

HALIBURTON, LEACOCK AND THE AMERICAN HUMOUROUS TRADITION

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EDMUND WILSON'S STUDY of Canadian literature, *O Canada, An American's Notes on Canadian Culture*, a slight book that was not received in Canada with hosannas, justifies itself, nevertheless, by its very existence: it is the only extended comment on Canadian literature by a major American writer. This would seem to imply that literary relations between Canada and the United States, not to put too despairing a face on it, are tenuous. This would be true if we confined ourselves to critical comment. But if we shift our attention to the imaginative writers, a nobler prospect opens up. The intermingling of people that has marked the growth of the two countries is matched by an intermingling of ideas and attitudes. The movement is, of course, heavily from south to north, modified recently by the impact on American writers of the two philosophical critics, Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan.

I shall look at Thomas Haliburton and, at greater length, at Stephen Leacock in the light of the intermingling of Canadian and American ideas. Leacock developed in close relationship to American traditions, but his sense of being a Canadian, which was sharply felt and eloquently expressed, gave him a sense of separateness. A study of his relationship to American cultural traditions reveals the pattern that can be expanded indefinitely — a pattern of indebtedness and independence, of similarity and differentiation, of sympathy and withdrawal. We can see this pattern clearly in terms of Leacock's attitude towards the American tradition of humour and satire, specifically in the use he made of two American writers, Mark Twain and Thorstein Veblen, who, in different ways and different degrees, belong to that tradition. A similar pattern emerges when we look at the work of Haliburton.

There can be no doubt of the centrality of the humourous tradition in nineteenth-century America. Humour was indeed, as Stephen Leacock pointed out,

“one of the undisputed national products of the new republic.” He went on to observe: “of American literature there was much doubt in Europe; of American honesty, much more; of American manners, more still. But American humour found a place alongside of Germany philosophy, Italian music, French wine, and British banking. No one denied its peculiar excellence and its distinctive national stamp.”¹ The centrality of American humour is not simply a question of a long parade of self-conscious funny men, most of them, including the greatest, absorbed into their pseudonyms; it is a question of the most durable strand in the main tradition. Miss Constance Rourke, in her classical study of American humour, uses as a subtitle “A Study of the National Character.” The book is a subtle and eloquent demonstration of how the qualities generated by humorous folk art entered into the imagination of the major shapers of American literature, writers as diverse as Henry James, Emily Dickinson and Edwin Arlington Robinson. She explains that the humorous tradition was bound up with the search for national unity and cohesiveness, given momentum and confidence by the Revolutionary War and by the full realization that the country won from Europe was one of incredible richness. Miss Rourke quotes from Bergson that “the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.”² Post-revolutionary America had entered upon this phase. There was a sense of boundless confidence in the egalitarian faith that had nourished the revolution and could now be given an immense scope. Here was a positive shining norm to be set against effete Europe, or later, with the opening of the West, against an East that had not sufficiently shaken off European ways. The American idea was so triumphant and so universally accepted that it could be presented in an exaggerated, even fantastic way, without inviting ridicule. There emerged a composite character, whose base was the shrewd practical Yankee and whose super-structure was the western teller of tall tales. The character was a theatrical creation who had a special lingo, costume and mask. Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur* was a late, sophisticated version of the type. Hank Morgan had all the New Englander’s shrewd practicality, his disdain for what seemed pretentious and unfamiliar, and his unflinching confidence in his own ability. Mark Twain has, however, stripped his Yankee of the colourful garb of the early part of the century, and has clothed him in the sober suit of the businessman. When Morgan finally achieves a position of power at the Court of King Arthur, he is by his own request known as the boss, the designation that for him confers the maximum combination of respectability and power. Morgan has also become an elo-

quent exponent of the theory of republicanism and individualism, and thereby loses a good deal of his appeal as a humourous character. He is, nonetheless, conceived of in the great tradition, a symbolic American who triumphantly and exuberantly exposes the ignorance and cruelty of those who dwell in non-American darkness.

