

The Globe and Mail June 10, 2007

CORRESPONDENCE

## **Rare glimpses of the private Leacock**

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### **The Letters of Stephen Leacock**

Edited by David Staines

with Barbara Nimmo

Oxford University Press,



564 pages, \$39.95

### **The Penguin Book**

#### **of Stephen Leacock**

Edited by Robertson Davies

Penguin Canada, 464 pages, \$25

Stephen Leacock is best remembered today as the name on a couple of Ontario schools (one of which, sadly, has recently been in the news more for its connection with terrorism) or as the author of one or two comic pieces: *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, his thinly disguised and affectionate portrait of Orillia, or *My Financial Career*, which so wonderfully sums up the terrors of dealing with banks. In his lifetime, though, in a career which started before the First World War and lasted to his death in 1944, Leacock was one of the most famous writers in the English-speaking world. He wrote more than 60 books and hundreds of pamphlets and articles.

He was a serious scholar as well as a humorist, with books that ranged from biographies of the two writers he admired most, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, to Canadian and U.S. history, and studies of the British Empire and education. His *Elements of Political Science*, translated into 19 different languages, was a standard textbook for generations of

students. Somehow he managed to do much of this while teaching and chairing the department of political science and economics at McGill University. One suspects he would have had little patience with the idea of writers' block or, indeed, those academics who huff and puff and turn out one tiny and unreadable article every so often. "I want to write for the public, not for the professoriate," he said early on -- and he did.

*The Letters of Stephen Leacock*, meticulously edited by David Staines, who has also provided very helpful comments and notes, show how thoroughly professional he was about his writing, and how, like most writers, he never felt his publishers were doing enough. "Do Rush the book & boom it," he writes in exasperation to one in 1930. He complains about their slowness in getting his books out and worries whether his royalties are being properly accounted for. Indeed, such are the vagaries of the way personal letters vanish or are preserved that there are far more here to his publishers than to anyone else. There are none to his first wife, for example, and very few to his son.

Leacock came from a generation that believed in hard work and fortitude and, like the Victorian he was, he kept a proper reticence about emotions. As he said firmly when a publisher invited him to reflect on his own life, "I will only write it in my own way; nearly all reflections, very little life." In his writings, and now in this much-needed and valuable collection, we catch glimpses of the inner Leacock. In his fragment of an autobiography, for example, he lets slip his bitterness about his feckless and drunken father. "In fact the sight and memory of what domestic tyranny in an isolated, lonely home, beyond human help, can mean, helped to set me all the more firmly in the doctrine of the rights of man."

Leacock loved McGill and never got over being obliged to retire when he reached 65. He had been convicted, he wrote in a humorous piece, for being part of "the notorious 'Senility Gang.'" He was also a great supporter of the British Empire, but as a free association of like-minded peoples. "I will not be a Colonial," he said firmly.

Although he was made much of by London society on his visits there, he never let it go to his head. "No doubt would forget me tomorrow," he writes to his mother after lunch with Arthur Balfour, the leader of the Conservative Party. He loved this country. "Thank you, Mother England," he wrote in reply to a suggestion that he might come home to his birthplace. "I'm 'home' now. Fetch me my carpet slippers from the farm. I'll rock it out to sleep right here."

His love was frequently mixed with exasperation. "The provinces," he complained after a trip out West, "have turned into little kingdoms." He writes a very funny letter to the local magistrates after he is convicted of not carrying flares in his truck. What other obscure regulations are there, he wonders, noting that his truck is green. "Is that legal? Or is it too Irish?"

His beloved wife died of cancer when she was only 46, and he was left to bring up their child, Stevie, alone. There are only hints in his letters of what he was going through. "I have to try to make a life around Stevie," he writes to a sister.

He also gave a large part of his considerable earnings to a campaign against cancer. One of his most charming, and revealing, letters is to his young son on the subject of getting confirmed. "If you do that, you must express an honest and honourable belief, without equivocation, in a lot of things in which I am apt to think you don't believe, and which, personally, I reject -- in some cases with contempt." Stevie, however, must make up his own mind.

From time to time, his worry over Stevie, who never grew beyond five feet tall and always looked much younger than his age, surfaces. "The doctor says he is growing quite satisfactorily," he assures his mother. He watches over his son, even through university and into adulthood, with a concern that must, at times, have been a burden to the young man. He tried to find him friends and jobs. "He has an unusual talent for writing smooth attractive prose," Leacock assures a Montreal acquaintance.

Leacock never married again, but he had close and affectionate relationships with several women. For a time, his secretary, Grace Reynolds, ran his household, and after her marriage, a favourite niece, Barbara Nimmo, took over until she, too, married. Grumbling about his own finances, as he did throughout his life, Leacock treats them with touching generosity. "You can come & live here as long as you like," he tells his niece when she and her husband are facing financial difficulties.

He also gives them much fatherly advice. "I have always felt," he tells Reynolds, "it is a wretched thing for people to get married unless they really & truly love one another & can't get on without one another." In the last two decades of his life, his main confidante was a summer neighbour in Orillia, Mrs. Herbert Shaw. His loving letters to her are like interrupted intimate conversations. "Dear Fitz," he writes from Edmonton, where he is about to take on Social Credit, "all ready to fight the lions -- everything heated up to fever point." As he heads homeward, he writes, "I'll be so glad to see you -- even to hear you." He tells her about his depressions: "I drop back into fears & abysses so easily . . ." The solution, he says, "is duty and work."

Leacock's letters were not intended for publication, and they have both the charm of immediacy and the accompanying lack of polish. So it is fortunate that Penguin is reissuing the selection of Leacock's humour made 25 years ago by Robertson Davies. To read these pieces is to be reminded of how wonderful his clear, precise prose is -- and how funny. His wit is gentle but sharp as he engages in what he himself described as "the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life and the artistic expression thereof."

Here, taken almost at random, is a definition from *Boarding-House Geometry*: "The landlady of a boarding-house is a parallelogram -- that is an oblong angular figure, which cannot be described, but which is equal to anything." Or this, from the description of his swashbuckling uncle who charmed his way into the hearts and pocketbooks of everyone he met, from dour Ontario farmers to prairie bankers. "All his grand schemes were as open as sunlight; and as empty."

As Leacock himself once said, "Humour and disillusionment are twin sisters." The final piece Davies chose to include was *The Business of Growing Old*. It was, Leacock said, like going over the top from the trenches toward eternity. "Give me my stick. I'm going out on to No Man's Land. I'll face it."

In 1944, he went into hospital with what he knew was probably incurable cancer of the throat. He set his affairs in order and wrote a last letter to Fitz. "I have good hopes & I am sure that you have." When he died, a month later, *The New York Herald Tribune* wrote, "Stephen Leacock, surely, was the First Citizen of Canada." These two books are a timely reminder to us of one of our great national treasures.

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