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# Stephen Leacock, humourless?

*Letters reveal a tragic figure*

By **Bruce Ward**

CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

One thing is missing from The Letters of Stephen Leacock: humour. There's hardly a smile in Leacock's correspondence, the best of which is gathered in a revealing new book by **David Staines**, professor of Canadian literature at the University of Ottawa.

"What stunned me most is there's almost no humour in the letters," said Staines, who spent 15 years collecting and editing the book's 800 letters.

"I think Leacock was a humorist by profession but not by nature, and that is intriguing. I didn't know that when I started. The absence of humour is quite surprising. I thought there would be much more along those lines but there isn't. Why isn't the author of Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town and Literary Lapses humorous with the people he's writing?"

"Then I began to realize that the great humorists are really tragic figures. Leacock is that way too."

The letters show that Leacock never truly recovered from the death of his beloved wife Beatrix, who died at 46 of breast cancer.

"He had a sad life. I think the one person in this world he truly loved was Beatrix, and that was a perfect relationship. Unfortunately there are no letters to her. She always travelled with him and went everywhere, so how could there be."

Leacock "had to do everything" after her death in late 1925. "He had to take care of their son, and he had to keep publishing and writing. You can see in the letters in early 1926 that something is gone from Leacock. And it gets worse as it goes on.

"He built a great house in 1928 in Orillia (Ontario) that he went to at Christmas and Easter and all summer. But it didn't have Beatrix. And he couldn't find compassion anywhere else."

Their only son Stevie was born with dwarfism. "With his son, Leacock's devotion became a kind of overriding concern for his welfare. In later years he was publishing a book every year so there would be money for his son afterwards."

Staines said Barbara Nimmo, Leacock's niece and literary executor, told him that Leacock treated Stevie according to his size, and not his age. "It was wrong. They didn't know much about dwarfism."

Leacock provided for his son in his will but Stevie was a disappointment.

"He was sort of a reprobate. He had a liquor problem and a pill problem. People who knew him said to me they didn't like him. In later life, he was just living in a room in Orillia."

There was another significant woman in Leacock's life — Mrs. Fitz Shaw. She worked for Leacock as a researcher and he wrote to her constantly. She often hosted dinner parties for Leacock in Montreal after his wife died.

But Staines believes their relationship never progressed beyond friendship.

"There is a great depth of feeling but I think it stops there. I think he was essentially a Victorian gentleman. It was a solicitous Victorian concern but I can't see that's there's anything more than that."

Leacock was a "devout and proud Canadian" for whom McGill University was the centre of the country. He gave his first lecture at McGill in January 1901 and taught there for 35 years. When Leacock was forced to retire from McGill after he was 65, he vented his anger to Mrs. Shaw in letters. He calls the board of governors "buggers and bastards" — the only profanity in any of the letters.

"I think he felt that being retired was an insult to all he did," said Staines. "He felt abandoned just as he felt abandoned by Beatrix's death. He wanted a home at McGill that he could walk to

every day, teach a class, and have lunch at the Faculty Club. He never really had a home again."

Staines did not expect to spend anything like 15 years on the book.

"Leacock wrote about 20 letters a day. Various publishers bequeathed his letters to universities. I gradually found out there were letters in Harvard, in England and California. There were lots of letters in Texas, too.

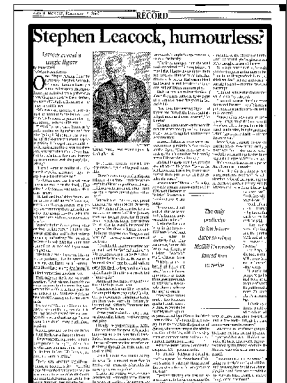
"Some people who had letters told me about other letters. I just kept going and going."

Fittingly, the project began in Orillia — the model for Mariposa in Leacock's humorous books. Barbara Nimmo had a stash of letters covering about 40 years. The two of them worked together on the letters through the 1980s until her death in 1993.

Leacock had an enormous capacity for work. He turned out more than 60 books, and thousands of articles for newspapers and magazines.

Staines can identify with Leacock's ceaseless toil — for eight of the 15 years he spent on the book, he also ran the university's English department as dean of the faculty.

"The book changed from the way I had conceived it," he explained. "I found that I had to divide up his life in sections, and then write an introduction to each section. That was an idea I had toward the end; I couldn't let some-



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one read 200 letters uninterrupted.”

Each section has an introduction of about five pages, followed by 40 pages of letters that cover five years in Leacock’s life.

“The book kept getting bigger and bigger, and Oxford (the book’s publisher) got more and more worried,” he laughed.

