

CRITIC OR ENTERTAINER?

*Stephen Leacock and
The Growth of Materialism*

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The social scientist and especially the student of political economy is compelled to make his peace with satire or humour. The callous vulgarity which characterizes the humour of the medical profession is paralleled by cynicism in the social scientist.

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Stephen Butler Leacock (1869-1944).

AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY Canadian society was undergoing changes so drastic as to constitute a social revolution. The agrarian and industrial "boom" following the opening of the West brought the Canadian economy its first great period of material expansion, returned the social order to a state of flux, stimulated the speculative spirit and the accumulation of wealth, and encouraged a mood of political and commercial optimism. It was an era to which Canadian writers for the first time applied the term "materialistic". This is the era that gave birth to Stephen Leacock, Professor of Political Economy and Humorist, and, to an extent scarcely yet realized, stamped his work with its imprint.

It is the *Arcadian Adventures*, with its destructive satirical portrayal of a rampant plutocracy, that marks an extreme of social consciousness and the closest approach to sustained social criticism in Leacock's work. Nowhere else is it quite so simple a matter to see the objects of his condemnation and his standards of judgment; and nowhere else, at the same time, is the element of kindness (which, as we shall see, he considered a necessary part of the highest form of humour) spread so thinly. Leacock's portrayal of the ethos of the plutocracy centres on the Mausoleum

Club: "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." The conjunction of childlike pastoral purity and simplicity and the artificial powers and splendours of the wealthy is an incongruity Leacock allows mainly to speak for itself:

The sunlight flickers through the elm trees, illuminating expensive nursemaids wheeling valuable children in little perambulators Here you may see a little toddling princess in a rabbit suit who owns fifty distilleries in her own right. There, in a lacquered perambulator, sails past a little hooded head that controls from its cradle an entire New Jersey corporation. The United States is suing her as she sits, in a vain attempt to make her dissolve herself into constituent companies You may meet in the flickered sunlight any number of little princes and princesses far more real than the poor survivals of Europe. Incalculable infants wave their fifty dollar ivory rattles in an inarticulate greeting to one another And through it all the sunlight falls through the elm-trees, and the birds sing and motors hum, so that the whole world seen from the boulevard of Plutoria Avenue is the very pleasantest place imaginable.

The princes of the Old World and those of the New, the hum of the motors and the singing of the birds, small innocent children and giant soul-less capital enterprises, fifty dollar ivory rattles and elm-trees in the sunlight, all together in the same idyllic scene form an active complex of incongruities. In the next paragraph the complexity gives way momentarily to a direct and harsh contrast:

If you were to mount to the roof of the Mausoleum Club itself on Plutoria Avenue you could almost see the slums from there. But why should you? And on the other hand, if you never went up on the roof, but only dined inside among the palm-trees, you would never know that the slums existed—which is much better.

It is significant that Leacock was typically less concerned with such overt contrasts between the palaces of the rich and the hovels of the poor than with incongruities within the life of the wealthy. He sought to explode that life's myths and belittle its attractions, rather than to attack its villainies. The wealthy exploiter in Leacock's portrayal attains none of the grandeur of evil. Thus, that "wizard of finance", Mr. Tomlinson, emerges from the darkness of his backwoods farm into the highest circles of plutocratic achievement despite his earnest attempts to avoid the greatness thrust upon him. Mere ignorance of the mysteries of

finance fails him, and even his most determined violations of common sense business practice cannot make him the poor man he involuntarily left behind him. The cult of money-making is debased to the level of its newest idol, a simple, ignorant farmer whose allegedly gold-bearing farm has transformed him into "*Monsieur Tomlison, nouveau capitaine de la haute finance en Amerique*", as Paris called him, an unhappy man whose fortune grows no matter how he tries to lose it. The qualifications of the members of the Mausoleum Club appear in a changed light in their mistaken admiration for Mr. Tomlinson; they remain neither admirable, dangerous or evil, but merely objects of scepticism and ridicule.

