

STEPHEN LEACOCK

Local Colourist

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MOST OF STEPHEN LEACOCK'S surprisingly few durable pieces of humour gain their solidity from characters and themes of the type prominent in the tradition of local colour fiction. In turn, his unique blend of humour, as well as a rare insight into life, make his version of local colour memorable. Both the local colour tradition and his special strengths contribute, for example, to the success of "My Financial Career", the first story in his first volume of humour, *Literary Lapses* (1910). The timid young man who momentarily loses his wits during his first visit to a bank reflects the small town dread of big city sophistication which underlay both American and Canadian local colour at the turn of the century. Henceforth he will save money, but he will keep his savings in a sock. He represents all the virtues admired by the tradition, which treated naiveté as innocence, stubbornness as perseverance, dullness as sobriety, and moral conformity as integrity. Consequently Leacock does not look on the hero as a fool at all. Instead he presents him to us as a friend, a companion for genial humour rather than a target for satire.

Local colour dominates only the one story in *Literary Lapses*, which is a medley of jokes, sketches and stories — some genial spoofs and some sharp satires — drawn from literature as well as from real life. In his second volume, *Nonsense Novels* (1911), Leacock devotes himself to one type and one topic only, the spoofing of literary fads. These parodies are by nature totally unrelated to real life in general or local colour in particular. In such a context it therefore comes as quite a surprise to find a direct reflection of two dogmas dear to the local colourists in "Caroline's Christmas: or, the Inexplicable Infant". Although this parody spoofs the Victorian melodrama of a villain harrying a heroine with an expiring mortgage, it becomes briefly something more than that when the Good Book turns out to be Euclid, and a fearsome temperance roots out buttermilk:

“‘John,’ pleaded Anna, ‘leave alone the buttermilk. It only maddens you. No good ever came of that.’” Here Leacock is enjoying, but not satirizing, the automatic religion and Puritanical morality of the little towns dear to the local colourists. Temperance is after all in great degree a fad, like that of the health addicts who idolize buttermilk, and fads delight Leacock. What delights him still more is the comfortable seriousness of the whole way of life of the small towns in which such fads flourished, and to this delight he devotes his third book of humour, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*.

LOCAL COLOUR, as developed by Maria Edgeworth and other Irish and Scottish novelists early in the nineteenth century, had attracted novelists of manners who wanted to exploit the untried literary topic of special ways of life as opposed to the typical manners of London society. Later novelists like Anthony Trollope in the Barseshire series revelled in a local way of life as superior to that of London. In the works of the masters the artistic dangers of a concentration on local manners and a theme of local perfection were overcome and hence not evident. Both new interests in fact resulted in a totally new kind of storytelling, one which stressed peculiar rather than representative traits. As a result characters by design look provincial rather than universal. In principle at least, the incidents which provide them with conflicts should involve distinctively local concerns. Descriptions need to point up the unique, which usually means taking pride in the manmade environment rather than the natural. Themes typically show the way to a “perfect” society, in which, as it is pictured, pastimes only too often cause more concern than work, and moral dogmatism underlies the portrayal of manners.

As developed in the United States and Canada late in the last century, local colour told of the life of the many small towns in countrysides where the frontier had been closed for at least a generation. In the United States hosts of local colourists described all the older regions of the country in the last generation of the nineteenth century. Writers like Sarah Orne Jewett brought out the distinctive features of New England life, and George Washington Cable recreated the special life of the Creoles in the Old South. In Canada too the local colourists were numerous and prolific. L. M. Montgomery idolized the quiet life of Prince Edward Island in more than a dozen novels. Duncan Campbell Scott wrote *In the Village of Viger* in praise of the self-contained life of a French-Canadian village

soon and lamentably to be swallowed up by Montreal. In Ontario E. W. Thomson and Ralph Connor praised the manliness and moral integrity of Glengarry folk, and many another local colourist ransacked the rest of Southern Ontario for ideal small towns. So pervasive was this preoccupation in life and in literature that Hugh MacLennan a generation later chose the small town outlook and its moral Puritanism as his distinctive Canadian trait in *The Precipice*.

In the local colour fiction the small towns appear as islands of perfection in a generally undirected or even misdirected civilization. Behind this pride and optimism centred on small town life, there lurks in the more perceptive writings a dread of the changes appearing in the new big cities. No doubt, industrial routine and mass housing seemed to the small town onlookers to banish happiness, and, worse still, to lead to a flexible morality. Storytellers took two approaches to their topic. Militant local colourists like Ralph Connor used their fiction as a pulpit to preach the way of perfection to less fortunate people in the cities, or sometimes on the frontier. They wrote vigorous stories tightly unified by their underlying sermons, so that often their works understandably became best-sellers in those Puritanical times, even outside the small towns. The other local colourists, like L. M. Montgomery, D. C. Scott, and E. W. Thomson, were complacent and gently humorous. They crammed their stories with the placid atmosphere of the society they loved. They were the local colourists who had no moralizing motives to interfere with a purely artistic aim.

