

# A SPECIAL TANG:

*Stephen Leacock's  
Canadian Humour*

*R. E. Watters*

A WELL-KNOWN ODDITY of Canadian literature is the fact that, out of all our authors, the two who have achieved the greatest reputations in the English-speaking world have been humorists. We ourselves have tirelessly repeated that the best of our literature is our poetry, but that world has paid our poets little attention on either the popular or critical levels. Abroad, even our fiction has made greater impact than our poetry. Our humorists are fewer than either our poets or novelists, yet two of them have caught the ear of the world. Thomas Chandler Haliburton was in his day this continent's best-known author on both sides of the Atlantic; and in the present century Stephen Leacock is read almost everywhere. To explain all this as simply the "mystery of genius" or perhaps an "accident of international preference" may be nothing more than obscurantism. Perhaps one should ask whether or not there is something in the soil or environment of Canada especially favourable to humour, something that perhaps imparts a special "tang" to it, a flavour obtainable from no other source and therefore valued abroad for its uniqueness, detectable even if undefined. A close examination of some of Leacock's humour may reveal some characteristics which produce whatever special "tang" or flavour it has, and at the same time may suggest how this unique quality is related to Canadian life.

"Canadianness" is not something which I believe either increases or lessens the literary merit of a work. Although a literary evaluation of Leacock's humour is outside the direct concern of this paper, the point of view taken must be explained. As everyone knows, national qualities

in a work of literature—especially when they are Canadian—have been praised by some as a strength, denounced by others as a weakness, and disregarded by many as irrelevant. The first attitude is usually considered the most objectionable, but in my view all three are equally wrong. The third attitude (“irrelevance”) is, in criticism, particularly mischievous because superficially it seems so impeccable. Nevertheless it is seriously wrong, because it fails to discriminate between the processes of understanding a work and of judging its excellence, and whenever the understanding is incomplete the judgement will be unsound. Precisely because the “content” of a work is really inseparable from its “form” or “expression” no aspect of that “content” can be irrelevant to the complete critical process. National differences are readily acknowledged and even carefully analyzed in an author’s language; even when his language is English, attention is paid to idiomatic variations between, let us say, usage in Great Britain, the United States, and Australia. But little or no attention has been given to national differences in less tangible but more significant matters such as general outlook, unspoken assumptions about motivation and behaviour, and attitudes towards certain issues of human existence. While the facts of life may be much the same everywhere, their interpretation may differ in extremely significant ways.

My conviction is that Leacock wrote Canadian humour, that our national characteristics shaped it, and that they are, in turn, revealed by it. Just as American humour can be distinguished from English, so can Leacock’s be distinguished from both. Since Leacock himself was interested in the national characteristics of humour he cannot be numbered among those who consider the “national” quality of a work of literature as either regrettable or irrelevant. Of course, he readily admitted that humour everywhere has a common basis and warned that national distinctions could be overdrawn. Nevertheless, he firmly believed that “the various circumstances of environment, of national character, and of language, at least emphasize and make salient certain aspects of national humour.”<sup>1</sup> Repeatedly he addressed himself to the challenge of distinguishing between English and American humour. In 1914 he saw in the jokes of the two countries a “divergence of national taste” which he considered “really fundamental”: “The Englishman loves what is literal . . . . The American . . . tries to convey the same

<sup>1</sup> His article on “Humour” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1945), 11:885.

idea by exaggeration.”<sup>2</sup> His remarks here were followed over the years by many more, too many for me to summarize. For instance, he is reported to have once told Cyril Clemens that “English humour is always based on fact, whereas American humour often deals with what really could never have happened except in the imagination.”<sup>3</sup> He has an entire chapter on “National Characteristics” in his *Humour, Its Theory and Technique* (1935), and he had further comments to make a couple of years later in *Humour and Humanity* (1937). In this book he goes into social history to explain the greater popularity of the pun in English humour than in American, and to explain why the humour of bad spelling, once so prevalent in the United States, never caught on in England.<sup>4</sup> He analyzes typical English and American jokes to demonstrate the national differences. “There is,” he says, “a broad distinction to be made between jokes that proceed by telling the truth and thus landing us in a sort of impossibility, and jokes that proceed to state an impossibility and land us in a truth. These contrasted types correspond very much to the *formal* aspect (not the inner) of typical British and American jokes.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Leacock seldom talked directly about the characteristics of his own humour, and said even less about Canadian humour generally. It is certain, however, that he never grouped himself with English humorists. Instead, he spoke of himself as an “American” humorist, though he used the word in its continental rather than national sense. The fact that he often contrasted the humour of Britain with that of the United States, but never (so far as I know) made Canada a partner in any contrast, suggests to me nothing more than his awareness of what would most interest his international public. As for his national public, Canadian interest must have seemed negligible, if he took as a sign the amount of attention given to discussion of Canadian humour in our periodicals.

