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The Achievement of
Stephen Leacock

Alec Lucas

I would like to address the subject of Stephen Leacock and McGill University, my long-time home university, where Leacock spent thirty-five years. I used to tell my students proudly that my office was once Leacock's until some wretch informed me that my office was only next to Leacock's. All the same, I retained my longstanding interest in Leacock and, for the present purpose, began to telephone those who, I was certain, had known Leacock personally at McGill. One easily forgets, however, that Leacock left McGill fifty years ago. His generation is almost gone. All who remember him at McGill were young when he was there, and their memories of him, I have found, are like those recorded in Allan Anderson's *Remembering Leacock* (1983), centring on anecdotes, manner of dress, way of lecturing, or professorial behaviour. But to return to those whom I phoned. One was off somewhere in Greece; another, somewhere in Europe and would not be back until June. (He apparently wished to avoid the Montreal winter, but counted on a mild spell in July and August.) Finally I reached Senator Carl Goldenberg, who, of all those who knew Leacock at McGill, is probably the best informed. He had Leacock as his graduate thesis director and later, for four years, shared an office with him when Goldenberg himself was on staff at McGill. Goldenberg has already appeared in Collard's *The McGill You Knew* (1975) and in Anderson's collection, and had little to add to what he has already said in these books about his former mentor and colleague. In general, he recalls Leacock as an affable, learned, and eccentric man. Specifically, however, he did emphasize the fact that Leacock liked to drink at the "violet hour," and he gave the lie to those who suggest that Leacock drank to excess and that this habit, along with his frequent lecture tours, detracted much from his work as a teacher, thus probably having some influence on his forced retirement from McGill in 1936.
Senator Goldenberg was specific on two other points. First, he had met George Leacock, Stephen's brother, and learned from him that Stephen much exaggerated the debt, regarding his work as a humorist, that he owed George. Second, like all I consulted, Goldenberg referred to Leacock's desire to make money.

In the introduction to *The Bodley Head Leacock* (1957), J. B. Priestley places Leacock among the finest humorists, but finds him of little significance otherwise, and, in general, Robertson Davies agrees with Priestley. Stevie, Leacock's son, I am told by those who knew him, said, however, that his father never sought greatness; he simply wished to have his say and found that humour helped to increase the size of his audience. True as that may be, Leacock, caught up in the success of *Literary Lapses* (1910), *Nonsense Novels* (1911), and *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), finally tired of this approach. "Do not," he wrote, "ever try to be funny, for it is a terrible curse. Here is a world going to pieces and I am worried. Yet when I stand up before an audience to deliver my serious thoughts, they begin laughing. I have been advertised to them as funny, and they refuse to accept me as anything else."

Priestley and Davies are partly right. Leacock owes his national and international reputation to his humour. The Leacock Symposium, however, has revealed him as a man of wide knowledge and perspicacious mind. It has been most satisfying to see him in a wider context than that in which he usually appears, clearly revealed now as not only a humorist but as a man who had important things to say about Canadian social and cultural matters. In this regard, aside from the pleasure of hearing Leacock discussed by specialists in various disciplines, I was taken with the paper, "The Roads Back: Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and George Elliott's *The Kissing Man*." Here Leacock appears as usual as a writer positioned halfway between those who praise and those who deride village life. On the road from romanticism to realism, he stands, through irony, on both sides simultaneously. He also appeared in a new orientation as a foil for Elliott's psychological analysis of village life. What, in revolt against the pastoral tradition, Leacock mocks in large part, Elliott treats with compassionate perspicacity and moves the pastoral on to new ground.

There is much yet to do in order to discover the boy Leacock left behind him and the man he became. We have many needs. We need a fully annotated scholarly text of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. Fortunately, we now have Ralph L. Curry's complete bibliography of Leacock's writings, and ECW Press will soon publish Curry's annotated bibliography. McGill recently secured a veritable treasure-house of Leacockiana, a fifty-six-page manuscript notebook covering in detail the dates and other details of Leacock's publications and addresses from 1901 until 1925. Several pages are blank, but all in all it is an invaluable record of twenty-five years in Leacock's literary career. It names and dates some 225 articles (fifty-three in his favourite, *Vanity Fair*) and commentaries that Leacock contributed to sixty-seven publications during that period.
It lists at least (the writing is not always legible) 143 public addresses and readings, along with dates and places, thus enabling one to trace Leacock's lecture tours precisely. Poems are also listed, and these entries contain two tantalizing comments: "Aug. 1910—poems "Today in History": one each day for a month. Pub. Press Synd." The second entry reads simply: "1913—verses (pub. 1914)." There is also a cryptic note for December 1911: "Canada (London) autobiography." If any proof of the industrious Leacock were needed, there are the entries for 1914 when he was simultaneously writing *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* and a series of five long articles on "My Club."

