

Collecting Stephen Leacock

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When people discuss the silly things they collect and my turn comes around, I sometimes admit I collect a book. Not different editions or printings of a book, just the one.

It's not a well-known book, at least not these days. I don't press it on people looking for something good to read, and I can't say I've read everything by its author. It's not that I expect my collection to appreciate, nor do I have the typical completist's mindset — there was never a varied field to piece together, no long-sought rarity just out of reach.

I guess you could say I started out to protect them.

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The town where I grew up, Oshawa, an exurb of Toronto, was at one time home to the largest automotive manufacturing facility in the world, with 10 million square feet of GM factory floor, some of that concrete dating back to 1907. When I moved to Canada from England in 1966, over half of my new classmates had parents who worked at “the Motors.” Not then, or now, a fertile training ground for an aspiring writer.

In the last year of high school, trying to imagine a literary future, I read 100 biographies of writers — most bought raggedly used from tiny Morgan Self Booksellers bunched into one corner of a brick building adjoint a leafy park on Oshawa's Simcoe Street. The bookstore faced the Canadian Automotive Museum, displaying a century of domestic carriage and engine design — Oshawa's pride.

I never learned how an internal combustion engine worked, or much cared, but S. J. Perelman's delight at learning the word “totaled” when he wrecked his car enthralled me. Perelman led me to *The New Yorker*, thence to James Thurber, from whom I learned about fantan and Superghost, Harold Ross, sympathetic ophthalmia, and the Zeiss loupe. I jumped from Thurber to Dorothy Parker (Marie of Roumania, the importance of *The Elements of Style*) and Robert Benchley taking his first alcoholic drink — one of too many — at the age of 31. Then it was on to George S. Kaufman, Marc Connelly, and the other wits of the Algonquin Hotel.

In that gritty corner of industrial Oshawa, I was transported back to those 1920s writers' hangouts. I knew their menus. (Later, when I got some money, I'd seek out those menus; I had a signed Jack Dempsey's.) The Round Table crowd led me to Moss Hart, Fred Allen, Al Boasberg, David Freedman, Alexander Woollcott, and Edna Ferber. At 18, I was ideally situated to enter adult life as an interwar Manhattan freelancer.

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If I'd been an American child, I might have had to wait for my teens and for Perelman and Benchley to lead me to their favorite humorist, the Canadian economist Stephen Leacock. But as a newly-minted Canadian, I met Leacock in Grade 5 when we read his story "My Financial Career."

When I go into a bank, I get rattled.

The clerks rattle me; the wickets rattle me; the sight of the money rattles me; everything rattles me.

The moment I cross the threshold of a bank and attempt to transact business there, I become an irresponsible idiot.

There was a small thrill here: growing up with two younger brothers, I'd been forbidden to say "stupid" or "idiot." But here was Leacock putting the naughty word right there in print.

In the course of his story, Leacock stumbles from teller's window to manager's office to vault with his \$56, creating accidentally along the way the impression that the "grave matter" he is there to discuss involves a large sum of money, or, perhaps, the security of the bank itself:

"You are one of Pinkerton's men I presume."

"No. Not Pinkerton," I said, leading him no doubt to presume I was from a competing detective agency.

As a recent arrival in Canada from a suburb of London, I'd thought: *fantastic! In North America, school kids study jokes*. Alas, everything else we read that year had to do with long division or Balboa's route to the Pacific. But I'd fallen in love with my first humorist.

Another Leacock story in that book, "How My Wife and I Built Our Home for \$4.90," got me laughing so helplessly, I obtained permission from the teacher to take *Literary Lapses* home and read its short pastiches to my brother and my parents:

I was leaning up against the mantelpiece in a lounge suit which I had made out of old ice bags, and Beryl, my wife, was seated at my feet on a

low Louis Quinze tabouret which she had made out of a Finnan Haddie fishbox, when the idea of a bungalow came to both of us at the same time.

"It would be just lovely if we could do it!" exclaimed Beryl, coiling herself around my knee.

