

# THE OTHER MR. LEACOCK

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**S**TEPHEN LEACOCK was four parts humorist, one part political economist and two parts controversialist. During his lifetime these discrete proportions were hopelessly confused and it is only with a great deal of excruciating research that we can now see them separately and clearly. Literary critics have been mainly interested in his life and times in order to illuminate and interpret his fiction; historians have recently become interested in his writings for the perspective they throw upon the past. The inadvertent result is that we are becoming acquainted with two Mr. Leacocks—the one a kindly and humane commentator on the foibles and fads of humanity, a genius apparently beyond both history and analysis;<sup>1</sup> and the other an imperialist, critic of the Canadian plutocracy, middle-class reformer and an intellectual deeply engaged in the debates of his day.<sup>2</sup> There was, of course, only one Mr. Leacock and an examination of his social values and assumptions may be of some relevance to the interpretation of the humorous works upon which his reputation justly rests.

Leacock was a political economist for some time before his name became a byword for humour. Though his academic credentials were impressive and his position as head of the Political Economy Department at McGill University pre-eminent, he saw the role of the man of learning in a very different light from what these symbols of professionalism suggest. He had been educated in literature and the classics, had taught these subjects for eight years at Upper Canada College, and was thirty-one when he went to Chicago to do graduate work in economics. This shift from the traditional learning to the new discipline was made by many other Canadian intellectuals in the decades after 1895. O. D. Skelton, who had graduated in classics and English literature at Queen's University and was in the political economy course at Chicago in 1907, suggested the reason for this change when he told the economist Adam Shortt, that "Strikes, trusts, taxes, socialism, tariffs [and] banking bulk a good deal larger in the public mind than the authenticity of John's gospel or the wherefore of the shyness of Hegel."<sup>3</sup> Lea-

cock made the same journey, but, perhaps because he did so only after his outlook was more or less fixed, his allegiance to the new discipline was partial and incomplete. He had no taste for specialized research and no patience with the pretensions to expertise purchased at the cost of cutting up the wide field of human knowledge into tidy compartments. And he did not share the conviction of Shortt and Skelton that the expert training of the economists should be put at the disposal of the efficient, regulatory state. He was as impatient of his discipline as he was of social constraint and regulation and he remained dubious about economics as a body of solutions. In one of his last pronouncements on the subject he said that the current economics of the schools was just a "babble of mathematical jargon, all plots and graphs and curves, signifying nothing."<sup>4</sup> Economics, he believed, was not a science; it was the name of a problem, the problem essentially of a socially just distribution of material goods and this was, in a profound sense, a moral and not a technical question.

True to his classical training he was committed to the view that education was to concern itself with the formation of character, the understanding of man, and the search for truth. He expected the university to be one of the driving forces of civilization, not in the obvious sense of being a part of politics, but as a place where the great issues of politics could be explored and clarified free from intemperate partisanship. Because the ultimate questions reduced themselves to moral ones, to questions about man, Leacock believed that the old learning was indispensable for dealing with those problems that modern political economy grappled with in vain. He also believed that these could be simply taught. Though the delight in entertaining and the desire for money were motives that played a large part in his life, still many of his stories were vehicles for expressing his social ideas and economic beliefs. Leacock was quite conscious of the serious purposes that even light fiction could serve — indeed, it followed logically from his critical view of popular democracy that for purposes of discussion of social and economic questions the generality of people could not be reached through excessively serious books and articles. If the average reader were to be ensnared at all into considering these issues, he wrote in 1920, the message must be hidden among the flowers. "Such is the recognized method by which the great unthinking public is taught to think."<sup>5</sup> It is hardly surprising that the line between his so-called humorous stories and his serious work was blurred and indistinct.

The society that Leacock saw around him in the years before the Great War bore no resemblance to that golden age of harmony and innocence which was invented by nostalgic imagination in the 1920's. The dominant note in his magazine

articles and his satire was one of dissatisfaction and revolt, a worry that traditional standards and historic ties and habits were being eroded, and a feeling that national development was unbalanced and unhealthy. The most obvious characteristic of Canadian life in these years, a fact which astonished visitors like Rupert Brooke, André Siegfried and James Bryce, was materialism, the simple-minded concentration on development and reckless individualism. "Our prevailing passion," Leacock wrote in 1911, "is for bigness, for rapidity of growth, for a sudden and sensational development." "We have gone astray in the wilderness on the false estimate that we have placed upon wealth and mere pecuniary success . . . Our whole conception of individual merit and of national progress has been expressed in dollars and cents."<sup>6</sup>