As artists these complacent local colourists faced two dilemmas. First, their absorption with features peculiar to a way of life invited them to stress the local rather than the universal, and usually they chose the superficial rather than the essential and permanent. In characterization they often stressed the quaint, in customs the bizarre. They were content with the charming in scenery and the dogmatic in morality. Ministers and housewives also were drawn as charming rather than devoted, except when the perfection of their lives was stressed. Special customs like gathering maple syrup provided incidents and scenery at once, and so did special moral problems like the tavern, or social phenomena like the Sunday School.

As a second dilemma, the complacent local colourists lacked any obvious pattern or device to unify their stories. The staple unit of local colour fiction is the self-contained anecdote or vignette, in which an odd character does something peculiar. The most obvious structure is a volume of independent sketches or loosely connected stories, which when bound together can radiate the desired atmosphere of a charming and unchanging way of life. But the novel with its

larger plot requires a dynamic development rather than a series of static situations. A plot depends on conflict and its conflict must lead to change. Neither is inherent in complacent local colour, and few if any of the writers who practised it at the turn of the century had the ingenuity to invent an appropriate large-scale plot on their own. Traditional if alien patterns were of course available. The tried plots of Victorian fiction tempted many a local colourist, but they shifted rather than solved the problem of unity. They belonged to conventions which were at odds with local colour, since they stressed the representative rather than the eccentric in human behaviour. Nor were their typically melodramatic conflicts a suitable mode for the complacent local colourists. Duncan Campbell Scott spoiled much of the unity of *In the Village of Viger* by concocting plots about madmen and murderers which clashed incongruously with the charm of his atmosphere and his French-Canadian characters.

The local colourists wanted to record a society in which neither disaster nor evil occurred. Tragic patterns were unthinkable, and so too was robust satire: there were no evils, it seemed, to attack. For, luxuriating in the best of all comfortable worlds, genial humour naturally became the staple mode. Again the local colourists were tempted into a difficult artistic form. Genial humour is fairly rare in literature; it is much more elusive than satiric wit. Several local colourists, like L. M. Montgomery, managed plot and humour nicely at the level of children's stories, particularly when growing up was the unifying device. But most, including L. M. Montgomery, were childish when they turned to adult life. It took a great genial humourist to meet the varied challenges — a Mark Twain or a Stephen Leacock.

SUNSHINE SKETCHES OF A LITTLE TOWN contains all the familiar ingredients of typical local colour, although in this version they look a little strange because the most memorable characters are more elaborated and more integrated into a larger purpose than usual. Yet in the background there are several quaint characters who have not been developed. The village drunk — here schoolteacher Diston who never gets a raise — is a staple of local colour fiction; and the undertaker Golgotha Gingham is similarly extraneous to plot and theme. More developed but still peripheral vignettes include Yodel the auctioneer, Mullins the banker, and fiery Judge Pepperleigh. A local custom which comes

right out of the tradition appears in the opening chapter, when the steam merry-go-round comes to Mariposa town and the calculating innkeeper Josh Smith treats all the children. Such characters and incidents justify the claim of the opening sentence that there are "a dozen towns just like it", but they also recall Canadian literature as much as Canadian life. They help to evoke the familiar golden atmosphere of "a land of hope and sunshine", as Leacock put it in his preface. But the atmosphere gains much more strength from the more developed incidents, which are all Leacock's own.

From the first Leacock presents Mariposa not so much in the usual formless collection of odd characters and bizarre incidents as through a pervading sense of a whole life. With a typical sense of being at the centre of the universe, the townfolk talk of "main street" and the "lake" from the first page on, ignoring the proper Indian names. They display their self-centred pride even more actively by comparing the width of Main Street favourably with that of Wall Street. These mannerisms are merely amusing, but Leacock uses other special customs and features of the environment to help define the four seasons of the year in Mariposa. By winter the electric light is as strong as coal oil lamps, by spring the farmers from Missanaba County stroll through Mariposa like dangerous lumbermen, by summer the seven cottages on the lake are rented, and by autumn the Salvation Army sings on street corners under naphtha lamps. In such a description Leacock goes beyond typical local colour, and beyond his typical humour too, using both as a means of comprehending a whole society.

In terms of characterization, the simply quaint figures like Diston the drunk schoolteacher merely lurk in the background of the stories. For the two bank clerks, in contrast, Leacock uses a sort of inverted quaintness by stressing their city-like similarity (the one with the cameo pin and the face of a horse, and the other one with the other cameo pin and the face of another horse). A central figure like Josh Smith may look at first like "a character" (and "an over-dressed pirate"), but he quickly becomes a rounded, vigorous and amiable representative of the small town at its best. Most unexpected of all, the town barber Jefferson Thorpe plunges right through the layers of quaintness and reveals a pathetic man of high principles who automatically assumes the money losses of townfolk who have speculated foolishly on his advice.