"Why not!" I replied, lifting her up a little by the ear. "With your exquisite taste."

"And with your knowledge of material," added Beryl, giving me a tiny pinch on the leg — "Oh, I am sure we could do it! One reads so much in all the magazines about people making summer bungalows and furnishing them for next to nothing. Oh, do let us try, Dogyard!"

Lifting her up a little by the ear. This, I'm amazed to note, was written 120 years ago. The lounge suit made of ice bags and the Finnan Haddie fishbox prefigure the absurd delight in language of Sid Perelman, who said in a 1977 *Dick Cavett Show* appearance that Leacock was the first humorist he ever read.

It was Perelman who turned Groucho Marx on to Leacock. Even from this distance I can see the appeal. I invite anyone to open *Wit and Humor of the Age* (ed. Melville De Lancey, 1910) and try to find a giggle anywhere in it. Even the Twain excerpts, without the carpet of story to sprawl out on, come across flat. Most of the material contemporaneous with Leacock's first collection reads like this:

MR. STAYLATE: Dear me, what makes your dog howl so?

MISS SHARP: Oh, he always barks like that when he thinks it's time to lock the doers for the night.

Or these pieces of condescending pith, from monologist Josh Billings:

"I never argy agin a success. When I see a rattlesnaix's head sticking out of a whole, I bear off the left and say to myself that whole belongs to that snaix."

"I have seen men so fond of argument that they would dispute with a guideboard at the forks of a kuntry road about the distance to the next town. What fools."

James Whitcomb Riley was a popular humorist of Leacock's youth. Extracting pleasure from Riley's tale "The Bear Story" is a hard slog. It's all inference and mock-politeness, demanding of a modern reader great patience and, as is often the case in humor from that period, a tolerance of dialect. In an 1894 *McClure's Magazine* interview with Hamlin Garland, each time Riley is about to say something amusing,

Garland unfailingly mentions the “twinkle in his eye”: “There came a comical light into his eyes, and his lips twisted up in a sly grin at the side, as he dropped into dialect: ‘I don’t take no credit for my ignorance. Jest born thataway.’”

Leacock took that slyness into his portfolio, walked around it a few times, and gave it a twist — the addition of bragging cluelessness — to show the Great Man out of his depth. In piece after piece, he mocked journalistic fawning after the famous. His titans of art and industry are fatuous, their humor condescendingly off, their insights banal.

And Leacock’s prose was actually funny, the way Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was funny. (Did folks even say “that’s funny” in 1900? They seemed to recognize humor the way one identifies calcium in a solution. *We have located it; it is this milky precipitate.*)



“My Financial Career” appeared in *Life Magazine* on April 11, 1895. A decade and a half later, having been turned down by Houghton Mifflin, Leacock borrowed money from his brother to privately print 3,100 copies of his first collection of short pieces, *Literary Lapses*, which quickly sold out. John Lane picked the book up for the Bodley Head in London the following year. It has never since been out of print.

That self-printed 1910 first edition is the volume that became an obsession for me; my Shangri-La, my Rosebud. *Gazette Printing Company, Limited*, it says on the title page. *35 cents.* *Gazette* was Leacock himself, sitting in a rented room in Uxbridge, Ontario, opening boxes of books and sticking the small gummed titles on the spines.

In 1985, I found a first edition of *Literary Lapses* in a used bookstore in Toronto: 125 pages, with a green board cover and dark green cloth spine. I’d never considered the possibility that any of the originals that started out in piles under my hero’s boarding house bed in 1910 had survived. I bought that copy, for less than a hundred dollars.

Leacock wrote over 30 more books. Between 1915 and 1925 he was the most popular humorist in the English-speaking world. It was said that more people had heard of him than had heard of Canada. In 1947, an annual award for literary humor was named after him. He’s on a Canadian stamp.

Jack Benny adored Leacock, having been introduced to him by Groucho. He was a hero to Thurber and to Dorothy Parker, and a mentor to Benchley, whom Leacock encouraged to publish his own humorous writing. Benchley blurbed the 1930 collection, *Laugh with Leacock*: “I have enjoyed Leacock’s works so much that I have written everything that he ever wrote — anywhere from one to five years after him.”

