

by Alice Munro

One of my favourite things to read is a tightly packed and punchy piece of biography, or, as you might call it, biographical observation. Finding out about people who seem to have become somewhat special — it's addictive. Maybe we think it will become instructive. I don't know. I do enjoy it.

Some are famous, it seems, because they always knew they would be. Others won't admit they are famous at all. (These are mostly Canadians, and over 50.) And there are rare people who just don't notice, because they are busy all the time doing something more worthy and exciting.

Doug Gibson has met a number of these people, and tells about it in this book. He is their editor and their publisher. He tells us something about what they're like, catching them in dire, or proud, or funny moments, when they are preparing for, enduring, enjoying, or living down whatever limelight falls on them. He's the man who helped them to get there.

He sees them in less fateful moments, too, if they have any. He deals with them, on these pages, with lots of good humour and observes them in ways that are acute, but mostly understanding. He is not easily dismayed.

People in this book have latched onto their fame in various ways, but it's the writers — fiction writers — that I go after. I don't care (much) who they might be having an affair with, or who they're not speaking to, and that's a good thing, because in this book I'm not going to find out. What I want to know is how they manage the separation — or the lack of it — between writing and life. What about their behaviour when they're recognized in public? The dismay when they're not? Do public readings throw them? Or buoy them up? Or both? Do they ever feel like a fraud? Is writing competing with real

life or could they not tell the two things apart? Did all of them have wonderful wives? (Yes. Yes.)

And here is a digression. I am noting that nearly all of them are of the gender that has wives, and the very stroke of my pen could get grumpy, but I have to tell you this was never Mr. Gibson's fault. He was as determined to spot, harass, encourage, and publish a female writer as anybody could possibly be. There just weren't many of us around.

Do I discover what I'm looking for about writers, do I get some idea of the everyday, unique person? Oh, yes. Some are bare-boned organizers, while some are ready to dance on tables, often showing that strange mix of humiliation and self-exposure that makes for a bumpy life and fine fiction.

There are the writers, of course, who go around marvellously disguised as perfectly normal human beings and are not much fun. There's another type of storyteller, too. They don't invent much. They pick up yarns and tales and pass them along as they go. Doug has some of them in his pocket as well. He has paid attention to the stories, the ways of life, belonging to those whose lives have meant a lot more to them than literature of any sort, who just like to tell you about something, then let it fall by the way.

A remarkable mix, this book.

And because of that, I have to break off from fiction, even though I believe it's in every breath we draw. Even in the story sworn as true, and provided with names, about the Mean-Daughter-In-Law that I heard in Tim Hortons the other day.

We have to bow to all the non-fiction writers here as well, prime ministers and others, and to all the accounts of events that really happened and maybe even changed the world forever. And make another bow to the once-living (or still-living) amazing characters, often beyond anything you'd get away within a mere story, faithfully produced in this book. As a former bookseller I know that here's what your father, your grandfather, or any other fiction-snooting fellow wants as a gift on important occasions. I have to say that the stories are interesting, sometimes compelling. Doug feels a powerful interest, and so will you. So do I.

Here I am, giving this book its due, and reading it with appetite and pleasure. How else would I ever know what the suave and delightful Charles Ritchie said to the thoroughly unpleasant Edward Heath?

So here is my prize read for people who are interested in books, writers, Canada, life, and all that kind of thing.

Thanks, Doug.



CHAPTER 1

1869–1944

STEPHEN LEACOCK

Professor, Humorist, and Immigration Agent

It was Stephen Leacock who brought me to Canada. Not literally, of course, for he died in March 1944, when I was only three months old — which, I suppose, in a way makes us contemporaries. But his books set me giggling and snorting as a kid in Scotland spending the lunch hour sheltering from the Glasgow rain in our high school's library. There his *Nonsense Novels* and *Literary Lapses* were my favourite reading. I chortled — Lewis Carroll's invented word for “chuckle and snort” is exactly right — over people riding off madly in all directions, and at immortal lines like “John!” pleaded Anna, ‘leave alone the buttermilk. It only maddens you. No good ever came of that.’”

I knew that Leacock was Canadian, but recognized that he had a shrewd take on Scots and Scotland, and on the attitude that had long ago produced my favourite line of old Scottish poetry, “The English, for once, by guile won the day.” For instance, in “Hannah of the Highlands,” Leacock's opening lines describe a typical heathery landscape where various Scottish heroes had rested (in one especially heroic case, pausing to change his breeches) while escaping or hiding from the English. In the course of this story Hannah's father shows his Scottish pride when he learns that she has accepted a silver coin from a member of a rival clan with which he is feuding.

