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Stephen Leacock, Humorist: American by Association

BEVERLY RASPORICH

"Gentlemen," said Mark Twain's contemporary, Artemus Ward, rising at a banquet with his glass held aloft, "I give you Upper Canada!"; then he added mournfully, "because I don't want it myself.

STEPHENV LEACOCK, "Mark Twain and Canada," Queen's Quarterly 42

The study of humour is a fascinating, complex, truly interdisciplinary pursuit, which engages a great many critical thinkers from various disciplines. The point of view of this essay is necessarily limited, but it is one which Leacock and his early twentieth-century audience would have approved and one which is loosely faithful to the socio-literary approach of some modern writers on humour: their point of intellectual departure being that humour is often an expression of culture or, in nineteenth-century terms, of nation. Just as literary reviewers of Leacock's time liked to speculate about the national biases of his humour, some of the classic studies in American humour, such as Constance Rourke's American Humor and Norris Yates' The American Humorist, investigate American humorists and their humour as articulations of their society.

The society that Leacock inhabits in his humour is rarely, as a Canadian audience might expect, overtly Canadian. Leacock's Canada was a colonial society; unrealized both psychologically and economically, it afforded him little inspiration or market for his humour. He preferred to define himself as an American writer and humorist in the continental sense. In 1936 he declared that "there is no such thing as Canadian literature today, meaning books written by Canadians in a Canadian way," just as much earlier, in 1916, he had dissolved the 49th parallel for Canadian authors, insisting that "Canadian literature—as far as there is such a thing—Canadian journalism, and the education and culture of the mass of the people approximates more nearly to the type and standard of Canada than to those of Great Britain." Leacock was able to exploit this common cultural experience in books such as Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy and Further Foolishness where his humorous sketches on such timely topics as movies, politics, literature, and education seemed to make him successful in the American market-place.
Leacock's humorous literature did not, of course, spring simply and directly from the American macro-culture he inhabited; his disposition was very much a literary one, which studiously revelled in the artistry of past and contemporary American humorists. For Leacock, American literary humour was a New World wonder, a "not unworthy literary product" which reflected American life and history and invited literary emulation. Not surprisingly, then, Leacock gravitated to the spirit and techniques of humorists south of the border, as his own literary tributes, *The Greatest Pages of American Humour* and *Mark Twain*, would indicate.

Literary critics and humorists in the United States have claimed Leacock as one of their own. Ralph L. Curry's biography of Leacock begins: "Stephen Leacock represented in a way the paradox which is Canada. Born in England, he moved to Canada and wrote American humor," and Robert Benchley admitted that as a humorist he was greatly indebted to Leacock.

Although Leacock may have considered himself an American humorist, it is impossible to overlook the fact that his own national experience of being a Canadian also distanced him from American culture and its humorous expression. However much he understood, even welcomed, the close social and cultural relations of Canada and the United States, he also demonstrated in his humour that longstanding nervousness about American dominance. "We share the weather," he noted. "If the barometer falls to a new low in Montana we have to watch our. If a farmer is reported frozen in Kansas, we lose a couple near Sudbury. If the Ohio floods the lower section of Cincinnati, it is likely that the Grand River will flood the lower section of Galt, Ontario." "In fact," he continues, "we have to watch the American papers or we might get drowned in our sleep.”

Claude Bissell's general analysis of Leacock's ambiguous attitudes to things American, as well as his sense of separateness, is well taken:

Leacock developed in close relationship to American traditions, but his sense of being a Canadian, which was sharply felt and eloquently expressed, gave him a sense of separateness. A study of his relationship to American cultural traditions reveals the pattern that can be expanded indefinitely—pattern of indebtedness and independence, of similarity and differentiation, of sympathy and withdrawal.

