The Timely Humor of Stephen Leacock

Harold Ridlon
Bridgewater State College

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The Timely Humor of Stephen Leacock

On this fortieth anniversary of his death, Stephen Leacock, one of the finest humorists of this century, and “the best known Canadian of any kind, except perhaps Mary Pickford,” according to Douglas Bush, deserves reassessment. Born in 1869 in Swansmore, Hampshire, England, and resettled with his family on a farm (“damndest place I ever saw”) near Lake Simcoe, Ontario, at age six (“I decided to go with them,” he was to say later), he survived the rigors of frontier life in a family of twelve children, all reared by a mother of breeding, hardihood, and humaneness, and deserted by a profligate, Micawber-like but insensitive father. Through his mother’s connection, Leacock remained throughout his life a committed and vociferous socialist, castigating liberals with acid wit and pungent satire, and extolling the virtues of the Empire. He carried his convictions into the classroom, particularly during his thirty-five year association with McGill University in Montreal, first as lecturer, then as professor, and finally as Chairman of the Department of Economics and Political Science. One of his students remarked, “His lectures were crowded. Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Malthus would come to life. He, before Winston Churchill, saved the British Empire every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at three o’clock in Room 20.”

As to the Ph.D. degree itself, Leacock wrote, “The meaning of this degree is that the recipient of instruction is examined for the last time in his life, and is pronounced completely full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him.” He took pride in it nonetheless, and when on a trip to Europe, having signed the register as Doctor Leacock, he was summoned by the Captain to “Have a look at the second stewardess’s knee,” he was “off like a shot.” “But it was no use. Another fellow got there ahead of me. He was a Doctor of Divinity.”

Leacock’s best known and most widely used text, Elements of Political Science (1906), earned him more money than any of his books of humor. It was revised and reissued in 1921, again proving successful. He published widely and influentially in his professional disciplines, chiefly political science, but it was his humor that built his reputation.

Privately printed, Leacock’s first humorous book, Literary Lapses (1910), proved so successful that John Lane of the prestigious Bodley Head, Ltd. of England purchased publication rights, thus establishing a long association with Leacock. A curious potpourri of sketches, Literary Lapses reflects many of the comic themes and devices which were to characterize Leacock’s writing from that point on. "My Financial Career" establishes a standard type in Leacock’s fictions, the little man bewildered by a world he can neither understand nor cope with (Charlie Chaplin later sought Leacock unsuccessfully to write a scenario for him) treated with a subtle blend of the ludicrous and the pathetic. Here a meek, shy, suspicious soul, persuaded to bank his life savings of fifty-six dollars, does so cautiously and furtively, money, he says secretively, "In fifties," and "In sixes." From then on, he keeps all his money "in silver dollars in a sock."
Literary Lapses' anticipates other persistent themes as well: attitudes toward education. At Oxford, students work at their own pace, while in American universities professors are concerned with a student's "deportment," his "organizing ability and his hope of promotion to a soap factory." To the American professor, "a student of genius merely means . . . a student who gives no trouble, who passes all his 'tests,' and is present at all his recitations." Such a student, "if he can be trained to be a hustler and an advertiser, will undoubtedly 'make good.'"

First he played with his toothbrush. He got a whole lot of water and brushed his teeth with it. This was huge. Then he played with his collars. He had no end of fun with them, taking them all out one by one and swearing at them, and then putting them back and swearing at the whole lot together.

The next toy was his pants. He had immense fun there, putting them on and taking them off again, and then trying to guess which side was which by merely looking at them.

After that he took his book and read some adventures called "Genesis" till breakfast.

After he kissed his mother and father, and sees his father smoking a cigar and his mother wearing her brooch proudly, he quietly determines "that next Christmas he will hang on to his money and take chances on what the angels bring."