“Siller!” shrieked the Highlander. “Siller from a McWhinus!”

Hannah handed him the sixpence. Oyster McOyster dashed it fiercely on the ground, then picking it up he dashed it with full force against the wall of the cottage. Then, seizing it again he dashed it angrily into the pocket of his kilt.

Later, in Winnipeg in 1982, I was to see a real-life example of such pride. Ed Schreyer had used his vice-regal position to steer the Governor General's Awards ceremonies to his hometown, and I was there at the Fort Garry Hotel auditorium to receive the Governor

General's Award for Fiction (English) on behalf of Mavis Gallant, who was stuck in Paris with a broken ankle.

These were difficult days for federal supporters in Quebec, and the person accepting the French-language fiction award was clearly not among them. From the stage he made a fiery separatist speech, entirely in French, denouncing the event, Canada, English-speaking Canadians in general and the Governor General and the audience in particular, then showed his utter contempt for the award by taking the winner's cheque and dashing it angrily into his pocket.

The unilingual audience of polite Winnipeggers applauded him warmly.

As the next speaker, I tried to rise to the occasion. I gave the first half of Mavis's acceptance speech (for, as luck would have it, a book entitled *Home Truths*) in my harsh French. This, I like to think, was painful to my separatist predecessor's ears. Certainly, my *savoir faire* seemed to impress the Winnipeg audience. Polite applause again.

Leacock, of course, knew Winnipeg well. It was for that city that his father set off from the Old Homestead near Lake Simcoe with his fast-talking brother, E.P., to make their fortunes as land agents, only to return to Ontario flat broke. Many years later, after his own much more profitable visits as a speech-giving celebrity, Leacock produced his famous line about Winnipeg's challenging winter climate. He noted that when a man stands in winter at the corner of Portage and Main with a north wind blowing "he knows which side of him is which."

A twenty-minute walk from the Fort Garry Hotel, if you go via Portage and Main, lies the University of Winnipeg, where my friend Ian McDougall spent his career teaching Classics. It was Ian who, back in that Glasgow Academy library, hired me (at zero salary) to be an official lunch-hour librarian — thus, arguably, setting me stumbling towards a literary career.

I was not a good librarian. I kept sloppy records, and even resetting the date stamp remained an inky mystery to me, but I did read lots of Leacock. (And over the years, I should note, that school library has nourished authors all the way from George MacDonald Fraser — of Flashman and McAuslan fame — to historians Norman Stone, Walter Reid, and Niall Ferguson.) And in due course, like my

friend Ian, I went on to attend the University of St. Andrews, for four happy years.

There Leacock crossed my path again. Not only because of his witty remarks about golf, which were much-quoted in that Royal and Ancient town, “the home of golf.” After a tour of Scotland (where he claimed that during two or three pleasant weeks spent lecturing there, he “never on any occasion saw whisky made use of *as a beverage*. I have seen people take it, of course, as a medicine, or as a precaution, or as a wise offset against a rather treacherous climate; but as a beverage, never”) he noted that even in Sabbath-respecting Scotland, rules against Sunday sports did not apply to golf, since golf was not, strictly speaking, a sport, but rather “a form of moral effort.” St. Andrews people agreed without question, especially after missing a short putt.

Another acceptable Sunday activity in St. Andrews was to attend the Film Society, which brought what we would now call “art house films” to the little university town, extending our education to include people like Antonioni, Kurosawa, and Eisenstein. Ingmar Bergman’s films were a regular feature, often set beside the same sort of chilly seas that washed against our local beaches. Later these cold sands were to gain movie immortality as the barefoot runners at the start of *Chariots of Fire* splashed across them.

To lighten this solemn highbrow fare (“The horses are slipping on the ice!” one famous subtitle ran, while another had a sad Swedish woman confiding to another, “I hate the smell of semen”), the program always included short films. And the greatest of these was Stephen Leacock’s *My Financial Career*. From the opening line, “When I go into a bank I get rattled,” this was a faithful, deadpan rendering of Leacock’s classic story, which I knew almost by heart. I watched it with delight — and with amazement, when I saw that this witty cartoon had been produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

It struck me then that any country that spent public money producing fine pieces of comedy based on a local writer’s work must be something special. As a subtle piece of advertising for a country’s culture, it worked on me then, and it still does. I began to think seriously about heading off to Canada after graduation, to see this place for myself.