This example of exceptional integrity indicates both a final trait which Leacock shares with the lesser local colourists and at the same time the insight which makes his version great. Like them he assumes that no evil or tragedy worthy of the label is possible in the small town of the story. Leacock can be funny on

this topic too, putting the perspective of humour between himself and the small town. When the *Mariposa Belle* sinks in six feet of mud in the “lake”, he tells us that disasters such as mass drownings never occur in Mariposa. The quip sounds satiric, but in effect it is whimsical. Leacock clung to his love of the small towns for a lifetime just because dreadful things really did not happen in the “land of hope and sunshine”. Yet he had the insight to recognize that men can be double-faced in Mariposa just as they can be anywhere. The most successful citizens are in fact hypocrites: Judge Pepperleigh orders the tavern shut down because he was kept out after hours, and Josh Smith ensures that it keeps operating by banqueting the leading citizens daily in his restaurant until his liquor license is renewed. Leacock laughs at both men, but he laughs with kindness. He recognizes human traits which almost every local colourist pretended did not exist in his town, yet they do not infuriate him as they do most humourists, who unlike him are satirists. To him they do not, cannot, constitute evil.

There is in fact a rare perception in *Sunshine Sketches* that has fundamentally nothing to do with humour, which is only the means of expressing it. In contrast to the typical thin glimpses of small town life, Leacock’s view comprehends all of small town life, giving us for example a sense of the whole town, rather than just a family at play, on the occasion of the annual picnic of the Knights of Pythias. At a more serious level, nothing fires interest in a real small town more than an election, but very few storytellers besides Leacock have told about one. Josh Smith wins the riding of Mariposa with a typical double-dealing trick, but deservedly, for he is also the ablest candidate. Smith is in fact a hypocrite using his talents to serve the best interests of Mariposa, as when he solves the crisis of the church building fund by setting fire to the old building for the insurance money. In drawing him Leacock has indeed made hypocrisy a neutral quality, which can even end in benevolence, as when Smith keeps the lavish restaurant open after his liquor license has been renewed.

This local colour is in fact both positive and mature. For Leacock the small town offered the best of all practical worlds. The sad, ruined Jeff Thorpe is really fortunate not to have gained the means to leave Mariposa:

It seemed to spoil one’s idea of Jeff that copper and asbestos and banana lands should form the goal of his thought when, if he knew it, the little shop and the sunlight of Mariposa was so much better.

The real tragedy is that of the old boys who have left and, in their prosperous old age in the city, long for small town life. *Sunshine Sketches* in fact ends on

this unhappy scene, with their dissatisfied dreams of a better way of life back in Mariposa, and of the trainmen calling out the station:

And, as we listen, the cry grows fainter and fainter in our ears and we are sitting here again in the leather chairs of the Mausoleum Club, talking of the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew.

Independence and Leisure were the keystones of Leacock's philosophy of life, and he tells us in his "Preface" that he enjoys "more in the four corners of a single year than a business man knows in his whole life". That is why he escaped as often as he could from Montreal to his country home near Orillia.

When applied to such a heart-felt purpose, the nonsense humour is also unusually positive and mature. Although a few of the quips and brief character sketches in *Sunshine Sketches* are as gratuitous as some of the background local colour, most of them serve the larger purpose. The humour itself can penetrate the degrees of pettiness in the citizens, but its genial tone provides for an acceptance of them all. Thus the sinking of the *Mariposa Belle* reveals the shallow faith of the lesser citizens, as when the student minister in the lifeboat assures the passengers that they are "in the hands of Providence", but "he was crouched and ready to spring out of them at the first moment". Meanwhile Josh Smith with his more practical faith corks the hull, lets the ship float, and sails it home before the lifeboat passengers can walk back. In the same incident, Leacock with his nonsense combinations extends his perspective momentarily to make fun of the national image: the boat began to sink just as everyone was singing "O — *Can-a-da*"; but those who stay with the ship are still singing it when Smith steers the refloated *Mariposa Belle* into harbour. Here a rare symbolism adds to the maturity of the humour. At the same time the sense of latent determination here and in almost every sketch, however oddly implied, builds up the mood of stability necessary for a positive presentation of the small-town way of life, and gives an exception to Carl Van Doren's sound criticism:

The local colourists were not very realistic observers. Ordinarily provincial, but without the rude durability or homely truthfulness of provincialism at its best, they studied their world with benevolence rather than with passion. Nor were they much differentiated among themselves by highly individual ideas or methods.