Leacock's second book, Nonsense Novels (1912), is a series of parodies of popular types of fiction: among them the social novel, the detective story, the chivalric romance, the futuristic novel, the yarn of the sea, the tale of life on the old heavily mortgaged farm. "Gertrude the Governess," orphaned long before she was born, has for her education but the meagre resources of her aunt's library and music room: a piano; French, Italian, Russian, and Roumanian grammars; a theodolite; and a book on mining engineering. The day she finds she must seek gainful employment, her eye lights upon an advertisement for a governess with "a knowledge of French, Italian, Roumanian, Music, and Mining Engineering." Struck by the correlation, it takes Gertrude but half-an-hour to realize that she is admirably equipped for the task of educating "two golden-haired children" destined to inherit an immense fortune obtained from mining operations. All ends happily: one who has loved her long, a nobleman no less, becomes her husband against his father's, the Earl's, and mother's, the Countess's, objections:

Gertrude and Ronald were wed. Their happiness was complete. Need we say more? Yes, only this. The Earl was killed in the hunting-field a few days after. The Countess was stricken by lightning. The two children fell down as well. Thus the happiness of Gertrude and Ronald was complete.

"Guido the Gimlet of Ghent" seeks the hand of Isolde; but for her love others have suffered:

Otto the Otter had cast himself into the sea. Conrad the Cocosnut had hurled himself from the highest bastlement of the castle head first into mud. Hugo the Helpless had hanged himself by the waistband to a hickory tree and had refused all efforts to dislodge him. For her sake Siegfried the Susceptible had swallowed sulphuric acid.
In Leacock's parody of the sentimental tale, John Enderby, about to lose the Old Homestead, titled “the crock of buttermilk that stood beside him and drained a draught of the maddening liquid, till his brain glowed like the coals of the tamarack fire before him,” and when his distraught wife urged him to read “the Good Book” instead, he “took from her hand the well-worn copy of Euclid’s Elements” and read “the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, and whosoever shall produce the sides, lo, the same also shall be equal each unto each.” Even Scottish national pride is punctuated in “Hannah of the Highlands.”

It was here in the glen that Bonnie Prince Charlie had lain and hidden after the defeat of Culloden. Almost in the same spot the great boulder still stands behind which the Bruce had lain hidden after Bannockburn; while behind a number of lesser stones the Covenanters had concealed themselves during the height of the Stuart persecution.

Parody depends heavily on the reader's familiarity with the original, but Leacock's parodies afford pleasure even to the uninitiated.

It was in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), and *Arcadian Adventures With the Idle Rich* (1914), that Leacock realized most fully that transposition into humor of the tensions in his life and art: desire for wealth, yet contempt for those amply endowed with it and insensitive to its proper use; affection for individuals, but suspicion of their clumping together institutionally; divided loyalties between the satisfactions of domestic life and the demands of a public career; ambivalence toward professions and their practitioners, including his own. Never a novelist, he was nonetheless able in these books to sustain consistency of character, setting, situation, mood, and theme to produce remarkable overall integrity.

In *Sunshine Sketches*, the town called Mariposa provides the major linking device. Mariposa was a thinly fictionalized version of Orillia, a town which Leacock knew well. In his preface, Leacock disclaimed “writing about a real place and real people,” claiming that Mariposa may be found “all the way from Lake Superior to the sea, with the same maple trees and the same churches and hotels.” Similarly, he disavows actuality of character, though the citizenry of Orillia so disagreed that Leacock barely escaped libel actions. The barber of the town said repeatedly to indignant customers. “How in hell was I to know he would put these things in a book.”

In the course of composing *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock revealed not only his ambivalence about Orillia's inhabitants, a microcosm of Leacock's whole world, but he also exposed many of his own predilections -- even prejudices -- about the manners and mores of his time. Moreover, by reading aloud sections of the book to friends and family, he discovered that rich potential for public speaking which he exploited fully in the years to come. He then called “Empire” lectures, which took him all over the British Empire in 1907, he said, “When I state that these lectures were followed immediately by the Union of South Africa, the Banana Riots in Trinidad,” and the Turko-Italian War, I think you can form some idea of their importance.

As to Orillia itself, Leacock built himself a summer home, “Old Brewery Bay,” on the shores of Lake Couching near the town. There he relaxed from the rigors of college teaching and lecture tours.

Mariposa, the fictional town in *Sunshine Sketches*, slopes down from Lake Wissanott, out of which flows the Ossawippi River. The frame for the story is Josiah Smith's hostility which, at the beginning of the book, he is obligated to endow, because of a threatened closing, with French chef, “rat's cooler,” and twenty-five cent gourmet meals, thus creating so strong a grass roots movements that he keeps his license without having to add the "girl room," whatever that was.