For a Scot, moving to Canada was hardly a stretch. My grand-

mother's sister had left Ayrshire in 1903 to homestead with her new husband on the open prairie northwest of Saskatoon, a couple of years before Saskatchewan became a province. As a result, my father's cousins were spread across the West, so that Arelee, Lethbridge, and Fairview rivalled Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver in importance in our mailbox. One cousin, Ian Robertson, spent his RCAF leaves at my parents' house in Dunlop, until a bombing run over Germany swallowed him up.

Now, courtesy of Stephen Leacock, Canada was in my sights.

A graduate scholarship to Yale in September 1966 brought me within striking distance. Towards the end of the year that earned me an M.A., some of my Yale friends returned to Connecticut wide-eyed from a spring visit to Expo in Montreal, confirming the wisdom of my plan. So I left New Haven and set off across the continent in a great clockwise loop that would take me to Canada's west coast. For almost ninety-nine days I used my ninety-nine-dollar Greyhound bus pass, learning tricks like the best seat in the bus to sleep free from oncoming headlights, how to find a good café near a bus station, and the best way to stow a battered suitcase and a smelly rucksack.

This was the summer that American inner cities burned, but much more important to me, it was also the Summer of Love. So instead of Stephen Leacock my inspiration came from Bob Dylan and Joan Baez as I drifted hopefully around Haight-Ashbury and the Golden Gate Park in my very hip black cord jacket (later to be worn, ironically, to their Toronto high school by my disrespectful daughters). Eventually I arrived in Victoria in my role as a Scottish immigrant with a very poor sense of direction. I was the only passenger on the ferry from Seattle who planned to immigrate — people stared when I spoke up and was led away — and it turned out that I was very unprepared, lacking medical papers and other prudent evidence of sensible planning for such a big step.

But my immigration officer was wonderfully reassuring. Leacock, you recall, once wrote that a person gains an Oxford education by sitting with his or her tutor and being “smoked at” by the tutor puffing on his pipe. I gained admittance to Canada amid a tableful of teacups, being “drunk at” by a kindly immigration man in his shirt-sleeves who helped me to fill in the unconsidered forms. And I mean

helped. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t have an address in Fairview . . . it’s a small enough place we don’t need it.” At one point he asked me about what sort of career I had in mind. I realized that with a couple of degrees, my summer jobs stacking bales of hay, rowing boats, and shovelling wet cement were not really worth mentioning, and hesitantly suggested that I was interested in working in journalism, maybe, um, even in book publishing. He grunted, encouragingly, and wrote something down. He was, as I say, a kind man.

The only crisis arose when he looked at his watch in alarm and said, “Hey, if you’re heading on to Vancouver, there’s a bus going in fifteen minutes. Let me just show you the way to the bus station. It’s very close.”

And so it was, and I caught the bus, missing the chance to roam around Victoria, where I would probably have found Munro’s Books, with a good chance that a young, still-unpublished writer named Alice might have been behind the counter. It took a few years for us to meet, but in the end we got together. We’ve now worked with each other on twelve books, and counting.

The story leaps across half a continent, where about thirty hours east of Winnipeg I noticed that the endless lakes and rocks and pines outside the Greyhound bus window were giving way to fields and farms and maple trees, and soon we were approaching a sunny little town of orange brick named, according to the signs . . . Orillia. I wasn’t at my most alert. Wait a minute! Surely this was the place that Leacock had . . . and of course it was, and in a sense I had arrived at the Canada I was seeking, even though we spent only a few minutes there, loading the bus for the remaining stages to Barrie and Toronto. But we got to stretch our legs, and the sun was shining, and the little town did indeed look like a scene “of deep and unbroken peace” — although I knew that, in reality, the place was “a perfect hive of activity.”

In Toronto I spent a fair number of weeks in a sleeping bag on friends’ floors, looking for work that would give me the essential “Canadian experience.” I found my first job in Hamilton, working in the McMaster University administration for the registrar, Jack Evans. (McMaster was so good to me that I was glad to donate my publishing papers to Archivist Carl Spadoni when the time came, forty years later.) Then in March 1968, after replying to a *Globe and*

Mail want ad for a “Trainee Editor,” I started work in downtown Toronto at Doubleday Canada — and very soon found myself at work on my first non-fiction book already under contract. It was, of course, a biography of Stephen Leacock.