Leacock found the explanation for the degeneracy of the times in the triumph of what he called business values. The whole "bias of our American life [is] towards commercialism" — "business, and the business credo, and business principles have become everything."<sup>7</sup> He was a child of the depression of the 1870's and 1880's and he knew what had happened to his remarkable uncle in the brief western boom of the early '80's: like most children of depression he was uneasy at the sight of prosperity and luxury, and filled with forebodings that these could not last. For the millionaires whose voice had become the voice of the new god Leacock had little but contempt. But it was qualified contempt. Back in 1899, the year in which Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* appeared, Adam Shortt had presented the conventional apology for the millionaire as the vanguard of economic advance. "America," he wrote, "is at once the most speculative of countries, and yet the one where mere luck counts for least and ability for most." In spite of speculation, wealth "usually reaches the most capable hands"; the contrast between the millionaire suffocated with wealth and money and others with nothing was fallacious; and the real motive of the millionaire was not money-making — his chief "interest is creative and is akin to that of the scientific enthusiast, the statesman or the artist."<sup>8</sup> Leacock accepted none of this. In his description of the Canadian plutocrats in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914) he made much of the illegitimate manner in which their wealth was acquired and, above all, their inordinate luxury and wastefulness. Tomlinson owed his money not to hard work and superior ability but to luck; his son, the perfect representative of the leisure class, spent his time reading inconsequential novels and eating chocolates. Leacock never questioned the permanence of private property, the legitimacy of profit, or the primacy of individual selfishness as the motive of economic progress. What he denounced was not wealth

itself but the easy acquisition of money through get-rich-quick-schemes, the manipulation of paper, gambling and speculation, and political favouritism. He could easily have subscribed to Shortt's contentions, but in the Canada of Sir Henry Pellatt with his extraordinary castle and Mackenzie and Mann who were showered with political favours almost every day, such views no longer coincided with reality and it must have seemed that Veblen was a better guide than Shortt. What obviously disturbed Leacock was that the plutocrats were a living denial of the older ethic, the one he retained, that work was a discipline and had its own rewards and that wealth was merely its token, not its only and exclusive aim.

LEACOCK BELIEVED that the pecuniary standard, the primacy of money-making, and the fascination with size had permeated all institutions and spheres of activity. The university which was once the custodian of a genuinely humanistic education had become devoted to specialization and technical training in the immediately useful.<sup>9</sup> The professor, once the disinterested pursuer of truth, was now the symbol of the useless and redundant because, as Leacock put it, he did not know how to make money.<sup>10</sup> Literature, like religion, was condemned to sterility because all intangibles were irrelevant in an age of materialism.

The acceptance of pecuniary standards and delight in size were nowhere more evident than in the management of national affairs. Leacock's thought on politics was very much part of the long tradition of Victorian criticism of popular democracy, and his denunciation of politicians was lifelong and intense. Long after the plutocrat disappears from his stories, the politician, surely the most pathetic creature in all his fiction, puts in a regular appearance. However much he might attribute Carlyle's pronouncements to indigestion, or Sir Henry Maine's critique of democracy to an excessive exposure to the East, Leacock shared with them, and with others like Goldwin Smith and Henri Bourassa, the concern that democracy had developed unforeseen and perhaps fatal tendencies. "Our politics," he wrote in 1907, "our public life and thought, rise not to the level of our opportunity. The mud-bespattered politicians of the trade, the party men and party managers, give us in place of patriotic statecraft the sordid traffic of a tolerated jobbery. For bread, a stone. Harsh is the cackle of the little turkey-cocks of Ottawa, fighting the while as they feather their mean nest of sticks and mud, high on the river bluff."<sup>11</sup>

Leacock was not talking of the spectacular incidents of political corruption:

he condemned all politics because its practitioners had pliantly accepted the standards of the plutocrats to measure national progress. This was obvious in their total preoccupation with public works; there was, he confessed, something about the Canadian mind that finds gigantic projects irresistible. But for Leacock one of the best examples of how the worship of numbers was undermining the standards of national life was the uncritical acceptance of thousands upon thousands of what he called "Slavonic and Mediterranean peoples of a lower industrial and moral status." Canadian immigration policy was a monument to the mistaken belief that a nation could be built by "holding a basket at the hopper of an immigration chute."<sup>12</sup> Such a policy was not only working against an organic unity of east and west; it was also destroying the bicultural dualism of the country which was Canada's unique national asset. Since the corruption in political life was due to the confusion between business standards and statecraft, and since, as he made clear in "The Great Election in Missinaba County", the malaise had spread to all corners of society, Leacock placed very little faith in organizational improvements. The professionalization of politics, the machines, bosses, cliques and contractors, could not be checked by the progressive remedies of the initiative, referendum and recall. Moralistic attacks devoted to purity only ended in the ironies of "The Great Fight for Clean Government". Though Leacock dabbled with electoral reform, he was convinced that the cure for political depravity lay in the improvement of public morality which would come through the work of the universities and the public schools and with the infusion of ideals into public life. For a while he believed that the World War, with its demands for sacrifices and service, was enough to fill all men with a passion for an ideal, yet he quickly discovered that one of its by-products was prohibition. He passionately hated this measure of "social tyranny," and found that its victory could only be explained by assuming that politicians in fact had no power at all, that the real governing forces in North America were such things as Big Business, Manufacturers, Labour Unions, and various forms of National Hysteria. The most contemptible of all men, the politician was satisfied with something even less than corruption — he was satisfied with only the appearance of power. "He moves about in his frock coat and his silk hat, a garb which he shares alone with the undertaker. . . . The ordinary politician is merely busy picking up his votes from the mud of democracy like the *ramasseur* of the Parisian streets picking up cigar-butts."<sup>13</sup>

By 1934 when he gave his presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association on the theme of the revision of democracy, Leacock had

come to the furthest edge of despair. Nineteenth century political freedom, he argued, rested upon an economic base which favoured individualism, government by representation, and legislation by discussion. The growing complexity of modern technology and society, however, made government by parties and parliaments "a vast complicated artificiality which serves only to conceal its own insufficiencies." For the party system he could only say that it was at least one solution to a major problem of civilization — how to keep a fool in his place and make him imitate wiser men. But for the ordinary citizens all they can do "is to try to get a set of men, trained and specialized to carry on the government, to cut loose from the mock allegiances and fictitious opposition of party."<sup>14</sup> What he hankered for was not the rule of the expert manager, but the kind of leaders that Sir George Parkin had thought Upper Canada College could produce, perhaps also the return of the Union government that had come into existence in Canada in 1917, a government which at least in its own propaganda had put the national interest first and had submerged partisan politics.