The notebook is entirely a compilation of titles, dates, and similar details, except for one very specific personal note regarding the birth of Stevie, which is given very precisely as August 19, 1915, 2:45 p.m. It is perhaps noteworthy in this context that he never mentions the death of his wife in 1925. Her death, however, may explain the termination of the notebook in that year. Again in this context, Senator Goldenberg has told me that Leacock was very much moved when leaving in 1925 to take his sick wife to England. When he spoke to Goldenberg, his voice broke and his eyes brimmed with tears.

Leacock's letters have never been edited, so there is no evidence to support Davies' comment that "we need expect no more substantial discoveries about his work from his letters or occasional pieces." In 1975 Vishna Chopra presented an edition of seventy of Leacock's letters as his doctoral dissertation at McGill. "This edition of Stephen Leacock's correspondence," Chopra writes, "reveals his personality in his various occupations: educator, public lecturer, and professional man of letters." Though limited, this selection does indeed disclose some fresh and interesting facets of Leacock's life. This dissertation, however, is only a start; unfortunately, no one has followed Chopra's lead.

Admittedly, simply collecting Leacock's letters would be difficult. As Barbara Nimmo writes, "They alone to his many friends, students, and business acquaintances could fill volumes," or, as Chopra comments, "Leacock's manuscripts are rather widely scattered throughout this continent." Even aside from their numbers (the Stephen Leacock Memorial Home in Orillia holds at least 7,000 items of correspondence), wide distribution, and, perhaps, family reservations, they might still be hard to collect, since they can command high prices. One Montreal lady, for example, hoped to be able to put her son through university from the sale of two letters that were merely notes. Yet Leacock's letters must be collected and edited for Leacock's sake and that of Canadian literature.

An edition of Leacock's letters would surely lead to a more comprehensive biography of the man than we now have. At the time (1959), Ralph L. Curry's biography of Leacock, the first, filled a very great need most adequately. Since then, however, Legate, Kimball, and Anderson have written of Leacock's life, but largely, except perhaps Kimball, again in terms of Leacock's public image. Albert and Theresa Moritz's recent biography has broadened, but not deepened, our knowledge of the man.
We need to look at Leacock's private life, at his dark side, as it were. We want to know more of the inner man, of the influences that moulded him, of his reactions to more than the nation's social, economic, and political affairs.

To illustrate the point: what, for example, motivated his drive for money? All who knew him admit that he wanted to make a lot of money. An old Leacock acquaintance at McGill knows from Leacock himself that he turned down an opportunity to write the history of his beloved McGill because there was "no money in it." Again, it is said at McGill that Leacock sought money in the name of cancer research after the death of his wife from that dread disease. Others assert that Leacock gave his concern for Stevie's future well-being as his motive. (Perhaps, of course, both desires influenced Leacock.) It has been suggested that he wanted to avoid the poverty of his childhood and youth, but what of a poverty that could afford a housemaid, a hired man, private tutoring, and secondary schooling at Upper Canada College?

What were Leacock's relationships with his wife and his son? With his own father? Davies notes that Leacock conceals his deepest feelings, yet neither he nor any other Leacock scholar has done much to get behind Leacock's mask regarding family matters. Almost all, for example, refer to Leacock's terrible threat, allegedly made when he was seventeen, to kill his father, if the latter should ever return to the farm, and, except for an expression of moral indignation over a mother abused, they leave the matter there. (There are two versions of the event. One sets it in winter; the other, in summer, a fact that changes its impact, for the winter version pictures Peter Leacock driving his wife from her home on a cold night to find shelter in a snow bank, a dramatic setting not possible, even in Canada, in August.) We need to know more about that father, Peter Leacock. Did Stephen inherit his wit and exuberance from him? Was his behaviour at the root of the son's cynicism and stoicism? Did Stephen turn from the study of literature to protect his emotional being? Did he turn to humour for the same reason? These are difficult questions. But since 1979 there has been available Elsie Tolson's _The Captain, The Colonel and me_, a history of Bedford, Nova Scotia, which throws at least a little new light on Leacock's father. It contains a photograph of a kindly-looking old man, Captain Lewis (1849-1940), to use Peter Leacock's pseudonym, and some interesting observations:

It is Stephen Leacock's father who should be explained and the most truthful way to do it is to quote what was told me by people who knew him in Bedford.