The author was David M. Legate, a legendary figure in the Canadian book world as the literary editor at the *Montreal Star*, at that time a major newspaper in a city with two thriving English daily rivals. He had signed a two-book contract with the man who had hired me, the amiable and energetic David Manuel, and had gained the contract on the strength of three things: his reputation, his fund of fine tales of the book world and its denizens, and his long association with Leacock, which began in 1923, when young Legate signed up for Professor Leacock’s course in Political Economy at McGill.

David Legate was born in Australia, as the title of his first book of memoirs, *Fair Dinkum* (which might be translated as “the real stuff”) indicates. But I know that my boss was disappointed that Legate had chosen to hold back some of his best literary stories from that first, only fairly dinkum volume, in order to bolster a second volume. The fact that no second volume ever appeared is a lesson for all those who write their memoirs.

One story that never appeared — though Legate, a good, cackling raconteur, delighted me with his verbal account — described the time when as an undergraduate he managed to get the perfect summer job for a *McGill Daily* writer with literary aspirations. He was hired by a major Montreal newspaper to assist in the book review section that was run with an iron hand by a Great Canadian Literary Authority. After a few weeks of learning the ropes, young Legate was allowed to take over the section, inserting the reviews written by the G.C.L.A. as required, while the Great Man went on vacation.

The Monday after a major review ran in the paper, an indignant lady showed up at the newspaper office, demanding to see the Great Man. Young Legate received her in his absence and was appalled when she produced the Great Man’s recent signed book review, and also a review by another hand from a London magazine some months earlier, which matched the Montreal book review word for word.

Legate was flabbergasted. He lost sleep over how on earth to handle this undeniable case of plagiarism (almost a capital offence in the newspaper world, then as now) by his legendary boss. Finally, the

day of reckoning arrived, the day a great and honoured career would perhaps collapse in . . . who knew?

“Anything happen while I was away?” asked the tanned Great Man, settling into his office chair.

“Well . . . this,” squeaked Legate, pushing the two dated reviews across his desk.

The Great Man looked at them. His brow darkened. He rose, smashed a fist on the desktop and bellowed. “Why wasn’t I informed about this?”

Then he stormed out of the office, leaving Legate agape.

Later, when it became clear that nothing further was to be said or done about the incident, Legate absorbed a valuable life lesson, that attack is often the best form of defence.

Not that Legate really needed instruction in this matter. The last lines of his preface to the 1970 book, *Stephen Leacock: A Biography*, catch the man’s combative side. “A final note. This book was written without any assistance from the Canada Council, which refused my application for a grant-in-aid.”

Earlier, the preface speaks of his youthful fascination with Leacock, thanks to his father, a Presbyterian minister in New Brunswick. Since his old man was so clearly delighted by Leacock’s work, Legate

quickly developed the habit of visiting the local public library every Saturday morning to borrow a Leacock volume. My judgment of my father’s judgment was soon confirmed. Here was sparkling fun. But along came a black Saturday. As usual, I had blindly pulled off the shelf a Leacock title and taken it home. What I read dismayed me. It was deadly dull. Leacock had lost his touch. I informed my father, who hastened to point to the title, *Elements of Political Science*.

It was Stephen Leacock who brought him to McGill University (and who later enjoyed hearing the story of young Legate’s textbook case of reader’s disappointment). *Fair Dinkum* records that making an application to this university in distant Montreal, “where the teaching staff included a person I devoutly wanted to meet in person, Stephen Leacock,” was not easy. “Since I had not sat for my matriculation (Principal Miles of the Saint John High School dismissed the

idea, noting that he didn't want the name of the school 'dragged in the mud') some sort of ingenuity was required in filing the application." So with what he described as "untamed superciliousness," he wrote to McGill's registrar stating that he had looked over the 1923 freshman year curriculum and decided that he really deserved to be *admitted to the sophomore year in Arts*.

Incredibly, acceptance followed. Only later did he learn that the letter so outraged the McGill authorities that they decided to make an example of him, with the principal himself, Sir Arthur Currie, roaring, in his best military style, "Admit him and pluck him."

Somehow, David Legate survived, going on to become the editor of *The McGill Daily*, and a Big Man on Campus. Even better, he met an interesting classmate named Marjorie, and their marriage lasted all their lives. And he did spend a great deal of time studying under — and studying — Stephen Leacock, who revelled in the academic life, tattered gown and all. The long vacations were especially appealing to Leacock: "I thus have what a businessman can never enjoy, an ability to think, and, what is still better, to stop thinking altogether for months at a time."

