be undertaken jointly by the British Empire and the emerging empire of the United States. As early as 1906, in the first edition of his Elements of Political Science, he described the "colonial expansion" of the United States. It included the Hawaiian Islands with their port of Pearl Harbor (annexed in 1898), the Samoan group of islands (annexed in 1899), and the several islands that were acquired from Spain as the "just" result of the Spanish-American War: Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. In 1909, in an article warning Canada not to rely on the Monroe Doctrine for security, Leacock observed, with some irony, that the United States had become an empire within the "outer empire" of Britain. Its possessions in the Pacific, he argued, had made the United States an "Asiatic power with new lines of interest radiating in all direc-
tions across the Pacific.” With its control of the strategically placed Virgin Islands and the right to intervene in Cuba, it had also become “the predominant partner in the West Indies, the former battleground of the maritime nations of Europe.” In Leacock’s eyes, the United States was therefore a “commercial power whose colossal and highly organized industries at home look[ed] to its new possessions as bases for the conquest of the export trade.”

As one of the world’s “leading states” it had, like Britain, claimed a share of the “great natural resources of the modern colonial area.” Leacock always believed, of course, that only a free-enterprise, industrial, capitalist economy could provide an adequate material basis for his expanding world civilization.

Leacock’s discussions of the imperial role of the United States were thus consistent with the “big stick” policy of Theodore Roosevelt and with the imperialist “Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine enunciated by that same president in 1904. Woodrow Wilson’s conduct of foreign policy, on the other hand, was the object of Leacock’s scorn. Although Wilson intervened forcefully in Nicaragua, Leacock mocked Wilson’s ineffectiveness in using military power against Mexico and the Dominican Republic and ridiculed his inconsistency, indecisiveness, and isolationism in respect of European affairs. Wilson’s reluctance to have the United States enter World War I—a conflict which resulted in the re-division of the colonial world—was a source of particular irritation.

In “Over the Grape Juice; or, The Peacemakers,” Leacock likewise scoffed at the proposition that world peace could be achieved by the self-congratulatory idealism of teetotalers and do-gooders. The moral underlying the satiric humour of this story is that true world peace was to be gradually and securely established for everyone’s happiness by the forcible expansion of Anglo-American imperial rule. A timely intervention in Haiti was his fictional case in point, an occurrence that had some basis in historical fact.

While maintaining that Anglo-American imperialism was the highest stage of man’s political evolution, Leacock also asserted that the development of a world empire was part of the natural order of things. If, as he observed in June 1939, the quest for imperial unity had been inspired “by grandeur and by courage, by meanness and by fear,” it had also been guided by “instinct.” Because “instinct” is by definition a type of non-conscious behaviour based on biological forms of existence in the process of adapting to an environment, Leacock could further claim that imperial unity was essentially “organic.” In another context, he argued that the spirit of the free-enterprise system is that “vital principle (the élan vital) which biologists seek to find to explain the life and growth of the animated world.” Vitalism together with voluntarism subsumed his imperial philosophy.

Even near the end of his life, Leacock’s vision of Canada’s future was informed by this world view. In 1941, he argued that the British Empire and the United States should combine their forces in the post-war period to “rule” the European world. Canada, he believed, would
then have "a higher place and a higher responsibility" than anything the past had seen:

From its very situation, Canada must be reorganized as the central buttress of imperial power. Wedged, as it were, between Great Britain and the United States, our Dominion becomes the keystone of a new arch of mutual support and common security.24

Leacock spelled out exactly what he meant by this role:

In point of force, then, it is plain that Canada must become, as it were, not exactly a fortified country in the old sense, but a country with a vast capacity, sufficiently developed to expand with ease, for producing armaments and munitions in places so safeguarded by natural obstacles that no war could impede their manufacture. Here is boundless water-power, as willing to run in subterranean channels as above ground; great battlements of rock that can be hollowed out into underground factories against which the largest bomber in the world is as harmless as a dragon-fly. With that is a store of minerals and metals that Pluto himself might envy. All hell can be raised in the bowels of northern Canada.25

This goal was articulated by Leacock, it may be noted, just two years before Winston Churchill and F. D. Roosevelt agreed secretly at Quebec City to develop the atomic bomb with Canadian uranium. Although Leacock certainly wanted Canada to be a liberal, democratic, and humane society, the imperial alliance of which it was a part was to form the core of a hegemonic iron fist.26 Leacock clearly understood that cosmopolitanism—doctrine which teaches, in the final analysis, the renunciation of patriotism, national sovereignty, and national culture and which calls for the merging of nations by forcible association—would be an appropriate ideological underpinning for such an empire.