Canada produced nothing comparable to this tradition; no national character emerged to become a symbol of triumph and superiority. The reason for this lies on the very surface of the social and political development of Canada during the nineteenth century. For the apocalyptic revolution, Canada substituted a protracted, largely invisible revolution that stretched from the 1790's when the Loyalists first arrived to the 1850's when the principle of responsible government was finally recognized. Responsible government, which, in brief, is the responsibility of the executive to the elected assembly and through them to the electorate, was a victory of the centre. In the process two extremes were avoided, although not eliminated — toryism, a transplanting of English ideas of an élite based upon property, privilege, and education; and republicanism, American variety, which was the communism of the day. The triumph of the solid centre did not mean any break with European traditions. Indeed, it meant a strengthening of them, since the ideas were derived from British liberalism, and these ideas were not incompatible, for the time being, with colonial status in the Empire. The opening up of the West did not modify the ideology. The West was not, as it was in the United States, a gradually advancing frontier — a front line against the wilderness; it was rather a series of hinterlands or semi-colonies to be settled by careful arrangement and exploited by systematic plan. The settlers were not usually adventurers from the settled east; they were more likely Americans attracted to free land who had already passed through the frontier stage, or Europeans who brought with them a heavy baggage of traditions.

What emerged in Canada, then, was not a single triumphant idea that nourished a confident self-reliance in a new and paradisiacal land. It was rather a consciousness of a variety of traditions that had been inherited from older societies, from Britain, France, colonial America, and the Republic itself. We have a key here to understanding the nature of the humourous traditions in the two countries.

IN THE UNITED STATES the humourous tradition permeates the works of a host of minor writers and has its great classical embodiment in Mark Twain. There is nothing comparable in Canada to the steady flow of

American humorous writing with its vast undergrowth of folk humour. The Canadian tradition is largely embodied in two writers; who were, however, two major English-Canadian writers. The first was Thomas Chandler Haliburton, who was born in 1796 and died in 1865; and the second Stephen Leacock, who was born in 1867 and died in 1944.

Leacock was in no sense a disciple of Haliburton. Indeed in his references to Haliburton, he is uniformly condescending and disparaging. To him, Haliburton was a historical phenomenon of some minor significance. I suspect, indeed, that Leacock never even bothered to read Haliburton; he simply accepts the image of a stuffy colonial Tory who exploited a popular device, but who had no genuine literary power. Haliburton was a much better writer than Leacock thought he was, and Leacock had an affinity with him of which he was not aware.

There were a number of similarities in the backgrounds and careers of the two men. Each was a conscious humourist and is remembered chiefly as such, but each devoted most of his energies to serious historical and social studies that have now been forgotten. By family background, each was in a position to understand and value the multinational nature of the Canadian tradition. Haliburton grew up in a tight little privileged society in Nova Scotia, but he was always conscious of the existence of a great North Atlantic community of which Nova Scotia was a minor part. His father was a Scotsman who had married into a Boston family before coming to Canada, and his mother was a daughter of a British officer who had been killed during the American Revolutionary Wars. The Leacock family traditions had a similar amplitude. His family had come to Canada from England in 1876 when he was seven years old. His parents belonged to two of the basic types of English immigrants to the colonies. His father was a younger son of a family of some means who was, in effect, a ne'er-do-well remittance man. His mother was a daughter of a Church of England clergyman, and the family had numerous ties both with the church and with the universities. There was never any doubt about Leacock's attachment to Canada; but he never lost his sense of sentimental identification with England and, up to the very last, he retained a touchingly robust belief in the indestructibility of the British empire. But as his literary fame broadened, he became increasingly well known in the United States; and he accepted the role of the American humourist who was a lineal descendant of Mark Twain. In his biography of Charles Dickens he sharply criticized the great man for his failure to see the epic quality of American civilization. Leacock had no such insensitivity to the United States, as did Haliburton before him. Both Haliburton and Leacock, then, had a multinational conscious-

ness; they were simultaneously spiritual citizens of Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. They had a sympathetic understanding of the qualities of each; they, therefore, avoided national absolutes and adopted an attitude of cultural and political relativism. It was an attitude that provided the basis for their humour.