Leacock's imperialism was inextricably intertwined with his social satire and his distaste for the perversions of Canadian politics. Imperialism, in one sense, was the voice of an older Canada, the Canada of Macdonald reminding the new country of Laurier of its historic obligations. Leacock was one of its most authentic spokesmen. He reiterated that this imperialism had nothing to do with economic greed or territorial acquisitions; it was in fact the antidote to materialism as much as it was a denial of colonialism and prolonged subordination. It was born in the English associations of the farm near Lake Simcoe but it was always much more than a sentimental admiration for British culture and the historical connection. For Leacock the imperial ideal meant a determined effort to accept the obligations of nationhood and to fulfill the promise of freedom. Fresh from his study of the fathers of responsible government — Baldwin, Lafontaine and Hincks — Leacock claimed that these men had believed in two ideas which were still the foundations upon which Canadian development must proceed. The first of these was that the steady extension of Canadian self-government could only find its logical culmination in a more complete consolidation of the British Empire. "I am," he testified, "an imperialist because I will not be a colonial. This colonial status is a worn-out, by-gone thing."<sup>15</sup>

As Leacock and other imperialists saw it, Canada was virtually an independent state; the only power which she lacked was control over issues of peace and war, over foreign policy; this lack was dwarfing and incompatible with her actual importance and power; the only way Canadians could attain full national rights

was to gain a voice over the destiny of the British Empire which was as much theirs as any Englishman's. When he declared in 1906 that "We cannot be an independent country,"<sup>16</sup> he did not mean that Canada would for ever be a colony; he meant that given the interdependence of nations and what he took to be the very real threat of war, Canada could never attain independence in complete isolation. To say that Canada had no need for maritime defence could only be based on the assumption that "no foreign nation could ever quarrel with us, or on the theory of a parasitic subordination to the United States."<sup>17</sup> A sharp sense of Canadian nationalism pervaded Leacock's imperialism: he rejected from his depths the view of Canada as an outpost of England or a transcript of British society. Though he admired such English institutions as Oxford, he could say that "we do not want to take things over ready-made; . . . we believe we have a national task of our own and we want to confront it with our own strength."<sup>18</sup> His descriptions of how the old and declining Britain would be surpassed in power by the young and larger countries like Canada led Winston Churchill to term his speech "offensive twaddle". It was, ironically, John Ewart, one of the great Canadian critics of imperialism, who chided Leacock for his bad-mannered remarks about Englishmen.<sup>19</sup>

When much later someone asked him whether he was interested in going home to England, Leacock replied by describing what he loved about Canada — the great spaces, the north — and concluded "Thank you, Mother England. I don't think I'll 'come home'. I'm 'home' now."<sup>20</sup>

The second idea which Leacock traced back to the Baldwin-Lafontaine legacy was the "real and organic alliance of the two races"<sup>21</sup> in Canada. As his allusions to the immigrants suggest, Leacock was not unaffected by the popular racial cast of thought of his day. For him the real Empire meant the white Dominions and Britain, not the tropical dependencies. Yet in Canadian politics he was no intolerant Anglo-Saxon supremacist. "In one sense of the word," he candidly wrote in 1910, "this is not a British country." Its roots and traditions run back to France as well as Britain and the presence here of two races is "our greatest national asset."<sup>22</sup> He believed that the French-Canadian desire to preserve their rights, privileges and "nationality" was compatible with traditional Canadian conservatism, but what he and other imperialists discovered was a French-Canadian nationalist movement which emphatically denied every one of their tenets and sentiments. Leacock could not possibly sympathize with the visions of Henri Bourassa, and for those separatists of the 1920's and 1930's who dreamed of a Laurentian republic he had only warm ridicule. Laurentia, he wrote, "is a

lovely place: there are no English there, and no capitalists or power companies, and there are no soldiers and armies, and it never goes to fight in Europe; in this dream world the Government is all by orators — young orators — and they talk and talk, and write newspapers and pamphlets, and fall asleep and wake up and talk. No one quite knows where this Laurentia is, whether Montreal is in it, whether it has ports and ships that block the outlet of a continent, or whether it is up somewhere in the snow near Peribonka, in the country of Maria Chapdelaine.”<sup>23</sup> Leacock’s intellectual commitment to the dualism of Baldwin and Lafontaine collided with the announced purposes of the French Canadian nationalists and he reconciled these two facts by convincing himself that the nationalists did not represent the true feelings of French Canada. Though he lived in the city where the two cultures touched there is little evidence of any meaningful French Canadian contacts in his life, and aside from his early histories, none of his books. One who described conscription in 1917 as the triumph of democracy purified could not have had a very penetrating insight into the feelings of French Canadians.