Teddy Roosevelt quoted from *Literary Lapses* and its follow-up, *Nonsense Novels*, in speeches. By 1921, Leacock was drawing large crowds on speaking tours of Scotland

and England. He influenced many mid-century comic stylists in their youth, inspiring *The Goon Show*'s Spike Milligan and a young John Lennon. John Cleese credits "Self-Made Men" from *Literary Lapses* as the inspiration for Monty Python's sublime complaint-bragging sketch, "The Four Yorkshiremen."

As a student at Princeton in 1915, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote Leacock a fan letter:

As imitation is the sincerest flattery, I thought you might be interested in something you inspired ... The two stories I wrote, "Jemima, A story of the Blue Ridge Mountains, by John Phlot Jr." and "The Unusual Thing" by "Robert W. Shamless," are of the "Leacock school of humour — in fact, Jemima is rather a steal in places from "Hannah of the Highlands" ...

Leacock wrote back, "Your stories are fine. Go on!"

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Inspired! *Exactly*. In middle school, fired-up, I teamed with a fellow British ex-pat, Darrell Vickers, to write purportedly funny material. At first we wrote for school productions and newspapers, then after high school for cartoonists and radio shows, "industrials" and training films, TV and stage.

In 1982 we got off a Greyhound bus after an almost psychedelically hellish 78-hour ride to Los Angeles, to begin our Hollywood careers by working for late-night host Alan Thicke. We wrote for buyers as diverse as Joan Rivers and *The Love Boat*. We staffed Don Adams' last sitcom, *Check It Out!* George Carlin read some of our material and invited us to work on his first HBO special. We wrote a musical and a lot of personal appearance stuff for Mickey Rooney. Then, in 1986, still without an agent, we smuggled some jokes to Johnny Carson through his 2nd Assistant Bandleader. Johnny brought us onto *The Tonight Show*, our era's version of the 1920s *New Yorker*. The night we got the news, we celebrated so loudly the neighbors called to complain. Darrell and I became head writers of *The Tonight Show* in 1988.

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Stephen P. H. Butler Leacock was born in Swanmore, England in 1869. In 1875, his family immigrated to Canada — to, as he described it in an unfinished autobiography, "a wind-swept hill space with a jumble of frame buildings and log barns and outhouses." At 18, defending his mother and siblings from his father's alcoholic abuse, he ordered Peter Leacock from their home and never saw him again.

He began a degree at Toronto's Upper Canada College, lived for years in boarding houses, taught Latin, Greek, French, German, and English for a decade, and hated it all. With the success of his first textbook, *Elements of Political Science*, then with

Literary Lapses, he was able to leave teaching and build a house on Lake Simcoe in 1928.

On a trip home from Los Angeles, I paid a visit to that house and grounds, now the Leacock Museum, 120 miles north of Toronto. The front desk had a sign plaintively inviting visitors to add their names to a petition aimed at preventing the city of Orillia from appropriating several acres of Leacock's beautiful parkland home for the construction of a municipal seniors residence. I was outraged.

When I returned to L.A. I wrote a letter to Orillia City Council on *Tonight Show* letterhead, appealing to their patriotism and sense of Canadian cultural history to leave my hero's property alone. This man was once better known than Canada! I had no reply. The land was seized and the housing erected the following year.

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Few writers I meet in Los Angeles, or anywhere, know about Leacock. I spoke to a Canadian bookseller at the New York Antiquarian Book Show in 2019 who said she couldn't recall ever having stocked one of his books. I wondered if this was perhaps the fate of the professionally glib. I think of comedian Fred Allen writing, toward the end of his life, "When a radio comedian's program is finally finished it slinks down Memory Lane into the limbo of yesterday's happy hours. All that the comedian has to show for his years of work and aggravation is the echo of forgotten laughter."