Today Haliburton is remembered only for *The Clockmaker*, which is made up of a series of sketches that were brought together in book form in 1836. He introduced the character of Sam Slick, a Yankee pedlar travelling in colonial Nova Scotia, and finding the lazy, unprogressive Bluenoses easy victims of his "soft sawder" and devious ways. Haliburton had a simple propagandistic motive in writing the book. He wanted to arouse his countrymen to the need for some agricultural and commercial reforms. But the purpose is not obtrusive and does not stand in the way of contemporary enjoyment. What is left — and it is by far the greater and more important part of the book — is the humorous commentary on national traits. Despite his profound English Toryism, Leacock was never guilty of naïve anti-Americanism. In a long historical study called *The English in America*, he later argued that American democracy and republicanism were not an outgrowth of the Revolution, but were implicit in the first colonial charters. What had developed in the United States then was peculiarly appropriate to that country. He begins his study of the English in America in this way: "I shall endeavour to explain briefly the complicated mechanism and simple action of the American Federal Constitution, and the balances and checks that have been so skillfully contrived by the great statesmen who constructed it; and also to point out the wonderful combination of accidental causes that contributed to its success, and the ability, unity, energy and practical skill of the people who work the machine and keep it in order and repair."³ His general attitude to the United States is that it has a point of view that works well within its own boundaries but is not exportable. Although Haliburton is by nature more sympathetic to the English point of view, especially as it is embodied in Toryism, he realizes that it, too, is unattractive in a foreign setting. He fought fiercely against giving the British-American colonies a greater degree of independence from the mother country, but this did not prevent him from inveighing against the arrogance and stupidity of British governors in the colonies.

Sam Slick is the vehicle by which Haliburton's critical judgments of national traits are made. The criticism is triggered in the minds of the reader by the extravagance with which Sam expresses himself. Here are two passages of soaring self-confidence that turn into self-ridicule:

I like to look up at them 'ere stars, when I am away from home; they put me in mind of our national flag, and it is generally allowed to be the first flag in the univarse now. The British can whip all the world, and we can whip the British. It's near about the prettiest sight I know of, is one of our first-class frigates, manned with our free and enlightened citizens, all ready for sea; it is like the Great American Eagle, on its perch, balancing itself for a start on the broad expanse of blue sky, afear'd of nothin' of its kind, and president of all it surveys.⁴

* * *

No, I believe we may stump the univarse; we improve on everything, and we have improved on our own species. You'll search one while, I tell you, afore you'll find a man that, take him by and large, is equal to one of our free and enlightened citizens. He's the chap that has both speed, wind, and bottom; he's clear grit — ginger to the backbone, you may depend. It's generally allowed there ain't the beat of them to be found anywhere. Spry as a fox, supple as an eel, and cute as a weasel. Though I say it, that shouldn't say it, they fairly take the shine off creation; they are actilly equal to cash.⁵

At other times, Sam is the humourous protagonist and critic; his racy colloquialisms and homely figures of speech drive home the critical judgment. Here is a passage where he talks about the absurdities of English travel literature about America:

Ensigns and lieutenants, I guess, from the British marchin' regiments in the Colonies, that run over five thousand miles of country in five weeks, on leave of absence, and then return, lookin' as wise as the monkey that had seen the world. When they get back they are so chock full of knowledge of the Yankees that it runs over of itself; like a hogshead of molasses rolled about in hot weather, a white froth and scum bubbles out of the bung-wishy-washy trash they call tours, sketches, travels, letters, and what not; vapid stuff, jist sweet, enough to catch flies, cockroaches, and half-fledged gals.⁶

And, at times, Sam Slick has a premonition of some of the problems inherent in the American nation, and it carries him beyond humourous comment to realistic vision.