Critics and reviewers in England seem more perceptive than those in the United States of certain differences in Leacock’s humour from both

<sup>2</sup> “American Humour”, *Nineteenth Century*, 76:455-456 (Aug. 1914).

<sup>3</sup> CYRIL CLEMENS, “An Evening with Stephen Leacock,” *Catholic World* 159:240 (June 1940).

<sup>4</sup> *Humour and Humanity* (London, Butterworth, 1937), pp. 42-49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

British and American. As with Canadian speech, the "American" characteristics in things Canadian are plainly evident to Englishmen. But British characteristics were also readily found in the humour, perhaps because English readers wished to have some claim on the man (after all, his first six years were lived in England!). The Americans felt no such need to discriminate, to look for differences; unlike the English they had nothing to gain, and had no need to placate their neighbour to the north. Canada had never asserted her rights in any aggressive manner; some Canadians, indeed, still think of Leacock as an Englishman in exile.

But the perceptiveness of English critics, with one notable exception, had more width than depth. Leacock was regarded as something like a literary mason, skilfully applying English craftsmanship to American materials. No thought was given to the possibility that he might have quarried some of his own stone, invented some of his own methods, originated some of the final design. Sir Owen Seaman (of *Punch*) once spoke of Leacock's humour as being "British by heredity" with "something of the spirit of American humour by force of association."<sup>6</sup> Another English critic described Canada as "a sort of half-way house in letters between U.K. and U.S.A.", and therefore found no surprise in Leacock's having discovered "the hilarious mean between American and English humour":

His fantastical ideas are often in the nature of American hyperbole—but they are developed in English fashion as a rule, in a quiet and close-knit narrative which has none of the exuberance of the typical American humorist.<sup>7</sup>

The notable exception is J. B. Priestley, who finds specific and positive Canadian qualities in Leacock's "outlook, manner, and style", which, he says, not only "belong to the man but . . . to the nation":

Very adroitly he aimed at both British and American audiences, but he never identified himself with either; always, at least when he is at his best, he remains a Canadian . . . .

The best of Leacock exists somewhere between—though at a slight angle from—the amiable nonsense of characteristic British humour (e.g. Wodehouse) and the

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Ralph L. Curry, *Stephen Leacock, Humorist and Humanist* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1959), p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> *The Living Age*, 311:353 (Nov. 1921). [An anonymous article reprinted in *The Living Age* from *The Morning Post* of Sept. 29, 1921.]

hard cutting wit and almost vindictive satire of much American humour . . . .

It is in fact the satirical humour of a very shrewd but essentially good-natured and eupeptic man, anything but an angry reformer. And two sorts of readers may find it unsatisfactory; namely, those who prefer humour to be the nonsense of dreamland, in the Wodehouse manner, and those who regard humour as a weapon with which to attack the world.<sup>8</sup>

Beside these words we might place an extract from Lister Sinclair's essay entitled "The Canadian Idiom":

We are beginning to realize our position in the world, and it is precarious. We lie between the greatest and grimmest of the Grim Great Powers . . . and in the middle of the night we sometimes dream of hot breath quietly playing on the backs of our necks . . . . We are very small in population . . . [yet] we wish to be influential; we have a small voice, but we wish to make it heard.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Sinclair also refers to what he calls the "calculated diffidence" of Canadians as being a kind of "protective colouration", and goes on to assert that the characteristic Canadian method of making our small voice heard is the use of irony, "the jiu-jitsu of literature . . . the weapon of Socrates . . . the principle of letting the giants destroy one another by their strength."<sup>10</sup>

Not only in the mid-twentieth century but throughout our history Canada's position has been "precarious". With inner tensions between our bi-racial cultures and provincial sectionalisms; with geographic, economic, and military forces pulling vertically within the continent, and with historical, nostalgic, and institutional ones pulling horizontally across the Atlantic; with our vast territory and strenuous climate dwarfing and threatening our numbers and our energies; with all the complexities, in short, which we fully recognize but cannot wholly command, the outlook of Canadians on the world and on human relations is far from identical with that of Englishmen or Americans. We have never known the easy national security and laurelled self-confidence out of which may issue the "amiable nonsense" of a Wodehouse, nor have we ever had the wealth and strength which can both provoke and withstand the iconoclastic satire of a Sinclair Lewis. While one's home is being shaken by violent winds, one neither blows bubbles nor batters another member of the household.