Young Legate revealed his uncanny ability to be part of the most interesting action when he was present at the Punch Felt Around the World. The famous magician Harry Houdini was in Montreal, and was boasting to Legate and a group of student friends that his stomach muscles were so strong that they could take any punch. They were invited to try (we can imagine the assurances, "Go on, as hard as you like!"). A McGill pal of Legate's, a heavyweight boxer, stepped forward and obediently threw a punch. It ultimately killed Houdini, who died in the U.S. a few days later. For a brief period of fame newsmen researching the incident reported that Legate was the man with the deadly punch.

Fisticuffs were involved in ending his academic career. Graduate students, past and present, right across the land will be impressed to hear that Legate's time as a grad student at McGill's English department ended when he got into a physical fight, in the corridor, with the dean of arts, Cyrus MacMillan. Having struck out, in every sense, he marched down to St. James Street to join the *Montreal Star* as a journalist, as nature surely intended.

His career was interrupted by the Second World War, where he

served with the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps in London during the Blitz, then switched to become assistant overseas commissioner of the Canadian Red Cross. And from these days one literary story did slip through his self-imposed barriers. On an introductory tour to meet the Red Cross staff in the London office, he came across four mature lady volunteers sitting at a table armed with scissors, glue, and strips of linoleum. They were gallantly pasting the linoleum on to paperback book covers, to provide sturdy reading for patients in Canadian hospitals. *Fair Dinkum* records what happened next:

“Trying to think of something to say, I patted one lady on the back and allowed as how, who knows, she might be an author herself one day.”

His tour guide reacted strangely, and back in his office was clearly in the grip of some deep emotion as he asked, “Do you know who you were speaking to?”

“No. Who?”

‘Agatha Christie.’”

As we worked together on his Leacock biography, this was the man who kindly made it his business to show me Montreal. Later, when I published William Weintraub’s marvellous look at Montreal in the forties and fifties, *City Unique*, with its accounts (second-hand, of course) of brothels and gambling dens and cops looking away, I realized that Legate had given me, a beardless boy, a censored version of his city.

He was a founding member and a regular attendee — even after his pancreas took him off the booze — at the Montreal Men’s Press Club. The name is significant, and reminds us that Mavis Gallant had left her successful Montreal newspaper column in 1950 to move to Paris at least partly because she realized that in Montreal she could never be “one of the boys.” David Legate kindly took me there, and the bar area was full of amiable legends with names like Dink and Red (and indeed I later published Red Fisher’s hockey-beat memoirs). Great journalism war stories were paraded, not always for the first time, including the tale of How Legate Scooped the World.

The Westminster Abbey coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 included several hundred reporters from across the world, and they were kept on the premises, in a metaphorical lock up, until the ceremony had ended. David Legate, however, “fainted” and was

carried out, ignoring offers of brandy and gasping for “fresh air.” Once free of the Abbey, he scampered off through the fine fresh air and filed his “I was there” story first in all the world. I politely pretended to be more impressed than I was, since watching it at home on black-and-white tv, I had been “there,” too, but in the scoop-crazy Press Club that was clearly a minority opinion.

Like the legendary Normandy Room, ideal for special dates and fine dining, the Press Club was then located in the Mount Royal Hotel (now deceased, transformed into a shopping mall). I stayed at this fine central hostelry for every Montreal visit. So did another Doubleday Canada employee, a salesman named Bruce. Now Bruce, I must insist, was a man of great probity and a controlled imagination, and yet he had almost incredible adventures at this hotel unique. Once, retiring to bed in his sober Toronto pajamas, he happened to pause at the window looking out across the hotel’s interior well. A woman at a window opposite noticed him and proceeded to stage a striptease that may have been impromptu, but was impassioned, and slow, and very impressively complete. On another occasion Bruce was wakened by a midnight thud at his hotel room door. Opening it, he found a man and a woman wrestling, naked, on the corridor carpet outside. Since they seemed evenly matched (although one must have had a sore heel from banging it against his door, in mid-tumble), he thought it best to leave them to it.

Ah, Montreal.