This sense of separateness from the American cultural experience is occasionally demonstrated explicitly by the Canadian context of Leacock's humour, as with the Grand River flooding Galt, but most often it is indirect, exercised by the authorial voice. A man of genteel, civilized Upper Canadian sensibilities, Leacock was a member of that time-honoured class in Canadian society that distrusted republican excess. He accepted republicanism but, in his own words, "I stopped short at the Queen, partly I suppose because one touched there on Heaven and Hell and the Church service and on ground which I didn't propose to tread." Leacock's was an Anglo-Canadian voice, conservative, literate, a gentlemanly echo of Susanna Moodie's. Small, but often nimble and ironic when threatened to be shouted down by John Bull and Uncle Sam, it is a
voice that is softly audible even as its author happily realizes the comic modes and techniques of nineteenth-century American humour.

As a theorist of humour, Leacock was a civilized Victorian who believed that humour had evolved with society from primitive and destructive forms to a higher, genial stage, and that sentimental humour was the ultimate art. The real artist was the Mark Twain who created *Huckleberry Finn*, a "great book" because "it elevates humor to that high reach, beyond the comic and the accidental, in which our human lot itself invites our tears and our smiles."8 And he was the Bret Harte whose "serious Western tales are permeated with humor, which at times breaks to the surface and floods the page." The real artists were "the California 'school' of writers—who never went to school. Of these Bret Harte and Mark Twain stand pre-eminent."9

As Constance Rourke points out, the California mining camps were a natural milieu for the development of such sentimental humour. She explains that in this frontier circumstance, vast sentimentalism overflowed with hilarity: "The current mood in California was purely native; and it was comic. With all the vicissitudes, the heartbeat, the losses, the abundance of human failure, the comic mood arose irresistibly. Quickly the curve of theatrical interest ran up from romantic tragedy to extravaganza."10 For Leacock, the hyperbolic mood of the California school was a high achievement in the field of humorous literature. He understood humour as a romantic flight which stressed the joy in expectation, followed by the melancholy of its defeat. The upbeat rhythm of comedy was the grand aspiration and nowhere was it grander than in the mythological frontier climate, west of the Mississippi, and in its Canadian equivalent, west to Winnipeg. Leacock learned of the former through Twain and Harte, and discovered the latter through the experience of his remarkable uncle, E. P. Leacock, who went west to Winnipeg in the early eighties.

In *My Remarkable Uncle*, a personal reminiscence, and "Boom Times," a fictionalized account, Leacock creates a legend in the western odyssey of the enterprising and thieving Britisher, who, reminiscent of Twain's Colonel Sellers, discovered in the boom time of Winnipeg the wonderful expectation of "the promised land" and the "new Eldorado."11 In *My Remarkable Uncle*, Leacock reveals his own romantic reckoning of the West:

There is something of magic appeal in the rush and movement of a "boom" town—a Winnipeg of the 80's, a Carson City of the 60's.... Life comes to a focus; it is all here and now, all present, no past and no outside—just a clatter of hammers and saws, rounds of drinks and rolls of money. In such an atmosphere everyone seems a remarkable fellow, a man of exception; individuality separates out and character blossoms like a rose.12

Although Leacock's hyperbolic interpretation of his uncle is in the tradition of American frontier humour, his character "so exaggerated
already that you couldn’t exaggerate it” (p. 3), the character is also remarkable as a genuine Canadian folk type, and a very curious hybrid indeed of gentleman and folk. British by birth but American by experience, Philip Leacock is a filum-flam man of aristocratic caste who confounds the locals in the bar-rooms of Ontario in the Canadian election of 1878 (he picked up the history and politics of Upper Canada in one day) by British pretension:

“Why let me see”—he would say to some tattered country specimen beside him glass in hand—“surely, if your name is Framley, you must be a relation of my dear old friend General Sir Charles Framley of the Horse Artillery?” “Mebbe,” the flattered specimen would answer. “I guess mebbe; I ain’t kept track very good of my folks in the old country.” “Dear me! I must tell Sir Charles that I’ve seen you. He’ll be so pleased.”