And yet at the same time technically Leacock's humour is still the same combination of incongruous extremes as in his score of other books. Anthologists can select individual sketches from *Sunshine Sketches* and print them side by side with ones from all the other books without jarring a single tone of humour. Nevertheless the anthologists do injustice to *Sunshine Sketches*. It does develop an

over-all unity which goes far beyond the unity of tone in *Nonsense Novels*. Leacock's philosophy of the happiest way of life makes the chief contribution to this larger unity. Yet although the special Leacock humour produces a unified tone, and the sense of wholeness in the local colour scene a unified atmosphere, both are essentially static, and although a single set of characters and incidents may unify as many as three sketches for a change, and Josh Smith and others recur in several different stories, *Sunshine Sketches* is still episodic. Nor does Leacock show any inclination to develop original plots in the individual stories. Chiefly he borrows conventional patterns like those he had parodied in *Nonsense Novels*, still inverting them amusingly. Not only does the sinking ship fail to sink, but the bank robbery is after all not a robbery, and the hopeless romance of young lovers turns out to have been prearranged by the parents. The effect just suits *Sunshine Sketches* with its happy balance of many interests, but it promises little help for future books. Leacock created a great book because his concern for his topic absorbed his regular talents and gave them direction. He did not hit on a plot pattern or a philosophy which offered a means to overcome his continuing problem of disunity and shallowness.

THE ANTHOLOGISTS also do injustice to *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914) when they isolate its separate sketches. This volume too has an over-all unity of atmosphere, this time the sense of city rather than of small-town life. Yet, with the larger scope, Leacock did not create so comprehensive a sense of varied sections of society as in *Sunshine Sketches*. Instead he concentrated on the life of the plutocrats in their twin bastions of the Mausoleum Club on Plutoria Avenue and the Grand Palaver Hotel downtown. Nor did he suggest the bustle of city life, but only the slumbering leisure of the Club, the Avenue, and the Church of the rich with rooks in the elm trees. What he did suggest admirably is the economic essence of big city success. The financiers, and their financial manipulations of their social, educational, religious and political lives, provide stories through which Leacock both comprehends urban life and laughs at it. This time, however, the laughter is unfriendly, harsh, satiric. Leacock saw plenty of evil in the city: in dishonest finance, in materialistic ministers, in ruthless politicians. The city leaders are hypocrites, and in this context Leacock is not gentle with hypocrisy. *Arcadian Adventures* offers only a negative attitude to the life it depicts, and so it achieves none of the deeper insight of *Sunshine Sketches*.

Indeed, *Arcadian Adventures* shows up in every way the brilliance of *Sunshine Sketches*. The negative attitude to city life lacks the intensity which the positive philosophy gives to the earlier book. Nor is there any advance in formal unity, although once again characters recur from sketch to sketch, and some plots run through several sketches. Most damaging of all, Leacock lost control of the tone of his humour, in a situation in which, given his satirical perspective, he could not afford to be affable or sentimental. Tomlinson, the farmer whose simplicity fools the tycoons into regarding him as a wizard of finance, looks absurd in his thousand-dollar-a-day suite in the Grand Palaver Hotel, but there is no satire directed at him. He is really as sad as a Jeff Thorpe who succeeds in getting away to the big city and finds it appalling. He is the product of a different literary outlook from that which exposes the arid materialism of the business leaders who dominate most of the sketches, and it is an anomaly to find him in the same book with them. When the satire and the nonsense humour appear inside the same sketch the jolt is even greater and the result may indeed be nonsense. The spoof of the religious fads of bored wealthy housewives in "The Yahi-Bahi Oriental Society of Mrs. Rasselyer-Brown" is merely silly. The women really want to escape from their unhappy city life, and so does Tomlinson, who is contented when he can in the end return to his dear old farm. Ultimately, *Arcadian Adventures* shows up Leacock's dread of big city life just as thoroughly as all his most earnest writing does, starting with the timid young man of "My Financial Career".

Arcadian Adventures provides a measure of the limits of Leacock's ability. He had tried his hand at a second study in depth, and he had failed in comparison with his earlier triumph in *Sunshine Sketches*. Afterwards he abandoned himself to being an incidental funny man without much of a philosophy or a theme. As a result his twenty later volumes of humour lack both the depth of vision and the formal unity which gave substance to *Sunshine Sketches*. By his last volume *My Remarkable Uncle*, the small towns are only a sad memory, sad because modern Canada is so much less comfortable than they were (cf. "The Old Farm and the New Frame"). Even in *Sunshine Sketches* the love of the small town way of life sounds a little nostalgic, a longing for a way of life which is already past, the same sad love which dominates Ralph Connor's Glengarry (in the preface to *The Man from Glengarry*). But in *Sunshine Sketches* Leacock still had enough faith in his theme for it to intensify his people and plots and humour and so produce a living book. Ultimately, Leacock could be great only when his characters and his jests were vitalized by the ideals, and even the quaintness, of the local colour tradition.