The humor of the book takes many different forms: plays on words, incongruity of various kinds, hyperbole, malapropisms, barely credible eccentricities, harmless deceptions, silly ambitions punctuated by deflationary rhetoric, paradoxical figures, irony, sudden shifts in tone and diction, outright puns, and situations that show the ineffable puny creature man pitted against a jungle of frustrating circumstance, from which he is rescued by inexplicable quirks of fate. However, the fundamental comic effect is achieved by Leacock's firm conviction that the finest humor arises from "an attempt to see things as they really are and not as convention has led us to think they are," as well as by his view that "the very essence of good humor is that it must be without harm and without malice" even though "there is in all of us a certain vein of the old original demonic humor or joy in the misfortune of another which sticks to us like our original sin."

The frame story in *Sunshine Sketches* recounts Smith's surprising election as M.P. from Missinaba County. His opponent, Bagshaw the Liberal, demonstrates an acerbic rhetoric that is still characteristic of Canadian politics today. Promising gentility and restraint, he refers to Smith as a skunk, a common saloon-keeper, a horse thief, a "notable perjurer," and "the Blackest-hearted liar in Missinaba County."

Set like jewels within the frame are nine stories which demonstrate the full range of Leacock's comic ability. Jefferson Thorpe, barber and speculator, makes a fortune in silver only to lose it all by investing in bananas. He maintains his composure in failure as he had preserved his modesty in success, by planning to contribute most of his money to the indigent and the idiots of Missinaba County. Even his daughter Myra, back at her job as telephone operator instead of on the New York stage, says "that if there's one thing she hates, it's the stage, and she can't see how actresses put up with it." *The Mariposa Belle*, an imposing side-wheeler, but easily mistaken for the Lusitania in a certain light, sinks, as she always does, in six feet of water, the deepest part of Lake Wissanott, during the "Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias." Mr. Pupkin, a lowly bank teller "with a face like a horse," wins the hand of Zena Pepperleigh, "the Judge's daughter, when, in an attempt at suicide, he fires instead at an intruder in the bank, wounding him slightly and being wounded sightly in return. His assailant turns out to be the bank guard who had mistaken Pupkin for the thief, whereas in reality there was no thief, no robbery, but only two heroes. Dean Drone, the financially inept vicar, is spared resignation by Smith's "notable perjurer," and "the Blackest-hearted liar in Missinaba County."

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first of the annual miscellanies. Here the
parodies persist, the familiar human types
abound, and the scathing commentaries
upon almost everything appear. Two of
the best pieces, both of which depend on
the myth of the common man’s vicissitudes
and triumphs, are “With the Photographer”
and “The Dentist and the Gas.” In the former,
aphotographer so annoys his subject with
fussiness over best angle, correct smile,
and flattering retouching, that the victim
finally revolts:

What I wanted is no longer done. Go on,
then, with your brutal work. Take your
negative . . . dip it in sulfide, bromide,
oxide, cowhide — anything you like: remove
the eyes, correct the mouth, adjust the face,
restore the lips, reanimate the
necktie, and reconstruct the waistcoat. Coat
it with an inch of gloss, shade it, emboss it, gild it . . . then . . . keep
it for yourself and your friends.

In the latter, an overcharged and irritated
patient sends a bill to his dentist for $400
($50 for mental agony, $100 for gross lies in
regard to the nothingness of gas, $50 for
putting him under gas, $100, for “Brilliant
ideas, occurred to me under gas and lost”).
Donald Cameron calls Behind the Beyond
one of Leacock’s best and “most
characteristic” books.

Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich,
Leacock’s fifth book, is the flip side of
Sunshine Sketches, more satiric and
exclusively urban. The Mausoleum Club,
around which much of the action centers,
is modeled on the posh Mount Royal Club of
Montreal. Plutoria, supposedly a city in the
United States, is really Montreal. The book
castigates charlatanism, exposes secularized
religious institutions tainted by big
money, pillories corrupt politics, and
trashses go-getting in the guise of
education. It demonstrates Leacock’s
deeply-held view that material means and
business methods may be used to solve
many human problems, but cannot be used
with impunity to hold society together or to
cement lasting spiritual bonds.