... In this way in a fortnight E. P. had conferred honours and distinctions on half the township of Georgina. They lived in a recaptured atmosphere of generals, admirals and earls. Vote? How else could they vote than conservative, men of family like them? (p. 4)

In the boom times of Winnipeg, E. P. comes into his own. With his humble “hail-fellow-well-met” instinct, in combination with his aristocratic side, his “activities were wide”:

He was president of a bank (that never opened), head of a brewery (for brewing the Red River) and, above all, secretary-treasure of the Winnipeg Hudson Bay and Arctic Ocean Railway that had a charter authorizing it to build a road to the Arctic Ocean, when it got ready. They had no track, but they printed stationery and passes, and in return, E. P. received passes over all North America. (p. 6)

Leacock’s E. P. is a delightful comic characterization, grandly individualistic in the frontier style, genuinely Canadian in his final definition as the failed British gentry, distinctly North American in his boom-to-bust story, and, in Leacock’s melancholy sentimental recollection of him, a perfect representation of sentimental frontier humour:

If there is a paradise, I am sure he will get in. He will say at the gate—

“Peter? Then surely you must be a relative of Lord Peter of Tichfield?”

But if he fails, then, as the Spaniards say so fittingly, “May the earth lie light upon him.” (p. 12)

Through the history of the gold rushes, then, with their atmospheres of hysterical expectations and personal defeats, a comic mythology—a pattern of humour—was developed which Leacock, speaking with a strong Canadian accent in My Remarkable Uncle, brought to life in E. P. For Leacock, the boom-to-bust frontier pattern was obviously rooted in the local, in Canadian history, but it was equally, if not more importantly, a North American phenomenon; in fact, he interpreted it as a North American principle of economic life:

It seems to me also that this alternation of sunshine and shadow, so plainly to be seen in the boom times and bad times of a new Eldorado, characterizes also all the economic side of our collective human life. We
see it in the alternating prosperity and depression of big business of which the "peaks" and "crashes" of the stock exchange are only the outward signs of the tumult within . . . .

This economic principle is also an inspiration to some of Leacock's best humorous narrative: the rags-to-riches-and-rags-again stories of Jefferson Thorpe from *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and Tomlinson's Creek from *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. Leacock creates some fine "frontier" gold rush humour in the exhilarating comedy of the great expectations surrounding these characters. The wonderfully optimistic illusions of grandeur of ordinary men, triggered by Northern Ontario mining booms, by Twin Tamagami, Abitibbi Development and the Erie Auriferous is also, in the spirit of Harte and Twain, followed by the melancholy humour of their economic defeats.

As well as appreciating the sentimental humour of Harte and Twain, Leacock attempted to reach out towards Twain's revolutionary spirit, an American burlesquing spirit which, Constance Rourke explains, conspired "toward the removal of all alien traditions, out of delight in pure destruction or as preparation for new growth." Leacock favoured Twain's *Innocents Abroad*, a classic of that comic genre where humour depended on criticism of the old country (and which was predated by the Canadian James de Mille's *The Dodge Club or Italy in 1869*, and Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Attache; or, Sam Slick in England*). He was very much impressed by the comic method of the frontier "eye of innocence," particularly when, as in *Innocents Abroad*, Twain applied it satirically to European culture: "He [Twain] was able to turn on Europe—on its forms and ceremonies, its monuments and its mummies (dead and living), its hauteur and its humbug—the eye of innocence of the Westerner."

The "eye of innocence," or the persona of the solemn wise fool, is perhaps as old as comedy itself, but prominent in America. Rourke differentiates it as the puritan mask:

The mask was a portable heirloom handed down by the pioneer. In a primitive world crowded with pitfalls the unchanging, unchanged countenance had been a safeguard, preventing revelations of surprise, anger or dismay. The mask had otherwise become habitual among the older Puritans as their more expressive or risible feelings were sunk beneath the surface.

She recounts Twain's statement that "the humorous story is toldgravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it" (p. 212) as indicative of the mask tradition in American humour and its procession of dull-looking oracles.

One of these dull-looking oracles was Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne), a famous comic lecturer, Twain's western contemporary, and a master of the puritan mask. Leacock championed Ward as a comic genius and was obviously impressed by his method, which he described as "that of solemnity itself. He affected an intense dullness of intelligence. His face was stamped with melancholy. He assumed an air of utter embarrassment, and in this mood, with his assumption of sorrow, he got off the
little sayings and epigrams that he called his lectures.” Here is Leacock's own report of the opening of Ward's lecture in London, 1866, at Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly:

You are entirely welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to my little picture-shop.