"He was a dandy nice man, and so was his wife. Every day in summer he sailed his 18-foot boat with the two sails, to Webster's point; and every day he went to the graveyard to tend his boy's grave. He had two hogheads there to catch rain-water and he planted roses and made a garden of the corner lot in the Anglican cemetery."

(Capt. and Mrs. Lewis had one son, Walter Harold, who died at age 17 and it broke their hearts.)

"He wouldn't let the undertakers in for a long time."
(Their first home was at the corner of Rutledge and Pleasant Streets, afterwards owned by Dr. Alan Cunningham.)

"Some college boys one summer rented the Fisher house near Canfield's. They used to dive from Lewis' boat and the Captain would race down the hill yelling at them."

(Then Capt. and Mrs. Lewis moved down to the shore property in Isleview.)

"I wondered what he was captain of?" continued the man who had known him, "he had two boats and a dinghy but he wasn't that good a sailor. One day Charlie Boutilier said to him that it was a good day for a sail and you know what good sailors the Boutiliers were. Suddenly out beyond the island one of those Basin storms broke. Boutilier was used to sudden changes but Lewis was nervous. 'Lard thundering Jesus,' yelled Charlie, 'let me at that tiller!'"

A woman who knew the Captain well when she was young said, "Capt. Lewis was so kind to us when we were young. He taught us all how to swim and he was so good to children. He was cranky, sort of, but he never drank and he never was cross with us. He fixed up his boathouse for the girls to change and stood guard outside. We girls practically lived there."

Such was the father, whom Leacock never saw again after their parting in 1887, and such is the portrait of a man that suggests a reassessment of the marital relationship of Leacock's parents, if nothing else. Any future biography must surely take Captain Lewis of Bedford into consideration, as it must, too, draw on the essays that originated at the Leacock Symposium.

Malcolm Ross

Back in the twenties, my family took the Montreal Standard, and there was a Leacock piece in nearly every issue. We used to take turns reading Leacock aloud. I remember once, after getting halfway through a piece called "Indoor Football, or Football Without a Ball," breaking down in uncontrollable laughter. My father took over but failed to get beyond the next paragraph as laughter got the best of him too. We managed to finish the piece together in gasping, sputtering silence, our shoulders heaving and tears streaming down our faces. I can remember waking at night in laughter at that little piece by Leacock. It never occurred to me to wonder why I had laughed, and I have never tried to dissect Leacock and put him under a critical microscope. I simply continued to laugh with him down the years.

It was not until the late fifties that Leacock became important to me in a different way, that is, as the saviour of the New Canadian Library.

In the fall of 1956, I approached Jack McClelland with a proposal to publish a series of Canadian novels in paperback. I was teaching then at Queen's University and was anxious to prepare a full course on Canadian literature. We were teaching some Canadian literature from
anthologies at the tag-end of a course on American literature. But you
cannot teach a novel with only a chapter in an anthology to go by. The
older novels were out of print, and the recent ones too expensive for
classroom use.

When I saw Jack in Toronto, he expressed interest but feared there
was no university market. Canadian literature in most universities was
restricted to small graduate courses and thesis writing. I was able to
persuade Jack that the availability of texts would create the market, and he
decided to gamble. We finally got underway in 1958, and McClelland and
Stewart announced a new series—the New Canadian Library.

The first two volumes were Morley Callaghan’s *Such Is My Beloved*
and Frederick Philip Grove’s *Over Prairie Trails*. Several newspapers
applauded the venture, although doubts were expressed about the
chances of a merely Canadian series surviving for more than a couple of
years. The bookstore sales were weak, and Jack took a substantial loss.
But he went ahead with two more books, one of them being Leacock’s
*Literary Lapses*. To our surprise this book sold like hot cakes and had to be
reprinted. Said Jack, “We’ll keep going. But you must put a Leacock in
every batch!”

So for the next five or six years, sometimes twice in one year, a
Leacock book came out in the New Canadian Library. I must confess that
I began to chafe under Jack’s directive. One of my colleagues quipped,
“Why don’t you change the series title to LCL—Leacock’s Canadian
Library?”