The truth seems to be that Leacock was able to retain an academic allegiance to the idea of the duality of cultures in face of much disturbing evidence because he subscribed to certain widespread views about French Canada which turned out to be untenable. It was much later, in 1943, that he himself came to see this, only after another war had swept aside the convenient rhetoric of the *bonne entente* and only after a lifetime of observation convinced him that the separation of French and English children in Montreal was “as complete as Turk and Christian, as Mohammedan and Hindu.”<sup>24</sup> In one of his finest autobiographical passages Leacock dwelt on this division:

In the days of peace that once were, many of us British people in Canada, and certainly most of us British people living in French Canada, considered the presence of the French, of their separate language and distinctive culture, a decided asset to the Dominion. It seemed to us to balance and offset certain shortcomings of our own people. The hysteria of the swing to prohibition led us to admire the refusal of the French to be carried away . . . We admired the quiet contentedness of the French Canadian *habitant* and its contrast to the eager haste, the get-rich-quick, the quest for money of the restless English. We liked the stories that Dr. Drummond told us of Jean Baptiste coming home again from the States, of Louis Hemon’s far-away-and-long-ago picture of the world of Maria Chapdelaine. Around French Canada hung the romance of history, the appeal of a lost cause and the respect for a people happy in their own lot. Above this level of the plain life of simple people was the pride felt by the educated and academic classes of



society living in a dual culture, in drawing upon two languages and two great literatures. . . . It looks in retrospect like a beautiful landscape, now a deserted garden . . . The old rallying cries no longer call to the heart. Where now is the twin glory of Montcalm and Wolfe, the brotherhood of Lafontaine and Baldwin, each elected by the other's people in North York and Rimouski?

Leacock's description of the loss of credibility in these views was the admission, not of one man, but of a whole generation of English Canadians. A tradition had collapsed and nothing remained, certainly not the vain dream of bilingualism. "The French have no right in law or in history or in common sense," he concluded, "to think of Canada as a combination in which all grave policy must depend on French Canadian veto or consent. The British have no right to misuse the British connection and the British heritage to give an unfair deal to the French by sheer majority power."<sup>25</sup> All the rest depended on men of goodwill and fairness.

Leacock's imperialism, then, rested on the belief, mistaken as he later recognized, that Canada with her unique foundations in a duality of culture could best attain nationhood within the imperial system. It expressed the conviction that only within the context of her historical ties could she attain not only the status of a nation but the functioning power of one. But it was also rooted in a profound rejection of the country, and it is this which joins his distaste for politicians and the triumph of pecuniary values to imperialism. Imperialism was a means of escape — an escape from the stupefying preoccupation with materialism and the coils of partyism and race and religious wars into the high uplands of wider activities and concerns. After paying his respects to the mud-bespattered politicians with their views of statecraft hardly rising above the village post office, he wrote: "This is the demon we must exorcise, this the disease, the cankerworm of corruption, bred in the indolent security of peace, that must be burned from us in the pure fire of an Imperial patriotism that is no theory but a passion. This is our need, our supreme need of the Empire — not for its ships and guns, but for the greatness of it, aye, for the very danger of it."<sup>26</sup> Leacock's imperialism, like Kipling's, was at once a rejection of the ceaseless getting and spending and an idealistic antidote to the follies of the age.

As it turned out it was not any commitment to imperialism that drew men back to service, but Canada's participation in the World War with its insatiable demands for sacrifices. The war generated an indescribable idealism in many quarters of Canadian society, especially among the Protestant clergy, and it seemed that the sense of sacrifice it evoked was the real answer to the self-indul-

gent luxury of the rich. Only sacrifice and self-denial could burn away selfishness and restore direction to national politics. Even Leacock's imperialism was transformed: he later confessed that he had been mistaken in his advocacy of Canadian representation in the Imperial Parliament. The war had proven that the shared values and intangible bonds of Empire were more powerful than constitutions could ever be: the legalistic debate over the Statute of Westminster left him untouched. His later books on Empire were completely dominated by economic considerations. The war, moreover, had thrown a lucid light upon the nature of capitalistic production and distribution and increasingly Leacock became preoccupied with economic problems and social justice.

In his diagnosis of the ills of capitalism, Leacock was the disciple of no single thinker. Too much of his analysis consists of personal predilections projected on to all of society for that to be the case, and, in any event, Leacock was too unsystematic an economist to be imprisoned in any theory or doctrine. Yet Leacock's economic thought does bear upon it the unmistakable imprint of the ideas of Thorstein Veblen under whom he had studied at Chicago and whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* had first attracted him to that university. It was Veblen's fate, as it was to become Leacock's, that he was frequently mistaken for an amusing clown and his abstruse books forgotten except in academic circles. The essence of Veblen's teaching did not primarily rest on his mordant commentary on the eccentric habits and "conspicuous consumption" of the idle rich. What Leacock himself termed "the central point" of Veblen was an explanation for the obvious disharmony between the productive capacity of technology and the persistence of poverty and periodic crises in the age of financial capitalism. Veblen saw the economy as divided between two irreconcilable forces — the one represented by the engineer who was concerned with workmanship, efficiency and increasing production, and the other symbolized by the financiers who controlled the instruments of production and were animated by atavistic values. They were concerned exclusively with making money and their relationship to machine production Veblen described as systematic sabotage. These ideas were most fully elaborated in his *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904). The point of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* was that by drawing innumerable parallels between the behaviour of primitive tribes and the mores of the rich, Veblen demonstrated how wasteful and pre-industrial the values of the financiers and all coupon-clippers really were. It was in terms of this conflict between those who produced goods and those who made money that Veblen explained the major problems of American capitalism.