I couldn't give you a very clear idea of the Mormons—and Utah and the Plains—and the Rocky Mountains—without opening a picture-shop—therefore I open one.

I don't expect to do great things here—but I have thought that if I could make money enough to buy me a passage to New Zealand I should feel that I had not lived in vain.

I don't want to live in vain. — I'd rather live in Margate—or here.

The manner of the solemn, blunt little sayings conveying an innocent American outlook, symbolic of a continent's genesis, special to Twain as well as to Ward, is incorporated into Leacock's comic style. The British writer C. K. Allan was so convinced that this was Leacock's outstanding feature as a humorist that in 1945 he wrote a parody of Leacock's work, Oh Mr. Leacock!, in which this very feature of comic delivery—the short, simple, apparently naive observation—is the heart of the comic imitation. The most pristine example of the puritan delivery in Leacock's work is a short piece in Literary Lapses, “A Study in Still-Life—The Country Hotel,” which is used with comic success, and not without some perversity, to celebrate drinking:

The country hotel stands on the sunny side of Main Street. It has three entrances.

There is one in front which leads into the Bar. There is one at the side called the Ladies' Entrance which leads into the Bar from the side. There is also the Main Entrance which leads into the Bar through the Rotunda.

The Rotunda is the space between the floor of the bar-room and the cigar-case. . . .

The walls of the bar-room are perforated in all directions with trap-doors. Through one of these, drinks are passed into the passages. Drinks are also passed through the floor and through the ceiling. Drinks once passed never return. . . . The Proprietor stands in the doorway of the Bar. He weighs two hundred pounds. His face is immovable as putty. He is drunk. He has been drunk for twelve years. It makes no difference to him. . . .

Attached to the bar is a pneumatic beer-pump, by means of which the Bartender can flood the Bar with beer. Afterwards he wipes up the beer with a rag. By this means he polishes the Bar. Some of the beer that is pumped up spills into glasses and has to be sold.

While Leacock often aped the puritan delivery, in the bulk of his work he did not wear the puritan mask as easily as this early sketch would suggest. The mask of sober innocence that Ward perfected as a lecturer through platform manner, with its awkward hesitations, digressions, and innocent truisms was not generally translated by Leacock, as it was by
Twain in his mature writings, into the authorial pose of the innocent dupe, the naive rube, or the innocent child. Unlike Mark Twain and Artemus Ward who fully assumed the guise of a foolish native American as naturally as they did their pseudonyms, Leacock stopped short of being totally absorbed into the popular will. Whereas Twain and Ward satirized America at home and Europe abroad through the eyes and idiom of the average American, to whom they were sympathetic, Leacock often took exception to him, dismissing him, for example, as a “poor shrimp” and a “poor nut” without a chin or opinions of his own, in the preface to *Winnowed Wisdom*.21

The deadpan manner applied by Ward and Twain on stage and in literature to convey the effect of the all-American babe-in-the-woods is used by Leacock, but mainly in a careful, occasional way as illustrated by the last sentence of this quotation from “At the Ladies Culture Club” in *Winnowed Wisdom*:

> The day I was there the meeting was held in the ballroom of the new Grand Palaver hotel, because that is a simple place suitable for science. There were no decorations except flowers and no music except a Hungarian orchestra which stopped the moment the lecture began. This is a rule of the club. (p. 120)

The last line is pure Artemus Ward, but of more significance is the real voice of this sketch which keeps his ladies at an ironic and somewhat patronizing distance. I have previously argued that the real voice of Leacock’s humour is that of a civilized and literate Canadian gentleman, the persona of the preface to *Winnowed Wisdom*.22 This Leacock voice may, under the right circumstances, admit or confess to being foolish, but he does not stoop to play the fool at much length or in any genuinely convincing way. He cannot pretend to what James Austin points out was a “new point of view” established by Ward and Twain in American frontier humour, that of the self-deprecating, unsophisticated naive American.23 Perhaps, as Silver Donald Cameron suggests, Leacock, unlike Mark Twain before him who was buoyed by his nation’s self-confidence, was too insecure to be a fool.24