It was then, of course, indisputably Canada’s greatest city, and St. James Street, where David Legate’s office lay, still represented Canada’s financial centre, and had not yet become Rue St. Jacques. Those immediate post-Expo years were exciting ones, with an unconventional Montreal intellectual in Ottawa as prime minister, and a future one working his way up from Baie Comeau through a downtown Montreal law firm in Place Ville Marie itself, the skyscraper at the heart of the smart new city. The October Revolution and the murder of Pierre Laporte were still to come.

Montreal was Leacock’s home for forty years, and among his sixty or so books was one about the city. Legate directed me to areas that Leacock would have recognized easily, despite the twenty-five years that had passed since his death. The McGill campus would have been especially interesting to him, now that the main building at the

top of the avenue off Sherbrooke was named after him. And west and north of McGill, despite the invasion of new apartment buildings, he would have recognized the surviving grand old mansions of the former “Square Mile,” many of them family homes of the “idle rich” that he had enjoyed mixing with, and drinking with, because, as he said . . . “I like the drinks they mix.”

As we put the book together, I was pleased to be escorted into Leacock’s old haunt, the University Club (not an exact copy of his Mausoleum Club), where he was a founding member, and his portrait by Richard Jack could be seen hanging in a place of honour above the fireplace. Club fireplaces, I learned, are especially important in Montreal. Apparently another club saw the dictatorial Premier Maurice Duplessis stride in (uninvited), unzip his pants (also uninvited), and urinate into the fireplace to demonstrate his contempt for the institution and its members. Some might dismiss it as just letting off steam, but others understood the serious message. And they also understood how essential Jean Lesage’s Quiet Revolution was if Quebec was to catch up to the modern world.

Over the years in publishing, I learned that portraits, either by photographers or painters, are important, since they show the face the subject wishes to present to the world when they are allowed to pose — a significant word. That Leacock painting by Richard Jack was what we chose to put on the front cover. It was exactly right for the book, showing a tweedy, rumpled Leacock sitting there, his tie askew, fresh from marking student essays with the red pencil in his hand. And on his squarely handsome, grizzled face he has the “old-boyish” grin we all know, the one that perfectly represents the chuckling humorist every reader imagines him to be.

And I fear that it was misleading.

In my experience, every humorous writer finds that his or her public confidently expects them to be a happy person, facing life with a wry chuckle, and perhaps a slow, smiling shake of the head. To his great credit, Leacock tried to shoot down this view. He wrote: “If a man has a genuine sense of humour he is apt to take a somewhat melancholy, or at least a disillusioned view of life. Humour and disillusionment are twin sisters.”

Robertson Davies (who knew more than most people about the expectations placed on successful authors in their private lives) wrote

in his 1981 introduction to *The Penguin Stephen Leacock*, “I have written a good deal about Leacock, and I believe that I was the first to press the point that he was not necessarily a man of continuously sunny, carefree temperament. . . . He had, in fact, the temperament of a humorist, and they are by no means unfailingly sunny people.”

Leacock’s life was not short of events that would have disillusioned anyone. His family (of, eventually, eleven children) came from England to rural Ontario and a life of genteel poverty (the boys were not allowed to go barefoot in the summer, like the other local kids; a matter, Leacock later said, “of caste and thistles”). The father, Peter, was a Catholic whose runaway marriage was never accepted by his wife’s Anglican family (and to make matters worse the bride was older, and may have been pregnant). Peter was excellent at provoking pregnancies, but less productive with his work on the farm near Sutton, just south of Lake Simcoe. He is politely described by the notable Leacock scholar David Staines as “a man of sluggish character.” In fact, he was so bad that Stephen and his brothers threw him out of the house (one version involves that Victorian staple, a horsewhip, and there were rumours of drunken violence in the marriage), telling him to stay away, which he did. Lack of money forced young Stephen to drop out of university for a year. For ten years he laboured as a schoolmaster, and, in the words of Robertson Davies “disliked the work heartily.”

Although he went on to enjoy great professional success and prosperity, in his marriage he lost his wife to cancer when she was forty-five, and never remarried. His beloved only son, “Little Stevie,” remained miniature, so tiny that he barely attained a height of five feet, and became an embittered drunk, his escapades hushed up by the local community. Even the teaching life Leacock loved, where in his tattered gown he could put on an Eccentric Old Professor show for his students, was taken from him when McGill briskly removed him from the faculty when he reached sixty-five — a crushing blow: “I was then retired, much against my will, on grounds of senility, having passed the age of sixty-five.” It should not have been a surprise, of course, since he had voted, many years earlier, for precisely that retirement provision.