You have heerd tell of cotton rags dipped in turpentine, haven't you, how they produce combustion? Well, I guess we have the elements of spontaneous combustion among us in abundance; when it does break out, if you don't see an eruption of human gore worse than Etna lava, then I'm mistaken. There'll be the very devil to pay, that's a fact. I expect the blacks will butcher the Southern whites, and the Northerners will have to turn out and butcher them again; and all this shoot, hang, cut, stab, and burn business will sweeten our folks' temper, as raw meat

does that of a dog; it fairly makes me sick to think on it. The explosion may clear the air again, and all be tranquil once more, but it's an even chance if it don't leave us the three steamboats options — to be blown sky-high, to be scalded to death, or drowned.⁷

STEPHEN LEACOCK did not make use of a spokesman like Sam Slick to express his views about national traits. He is his own spokesman; we can see him smiling ironically or chuckling with enormous relish. One of the sketches in his first humourous book, *Literary Lapses*, which appeared in 1910, the year of Mark Twain's death, was a parody of the English romance of high life. Lord Oxhead's daughter confesses that she proposes to marry an American. The passage continues as follows:

"You surprise me indeed," answered Lord Oxhead; "and yet," he continued, turning to his daughter with the courtly grace that marked the nobleman of the old school, "why should we not respect and admire the Americans? Surely there have been great names among them. Indeed, our ancestor Sir Amyas Oxhead was, I think, married to Pocahontas — at least if not actually married" — the earl hesitated a moment.

"At least they loved one another," said Gwendoline simply.

"Precisely," said the earl, with relief, "they loved one another, yes, exactly." Then, as if musing to himself, "Yes, there have been great Americans. Bolivar was an American. The two Washingtons — George and Booker — are both Americans."⁸

It is difficult to know whether the fun is at the expense of the English or the Americans.

The balancing of the qualities of England and America is the whole basis of one of Stephen Leacock's best books, *My Discovery of England*, which was written following his tour of the British Isles in 1921. The observer throughout is the visiting colonial, the writer from Canada who has managed surprisingly to attract the attention of the literary world. Stephen Leacock relaxes maliciously and plays the two great transatlantic powers against each other. Here is a passage where extravagant humour and sharp critical judgment agreeably jostle each other:

The terrible ravages that have been made by the Americans on English morality are witnessed on every hand. Whole classes of society are hopelessly damaged. I have it in the evidence of the English themselves and there seems to be no doubt of the fact. Till the Americans came to England the people were an honest, law-abiding race, respecting their superiors and despising those below them. They had

never been corrupted by money and their employers extended to them in this regard their tenderest solicitude. Then the Americans came. Servants ceased to be what they were; butlers were hopelessly damaged; hotel porters became a wreck; taxi drivers turned out thieves; curates could no longer be trusted to handle money; peers sold their daughters at a million dollars a piece or three for two. In fact the whole kingdom began to deteriorate till it got where it is now. At present after a rich American has stayed in any English country house, its owners find that they can do nothing with the butler; a wildness has come over the man. There is a restlessness in his demeanour and a strange wistful look in his eye as if seeking for something. In many cases, so I understand, after an American has stayed in a country house, the butler goes insane. He is found in his pantry counting over the sixpence given to him by a Duke, and laughing to himself. He has to be taken in charge by the police. With him generally go the chauffeur, whose mind has broken down from driving a rich American twenty miles; and the gardener, who is found tearing up raspberry bushes by the roots to see if there is any money under them; and the local curate whose brain has collapsed or expanded, I forget which, when a rich American gave him fifty dollars for his soup kitchen.⁹

The point of this passage is not that the Americans are corrupt but that the English are corruptible.