In similar fashion when the spectre of labour unrest appears in Leacock's *Arcadia*, it is merely an opportunity for the wealthy to display their ludicrous self-centredness and inconsistency. "Just imagine, my dear," says one rich lady to another, "my chauffeur, when I was in Colorado, actually threatened to leave me merely because I wanted to reduce his wages. I think it's these wretched labour unions." The "wretched labour unions" threatened the very heart of *Arcadia*, the Mausoleum Club, by a strike of the catering staff at a moment which proved embarrassing for Mr. Fyshe, the successful financier: "Luxury!" he was exclaiming at the beginning of the sumptuous dinner scene set to trap the (non-existent) fortunes of the Duke of Dulham, "Luxury! . . . It is the curse of the age. The appalling growth of luxury, the piling up of money, the ease with which huge fortunes are made . . . these are the things that are going to ruin us." Mr. Fyshe's propensity for social revolutionary doctrine, however, did not survive the test:

"Eh? What?" said Mr. Fyshe.

The head waiter, his features stricken with inward agony, whispered again.

"The infernal, damn scoundrels!" said Mr. Fyshe, starting back in his chair.

"On strike! In this Club! It's an outrage!"

BUT THE *Arcadian Adventures*, even though its thesis is modest and uncontentious, makes Stephen Leacock appear more of a socially purposeful satirist than he really was. His work as a whole is not contained within the level of that severe, obvious and well deserved criticism of the vices and follies of the over-privileged which is characteristic of the *Arcadian Adventures*. Nor is there more justification else-

where for an attempt to define Leacock as a writer with serious interests in radical reform. On the contrary, Leacock looked upon himself as a humorist (that being for him the term of wider range) rather than a satirist, and freely confessed himself to be a Tory in politics. Like Lucullus Fyshe, Leacock could have claimed himself to be, on the basis of the *Arcadian Adventures*, something of a "revolutionary socialist". But in *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920), his most elaborate and explicit discussion of the politics and economics of contemporary society, he denied himself this possibility once and for all: the book is primarily a critique of radical idealism, an attack on the socialist answer to the "riddle of social justice". In 1907 Thorstein Veblen, whom Leacock had known during their post-graduate days at the University of Chicago, indicated his awareness of the fact that socialism for many serious exponents of radical ideas had passed out of the Utopian phase. "The socialism that inspires hope and fears today," Veblen wrote, "is the school of Marx. No one is seriously apprehensive of any other so-called socialistic movement, and no one is seriously concerned to criticise or refute the doctrines set forth by any other school of socialists."¹ Leacock himself ostensibly did not agree with or did not know this argument of his brilliant acquaintance. *The Unsolved Riddle* is concerned with refuting socialism as it is described in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; and in the fact that it repeats the task undertaken in Canada by Goldwin Smith a generation before, it suggests the course of thought (or lack of it) on such matters undergone by certain portions of the Canadian intelligentsia during these years. "The scheme of society outlined in '*Looking Backward*,'" Leacock asserted, without alluding to other socialist writings, "may be examined as the most attractive and the most consistent outline of a socialist state that has, within the knowledge of the present writer, been put forward . . . No better starting point for the criticism of collectivist theories can be found than in a view of the basis on which is supposed to rest the halcyon life of Mr. Bellamy's charming commonwealth." "Nor was ever," he claimed, "a better presentation made of the essential program of socialism." Without undue difficulty Leacock succeeded in knocking down this idealist of a former era. Socialism, he concluded his analysis, would function admirably in a community of saints, but for ordinary human beings it would be unworkable. "With

¹ I. Kipnis. *The American Socialist Movement*, p. 4.

perfect citizens any government is good," he argued (apparently he was no more aware than the theorist he was criticizing that the public and private virtues, the motives of the individual and the organization of social relations, are never in a simple causal relationship). "In a population of angels a socialistic commonwealth would work to perfection. But until we have the angels we must keep the commonwealth waiting." The movement towards socialism, he warned, using the apocalyptic image that runs through the book, will lead "over the edge of the abyss beyond which is chaos."