Nonetheless, Leacock did applaud the Yankee irreverent comic eye turned towards European culture, and emulating Twain, became his own innocent abroad in the volumes *Behind the Beyond* and *My Discovery of England*. Silver Donald Cameron in *Faces of Leacock* has commented extensively on this very matter, on Leacock’s debt to Twain, in these two volumes, as well as on the literary alchemy that occurs as Leacock moves beyond mere imitation into sophisticated and complex postures of what Cameron calls “negative irony.” This feature, an ironic undercutting of all that Leacock pens, of both visitor and visited—of the small-town Orillian or the average American traveller (the guise of whom the Canadian professor periodically assumes)—as well as England, as well as America itself, is remarkable for the scope of its playfulness; it is also remarkable for the chameleon-like character of the authorial voice, which, unlike Twain’s in *The Innocents*, does not project consistent ironic standards.
However, what Cameron says of *Behind the Beyond* is also true here, that the reader often has the impression that Leacock himself, as author, adheres to another, mature set of values.

Leacock's private voice of Canadian tone and accent is immature in this volume, but his country's national definition of being in *media res*, of being between two cultures, would nonetheless seem to allow a comic advantage. In *My Discovery of England* the multi-faceted point of view and the sophisticated technique of negative irony seem the natural, self-comprehending expression of the archetypal Canadian patriot, introduced earlier to the Leacock reader in *Sunshine Sketches* as the Mariposan who is glad to be an Englishman on St. George's Day and equally glad to be an American on the Fourth of July.

Obviously, Leacock also understood that the innocent eye needed adjustment, that the time had passed when simple satire of the Old World was possible; in effect, New Eden had in its own way become Old World and the American traveller was coming collectively now to Europe invariably projecting his own not-so-innocent cultural absurdities. Delighting in burlesquing the whole spate of what he calls "the balance of trade in impressions" from both sides of the Atlantic, Leacock nonetheless takes an almost wicked delight in cocking America's own innocent eye inwards, ironically, on itself. In the following experience of the innocent abroad, Leacock humorously deflates America for being a somewhat aggressive and ideological country:

I pass over also the incidents of my landing in Liverpool, except perhaps to comment upon the extraordinary behaviour of the English customs officials. Without wishing in any way to disturb international relations, one cannot help noticing the rough and inquisitorial methods of the English customs men as compared with the gentle and affectionate ways of the American officials at New York. The two trunks that I brought with me were dragged brutally into an open shed, the strap of one of them was rudely unbuckled, while the lid of the other was actually lifted at least four inches. The trunks were then roughly scrawled with chalk, the kids slammed to, and that was all. Not one of the officials seemed to care to look at my things or to have the politeness to pretend to want to. I had arranged my dress suit and my pajamas so as to make as effective a display as possible: a New York customs officer would have been delighted with it. Here they simply passed it over. "Do open this trunk," I asked one of the officials, "and see my pajamas." "I don't think it necessary, sir," the man answered. There was a coldness about it that cut me to the quick.

But bad as is the conduct of the English customs men, the immigration officials are even worse. I could not help being struck by the dreadful carelessness with which people are admitted into England. There are, it is true, a group of officials said to be in charge of immigration, but they know nothing of the discriminating care exercised on the other side of the Atlantic.

"Do you want to know," I asked one of them, "whether I am a polygamist?"

"No sir," he said very quietly.
"Would you like me to tell you whether I am fundamentally opposed to any and every system of government?"

The man seemed mystified. "No, sir," he said. "I don't know that I would."

"Don't you care?" I asked.

"Well, not particularly, sir," he answered.

I was determined to arouse him from his lethargy.

"Let me tell you, then," I said, "that I am an anarchistic polygamist, that I am opposed to all forms of government, that I object to any kind of revealed religion, that I regard the state and property and marriage as the mere tyranny of the bourgeoisie, and that I want to see class hatred carried to the point where it forces every one into brotherly love. Now, do I get in?"

The official looked puzzled for a minute. "You are not Irish, are you, sir?" he said.

"No."