Leacock was usually the innocent Canadian observing the qualities of the two great Anglo-Saxon powers, but he also liked to turn his humourous eye on the national obsessions of his native country. In *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Leacock's nostalgic recollections of small town life in southern Ontario, the action is set against the election of 1911 in which the dominating issue was reciprocity with the United States. It was an issue that aroused lively nationalistic feelings and great fears of being swallowed up by the Republic to the South. The Liberals, who supported reciprocity, were defeated. There was a feeling in the country stimulated by the fervent conservative propaganda, that Canada once again had been saved from the Yankees. Leacock himself was a devoted conservative and rejoiced in the results of the election. But as a humourist he sensed the absurdity that was just below the surface of the national emotion. In the book, he has John Henry Bagshaw, the old liberal warhorse of the local constituency, give this sad farewell speech. "I am an old man now, gentlemen, and the time must come soon when I must not only leave politics, but must take my way towards that goal from which no traveller returns. There was a deep hush when Bagshaw said this. It was understood to imply that he thought of going to the United States."¹⁰

Later on when Stephen Leacock ceased to use Canadian place names and gave an American setting to his books, he could parody the American well-intentioned

condescension to Canada. Thus, in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, the fashionable doctor recommends that his wealthy patients should go for a visit to Canada, "perfectly quiet, not a soul there and I believe nowadays quite fashionable."¹¹ Like Shaw, Leacock knew that a light-hearted display of contempt for one's own country is a sure way of getting a laugh.

Humour in Haliburton and Leacock then depended upon ironic balance as opposed to the triumphant contrast that was the main spring of American humour. But the American manner was not without influence in Canada. Haliburton adopted it even though at the same time he made fun of it. And Leacock, especially as he became in the 'thirties the unofficial spokesman for the American humorous tradition, was attracted to the robust humour of sharp contrasts. Of Mark Twain he said that "his was that characteristic American attitude, at least for the America of his day, of alternating between prayer and profanity, emotional belief and iconoclastic denial, asceticism and a spree, hard work and a bust, cold water and raw rum — with nowhere a happy medium, an accepted path and way. Out of this national phase of development is spun much of the legislation of the United States; and most of the worst of it. Mark Twain was in this, as in all else, a true American." The admiration is that of an outsider who stands in wonder but finds it impossible to participate. Yet with one side of his nature, Leacock wanted to participate. He greatly admired, for instance, the Mark Twain book that he realized was at the very heart of the robust American tradition of contrast and extravagance, *A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*. He recognized that *Huckleberry Finn* was the masterpiece, but, in many ways, he preferred the later book. To him, it was a more satisfying artistic whole than *Huckleberry Finn*. He revelled in the machinery by which Yankee inventiveness and individualism were made to shatter the feudal world of Europe. In an introduction that he wrote for the book, he praised its high purpose and said that "it was inspired by a passion for righteousness and justice which blazes out at times in a flame of indignation."¹² Yet despite his admiration for the emotional intensity with which the book was written, and for its success both as artistic whole and political statement, he had strong reservations about its ultimate implications, particularly about the unqualified endorsement of political democracy and the faith in technological progress. In his final estimate of the book, he wrote as follows: "Such criticism of England, past and present, from a citizen of the American Republic, was a little too much like a child of light reproving the children of darkness. Against the tyranny of aristocracy could be set the rising tyranny of the trust; the criminals and bandits of King Arthur's time (whenever it was)

were soon to be overmatched by the gangsters of the United States; against the power of the church stood the social tyranny of puritanical America; denunciations of slavery came ill from a writer brought up in a slave-holding family in the greatest slave state the world ever saw and the rack and stake of the Middle Ages could be paralleled in the hell-fires of the Southern lynchers. At best, it was Satan rebuking sin, the fire calling the kettle black. Underneath was the insult that Mark Twain really thought America a far superior place to England, a fact of which the next generation were not so assured. But the illusion of American freedom died hard.”¹³

Leacock’s enthusiasm for the structure and literary effect of *A Connecticut Yankee*, as well as his serious reservations about its political philosophy, can be understood in the light of his finest book, *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, which appeared in 1914. It was Leacock’s attempt to embody in one coherent structure his comments on the flourishing industrial state that had suddenly arisen in Canada in the opening years of the twentieth century. It was in a sense Leacock’s reply to Mark Twain’s exuberant response to the flourishing American industrial state that had preceded Canada’s by several decades. (Leacock did not see that *A Connecticut Yankee* was a confused book, in which Mark Twain’s sense of despair was beginning to emerge.)