<sup>8</sup> *The Bodley Head Leacock*, Edited and Introduced by J. B. Priestley (London, The Bodley Head, 1957), pp. 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> MALCOLM ROSS (ed.), *Our Sense of Identity* (Toronto, Ryerson, 1954), pp. 236-237.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

AS A PEOPLE bent on self-preservation, Canadians have had to forego two luxuries: that of forgetting themselves in gay abandon and that of losing their tempers in righteous wrath. Yet there is a kind of humour that combines full understanding of the contending forces with a wry recognition of one's ineffectiveness in controlling them—a humour in which one sees himself as others see him but without any admission that this outer man is a truer portrait than the inner—a humour based on the incongruity between the real and the ideal, in which the ideal is repeatedly thwarted by the real but never quite annihilated. Such humour is Canadian.

What Lister Sinclair calls our "calculated diffidence" would never draw attention to itself in humour by exuberant slapstick or by linguistic pranks in the form of explosive wisecracks—and there is little of either in Leacock. The Socratic irony of letting the giants destroy themselves by their own utterances is a standard device of Leacock—witness, for example, the self-destruction so wrought amongst university administrators and professors, high financiers, clean-government reformers, and church boardmen in his *Arcadian Adventures With the Idle Rich*. Here Leacock may be, in Priestley's phrase, "anything but an angry reformer", yet a reformer he unmistakably is. So also with the *Sunshine Sketches*. Both these books display neither the "amiable nonsense" of a Wodehouse nor the "hard cutting wit and almost vindictive satire of much American humour." Good-tempered restraint is less easy to detect than slashing attack, and is perhaps less colourful to watch, but it has its own unique value. Given Canada's "precarious" situation of inner and outer relationships, self-restraint means self-preservation. We cannot enforce change or reform with a scourge or bludgeon, because the tightrope we walk is no place for flailing arms. The Canadian satirical weapon is, of necessity, the scalpel of the cool surgeon or the quick flip of the judo expert.

In his recent biography of Leacock, Ralph L. Curry frequently refers to Leacock's "favorite character, the little man in the society too complex for him", who preserves "his dignity by continuing, in his ignorance, to act like a man".<sup>11</sup> Wearing his American spectacles, Mr. Curry has

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 242 *et al.*

misread Leacock, for the "little man" he describes is portrayed by various American humorists but not by Leacock. In the light of his own description, it is rather surprising that Mr. Curry cites "My Financial Career" as a good portrait of Leacock's "little man". The protagonist of this most famous of all Leacock's sketches is certainly not an innocent overwhelmed by an environment too complex for his understanding.

The truth is very simple: Leacock's "favorite character" was indeed a "little man" but he was a Canadian type, not an American; and "My Financial Career" is a good portrait of him but only when its Canadian subject is properly identified and described. In this sketch Leacock introduces us to a somewhat diffident young man who, he tells us, knows "beforehand" what is likely to happen but who nevertheless enters the bank undeterred by this knowledge. The young man has formed an ideal of saving his money and he considers the bank the best place to accomplish his purpose. He understands the essentials of banking, if not the details; he understands how he appears to others (confused, incompetent, helpless, etc.) and also *why* he appears so; he understands what he does wrong while he does it; and above all he understands himself thoroughly, past and present, both his inner self and his outer appearance. Far from preserving any "dignity" by "continuing in his ignorance, to act like a man", he is acutely handicapped by the very completeness of his knowledge. It is true that he cannot control his nervous reactions any more than he can change the atmosphere of the bank—the humour lies in just this ineffectiveness.

Throughout the sketch the humour sparkles from the changing facets of the young man's "identity", how others see him and how he sees himself, the incongruities between appearance and reality. Besides his own true identity there is mistaken identity, assumed identity, and apparent identity. For instance, the bankers mistake him at first for "one of Pinkerton's men", and then for "a son of Baron Rothschild or a young Gould"; later he himself tries to act or look like an insulted depositor or an irascible curmudgeon; and at the end he appears to the bankers as an utter fool. All the while his essential nature remains intact and unchanged, despite all the environmental entanglements. Unable to adjust his inner self to an environment too powerful for him, he retreats under a barrage of laughter. But consider the ending of the story. Following the description of the roar of laughter he hears as the bank doors close

behind him come two concluding sentences:

Since then I bank no more. I keep my money in cash in my trousers pocket and my savings in silver dollars in a sock.