And what a perfect Leacock funny story that would be: a middle-aged professor, certain that old age will never come to him, votes for

compulsory retirement at sixty-five, then reacts with outrage when it is applied to him. Leacock's coolly classical view of human nature, in which people routinely fall prey to false hopes and small hypocrisies, believing that they are exceptions to the follies of human nature, provided him with his profitable living as a humorist. But it did not protect him here, in his own life. He did not die a happy man.

So what remains? In Montreal there is, of course, the Leacock Building at McGill, and the portrait in the University Club. Margaret MacMillan's excellent 2009 short biography (*Stephen Leacock*, in Penguin's Extraordinary Canadians series) notes that in Toronto there is a Scarborough high school named after him, which was attended by young people arrested as accused Islamic terrorists in 2006: a stranger-than-fiction example of how the old Victorian imperialist's conservative Canada has changed.

By way of contrast, there is the Stephen Leacock Museum at Old Brewery Bay in Orillia. Built in 1927 from his book royalties as the world's most popular humorist, it is a fine example of a rich Canadian's lakeside cottage. It was Leacock's base for fishing and sailing and other summer pursuits, which included paying proper respect to the site's convivial name. But it was also a research base, though his excursions into Orillia as a famous but unaffected local writer did not have the desired effect. The town barber once complained about the summer visitor's shameless use of hot local gossip as material for his writing. The complaint predictably ran along the lines of "How the hell was I to know that he was going to take that stuff and . . ."

Time has healed these wounds, and the Leacock Museum has become a tourist asset. Despite the spread of nearby houses (a scandal worth a Leacock story), the house itself is protected by its site on a point on Lake Couchiching, in tree-shaded grounds. The building is preserved as an old-fashioned cottage, with dark wood panelling throughout its interior, and comes complete with a library, straw hats on pegs, and ancient tennis racquets apparently ready for service. As you tiptoe through the two-storey house, upstairs and downstairs, peering at book titles, or at the papers on the desk in the study, or at the dishes in the kitchen, it's hard to avoid the Goldilocks sense that the owners will return at any moment.

One missing component is Leacock's flourishing garden, which inspired the famous beaming-farmer-in-straw-hat Karsh photograph, still on display in the lobby of Ottawa's Château Laurier hotel. It also produced the story, recounted by a niece, of the late-summer family dinner that was interrupted by the grumpy host's complaints about the soup. The surprised guests were then hounded from the table to pick fresh tomatoes in the garden, which were to be delivered to the kitchen and turned into a (very) fresh batch of soup. It could be called the Hundred-Yard Diet.

And the final biography? Legate's book was well researched, inspired by direct knowledge of the subject, and well written, and it was respectably reviewed, but is now sadly out of print. Even Robertson Davies' thoughtful selection, *Feast of Stephen*, is no longer available. (I should note that my wise old friend, who as the author of *Fifth Business* and much else, knew about writing novels, once told me in passing that Leacock could have been a fine serious novelist.) Sadly, too, David Legate is long gone. I heard of his death and asked for details at his old Press Club. The French-Canadian barman, who liked him, told me that "To the en', he fought like a ti-gerr!" There are worse obituaries.

To be selfish, Legate's ambitious book taught me a lot, since I was working on a biography with all the trimmings — a photo section, captions, an index, and so on. In editorial terms, when David Legate and I disagreed he would refer the matter to a mysterious authority, another McGill grad who knew Leacock, he said. It took me a shamefully long time — perhaps after too many hours in the Montreal Men's Press Club — to realize that this authority figure was his wife, Marjorie.

I even learned a technical lesson about book making. The unvarnished truth, you might say. Soon after the books appeared in the shops, complaints flooded in that the attractive scarlet colour on the cover was rubbing off, to reveal the yellow below. This was serious, and evidence of a problem with the printer's varnish. In his office my boss and I had a tense meeting with the printer and his salesman. The young salesman set out to prove that there was no problem. "See," he began confidently, "when I take this pencil with the eraser at the end and start to rub at the red cover, there's no . . ."

He faltered, as streaks of yellow began to appear.

“Bob, why don’t you go and wait in the car?” his boss said, not unkindly. We soon reached an agreement with him.