When five years were done, I wrote Jack, imploring him to release
me from the burden of my pledge. “Not yet,” he said. “We still need him.”

By this time there were very few of the humorous books left, and
several months after my last desperate plea, I tried again. “Jack, am I to
assume that if we are to stay alive we’ll have to start reprinting Leacock’s
books on economics and his history of Montreal?”

He phoned. “We’re off the hook. We’re making a profit—and not
just on Leacock.”

Not only had sales in the bookstores mounted. Adoptions were
flooding in as university introduced courses on Canadian
literature. Leacock had not only saved the New Canadian Library, he had
advanced, probably by some years, the introduction of full Canadian
literature courses in many of our schools and colleges.

Grateful as I was to Leacock, by the time we had published the last
of his volumes I had become just a little jaded, even perhaps jaundiced,
in my feeling for some of his work. I do not think I read a line of Leacock
again for about ten years. Then, under some inner compulsion, I began
taking him with me on planes and trains. I still thought that some of his
parody and burlesque were contrived and derivative, some of the pun-
ning mechanical and done to formula. But in his finest humour (and
supremely in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*) there is a tone and a magic
utterly and uniquely his own. To be sure, he owed a great deal to Mark
Twain and the American tradition of humour. But he did find his own
unmistakable and inimitable voice.
The reflections of Guy Vanderhaeghe and Timothy Findley are most illuminating. Vanderhaeghe writes of the marvellous particularity of person and place in the *Sketches*, a particularity so vivid, so intense that it becomes a universality in which we can see ourselves and each other. And Findley stresses the importance of scene in these *Sketches*, of the tight congeries of situation, setting, and event in which people relate dramatically to one another.

Leacock was a conservative and an imperialist. He was also the compassionate friend of the poor and the oppressed. The *personae* of his stories are sometimes American, sometimes British, sometimes Canadian—or a mix of all three. His authorial voice, often heard over the voice of the *personae*, is perhaps multi-national and his Toryism (even if sometimes “red”) is audible enough.

But there is a Leacock voice which encircles these other voices like a heard halo. It is the voice in which irony, wisdom, and an iron compassion are fused in a golden humanity. This voice is not the breath of Leacock’s mixed “national” postures or of his political and social convictions. It is a voice out of the very marrow of the man’s inner life and sensibility. Hark and you can hear it—soaring above all that he has made in the image of any political allegiance, any nationality, any literary precedent.

There is in the highest art a purifying fire. Surely there is also a purifying laughter. For me, at least, Leacock’s humour, at its highest, has always been therapeutic and, therefore, life-enhancing.

Glenn Clever

I would like to consider two aspects of Leacock: first, his historical place in the development of Canadian literature; and second, his place as a humorist.

I see Leacock as essentially a part of the Confederation period. He was born in 1868, very few years later than that group of writers—Scott, Roberts, Lampman, Carman, Campbell...—who, by general consensus, comprise the “Confederation School” of Canadian writers; Confederation because they came to maturity with the new Dominion of Canada—how curiously old-fashioned even the term sounds today! Writers are everywhere much the same in the kinds of worlds they create; once they emerge from the derivative phase of aping their models, they look back for their own idiosyncratic material and, consequently, forms; their major works reflect the decades of their own growing up to maturity and the immediately preceding years fleshed in by parental mythologies. The writer’s world is, so to speak, that stretch of years of the parents’ maturity and the writer’s nonage. So Leacock’s world embraces those years from about 1850 to 1900: this is his Mariposan fictional Dominion.

Leacock’s world is rather an old-fashioned world, one of class awareness peculiar to the pre-World War I era, of a scorn for encroaching socialism, of automatically accepted male superiority, of nationalism
but in the watercolour mode of late nineteenth-century Canada, like Bartlett paintings, not the explosive blood-colour of American Revolution, repeated in the Civil War of the 1860s, nor even Canada’s own bloodletting of 1914-1918, and, of course, the imperialist ideal. That Leacock’s fiction peaked in popularity between 1910 and 1925 reaffirms that essentially he belongs not to the post-war world of the 1920s but to the Confederation world then closing its doors.