In short, this diffident young Canadian's initial intention of saving his money has been quite unaffected by what has happened to him in the bank. Wryly recognizing *once more* his inability to cope with the overpowering atmosphere of the banking world, he changes his method of money-saving to one which is free from external pressures and is entirely within his own control. In his own way this "little man" has solved his problem—a richly humorous one for the reader, to be sure, because of the incongruity between the ideal of his intention and the reality of his sock.

I have laboured the analysis of this story not because I think that Leacock while writing it intended consciously anything like a commentary on the Canadian national character, but because I believe that we have here a prime example of how an author's outlook on life, including his interpretation of the ridiculous or amusing, is coloured by the social environment and the people he knows best. And for Leacock these were not English, not American, but Canadian. That last sentence of "My Financial Career" is pure Canadian.

The little Canadian of this sketch is encountered elsewhere in Leacock. Take, for example, "The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones". Here the protagonist again finds himself caught in an environment not of his own making—the social context of expected "white lies"—for which he is again morally and emotionally unconstituted. Jones is introduced as "a curate—such a dear young man, and only twenty-three", whose problem was that he "simply couldn't get away from people". As Leacock brilliantly explains the difficulty, "He was too modest to tell a lie and too religious to wish to appear rude." Here is the scalpel stroke, laying bare the twisted values in modern society—the reversal of sanctions between the ideal and the real, where the white lies of social politeness demand and receive the homage due only to religious truths. The dilemma is funny to us because of the incongruity between the momentousness of the ideal principle and the apparent triviality of the real predicament. But consider the significance of this little Canadian's "exit line":



. . . he sat up in bed with a beautiful smile of confidence playing upon his face, and said, "Well—the angels are calling me; I'm afraid I really must go now. Good afternoon."

In that beatific "Good afternoon" the little curate finally departs *on his own terms*: truth and politeness here at last coincide. Though he must die to be true to himself, he has solved his problem to his perfect satisfaction! And again there is the ironic incongruity between the ideal of his simple intention and the reality of his drastic method.

Again and again in Leacock's humour—particularly in the writings of his best years, between 1910 and the early 1920's—we encounter this same "little man" exposed to pressures of various kinds from our complex society, yet maintaining both his dignity and his identity. He is not baffled by the complex world, though he may be frustrated by its overwhelming powers; he is sustained not by ignorance but by his integral understanding of his own nature and position within the world he inhabits. It is of course not a world peculiar to Canadians, as Leacock's wide popularity attests, but perhaps from longer experience Canadians have learned how to treat it humorously.

The diffidence of Leacock's little Canadian must not be misinterpreted as an unreadiness to set forth his own clear convictions. Take, for example, "Are the Rich Happy?" Here the little man reports faithfully the answers given by the rich themselves to his inquiries, but he is not for a moment taken in by the sob stories he hears. He is merely allowing the giants of wealth to destroy themselves with their own tongues, just as they had in another sketch entitled "Self-Made Men". The observant little inquirer in "Are the Rich Happy?" delightedly helps in the rout, indeed, by quietly loosing such barbed shafts as these:

My judgement is that the rich undergo cruel trials and bitter tragedies of which the poor know nothing . . . .

The rich are troubled by money all the time . . . .

I have seen Spugg put aside his glass of champagne—or his glass after he had drunk his champagne—with an expression of something like contempt . . . .

Yet one must not draw a picture of the rich in colours altogether gloomy.

And then comes the ending of the report, which shows the little man's full ironic understanding. The rich Overjoy family, he is told, is now "absolutely cleaned out—not a cent left." On closer inquiry, however,

he finds that the Overjoys haven't sold their mansion—"they were too much attached to it"—nor given up their box at the opera—they were "too musical" for that. Nevertheless by general report they are "absolutely ruined . . . . You could buy Overjoy—so I am informed—for ten dollars." Then he shifts from his ironic reporting to a final direct comment of his own: "But I observe that he still wears a seal-lined coat worth at least five hundred."