Though there is no indication that Leacock ever understood, let alone accepted, the complicated theory of instincts or the technological environmentalism which underlay Veblen's thought, there is no doubt that in his *Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920) he followed Veblen's general approach. Leacock saw the problem in terms of the "contrast . . . between the vastly increased power of production and its apparent inability to satisfy for all humanity the most elementary human wants,"<sup>27</sup> and he advanced two explanations for this paradox. The first lay in the wastefulness of capitalist production — in the channeling of resources and energies into the making of nonessential luxuries and in war destruction. Leacock's personal abhorrence of waste was abiding: he husbanded his own resources very carefully; nothing figures in his pictures of the plutocrats so prominently as their "shameless luxury", and during the war he appealed for a campaign for "national thrift".<sup>28</sup> He was convinced that perhaps nine-tenths of all workers were involved in basically wasteful occupations. Leacock's second explanation for the failure of machine production to fulfil human needs related to the fact that the supply and value of commodities were determined not by the upper limits of machine production or the satisfaction of wants, but in terms of guaranteeing satisfactory returns. Supply and values are the outcome of "competing forces that are not based upon justice but upon 'economic force'." Ideally, if a large enough quantity of any commodity were produced it would ultimately be worth nothing at all: sellers therefore adjusted price and quantity in order to ensure returns; the whole system rested on artificial scarcity. "Precisely here," wrote Leacock, "is found the key to the operation of economic society . . . The world's production is aimed at producing 'values', not at producing plenty."<sup>29</sup> In pitting productivity and social justice against the concern with money values and a brutal conflict of forces Leacock was true to the tenor of Veblen's analysis. It followed from this diagnosis that the betterment of society could never automatically come from unlimited technical progress or mere development, nor did it necessitate, as Leacock's rejection of socialism made clear, any wholesale alterations in the fundamentals of capitalism. The solution lay in the encouragement of countervailing powers like labour organizations and in the regulatory activity of the state, in "a progressive movement of social control." The war had taught everyone the lessons of social obligation: if a man were obliged to die for his country, society owed him the opportunity for a livelihood. The "government of every country," he concluded, "ought to supply work and pay for the unemployed, maintenance for the infirm and aged, and education and opportunity for the children."<sup>30</sup>

For a brief moment, Leacock was inspired by the example of war-time regulation and a genuine humanitarianism, and he stood with many others on the brink of a new era. This enthusiasm and idealism, however, vanished in the early 1920's. By the 1930's he spoke less and less of a progressive movement of social control and more and more of the spectre of socialism and the dangers of restraint and regulation. The connecting link between his rejection of socialism in *The Unsolved Riddle* in 1920 and his writings of the 1930's were those stories, published in the 1920's, in which he made very clear his suspicion of restraint, restriction and regulation.

Leacock was fascinated with the construction of utopias in which the fundamentals of an ideal social system were realized in their simplicity and one of his favourite devices was to take a simple item from the popular culture and develop it into a kind of anti-utopia, until it became a caricature of itself. His story, "The Man in Asbestos: An Allegory of the Future", published in 1911, was an early example of this style. In *The Garden of Folly* (1924) and *The Iron Man and the Tin Woman* (1929) he turned his irony and satire upon nearly every popular fad of the twenties — popularized psychology, personality building courses, intelligence tests, love of gadgets, spiritualism and many others — but his most effective pieces are those in which he dealt with the hateful way that social regulation impinged on the deeper aspects of human life, especially on love and courtship. "The Iron Man and the Tin Woman" was a satire upon the faith in gadgets and labour saving devices: it had reached the point where men used robots to propose to women in order to spare themselves embarrassment. In the tale, "When Social Regulation is Complete", the two lovers encountered "Preventive Officers Against Premature Courtship", possessed a "Suitable Acquaintance Tag", and had to obey the "Use-of-Endearing-Terms-in-Public-Places-Act". "This present Age of Restriction," Edward tells Angelina, "seems to have begun bit by bit; first one thing got regulated and then another. The more people got of it, the more they seemed to want. . . . It began with the world war and after that it all came in a rush."<sup>31</sup>