Not only did Stephen Leacock differ with socialism, as he saw it, in regard to solving the problem of social justice, but, as one would expect, he differed in his analysis of the conditions which gave rise to socialism. He saw the same kind of inequalities and incongruities in the materialistic society of 1920 as did the radicals:

Few persons can attain adult life without being profoundly impressed by the appalling inequalities of our human lot. Riches and poverty jostle one another upon our streets. The tattered outcast dozes on his bench while the chariot of the wealthy is drawn by. The palace is the neighbour of the slum. We are, in modern life, so used to this that we no longer see it.

But Leacock's emphasis was different. While socialists were crying out against the suffering of the underprivileged, Leacock counselled against what he assured the reader was a kind of sentimentality which might lead to unfortunate social consequences:

An acquired indifference to the ills of others is the price at which we live. A certain dole of sympathy, a casual mite of personal relief is the mere drop that any one of us alone can cast into the vast ocean of human misery. Beyond that we must harden ourselves lest we too perish.

We make fast the doors of our lighted houses against the indigent and the hungry. What else can we do? If we shelter *one* what is that? And if we try to shelter all, we ourselves are shelterless.

For Leacock the root of social evils lay not at all in the nature of the political or economic system, but entirely in the nature of man. Thus, the war of 1914-18 for Leacock was a demoralizing force because it gave cause for an outbreak of the old Adam: "A world that has known five years of fighting has lost its taste for the honest drudgery of work. Cincinnatus will not go back to his plow, or, at the best, stands sullenly between his plow-handles arguing for a higher wage." But Leacock's most

important difference with the socialists was in regard to the concept of freedom. Leacock, in the tradition of nineteenth century Liberalism, maintained that in his society the individual, whatever his hardships, was a free agent; the socialists were arguing that political freedom was meaningless in the face of economic slavery. Leacock wrote:

Yet all [men in our society] are free. This is the distinguishing mark of them as children of our era. They may work or stop. There is no compulsion from without. No man is a slave. Each has his 'natural liberty', and each in his degree, great or small, receives his allotted reward.

But although Leacock was conservative in his rejection of the blueprint state, and in his refusal to "sentimentalize" the lower levels of society, his awareness of the vices of modern industrial civilization did not allow him easily to become an uncritical spokesman for reactionary Toryism. In the *Unsolved Riddle*, while condemning socialism, he also condemned the nineteenth century doctrine of laissez-faire individualism. Fifteen years later in the midst of the Great Depression, his was a somewhat chastened and reformed individualism: "I believe," he wrote, "that the only possible basis for organized society is that of every man for himself—for himself and those near and dear to him. But on this basis must be put in operation a much more efficient and much more just social mechanism."

There was something remarkably anachronistic about Leacock's failure (though himself an economist) to understand those economic factors of the modern world which were making freedom and individualism in any simple sense impossible. In 1936 he complained:

I cannot bear to think that the old independent farming is to go: that the breezy call of incense breathing morn is to be replaced by the time-clock of a regimented, socialized, super-mechanized land-factory. We must keep the farmers. If they cannot regulate the 'how much' of their production, let them, as they used to, raise all they damn can, and then fire it around everywhere—pelt one another with new-mown hay and sugar beets. But don't lets lose them.

If such gaiety and gusto seem a little remote from the actual conditions of farming and marketing in the mid-thirties, on the other hand Leacock had no illusions about rural life as such, despite such parables of its virtues triumphing over the decadence of the city as that of Mr. Tomlinson, "wizard of finance". Having been raised on an Ontario farm "during the hard times of Canadian farming", Leacock could claim as

he did in the Preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* that he had seen "enough of farming to speak exuberantly in political addresses of the joy of early rising and the deep sleep, both of body and intellect, that is induced by honest toil."