For the idea and structure of the book, Leacock may well have been indebted to Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that appeared in 1899. Leacock had read Veblen’s book when he was contemplating graduate work and he had been delighted to find that the social sciences were not incompatible with wit. No doubt the presence of Veblen on the faculty of the University of Chicago was a strong influence in attracting Leacock there.

Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich was almost a fictional companion piece to *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The argument of Veblen’s book is briefly this: In a modern, industrial society, the main function of the wealthy is ownership, along with various subsidiary functions all concerned with the acquisition and accumulation of wealth. The respectable activities are banking, since it carries the suggestion of large ownership, and law which, although it has no necessary relationship to ownership, has “no taint of usefulness.”¹⁴ The wealthy are driven by a passion to assert their superiority to others in some clearly observable and recognizable way. This can be achieved by doing nothing conspicuously and spending money lavishly. To be conspicuous expenditure must be on superfluities. Expenditure on the church and higher education qualify because their buildings “are constructed and decorated with some view to a reputable

degree of wasteful expenditure.”¹⁵ “The priestly vestments are notoriously expensive, ornate and inconvenient.”¹⁶ In both church and university there is a great emphasis on “form, precedent, graduation of rank, ritual, ceremonial vestments, and learned paraphernalia.”¹⁷ The clergy and the academic staff are part of the retinue of the rich, and expenditure on them by the wealthy is essentially a form of self-indulgence.

In *Arcadian Adventures* the dominating theme is the conspicuous expenditures of the very rich — on clubs, ornate summer homes, and bogus religions. The church and the university are useful appendages to this world. The university indeed becomes a great business corporation. Leacock’s humour swells into a prophetic vision of the multiversity:

The university, as everyone knows, stands with its great gates on Plutoria Avenue, and with its largest buildings, those of the faculties of industrial and mechanical science, fronting full upon the street.

These buildings are exceptionally fine, standing fifteen stories high and comparing favourably with the best departmental stores or factories in the city. Indeed, after nightfall, when they are all lighted up for the evening technical classes and when their testing machinery is in full swing and there are students going in and out in overall suits, people have often mistaken the university, or this newer part of it, for a factory. A foreign visitor once said that the students looked like plumbers, and President Boomer was so proud of it that he put the phrase into his next Commencement address; and from there the newspapers got it and the Associated Press took it up and sent it all over the United States with the heading, “Have Appearance of Plumbers; Plutoria University Congratulated on Character of Students,” and it was a proud day indeed for the heads of the Industrial Science faculty.

But the older part of the university stands so quietly and modestly at the top end of the elm avenue, so hidden by the leaves of it, that no one could mistake it for a factory. This, indeed, was once the whole university, and had stood there since colonial days under the name Concordia College. It had been filled with generations of presidents and professors of the older type with long white beards and rusty black clothes, and salaries of fifteen hundred dollars.

But the change both of name and character from Concordia College to Plutoria University was the work of President Boomer. He had changed it from an old-fashioned college of the by-gone type to a university in the true modern sense. At Plutoria they now taught everything. Concordia College, for example, had no teaching of religion except lectures on the Bible. Now they had lectures also on Confucianism, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, with an optional course on atheism for students in the final year.