"Then I think you can come in all right," he answered. (pp. 12-14)

Interestingly, the persona himself, with his fussy tone, his antipathy towards "the dreadful carelessness" and bad manners of the officials, is suspiciously British. Donald Cameron is right about My Discovery of England. It is one of Leacock's best books; in it "negative irony becomes an artistic principle" (p. 93).

Besides the humour of the innocent abroad, the characteristic most typical of frontier humour was exaggeration. As Leacock himself concluded, "Above all the new West, spacious and unlimited . . . helped to bring back into humorous literature the feature of exaggeration which was one of its primitive elements." On the western front, it was Mark Twain who became the master of the tall tale and the big lie, an art which in Leacock's reckoning was a "national" characteristic: "The amazing rapidity of American progress, and the very bigness of our continent, has bred in us a corresponding bigness of speech; the fresh air of the western country, and the joy of living in the open, has inspired us with a sheer exuberant love of living that has set its mark upon our literature."

In Leacock's humour, the exaggerative mode is not precisely of the same nature as that of Twain's—nor of the American frontier. It is most certainly there, as is in Twain's work, as a grand comic streak of absurd or overblown metaphor and outrageous anecdote or statement. The clue to Leacock's difference from Twain is in the special literary emphasis of Leacock's exaggerative response. Typical of Twain's humour is a yarn like "Dick Baker's Cat," spun in homely dialect and dependent for its fun on the simple exaggeration of a cat who is a wise miner but who becomes prejudiced against quartz mining when he is partially blown up by dynamite. In contrast, in Leacock's fiction, exaggerative humour is most often rooted in a literary reference, spun out of a literary context, or combined with other subtle techniques of humour such as verbal absurdity or understatement. The purely native sky-breaking physical humour of Twain's western yarns is not typical of the genial and sophisticated Canadian professor.
While Leacock loved the exaggerative method as positive exuberance in Twain, he clearly had his decorous Canadian reservations about the primal quality that was often characteristic of Twain's exaggeration. The Canadian humorist delighted in the outrageous fantasy of Twain's "Cannibalism in the Cars" where a number of Congressmen, snowed in and about to die of hunger, resort to eating one another through full legislative procedure, but he was critical of the savage aspect of the humour. "Crude," "coarse," and "vulgar" were all epithets applied indirectly by Leacock to this piece (p. 101). It would seem that Twain was treading on that radical, republican ground that Leacock rejected and that he (Leacock) feared most about the American exaggerative method, that is when "it passes the bounds of common sense, and becomes mere meaningless criminality" (p. 107).

In the following pieces Leacock is surprisingly like Twain in his use of the primitive exaggerated anecdote, but even in these tall stories the destructive thrust is muted by pathos or genial celebration. "The Retroactive Existence of Mr. Juggins," for example, is a wildly improbable piece in which Mr. Juggins, with his retrospective glance, looking backwards to the roots of his own education and his own memory, thinks himself out of existence. While Twain could have delighted in the man's stupid act of self-destruction, Leacock is melancholy over Mr. Juggins' eventual demise. Similarly, there is an element of pathos in "The Awful Fate of Melpomene Jones." Here the curate who goes to tea can't make a graceful exit and can only escape by dying: the passing of his spirit, described in the manner of Twain, is "as rapid as a hunted cat passing over a garden fence." In "The New Food" disaster occurs when the whole Christmas dinner, concentrated into a modern pill, is accidentally stolen and eaten by the baby. The baby's subsequent explosion is, however, a happy one. Even in his humour based on primitive exaggeration, Leacock, by introducing pathos or geniality, was most often true to his own conception of humour as a civilized and kindly art. The exaggerative feature of Twain's western humour, then, Leacock could claim in a muted way among his own comic talents. It was a talent, too, for an Ontario gentleman, which, in the above anecdotes, came dangerously close to that uncivilized and savage mode of humour which he steadfastly denied.