The mood of the book is struck in the
opening pages where infant scions of
financial empires are wheeled about the city:
“. . . a little toddling princess in a rabbit suit
who owns fifty distilleries in her own right”;”
“. . . a little hooded head that controls from
its cradle an entire New Jersey cor­
poration”; “a million dollars of preferred
stock laughs merrily in recognition of a
minority control going past in a go-cart
drawn by an imported nurse.” From birth
to death, these Plutorians control lives they
know nothing, care nothing, about. They
ingratiate themselves with visiting nobility,
they patronize ecclesiastics and academics
alike, thus vitiating the potential of the
institutions they represent; their wives find
their jewels and fur wraps “deastralized” by
two “old criminals” who have “worked this
same thing in four cities already, and both of
them have done time, and lots of it.” Even
the fight for “clean government” is really
staging for the entrepreneurs to “clean up”
financially. The businesslike merging of St.
Asaph’s and St. Osaph’s churches, the only
truly topical note in the book, satirizes
harshly an unholy alliance Leacock
particularly deplored.

Those chapters dealing with Mr.
Tomlinson, the “Wizard of Finance,”
iluminate Leacock’s method and purpose,
as well as the relation of his art to his life. The
Wizard farmer whose gold strike has
plummeted him into a fortune, tries
diligently to fail. Completely out of his
natural environment in a fancy expensive
hotel, he endures stoically the torments of
wealth and prestige: pitying his wife
agonie as inept society matron; seeing his
son Fred, a good, hardworking farm boy,
become infected with the malaise of
indolence and the curse of decadence;
having his tacit ignorance interpreted by a
host of manipulators as creative
shrewdness; and being besieged on all sides
by self-serving businessmen, politicians,
lawyers, clergymen, and academicians.
Among these is President Boomer of
Plutoria College, who wants money to
restructure the campus and revamp the
faculty (“to dismiss everybody but himself
and Dr. Boyster”), and who has already
changed Plutoria College into a modern
university where anyone can study
anything. When Tomlinson’s dream of
financial failure is realized, he returns home
with a happy wife and a reconstituted son.

The other story best illustrating
Leacock’s blend of satire and sentiment is
that of the strange marriage of Mr. Peter
Spillikins, a wealthy twenty-four year old, to
a widow with four sons, the eldest but four
years younger than Peter, who weds him for
his money, then falls deeply in love with him.
Peter is philanthropic, cares not one whit for
his money intrinsically, and is not a schemer
or manipulator. He thus earns a happy
home, a dutiful wife, and four sons who love
him, and, better yet, play his favorite game
of billiards with him whenever he wants
them to.

Clark Bissell considers Arcadian
Adventures Leacock’s finest book because it
so skillfully pulls together those two
divergent strains of his humor, the utterly
ridiculous and the bitingly satiric. For
Edmund Wilson, those polarities were
outward manifestations of an inward and
spiritual tension, a kind of tug-of-war
between “slapdash buffooneries”
and “Canadian Violence.” Robertson Davies,
however, moderating Wilson’s extremism
somewhat, claims that Leacock’s inherent
violence “springs from a tension in the
mind” typical of all serious humorists.

“Leacock is violent,” he says, “as Chaplin is
violent; under the clowning works a
vigorou turbulent spirit, whose mellowest
productions leave always on the palate a
hint of basic brimstone.” Leacock’s own
favorite story involves a man who tells a
physician of his insomnia, nervousness,
unlocalized discomfort, and general
despersion. The doctor says, “What you
need is a lift of the spirit which will take you
away from yourself and amuse you. Go see
the clown Grimaldi. I saw him last night.
You’ll come away cured,” whereupon the
man replies “I am Grimaldi.”

Stephen Leacock, a man of gusto, pride,
and insecurity, constructed from his fears
and his hopes, his triumphs and his defeats,
his meanness and his magnanimity, his loves
and his hatreds, a quality of humor that
defies precise classification but commands
affectionate recognition. Repeatedly, we see
ourselves mirrored in his work because his
insatiable curiosity and his courageous and
perceptive articulation fix us in the amber of
his sketches. Gelett Burgess, another
humorist of considerable stature, put it well
when he wrote, “Though I say it as
shouldn’t, it takes a fine scientific mind to
write good nonsense, and Stephen Leacock
has placed himself in the class of Edward
Lear, Dodgson, Barrie, Oliver Herford and
the author of Felix the Cat.” One could
hardly hope to be in better company.