And, of course, they had long since admitted women, and there were now beauti-

ful creatures with Cléo de Mérode hair studying astronomy at oaken desks and looking up at the teacher with eyes like comets. The university taught everything and did everything. It had whirling machines on the top of it that measured the speed of the wind, and deep in its basements it measured earthquakes with a seismograph; it held classes on forestry and dentistry and palmistry; it sent life classes into the slums, and death classes to the city morgue. It offered such a vast variety of themes, topics, and subjects to the students, that there was nothing that a student was compelled to learn, while from its own presses in its own press-building it sent out a shower of bulletins and monographs like driven snow from a rotary plough.¹⁸

The climactic incident in the book is the business-like merger between the Presbyterian and the Episcopalian churches. All society has become a vast business corporation whose motto is profits and conspicuous waste.

IT COULD BE SAID then that Leacock had presented a picture of industrial society in the *Arcadian Adventures* which was no less damning than Mark Twain's picture of feudalistic Europe. If we ignore the tone of the book and simply concentrate on what happens, we could summarize the argument of the book in this way: Society is based upon wealth, and wealth derived from inheritance, promotion or speculation, rather than from useful manufacturing. The upper classes are unaware of the world outside their circle and insulate themselves from poverty. Success in this world depends upon cajolery, deception, deceit and simple graft. Among the very rich, there is no intellectual distinction, only an infinite capacity for being impressed by the false and the pretentious. The professions are slavishly dependent upon the very rich; doctors develop a reputation by advocating what the patients most desire — that they be kept quiet in some distant and exotic summer resort; university presidents play the game of separating the rich from their money by flattery and a display of conspicuous knowledge; university professors are content to work in genteel poverty provided they are respected and are free to neglect their classes; clergymen are experts in graceful ritual or are pompous, self-important expositors of an antique and discredited theology. This society seeks its pleasures in expensive and useless ways — in building grotesque and expensive retreats, in fostering absurd religious movements, and in the process is duped by its servants and victimized by those whom it admires.

Such a summary makes Leacock a dark satirist of a much more forbidding nature than even the later Mark Twain. But actually the book leaves no such impact. For the tone is relaxed; the activities of the very rich are seen as comic extravaganzas, and not as venal indulgences. Only occasionally does the relaxed smile of the humourist give way to indignation. The bitterness lurks far below the surface. The opening paragraph sets the mellow, ironic tone, and the concluding paragraph pronounces a slightly tart benediction.

The Mausoleum Club stands on the quietest corner of the best residential street in the City. It is a Grecian building of white stone. About it are great elm trees with birds — the most expensive kind of birds — singing in the branches.¹⁹

* * *

Thus all night long, outside the club, the soft note of the motor horns arriving and departing wakened the sleeping leaves of the elm trees with their message of good tidings. And all night long, within its lighted corridors, the bubbling champagne whispered to the listening rubber trees of the new salvation of the city. So the night waxed and waned till the slow day broke, dimming with its cheap prosaic glare the shaded beauty of the artificial light, and the people of the city — the best of them — drove home to their well-earned sleep, and the others — in the lower parts of the city — rose to their daily toil.²⁰

What I think accounts for the quality of this book, potentially so bitter an attack upon the status quo, actually so genial a recollection of an era that was passing away is the nature of Leacock's social convictions. Here again, as in Leacock's treatment of national traits, it is a matter of recognizing variety, of avoiding absolutes and embracing relativism. Leacock had a lively faith in the businessman and the beneficent powers of individualism. Indeed, he could at times sound like an apologist for unreconstructed competitive individualism. When he reviewed the economic conditions of Great Britain in the early 'twenties, he called for a revival of tough business enterprise.

The next thing to be done, then, is to "fire" the government officials and to bring back the profiteer. As to which officials are to be fired it doesn't matter much. In England people have been greatly perturbed as to the use to be made of such instruments as the "Geddes Axe": the edge of the axe of dismissal seems so terribly sharp. But there is no need to worry. If the edge of the axe is too sharp, hit with the back of it.