As to his humour, Leacock, it seems to me, considered humour as being of two kinds: divisive or unifying. Divisive being demonical laughter at others, the childish regression of delight in demolishing things, the kind of laughter that threatens civilized social behaviour. Unifying humour, to the contrary, being shared laughter with others, the adult laughter of the realization of the oneness of all things, the kind that contributes to civilized social behaviour. In Leacock’s own work, for example, we can all feel with his comic figures who are nonplussed by new experience, as in “My Financial Career”; by the social unease of the Mr. Melpomenuses of this world; or by the indecision of the Mr. Jugginses.

Leacock’s primary mode of humour is that of irony, of which he is the superb master, and where he perhaps most differs from Thomas Chandler Haliburton, the direct satirist. Through Leacock’s ironic eye we see late nineteenth-century Canadians in relation to their most reverential myths: of royalty, business, high society, romantic notions, organized religion, politics, education, the booming West, our always gullible selves, even his own public-speaker figure—the irony always functioning to show his deep concern that socialism, technology, and commercialism would deny human individuality and dignity.

It is interesting to compare Leacock as a humorist with Haliburton. Haliburton’s colonial world of eighteenth-century, Addison/Steele satiric models sharply differs from Leacock’s. Haliburton aims to satirize; consequently, his tales tend to be fable-like in form, with their morals tacked on, often awkwardly. Usually Haliburton gives the text of the day as introduction, then the amplifying example as the body of the story, then the tart moral to close. And his is a totally regional, squirearchical world, curiously remote from the realities of pioneer life, and those parts of his world that he does present Haliburton pictures at arms’ length for us to view in their frame. Leacock’s stories, being shaped by the principle of irony, habitually extend a situation to its ironical if often absurd extreme so that it is whatever moral it has; and because his habitual mode is unifying and not divisive, we find ourselves chuckling not at the cut-ups of a Sam Slick secondary world but with characters from our primary world, in which we recognize often that there but for the grace of God go we, for we are a part of the world depicted in a way we never are with Haliburton’s.

Another of Leacock’s achievements, in my view, is that his own deep concern for people shows through enough to indicate that the laughter sometimes borders on tears, as in sections of Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich. Leacock, superb raconteur though he was, is more than
a glib comic, his humour balanced by an awareness of the deliberate evil of much human motive and act. The self-interest and focus on money and power evince a sympathy for the dispossessed, the deprived, the lonely, and the victimized of the age that he saw slowly encroaching on Mariposa.

So, a “Confederation” writer, one whose major fiction was written before World War I, with all the latent colonial regionalism, the Nature with a capital N, that “Confederation” implies? I think so, even though his “nature” was archetypical provincial small-town, for his fictional world is essentially limited to the Upper/Lower Canada pre-existing the new Dominion, without even Duncan Campbell Scott’s imaginative extension into the north and west of the new land. And Leacock peopled his world with outscape s of people in typical nineteenth-century mode. The dramatization of the inscape s of characters, comic or serious, of Canadian cities, prairies, Pacific coast, Maritimes, and northern reaches of the post-war era would be done by others whose formative years were later in time.

R. L. McDougall

The upside of the record of Stephen Leacock’s achievement is unassailable. I mean the humour at its best. To have made an Englishman (was it J. B. Priestley?) laugh out loud in an English railway carriage is surely a great achievement. It is a mark of Leacock’s achievement that the best of his work is still in print and is likely to remain so as long as books are made. In the last few weeks I have pulled Leacock from my shelves for my own refreshment. I too have laughed out loud. Behold Lord Nosh (spelt Knotacent) confronting Gertrude the Governess: “Where had he seen those lineaments? Where was it? At the races? or the theatre? on a bus? No. Some subtler thread of memory was stirring in his mind. He strode hastily to the sideboard, drained a dipper and a half of brandy, and became again the perfect English gentleman.” Or Dr. McTeague, confronted with the unlooked-for and unanswerable question from his class, mouth open like a stranded fish, toppling slowly forward over his desk, paralyzed. More moderately, I have admired again the superb control of the opening paragraphs of Arcadian Adventures, where expensive birds sing in the trees above Plutoria Avenue, while baby heirs to commercial fortunes roll back and forth in their perambulators, waving their fifty-dollar rattles in an inarticulate greeting to one another.