The page margins were reduced to fit in more letters and appendices. “I know I cut a lot of things but nothing that was important.”

Leacock’s letters are often warm and affectionate, particularly those to his mother Agnes. “Those letters are so revealing. With his mother, he is totally himself. He was devoted to her.”

It’s hard to grasp today how popular Leacock was in his prime. “He was the best known and best-selling humorist in English from 1910 to almost 1930. He ruled the waves.”

Leacock was wildly successful before he wrote a single humorous book. His 1906 book *Elements of Political Science* was translated into 19 languages.

“Remember, it out-sold all that he wrote. And the humour books were all bestsellers.”

Easily the funniest letter in the book is a 1937 note Leacock sent to a judge in Brockville, Ont., after his driver, Lucien Pelletier, was fined for driving Leacock’s truck without flares.

“I never in my life heard of flares till now,” Leacock fumes. Ignorance is an excuse if the government fails to provide “a reasonable chance to know the law,” he argues.

“Now what comes next.... Lou Pelletier speaks French: shall I be fined in Ontario for that? My truck is painted green. Is that legal? Or is it too Irish? I have no idea – What remedy have I except to move back into the province of Quebec, where they temper the administration of the law with the saving

grace of common sense and where a penitent tear blots out a fine.”

With the letter, Leacock enclosed a cheque for \$19 – payment in full.

For Leacock, “humour is a kind of comfort against the tribulations of life” said Staines. “It’s the only thing that offers an alternative to the weary state of life itself.”

The most affecting letter lays out Leacock’s advice to Stevie concerning the possibility of the boy’s confirmation as

a member of the Church of England. Don’t do it until you’ve given it much more thought, Leacock tells him.

To accept confirmation, he writes, you must express an honourable belief “in a lot of things which I am apt to think you don’t believe, and which, personally I reject – in some cases, with contempt.

“I do not believe that God made the world in six days, do you?

“I do not believe that God created Adam and Eve from one of his ribs and put them in a garden and created animals, do you?

“Those of us who cannot believe (these things) must find our salvation elsewhere.... It is for you to decide. Unbelief is a burden, but the pretense of belief, hypocrisy, is death to all that is decent in you.”

Leacock was a superb businessman and the letters prove it. If a royalty payment was due at the end of June, he would be writing the publisher in early July if the cheque hadn’t turned up.

Staines rates Leacock on a par with Mark Twain as a humorist.

“Leacock endures. I think he is still being read, and read well. *Sunshine Sketches* is one of the top-selling books in the New Canadian Library. *Arcadian Adventures* does well, and *Literary Lapses*

does well. I think they will always do well.”

Much of Canadian humour today has its foundations in Leacock, he said.

“The gentleness, the irony, and the laughing with and at people comes from Leacock.”

His hope for

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the book is that it will renew interest in Leacock's other works.

"I would like people to go back and look at the corpus of works. He published almost 70 books. That's astonishing.

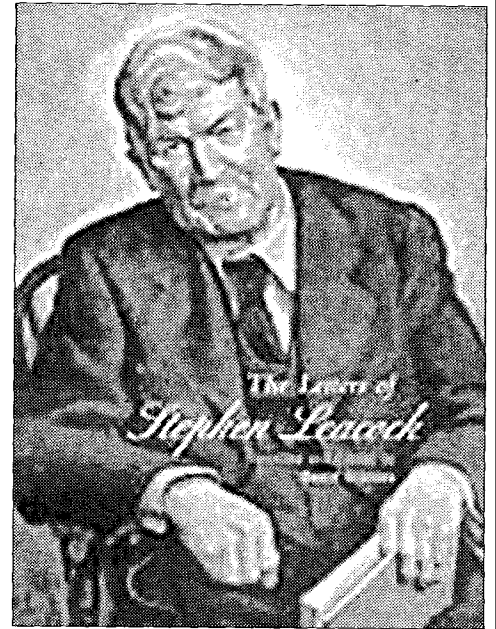
"I think my audience is interested readers who want to know more about Leacock and his life. The book — I think it's a good book — puts them in context."

Leacock died of throat cancer in 1944, aged 75. Near the end, he could no longer speak but was still able to write notes. He faced death with dignity, as recorded by his friend Adelaide Hett

Meeres, who was with him when he passed.

"'Give me my stick,' he wrote. 'I am going out to No Man's Land. I'll face it.' And he went, but he did not shrug his shoulders and there was no twinkle in his eye this time. Death is a serious thing, not to joke about."

*The only  
profanity  
in his letters  
dates to when  
McGill University  
forced him  
to retire*



WEB PHOTO

*Stephen Leacock never recovered from the death of his wife.*