As to the profiteer, bring him back. He is really just the same person who a few years ago was called a Captain of Industry and an Empire Builder and a Nation Maker. It is the times that have changed, not the man. He is there still, just as greedy and rapacious as ever, but no greedier: and we have just the same social

need of his greed as a motive power in industry as we ever had, and indeed a worse need than before.

We need him not only in business but in the whole setting of life, or if not him personally, we need the eager, selfish, but reliant spirit of the man who looks after himself and doesn't want to have a spoon-fed education and a government job alternating with a government dole, and a set of morals framed for him by a Board of Censors. Bring back the profiteer: Fetch him from the Riviera, from his country place on the Hudson, or from whatever spot to which he has withdrawn with his tin box full of victory bonds. If need be, go and pick him out of the penitentiary, take the stripes off him and tell him to get busy again. Show him the map of the world and ask him to pick out a few likely spots. The trained greed of the rascal will find them in a moment. Then write him out a concession for coal in Asia Minor or oil in the Mackenzie Basin or for irrigation in Mesopotamia. The ink will hardly be dry on it before the capital will begin to flow in: it will come from all kinds of places whence the government could never coax it and where the tax gatherer could never find it. Only promise that it is not going to be taxed out of existence and the stream of capital which is being dried up in the sands of government mismanagement will flow into the hands of private industry like a river of gold.

And incidentally, when the profiteer has finished his work, we can always put him back into the penitentiary if we like. But we need him just now.²¹

Leacock was always severely critical of socialism. His argument was that it would not work; that it depends upon an nonexistent motive power; that it ignores the inevitable corruption of all governments; and that, anyway, its vision of the good society was like the fundamentalist's vision of heaven, dull, desolate and depressing. But Leacock would balance this indictment with a strong critical attack on the dangers of unrestricted private enterprise. He was a passionate humanist who believed that human life must be placed above economic doctrine, and he did not hesitate to recommend strong state intervention to protect society from the greed of individuals and corporations.

Leacock's political and social position is thus central and flexible; he recognizes that truth may rest simultaneously in opposed doctrines, and that there is an inevitable tendency for abstract ideas to foster injustice and a disregard for human emotions. His social criticism, then, is similar in tone to his criticism of national traits. He uses an ironic balance rather than sharp contrast, relaxed irony rather than intense indignation. The *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* might have been a burning indictment; given Leacock's point of view and temperament, it was a series of humorous and exaggerated recollections, with the criticism muted and softened.

Leacock's position, like Haliburton's, is individualistic and uncommitted. He is aware of the tensions between appearance and reality; but he keeps them in playful suspension; he does not resolve them in a burst of indignation. He writes not satires but pastorals with a satirical element. His point of view is not distinctively Canadian — there are plenty of English predecessors — but it is a posture congenial to Canadians. Our political and social traditions have decreed reconciliation rather than polarization, diversity rather than integration, a willing suspension of conviction. This point of view has many political advantages; as both Leacock and Haliburton demonstrate, it has a number of literary advantages as well.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *Mark Twain* (New York: Appleton), 2.
- ² *American Humor* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 22.
- ³ *English in America* (London: Colburn, 1851), I, 5.
- ⁴ *The Clockmaker* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1958; New Canadian Library), 48.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 70-71.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.
- ⁸ *Literary Lapses* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart; New Canadian Library), 7.
- ⁹ *My Discovery of England* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961; New Canadian Library), 58-59.
- ¹⁰ *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (Toronto: Collins, 1944), 174.
- ¹¹ *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1959; New Canadian Library), 84.
- ¹² "An Appreciation," *The Stormfield edition of The Writings of Mark Twain* (New York: Harpers, 1929), Vol. XIV, ix.
- ¹³ *Mark Twain*, 104-05.
- ¹⁴ *The Theory of The Leisure Class* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919), 231.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.
- ¹⁸ *Arcadian Adventures*, 38-40.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.
- ²¹ *My Discovery of England*, 129-30.