To classify and to assign influences in the face of humour as intensely creative as this is not usually a rewarding procedure. In the sixties, it was said, in response to the Socratic statement that the unexamined life was not worth living, that the trouble was we had examined the hell out of it. But Beverly Rasporich has done a good job in this area, and we must be grateful to her for a well-reasoned and informative essay. The question of the “American” Leacock has been raised also in James Steele’s provocative paper on the “multi-national persona,” and our judgement
on it may well affect our final tally on Leacock's achievement. Was Leacock, for example, just playing games for money when he slipped into one or other of his American guises? I venture only two pieces of evidence about the nature of Leacockian humour, neither of them new, but both worth recalling. Leacock had two little stories that he loved to tell. One was about an old lady facing a painful terminal illness in hospital who wrote to thank him for the light and joy he had brought to her in her valley of the shadow. She had been blessed by the laughter that, as Leacock said elsewhere, touches universals and unites rather than divides the human family. This was the laughter of release and reconciliation, and Leacock was right in seeing it as no small gift in a world where man was born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward. The second story was about the great clown Grimaldi. A man came to see a doctor who had been recommended by a friend. He was depressed and so utterly weary of life that he had thought of committing suicide. After some talk, the doctor said: "I'll tell you what to do. Buy a ticket for a performance of the great Grimaldi; he will cheer you up." "But," the man said, "I am Grimaldi." Both stories carry bright proud banners of human dignity, and both drift towards the sad end of the spectrum of human experience. My mother-in-law, who is very old now and very wise, knew Leacock reasonably well in his later years at McGill, and when I asked her a few weeks ago what she thought of him, she said simply: "I thought he was a very sad man."

If it is true that the man that suffers is separate from the man that creates, it is true also that a single spirit encompasses them both. Leacock, it seems to me, was very much a whole man; and the whole Leacock—husband and father, academic and teacher, performer and humorist—may be seen as in itself a kind of transcendent achievement. We are indebted to Ian Ross Robertson for placing Leacock in the intellectual milieu of his times. That has been done in part before, but now it is done conclusively. Although these turn-of-the-century years were years of great flux in ideas and values, the flux was contained and disciplined by a remarkable consensus that was being swept on into the new century from the heyday of high colonialism which Roy Daniells has described so well in <i>Literary History</i>. Leacock, together with Lighthall and Macphail and others of an idealistic persuasion, bobbed about a bit in the flux, but each found within the surviving consensus the support they needed to shape a package that made some sense of the world they lived in. The point is that Leacock knew exactly where he stood on most of the major issues of his day. How else could he have implanted those bits of steel that are the satiric dazzle beneath the surface of his best work? Yet the character of the man (I don't know if the word will convey my meaning) remained important. On the question of social justice, for example, Leacock was eclectic, but the cornerstone of his response was his basically tragic view of the human situation—what he called "the appalling inequalities of our human lot." I remember reading a passage from <i>The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice</i> when I was a student at the University of Toronto and being very moved. Having listed some of life's many in-
justices (and how acutely he must have thought of his malformed son), Leacock went on to say:

The human mind, lost in a maze of inequalities that it cannot explain and evils that it cannot, singly, remedy, must adapt itself as best it can. An acquired indifference to the ills of others is the price at which we live. A certain dole of sympathy, a casual mite of personal relief is the mere drop that any of us alone can cast into the vast ocean of human misery. Beyond that we must harden ourselves lest we too perish. We feed while others starve. We make fast the doors of our lighted house against the indigent and the hungry. What else can we do? If we shelter one, what is that? And if we try to shelter all, we are ourselves shelterless.

In the fervour of my youth, I thought this at first a shameful cop-out. But I came to think otherwise, for out of his dark vision Leacock articulated, surprisingly for his tory colouring, a rationale for something like the welfare state; and into “the vast ocean of human misery” he cast the sweet potion of his laughter. So it is on these terms, and others, that I think Leacock acquitted himself well as a human being. He wrote lightly, but he took all his work seriously. Rereading his books on Dickens, Mark Twain, the Arctic, and Canada at war, I am impressed, not perhaps by their scholarship, but simply by how well they are written and with what diligence and integrity each task has been carried out. The same qualities, by all accounts, were in his teaching.

Did Leacock prostitute his great gift for humour? Did he allow the talent to grow tawdry in servile response to an audience he knew would lap up anything he wrote, fresh or stale, and pay him well for it? Did he, as Robertson Davies has suggested, betray his talent by failing to accept the challenge of the novel’s more exacting forms? This is the area of the downside in Leacock’s achievement. I have no time for it now, and not much inclination if I had. I rest my case here.
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