This impatience with restraint and restriction underlay Leacock's attack on socialism in 1920 and throughout the 1930's and early 1940's. He was very much a participant in the great debate of the depression years over social control and the role of the social scientist in the practical world, but the extent of this participation was concealed by personal preference. Just as there are few direct and specific allusions to the Canadian context in his stories, so too in his polemical essays there are few specific references to the current Canadian scene. He pre-

ferred, he frequently said, to deal with movements and ideas rather than parties and personalities, and he expected that just as humour should be kindly and not vicious, so also it should be possible for decent men to discuss fundamentals without being bad-tempered and nasty. At a time when governors of universities were hounding academic socialists, Leacock defended their rights to free speech provided they were not merely propagandists in their classrooms.<sup>32</sup> But in spite of such disclaimers, those against whom his darts were directed understood well enough. When in his *Hellements of Hickonomics*, published in 1935, the same year that the League for Social Reconstruction put out its blueprint for a socialist Canada, *Social Planning for Canada*, he denounced that man with "his goddam Social Plan",<sup>33</sup> there was no doubt as to whom he had in mind. When he appealed for a group of apolitical men to lead Canadians out of the depression, F. H. Underhill said of Leacock that he "rushes madly into Fascist mysticism, shouting *à la* Carlyle for leaders who will act and not talk, their action apparently to need no guidance from trained specific intellectuals but to be decided by pure intuition."<sup>34</sup> And when in 1934 he warned of the growing unrest and longing for security in Canada and a possible social catastrophe, it was obvious that he was referring to the growth of C.C.F. strength which took that party to power in Saskatchewan in 1944 and within an ace of victory in Ontario. Even his critique of economics may be read in an anti-socialist light, for to question that subject as the key to all problems in the 1930's was like doubting the efficacy of prayer at an earlier date.

His case against socialism in the thirties was the same as that established in his *Unsolved Riddle*. In the 1930's, as in 1920, he found the essence of the socialist argument in Edward Bellamy's utopian romance, *Looking Backward*. As some observers have pointed out it was unfair to take a book published in 1888 as though it were the latest pronouncement of socialist thought<sup>35</sup> and Leacock was certainly aware that democratic socialism had since that date abandoned its revolutionary aims, had settled on a policy of gradualism, and was in many respects profoundly individualistic.<sup>36</sup> Yet he insisted that Bellamy's commonwealth, where the instruments of production and distribution were owned by the state and administered by elected officials, necessarily and inevitably had to be the only logical conclusion of all socialism. The Canadian social democracy outlined in *Social Planning for Canada*, with its Benthamite zeal for rationality, efficiency and order, and with its board of experts overseeing even the nation's mental health, could only have confirmed him in that conviction. Revolutionary or gradual, socialism was all the same — it expected a sudden and mechanical

transformation in human nature and assumed that democratically elected boards of officials would behave quite differently than popular democracy in the past. And above all, what Leacock rejected in his addresses to the Canadian Political Science Association as well as in his stories in *Afternoons in Utopia* (1932), was the restriction on individual freedom and the uncontrollable itch of all moralists and reformers to tell other people what to do.

The uncritical adherents of free enterprise on the right were just as dangerous as the planners on the left, and Leacock's attacks on the outmoded clichés of laissez-faire were consistent with his earlier views. He enthusiastically supported R. B. Bennett's new deal in 1935 and announced in a preface to the published version of the Prime Minister's first radio address that laissez-faire, under whatever captions it appeared, "was evidently no cure for social injustice, for social inequality, for industrial crises, for low wages, for the starvation of the submerged poor and the intolerable opulence of the over-rich."<sup>37</sup> Laissez-faire economics was bankrupt: the only thing left of Adam Smith was the principle of human selfishness, that "the world can only be run on the principle of every man for himself."<sup>38</sup> That motive and that system had produced prodigious wealth; it could not ensure its just distribution. Only the state could do that through social welfare and the creation of equality of opportunity. It was on the idea of the "social heritage", a concept shared by the founder of social credit, Major Douglas, and Veblen, that Leacock based his argument. No one brought anything into the world with him, Leacock explained, "Each of us has his natural claim to a share. We are, as it were, the joint heirs of a great estate, whereas our present social order dispossesses ninety-nine to instal one. We may imagine that, in a general way, of all the wealth produced in a year, a certain part is due to the original heritage, and each of us has the right to that, whether we work or not. Rich or poor, wise or stupid, lazy or energetic — that much is ours."<sup>39</sup> Though this conviction led him to support the welfare state, Leacock came down in the end to insist on the primacy of individualism. It was because "we want to retain the essentials of individual freedom," he concluded, that "we must be prepared to restrain its incidental injustices."<sup>40</sup>

There is one final dimension to Leacock's response to economic breakdown which further affirms his hatred of restraint and limitations. One of the main contentions in the socialists' indictment of capitalism in 1930's was that the long period of Canadian economic expansion which had concealed the weaknesses of the economy had come to a conclusive end and that rationalization and planning were necessary adjustments. Coupled with this belief was the feeling that the

outer limits of geographical expansion had been reached and that Canada could absorb no more immigrants. In his three books, *The Economic Prosperity of the British Empire* (1930), *Back to Prosperity* (1932) and *The British Empire* (1940), and his last articles warning of imminent catastrophe, Leacock rejected these notions of the stationary state. His short-run solution to the depression lay in the establishment of a new gold standard and in inflation; but the path to permanent recovery was to be found in further expansion within Canada and in the economic unity of the Empire.