In 1977, I'd been as enraged as a Canadian can be after enrolling in a college course with Leacock on the curriculum, only to have him dropped because, as the professor announced on the first day, "I find humor iffy."

Maybe she meant sly, allusive, inconclusive. Leacock's is the gentlest of authorial voices. His narrators profess little knowledge of worldly things, instead praising everyone who does, letting the blowhards and dullards, the Industrialists and Giants of Industry hang themselves.

Gentle and gentlemanly things struggle to survive. If Leacock has been washed out by the laser-harsh humor that followed, it's a pity. I daresay no one before him would have had a narrator lift his wife up "a little by the ear" for no real reason, displaying — what? Artful randomness? Surely not, the words are well chosen and make a clear image. (Compare Woody Allen's attempts to "do" Perelman in *The New Yorker* for 40 years, banging together Yiddish, recondite adjectives, Hollywood smarm, and little-guy braggadocio, but often in the new century scraping a bucket and getting only the sound of the spoon.)

Leacock, for me, prefigured Absurdism's burlesque of norms and popular styles. I don't know how he knew that was something people needed in those straight-laced times. His contemporary Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Wonderful 'One-Hoss-Shay,'"

published in 1891, contains 119 lines and one joke, as if readers of the time might be ejected from their corsets and drop their sniffers if forced against their will to guffaw robustly.

I admired and at 18 awkwardly emulated Thurber's fumbling little guy, Dorothy Parker's wit and asperity, Ogden Nash's badminton with words, S. J. Perelman's miffed loquacity. But Leacock had been the first to make me giggle with happiness. It was like discovering oxygen, a sweet-smelling necessary thing. He made me want to sit down and paw at the machinery that was necessary to turn it on and off.

A few years after I happily found that first edition, a friend of mine found another in a library remainder sale and mailed it to me. I put them together in a shoebox and made a mental note to check the used bookstores I visited for other copies.



Leacock worked, alone, in a room overlooking Old Brewery Bay, for 16 years until his death in 1944. He's not associated with any literary salon or group. His *esprits* aren't quoted. He never had to suffer, thank God, in a "writer's room." His niece Elizabeth Kimball, in 1983's *My Uncle Stephen Leacock*, paints him as a bellowing *paterfamilias*, barkingly unaware when he was overdoing things by dragging a squadron of nephews and nieces from their summertime games to joyless outings, swatting flies in deep brush.

He was a jacket-and-tie-at-the-cottage conservative. In 1944 he wrote *While There Is Time*, a call for Canada to reexamine its economic roots (*what?* fur trading?) and moderate the influences of unions and overreaching socialists. He opposed women voting and non-Anglo-Saxon immigration.

I knew none of that. From his collections of pastiches I learned about the Hohenzollerns and Prohibition, about geometry textbooks and boarding house managers. About "getting up a collection" and Toronto's Blue Laws, Whigs and Tories and The Armenian Question. And about Lord Ronald, who "flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

When I'm asked about ideal dinner-party guests from the past, I want to invite young Stephen. Not just to hear him talk; I want to tell him, "*You did it. You're immortal.*"



As the Internet era dawned I located more first editions of *Literary Lapses* — in Canada, Australia, Europe, Upstate New York. At some point I noticed my purchases driving up the price.

Today, there's one signed copy available for sale. The Leacock estate in Orillia has a copy. The Leacock Collection at McGill University in Montreal has three.

I have 33, one percent of the original print run. They sit together on a shelf in my bedroom, the spine labels that he unevenly applied jiggling up and down like 16th notes in a cadenza.

Who knows how many are still out there, in Hamilton attics and Ottawa basements? Some of mine are heavily-read, some are near-pristine. One has been crayoned in.

Like spent nuclear fuel rods, they've discharged their power into the culture and yet here they are, readable, still potent as acorns. I imagine Leacock cutting open the boxes that contained them with a pocket knife and laying them out on his bed. I can't help feel that if I keep them pressed together they'll conjure some collective magic, something long-gone but wonderful, a sharp unexpected delight at the foolishness of an age, fanned back to life.