Leacock's place in the annals of American humour is not only assured by his use of an outrageous principle of exaggeration characteristic of the Old West. The official evaluation of Leacock in the Literary History of Canada is that he was very much indebted to humorists such as Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, Bill Nye, Mark Twain, and others for particular literary forms and verbal techniques:

As they did, he [Leacock] used a multiplicity of forms: the dialogue, the memoir, the letter, the travel sketch, the tall tale, the anecdote, the literary burlesque and parody. He had the same bag of highly developed tricks as they had: the pun, chop-logic, the sudden juxtaposition of levels of speech, the mixed metaphor, the absurd coupling of words, the malapropisms and the apparently witless flow of free association.
In his linguistic appreciation of such humorists as Bill Nye, Leacock was often even close to plagiarism. Nye’s famous comic line, for example, about how an audience had said, “Come again, we should like to see you in broad sword combat with a meridian of longitude,”30 is close to that famous Leacock line which describes Isolda as “graceful as a meridian of longitude.”31

Two aspects of Leacock's North American humour, his penchant for literary burlesque and his verbal nonsense, are particularly interesting because, juxtaposed, they illustrate his characteristic pattern of sympathy and withdrawal from the republican comic muse—the tension between democratic revolt and the Upper Canadian restraint that was his Canadian voice and that underlies his humour. In the tradition of nineteenth-century free-wheeling America, Leacock preferred the fresh, iconoclastic broad sweep of burlesque to the singular and specific art of parody. His parodies, for example, in the volumes Nonsense Novels, Further Foolishness, and Winsome Winnie are parodies of genres rather than of specific works and do not depend for their appreciation on a knowledgeable literary readership. Because of this ultra-democratic approach, the author is often called to account. Dwight Macdonald, understanding parody as an elitist and classical genre, does not include Leacock in his anthology, reasoning that “Stephen Leacock's many volumes with titles like Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy are so broad as to be equatorial; they illustrate the tendency of parody towards philistinism.”32 As a parodist, Leacock wrote in the “philistine” spirit of Artemus Ward and Bret Harte, who, Leacock points out, knew the value of loose parody and knew it best as an American jest:

The test of a good parody, or burlesque, is whether it makes good reading without the original. Those of Bret Harte in his Condensed Novels certainly do. More than that—and the fact seems to have escaped the literary historians—they represent American Humor in the real sense. Underneath the surface of many of the stories, the basis of amusement lies not only in the verbal parody but also in the ridicule of the thought and institutions of Europe.33

There is even something of Harte's New World ridicule underlying such Leacock parodies as “Gertrude the Governess,” “Winsome Winnie,” and “The Split in the Cabinet”; and most certainly Leacock understood in “Winsome Winnie” as Harte did in “Lothaw” that “nothing was so fatal to England as to be hit in the prestige.”34

The surface humour, the verbal play in Leacock’s parodies, also argues for him writing in an American vein, as he incorporates the kind of verbal nonsense that he learned from Artemus Ward, Mark Twain, Bill Nye, and O. Henry. Leacock appreciated the “dazzling” verbal technique of the absurd combinations of words, which he lauded in such a Twain delight as “the horses are bituminous from long deprivation” from Roughing It, or such an O. Henry comic gem as “I tell you Andy [says old Mack Lonsbury in disclaiming all knowledge of women] I never had the least intersection with her dispositions.”35 This kind of inspired verbal
humour is itself an inspiration for such famous Leacock verbal nonsense in *Nonsense Novels* as:

After he had left, Gertrude had found her aunt in a syncope from which she passed into an apostrophe and never recovered. (p. 77)

At times in her presence he would fall, especially after dinner, into a fit of profound subtraction. (p. 83)

He was sitting on a thorn bush beneath her, and his upturned face wore an expression of agonized pallor. (p. 84)

And the most often quoted Leacock line:

Lord Ronald said nothing; he flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions. (p. 73)

With Lord Ronald, Leacock is at his most spontaneous and quixotic nonsensical self, indulging in an apparently witless game of free association that rivals his American company. With Gertrude’s aunt, the technique of absurd word combinations is fun enough, but the Leacock choices of “syncope” and “apostrophe” suggest less the frontier fool than a man of letters. Leacock, in fact, was very much the controlled and literate author of verbal nonsense. He admired the pure fun of the verbal and logical absurdities of the likes of Artemus Ward, who with deadpan stage presence lingered over such nonsensical *non sequiturs* as “I once knew a man in New Zealand who hadn’t a tooth in his head,” then looked reminiscent and continued, “and yet he could beat a base-drum better than any man I ever knew.” He himself, however, could not entertain for long playing the utter fool or indulging in utter foolishness. He was never really comfortable with the complete illogic or the nonsense sounds of Yankee-doodle-dandy that jingle throughout American humour. Neither could one have expected him to make comic claim on the playful foolery of the following, penned by a humorist Leacock admired, John Kendrick Bangs: it belongs both in content and spirit to the United States of America:

We are Jackies, Jackies, Jackies And we smoke the best tobaccys You can find from Zanzibar to Honeyloo. And we fight for Uncle Sammy, Yes indeed we do, for damme You can bet your life that that’s the thing to do-doodle-do You can bet your life that that’s the thing to doodle-doodle-doodle-doodle-do.37

Verbal nonsense for its own sake — of the doodle-do variety — is rare in Leacock and the Lord Ronalds are infrequent. More typical are the vocabularies of biology, medicine, business, advertising, education, or the classics, studiously *applied* in an incongruous way not only for a nonsensical effect but for satiric purpose. In this example, in the same vein as “How to Live to Be 200” in *Literary Lapses*, Leacock’s verbal nonsense is a studied parody of the nutritionist’s argot, meant to discredit the man who takes seriously a mechanistic approach to health through diet:
If he is wise he will realize that the food ought to contain a proper quantity of both proteins and amygdaloids, and, while avoiding a nitrogenous breakfast, should see to it that he obtains sufficient of what is albuminous and exogenous to prevent his breakfast from becoming monotonous.

For the most part, Leacock could not beat the republican humorists at their own game of excited and ingenious nonsense, partly because he was a modern man and partly because he was not a republican. He was not a frontier American inventing American English for the people, high-spiritedly, freely, and with childlike glee playing the inspired idiom and exploding the linguistic conventions of proper John Bull: he was a Canadian professor, trained to be a gentleman, trained in the classics, willing to concede that language was process, like the making of wine, but, at the same time, firmly believing that slang was its scum. Literary, schooled, conservative, Leacock aspired towards the pure pleasure of gratuitous verbal nonsense that he discovered, not only in American humorists but in the British Victorian writers Edmund Lear and Lewis Carroll, but he was too controlled to unleash it. The unconscious free association of totally absurd language invites the primitive, and with it, the potential for emotional and social anarchy—thus Leacock, a restrained Upper Canadian man of letters, predictably stopped short.

Instead, Leacock’s preference and his strength was the rational irrationality of misused terms and the misapplication of language. The fun, of course, in Leacock, is often in the pun, in an intellectual understanding of related but incongruous word play, as in such seventies American college jokes as “Immanuel Kant but Kubla Khan,” or “Have you heard about Maxim Gorky and his brother, Minimum?” In Nonsense Novels, burlesquing chivalry, Leacock gives us a Coat of Arms that shakes the heroine’s heart with its heraldic design: “A lion, proper, quartered in a field of gules, and a dog, improper, three-quarters in a field of buckwheat.” As a humorist of verbal nonsense, Leacock is definitely, unlike the California school, a man who went to school. American humorist George Ade described him well as “a college professor who can be a quizzical fun-maker without sacrificing his dignity as a member of the Faculty.”

When Stephen Leacock gave his first lecture in London, England, he was introduced by a Sir Owen Seaman, who claimed, as many appreciators of Leacock have done and still do, that “Mr. Leacock’s humour is British by heredity; but he has caught something of the spirit of American humour by force of association.” And so he had. The comic patterning of sentimental gold rush humour, the puritan delivery, the perspective of the innocent eye, the comic method of frontier exaggeration, the form of literary burlesque and the techniques of verbal nonsense were all special to the New Republic—and to Stephen Leacock, a Canadian professor of Northern Attic voice. Ironically, even as Leacock insisted on there being no such thing as Canadian literature or Canadian humour, his own voice began to make a difference. As he withdrew from
the edge of the republican abyss with a gentlemanly caution and in respect of his own character, he demonstrated that if his humour was British by heredity and American by association, then, at the very least, it was also Canadian by experience.