Leacock was convinced that the insistence on political liberty had undermined imperial economic integration and he insisted that the unity of an earlier day could be restored. "Is there no way to get back to what we have lost?" he asked in 1935. "George III and Lord North and those people had the right idea: an empire, a real one — ships, colonies, commerce. Can we not still find it?"<sup>41</sup> The Dominions were practically empty countries; their resources, a heritage of all the British people, were rich and immense. He then proposed an elaborate and complicated system involving an imperial super-tariff, common currency, regulated triangular trade between Britain, the Dominions and the tropical dependencies, a quota system on exports and imports, government purchase of Canadian wheat for storage in England, the stimulation of immigration (of the right sort) by chartered companies, and a pool of investment funds. For Canada his dream was no less grandiose: a rush to develop her natural resources, the construction of highways, the rebuilding of railways, the reconstruction of her cities, and an immigration programme which would help expand her population to 200,000,000 people. There would be ceaseless expansion northward. "The course of civilization," he wrote in paraphrasing the chief theme of his friend Vilhjalmar Stefansson, "moves northward." "We can abolish cold" — cities like Montreal will rise in the far north. He had never been there, he confessed, but the thought of it as he sat in his study made him feel good. We are the trustees of that vast territory, he added more soberly, "let us see to it that in the new trust of the future of the North we make fewer errors than in the old."<sup>42</sup> Only by the denial of limits, only by hectic development under the stimulus of free enterprise and under the auspices of the welfare state could a political upheaval in the post-war world be avoided.

It is tempting to see this appeal for imperial economic integration and Canadian development as the result of Leacock finally giving way to that temptation to construct his own utopia, or rather anti-utopia. Could it be that his books on Empire were huge satires on the current zeal for reducing economic life to a

system? What better way was there to satirize the faith in planning than to employ it to reconstruct Lord North's empire, what more effective way of poking fun at the folly of sudden solutions? Surely Leacock knew better than to expect such heroic measures from the politicians who gathered at the Ottawa Conference of 1932 and to whom *Back to Prosperity* was ostensibly addressed. And what was his endorsement of Canadian development but a harking back to the boomsters of the Laurier era with their endless designs for transcontinental railways. But to see these works as an elaborate joke would be to attribute to Leacock more cunning than he really had. They confirm, on one level, his failure to solve the problem of capitalism as he had defined it in 1920 and, on another plane, they suggest that in terms of his early remark about the Canadian mind finding grand material projects irresistible that never was he more Canadian than in his last pronouncements.

The most arresting and persistent features of Leacock's social thought were his virtual indifference to institutions, his hostility to restrictions, and the unresolved tensions in his outlook. He had no feeling for the malleability of human nature and he hated the gross oversimplifications that were preliminary to reconstructing society. In a profound way he believed that laws, institutions and politics in a conventional sense were of secondary significance in human affairs. "In all institutions," he wrote, "in all laws, the inspiring spirit must come first . . . Laws merely express and make regular the forces that the mind and will of society have already brought into being."<sup>48</sup> His imperialism was as much an inspiring spirit as a political programme; the ills of popular democracy were to be cured, not by institutional correctives, but by good men and the uplifting of public morality; the depression and the threat of social upheaval were to be vanquished by a will to recast an Empire and turn back over a century of history.

Leacock was a man of passionate convictions and his mind fell prey to a series of utopian idealisms. Yet he knew too much of human nature to expect, perhaps ever really desire, the attainment of these hopes. And certainly he knew how easy it was to accommodate the temptations of this world and do the radio broadcast for Pond's Cold Cream and write an indifferent history of Canada for the House of Seagram. It almost seemed that in his social writing he was often gripped by the feeling of how simple great changes could be, if only the will were there, and that he immediately drew back, conscious of the foolishness of such hopes. It is not accidental that so much of his social thought hinges on the perception of opposites — the promise of a Greater Canada and the squabbling of politicians, potential plenty and the facts of waste and poverty, the admiration