Leacock has been described (by Desmond Pacey) as a "country squire" upholding the "eighteenth century values: common sense, benevolence, moderation, good taste",² but he apparently believed there was nothing in his own age which approximated or even partially embodied these values. The mild eighteenth century satire of Addison and Steele, certainly, was based on the kind of positive faith in man and in society which Leacock frequently and explicitly renounced. Leacock's attitude was more akin to that of cynicism, the cynicism of Diogenes, for example, of whom it has been said:

He would deface all the coinage current in the world. Every conventional stamp was false. The men stamped as generals and kings; the things stamped as honour and wisdom and happiness and riches; all were base metal with lying superscription.

Leacock's extensive dissertation, *Humor, Its Theory and Technique* (1935), reveals more about the author than perhaps any other of his works. Especially it throws light on the basic attitudes which led Leacock to squander his talents in a mass of books turned out for the Christmas book-trade, to use his humour sparingly as a weapon or a tool of criticism, and by and large to accept the social *status quo* despite his criticism of it, rather than to try to alter it. In that work there is, indeed, praise for the two "greatest" humorists, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, because each in his own way "sought as a part of his work to uplift the world with laughter." There is also condemnation for those modern writers who merely aimed at pleasing the masses, the "ten-cent crowd":

Please the public! That's the trouble today . . . with everything that is written to be printed or acted, everything drawn, sung, or depicted. Nothing can appear unless there is money in it . . . It is the ten-cent crowd that are needed if profits are to be made, not the plutocrats. Hence has been set up in our time an unconscious tyranny of the lower class. The snobbishness of the term may pass without apology in view of the truth of the fact . . . It is the wishes and likings of the mass which largely dictate what the rest of us shall see and hear.

² *Creative Writing in Canada*. p. 101.

But these remarks cannot be taken as support for a kind of humour which is devoted to immediate social or moral purposes. On the contrary, Leacock has just as little use for that type: "Much of our humour now—dare one say, especially in America?—is over-rapid, snarling, and ill-tempered. It is used to 'show things up', a vehicle of denunciation, not of pleasure." The satirical aspect of humour must always mind itself lest it become simply "mockery, a thing debased and degraded from what it might have been." Somewhere in the course of history, "mere vindictiveness parted company with humor, and became its hideous counterpart, mockery", but still "too much of the humor of all ages, and far too much of our own, partakes of it."

The highest humour, then, is such that it will uplift the world but nevertheless avoid denunciation and mockery. Leacock apparently sees this type in the portrayal of Mr. Pickwick, for example, who "walks through life conveying with him the contrast between life as it might be and life as it is." Humour of this kind depends on a clearly understood and firmly held pattern of values, manners, and presuppositions. The difficulty arises when one attempts to infer such a pattern from Leacock's own works. *Sunshine Sketches* holds out the best promise of such a pattern, and readers have professed to find it there. Leacock's Preface offered the lead, touching as it does at its conclusion tenderly on the "land of hope and sunshine where little towns spread their square streets and their trim maple trees beside placid lakes almost within echo of the primeval forest," and asserting the "affection" at the basis of its portrayal. Mariposa, the most peaceful and the most foolish of small towns, stands as an unconscious critique of the big city ways it tries to ape. Yet Mariposa itself does not contain a pattern or even hints of the good life, unless we choose to pitch our understanding at the level of the beguiling narrator. There is nothing admirable, nothing fine, nothing dignified, nothing sacred in Leacock's portrayal of the little town: all its coinage is defaced. The only virtues are its sunshine and its littleness, its failure to achieve the larger vices of modern industrial urbanism, hard as it tries to do so.