Leacock's attitude towards Canadian nationalism was consistent with this world view and therefore ambivalent. Like Thorstein Veblen, he believed that nationalism was useful in time of war for the mustering of patriotic forces.27 He further argued that the "close of the Great War made Canada not only a nation in its consciousness but even in the acknowledged sense of the term, as a signatory of the Treaty of Versailles and a member of the League of Nations."28 In times of peace, however, nationalism was a regressive and dangerous movement. He told the Empire Club in 1909 that the goals of nationalism were mean and provincial29 and that nationalism lacked the power in Canada to compose either the racial feud between English and French or the religious strife between Protestant and Catholic. Only the Empire, as a higher and more powerful organization, could guarantee the security of Canada's confederation as well as offer "the joint greatness of a common destiny."30 Even as late as 1945, Leacock argued that a breach of unity between Canada and Britain would "disrupt Confederation."31

While Leacock observed that the development of international law, particularly since the time of Grotius, was contributing to the construction of an international world order,32 he always assumed that the
strongest bonds that linked the peoples of the British Empire with the people of the United States were of a non-legal, social kind. These ties he described in some detail in such works as *The British Empire: Its Structure, Its Unity, Its Strength and All Right, Mr. Roosevelt* (Canada and the United States). They included, to be sure, links formed by tourism and migration, by trade and commerce, and by an awareness among peoples that they share a kindred descent and common traditions. These bonds were also based on the fellowship fostered by such organizations as the Boy Scouts and Rotarians and on a "union of intercourse and ideas" in such fields as education, the professions, and sport. Still other ties had been created by the use of a common language and by "the community in literature that it brings." Taking together, these social bonds made for a "union of hearts" that constituted the basic strength of the imperial polity. Political and legal forms were their mere shadows.

Leacock thus regarded literature as a basis for one of the bonds of union in an imperial community. In his view, "speech, thought and language [in the Anglophone community] now amalgamate, not diverge." All great literature in English was therefore a powerful intellectual instrument for the formation of the desired supra-national, cosmopolitan consciousness. As the world was being "unified into one" with the increasing "standardization of mankind," even humour, he argued, should be used to create the "kind of world-consciousness that [would] one day replace nationality." While Leacock suggested in "Laughing off our History" that each nation could use humour to exercise outmoded social behaviour, he also argued, with perfect consistency, that jokes ridiculing national stereotypes are themselves outmoded. To the best of my knowledge, there are no vulgar Americans, parsimonious Scotsmen, or stupid Frenchmen inhabiting the cosmopolitan civilization of Leacock's fiction, although such qualities as vulgarity, parsimony, and stupidity are certainly objects of Leacock's humour. The only exception is the German people, an imperial enemy ridiculed by Leacock in time of war.

His perception of Canadian literature in particular was informed by this world vision. In an essay entitled "The National Literature Problem in Canada," Leacock asserted that he could discern no literature written in Canada that could make a distinctively Canadian contribution to the stock of great literature produced by England and the United States. He doubted, in fact, whether Canadians could ever develop a distinctive way of writing, given the general historical process of cosmopolitan amalgamation.

The world is changing into an intellectual unity, drawing on all sources. The Canadian may have to remain a mere contributor to the chorus, like the American negro. Nay, the very British and American themselves will more or less amalgamate, under the new encircling influence of common thought. The American revolution is all over.

This, however, in no way circumscribes our efforts and our aims. We don't have to be different.
There is no reason why we should not be superior. If our thought must run in the common mould of all who use the English language, that does not in any way impede a gifted child of Canada. He need not try to write a Canadian play; let him just write one like those of Shakespeare. He needn't write a Canadian work: anyone as good as Dickens will do nicely.

It seems to me, in short, that the attempt to mark off Canada as a little area all its own, listening to no one but itself, is as silly as it is ineffective. If a Canadian author writes a good book, I'll read it; if not I'll read one written in Kansas or Copenhagen. The conception of the republic of letters is a nobler idea than the wilful attempt at national exclusiveness.57

Leacock's idea of a world empire that would incorporate all nations, his understanding of history as a movement towards that goal, and his concept of national literatures as part of a proleptic universal republic of letters all provide implicit rationales for his multi-voiced cosmopolitan persona. The riddle of his multi-national literary identity is therefore partly solved. Leacock himself, however, nowhere comments directly on his own contradictory practice. The prime witness is, so to speak, silent in this case, and all the evidence textual and circumstantial. A complete solution to the riddle is therefore wanting.

The mystery is only "partly" solved in another sense as well. In the real world—even the real world of Anglo-American imperialism—a supra-national Leacock could have had no real existence. He would have been stopped and questioned at national borders, as indeed he tells us he was. In the freer world of literary discourse, however, he was at perfect liberty to assume whatever identity his heart and mind desired. Yet Leacock always believed that literature, or at least great literature, is an expression of the individual human spirit—a force that ultimately, in his vitalist and voluntarist philosophy, governs and directs the real world. The paradox involved here is perhaps analogous to the paradox that he attributed to the Empire as a whole when he described it as a spiritual unity of nations that were without formal union. Leacock's cosmopolitan persona was made of the same spiritual stuff. Through the artifice of literary masks, he attempted to realize a cherished ideal: a unity of distinct national voices in the identity of a single spirit—his own. Whatever one may think of these contradictions and their imperialist underpinnings, it should be evident that Leacock's theory and practice of cosmopolitanism were consistent with each other.