for the "economic man" and the existence of the "idle rich", the desire for social justice through progressive control and the suspicion of control and regulation, the disdain for mere bigness and his own worshipful attitude to population figures. He said of humour that it rests on the strange incongruity between our aspiration and our achievement; it might be said of his social thought that it rested on the tension between an idealism which led him to hope for a better world verging on perfection, and a pessimism about human nature which warned him that it could never be.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R. Curry, *Stephen Leacock: Humorist and Humanist* (New York, 1959); Donald Cameron, *Faces of Leacock* (Toronto, 1967); Robertson Davies, *Stephen Leacock* (Toronto, 1970); David Legate, *Stephen Leacock* (Toronto, 1970).
- <sup>2</sup> G. R. Cook, "Stephen Leacock and the Age of Plutocracy, 1903-1921", *Character and Circumstance*, ed. J. Moir (Toronto, 1970), 163-81; C. Berger, *The Sense of Power* (Toronto, 1970).
- <sup>3</sup> Douglas Library, Queen's University, Adam Shortt Papers, Skelton to Shortt, July 27, 1907.
- <sup>4</sup> Stephen Leacock, "What's Ahead for Canada?" *Maclean's Magazine*, LVI (May 1, 1943), 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Leacock, *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (Toronto, 1920), 104.
- <sup>6</sup> Leacock, "Canada and the Immigration Problem", *National Review*, LVII (April, 1911), 326; S. Leacock, "Democracy and Social Progress" in *The New Era in Canada*, ed., J. O. Miller (Toronto, 1917), 32.
- <sup>7</sup> Leacock, "Literature and Education in America", *University Magazine*, VIII (Feb., 1909), 16.
- <sup>8</sup> Adam Shortt, "In Defence of Millionaires", *The Canadian Magazine*, XIII (Oct., 1899), 493-98.
- <sup>9</sup> Leacock, "The University and Business", *University Magazine*, XII (Dec., 1913), 540-49.
- <sup>10</sup> Leacock, "The Apology of a Professor", *ibid.*, IX (April, 1910), 176-91.
- <sup>11</sup> Leacock, "Empire and Education", *Empire Club Speeches, Being Addresses Delivered Before the Empire Club of Canada During its Session of 1906-07* (Toronto, 1907), 285.
- <sup>12</sup> Leacock, "Canada and the Immigration Problem", 317, 318.
- <sup>13</sup> Leacock, "The Warning of Prohibition in America", *National Review*, LXXIII (July, 1919), 682.
- <sup>14</sup> Leacock, "The Revision of Democracy", *Papers and Proceedings of the Canadian Political Science Association*, VI (1934), 5-16.
- <sup>15</sup> Leacock, "Empire and Education", 282.
- <sup>16</sup> Leacock, "The Imperial Crisis", *Addresses Delivered Before the Canadian Club of Toronto, Season 1905-06* (Toronto, n.d.), 118.
- <sup>17</sup> Leacock, "The Great Victory in Canada", *National Review*, LVIII (Nov. 1911), 390.
- <sup>18</sup> Leacock, "The Political Achievement of Robert Baldwin", *Addresses Delivered Before the Canadian Club of Ottawa, 1903-09* (Ottawa, 1910), 163.
- <sup>19</sup> John Ewart, "A Perplexed Imperialist", *Queen's Quarterly*, XV (Oct., 1907), 90.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted by Frank Watt, "Nationalism in Canadian Literature", *Nationalism in Canada*, ed., P. Russell (Toronto, 1966), 246.
- <sup>21</sup> Leacock, "The Political Achievement of Robert Baldwin", 163.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.
- <sup>23</sup> Leacock, "Canada and the Monarchy" *Atlantic Monthly*, CLXIII (June, 1939), 743.
- <sup>24</sup> Leacock, "'Tale of Two Cities'", *Maclean's Magazine*, LVI (Mar. 1, 1943), 41.
- <sup>25</sup> Leacock, *While There is Time: The Case Against Social Catastrophe* (Toronto, 1945), 119-21, 126-7.
- <sup>26</sup> Leacock, "Empire and Education", 286.
- <sup>27</sup> Leacock, *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*, 25.

- <sup>28</sup> Leacock, "Our National Organization for the War" in Miller, *op. cit.*, 409-21.
- <sup>29</sup> Leacock, *Unsolved Riddle*, 73.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-2, 128, 140.
- <sup>31</sup> Leacock, *The Iron Man and the Tin Woman With Other Such Futurities* (Toronto, 1929), 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Leacock, "'Academic Freedom'", *Maclean's Magazine*, XLIX (Feb. 1, 1936) 14-5, 38-9.
- <sup>33</sup> Leacock, *Hellements of Hickonomics in Hiccoughs of Verse Done in Our Social Planning Mill* (New York, 1936), 3.
- <sup>34</sup> F. H. Underhill, "The Conception of National Interest", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, I (Aug., 1935), 407. In connection with Leacock's *Back to Prosperity* (1932), Underhill commented: "Professor Stephen Leacock still remains our leading humorist when it comes to writing serious books about Canadian social problems." *Canadian Forum*, XIV (Nov., 1937), 74.
- <sup>35</sup> F. W. Watt, "Critic or Entertainer? Stephen Leacock and the Growth of Materialism", *Canadian Literature*, 5 (Summer, 1960), 36. R. Cook, "Stephen Leacock and the Age of Plutocracy, 1903-1921", 178n.
- <sup>36</sup> Leacock, *Elements of Political Science* (Boston, Revised Edition, 1913), 383-4.
- <sup>37</sup> Leacock, "Foreward", *The Premier Speaks to the People. The Prime Minister's January Radio Broadcasts issued in book form. The First Address . . .* (Ottawa [1935], 6.
- <sup>38</sup> Leacock, "What is Left of Adam Smith?", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, I (Feb., 1935), 43. See also his "The Economic Analysis of Industrial Depression", *Papers and Proceedings of the Canadian Political Science Association*, V (1935), 5-24.
- <sup>39</sup> Leacock, "Social and Other Credit in Alberta", *Fortnightly Review*, CXLVI (Nov., 1936), 529.
- <sup>40</sup> Leacock, *Back to Prosperity, The Great Opportunity of the Empire Conference* (Toronto, 1932), 8.
- <sup>41</sup> Leacock, "Economic Separatism in the British Empire", *Quarterly Review*, 265 (July, 1935), 11.
- <sup>42</sup> Leacock, *The British Empire. Its Structure, Its Unity, Its Strength* (New York, 1940), 65; *My Discovery of the West* (London, 1937), 290-304. His "Reflections on the North", which originally appeared in *The Beaver*, Dec. 1936, has been reprinted in that magazine, Summer, 1970.
- <sup>43</sup> Leacock, *My Discovery of the West*, 305.