In "We Have With Us Tonight" the little man is a travelling lecturer subjected night after night to the bumbling rudenesses and absurdities of pompous chairmen. The world of the lecture circuit bothers but does not baffle him. Though he cannot evade the institutionalized rules and procedures, he can analyze and classify them. He can even extract from them a wry amusement at his occasional discomfitures as well as his petty triumphs. In "The Man in Asbestos" he refuses to yield to persuasion or example that a future Utopian society free from toil and risk and tension is preferable to our own; whatever the stresses and strains of our present world he has no desire to escape to a brand new one. In "Homer and Humbug" he is again resisting the pressure of organized opinion—the demand on him to admire as supreme genius what in his personal judgement is nothing but "primitive literature". In "Roughing It in the Bush" he is opposing such conventional patterns as that physical discomfort is a requisite for proper moose-hunting; he has been quite content for ten years with his own pattern of high living in the wilderness. And for a final example consider "The Transit of Venus," a short story about a professor of astronomy in love with a student. This "little man"—Leacock's own term for Lancelot Kitter—is inexperienced in the ways of love rather than ignorant of them; he lacks knowledge of women but not of his own state of mind. When he is inept in a situation he knows he has "failed again". He is fully aware of what he should do, of what is expected of him; he just cannot do it. The story has the conventional happy ending, not because he is forced or manoeuvred into something he does not want, but only because an opportunity comes along with no distracting cross-currents to prevent his grasping it. No doubt the girl makes it easy for him—but again the ending is significant. This little professor of astronomy does not weakly join the girl's orbit; instead, she is swung into his to become indistinguishable from "any other professor's wife".

All these "little men" know their environment, know themselves, know what is expected of them; sometimes they cannot conform, sometimes they will not, but invariably they draw their strength from within themselves. The world they choose to live in is a huge one, just as the clothes Stephen Leacock chose to wear were always several sizes too big for him. Yet the essential size and identity of the man inside is unaffected by the bigness outside, even though to outsiders the appearance may seem ridiculously dwarfing.

Leacock's Canadian archetype is therefore radically different in outlook from such a character as Benchley's befuddled little man in an incomprehensible world, or Thurber's Walter Mitty, who can live only by escaping into a fantasy of his own making. To Leacock's "little man" the world is not incomprehensible, nor does he want to escape into fantasy. He wants to continue living in this complex world, preferably by making changes in it to suit himself, but if this is impossible—as it usually is—then to live in this world somehow without sacrificing his self-respect, his principles, or his continuing identity. In an ideal world one should be able to reconcile, through knowledge of both, the outer pressures and the inner desires. But in the real world the actual power to shape and achieve may be lacking. Incongruity between the real and the ideal is everywhere a basis of humour—but which aspect of the real and which aspect of the ideal are not everywhere given the same emphasis. As Leacock said: "The various circumstances of environment, of national character, and of language, at least emphasize and make salient certain aspects of national humour."<sup>12</sup> If my analysis of some pieces of Leacock's work is valid, then certain salient characteristics of his humour are unmistakably national. In our precarious and complicated circumstances, and given our national character, Canadians must either cry with frustration or laugh with Leacock.

All through our history, the favourite intellectual game of Canadians has been to measure ourselves against the British on the one hand and the Americans on the other. We have tended to define what we are almost exclusively by detecting our differences from both. Consequently, if any people anywhere should be especially skilled in the comparative study of human beings considered as groups or types rather than as individuals, it should be us. And we should also be equipped to tell the world

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 1, *supra*.

whatever insights into general human nature such processes provide. Now consider what Leacock says:

Comparison is the very soul of humour . . . . It is the discovery of resemblance and the lack of it that builds up the contrasts, discrepancies and incongruities on which . . . humour depends.

As Leacock well knew, poetic imagery also springs from the perception of similarities and differences; but humour, not poetry, builds upon the resultant discrepancies and incongruities, particularly as applied to types of human nature and typical human behaviour. For generations, then, Canadians have cultivated the soil from which humour springs, and we therefore should not be surprised that out of Canada have come two great humorists to whom the world has given its approval. Men everywhere can detect and savour a special "tang" without caring about its special ingredients or even its origins.

It is noteworthy that Haliburton's humour is almost entirely the result of scrutinizing the differences between Americans, Nova Scotians, and Englishmen. The neglect into which Haliburton's humour has fallen is usually attributed to the lost appeal of dialect humour. A better reason may be that he concocted his Canadian humour for too restricted a contemporary market—for the provincial societies of England, the Eastern United States, and Nova Scotia; his "tang" is too crude for general modern taste. Leacock's blending is much subtler—he left out almost entirely such a strong ingredient as dialectal differences—and thereby he provided a refined seasoning for the humorous feasts of the entire western world, not merely for the Atlantic fringe. Canada has other humorists besides Haliburton and Leacock; they are lesser men, perhaps, but some day the world may discover them too.