ONE IS TEMPTED to say that Mariposa's curiously nostalgic appeal lies not in its positive attractions but in its success in transforming great evils into small, its rendering innocuous if not innocent the worst aspects of our modern world. Much of Leacock's writing answers to the same formula. "In retrospect," Leacock claimed in his book on humour, "all our little activities are but as nothing, all that we do has in it a touch of the pathetic, and even our sins and wickedness and crime are easily pardoned in the realization of their futility." It is by this perspective that *Sunshine Sketches* charms the reader, by making the "real" pleasantly innocent, not by comparing it with the "ideal", the "might have been". We are perhaps to understand that humour "uplifts" the reader by bringing him to this Olympian height of contemplation. In Leacock's philosophy the ideal is illusory. On occasion he himself may have looked back longingly at "the wholesome days of the eighties or nineties," or at the simple life of the farmer, but at other times he repudiated such attempts to escape the present:

Each age sees the ones that preceded it through a mellow haze of retrospect; each looks back to the good old days of our fore-fathers . . . Each of us in life is a prisoner. We are set and bound in our confined lot. Outside, somewhere, is infinity. We seek to reach into it and the pictured past seems to afford us an outlet of escape.

But in the end, "Escape is barred."

Humour as Leacock conceived it lay at the heart of his philosophy, in fact *was* his philosophy:

. . . humor in its highest meaning and its furthest reach . . . does not depend on verbal incongruities, or on tricks of sight and hearing. It finds its basis in the incongruity of life itself, the contrast between the fretting cares and the petty sorrows of the day and the long mystery of the tomorrow. Here laughter and tears become one, and humor becomes the contemplation and interpretation of our life. In this aspect the thought of the nineteenth century far excelled all that had preceded it. The very wistfulness of its new ignorance—contrasted with the barren certainty of bygone dogma—lends it something pathetic.

The allusion to nineteenth century agnosticism is by no means irrelevant. It is the doubt about man's ultimate significance that provides the basis for humour at its highest, for the universe itself is a kind of "joke"

in which the trivial and futile aspirations of mankind are the crowning incongruity. Humour

. . . represents an outlook upon life, a retrospect as it were, in which the fever and the fret of our earthly lot is contrasted with its shortcomings, its lost illusions and its inevitable end. The fiercest anger cools; the bitterest of hate sleeps in the churchyard and over it all there spread Time's ivy and Time's roses, preserving nothing but what is fair to look upon.

Presumably the best joke of all, conducive to the most tears and the most laughter combined, will be the apocalypse as Leacock describes it:

Thus does life, if we look at it from sufficient distance, dissolve itself into 'humor'. Seen through an indefinite vista it ends in a smile. In this, if what the scientist tells us is true, it only offers a parallel to what must ultimately happen to the physical universe in which it exists At some inconceivable distance in time . . . the universe ends, finishes; there is nothing left of it but nothingness. With it goes out in extinction all that was thought of as matter, and with that all the framework of time and space that held it, and the conscious life that matched it. All ends with a cancellation of forces and comes to nothing; and our universe ends thus with one vast, silent unappreciated joke.

For Stephen Leacock as cynic there was no "might have been" except in a wistful and illusory nostalgia, and even here his sense of the follies and shortcomings of men would not allow him to be blinded. It was easier for him, with his belief in the futility of man's petty actions to take his role of artist lightly, to observe the evils of his society without bitterness or indignation, accepting and defending the world as he found it, and to turn his irreverent humour on every aspect of experience and upon all manner of people and things. But perhaps after all he was less like Diogenes, who also credited the world with no virtue, yet who asked its princes nothing in return but that they "stand a little out of his light", than like that other cynic, Teles, who taught the doctrine of self-love and received money from the hands of rich patrons with words like these: "You give liberally and I take valiantly from you, neither grovelling nor demeaning myself basely nor grumbling." For Stephen Leacock was a part of the prospering materialistic civilization of which he wrote; he was sometimes its critic, but always its entertainer.