And Leacock’s reputation? Leacock, born in 1869, was literally a nineteenth-century figure. As a young boy in England he knew an old sailor who spoke of his service in “The Great War” — the Napoleonic war. And Leacock was both Conservative and conservative. Much of what he wrote (and with sixty books he wrote too much, and much too fast) makes jarring reading today, especially when he deals with women and with people from other cultures. For instance, his innocent mention of “smiling negroes” glimpsed in a glamorous passing train produces unease, even if his point is just to establish that this train has a grand dining car, with waiters.

Yet for all that, and for all his “disillusionment,” his best work is still very funny, and not just to those traditionalists familiar with the term “Upper Canada.” (So funny, in fact, that Robertson Davies records that at Leacock’s readings, people in their seats laughed so hard that “small but significant personal misfortunes befell them.”)

It’s interesting to note that, as Legate discovered, “How We Kept Mother’s Day” (a satire on selfish male domestic blindness) was taught in Soviet Russia to millions of student readers. Leacock dealt well with universally understood themes like hypocrisy — for instance when five men who talk a great game about the joys of early morning fishing never actually make it onto the lake in the chill of dawn. Or when the suicidal hero Peter Pupkin tries to throw himself in front of a train (surely an interesting literary theme for those Russian students), but finds that “he was never able to pick out a pair of wheels that suited him.”

Peter Pupkin, of course, features in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, where we find him screwing up his courage to “do a thing seldom if ever done in Mariposa. He would propose to Zena Pepperleigh.” Critics disagree about just how “gentle” Leacock’s humour was; Robertson Davies makes the point that the town contains — by contrast with the novels of Dickens — not a single character that we would like to associate with in real life. Yet most, including Davies, seem to agree that *Sunshine Sketches* shows Leacock at his best, giving

us glimpses of the town, with its “buildings of extraordinary importance” on Main Street.

Vancouver Island’s Jack Hodgins, who knows about small towns with large portions of self-regard, has written a thoughtful afterword to the classic New Canadian Library edition of the book (published, I’m proud to say, under my aegis at McClelland & Stewart). There Hodgins claims that among the few scenes in Western literature worthy of catching the wide public imagination is the sinking of the *Mariposa Belle*, in six feet of water, something that even non-literary types recall with relish. It’s worth recalling, too, that the first time the steamboat is mentioned, in the book’s first hundred words, it is “tied to the wharf with two ropes of about the same size as they use on the *Lusitania*.” Leacock was good at seeing the world through the excited eyes and exaggerated speech of a young boy, a Tom Sawyer, if you like. The title of his posthumous memoir, *The Boy I Left Behind Me*, may set us whistling, but it may not be true that the boy was ever really left behind.

Then Jack Hodgins raises the puzzling final story of the book, “The Train to Mariposa,” where Leacock’s ironic outsider’s tone changes. Magically, we are transported aboard a little train from the city, where we have all spent far too much time getting and spending, and forgetting the old hometown. Even more magically, as the train moves north, it changes, with the electric locomotive that took us out of the city now replaced by an “old wood engine hitched on in its place.” The inside of the cars change, too, becoming older, and strangers start to chat. And most magically of all, we change, as well: “No, don’t bother to look at the reflection of your face in the window-pane shadowed by the night outside. Nobody could tell you now after all these years. Your face has changed in these long years of money-getting in the city.”

In the end, when we reach the bright lights of Mariposa station, we have reached what Robertson Davies might have called the Land of Lost Content. While some may find this last chapter puzzling, I find it moving, perhaps the most powerful of all his work, worth reading by anyone who now lives far — in time or space — from what they grew up calling home.

Another living part of Leacock’s legacy is the Stephen Leacock Award

for Humour, given annually to the best humorous Canadian book, as judged by a jury selected by the Orillia organizers. I have a weakness for publishing funny books, so I have been involved with many celebratory dinners down through the decades, featuring my friends Harry J. Boyle (who enjoyed being Mariposa's Honorary Mayor), Robert Thomas Allen (author of *Children, Wives, and Other Wildlife*, who was delighted but shy), Donald Jack (who played up to his multi-book character, Bartholomew Bandy, by dressing in a cocked hat), and W.O. Mitchell (who misbehaved, and got into a public spat with a cousin). In 2008 the winner was my pal Terry Fallis, who was such a good friend that he had never once asked me to "take a look at" his then-unpublished first novel, *The Best Laid Plans* (which later was declared the "essential novel of the decade" by the 2011 Canada Reads panel). When he published it himself, and then went on to win the prestigious Leacock Award, that opened the door to my reading it, and publishing it with pride . . . as I did the follow-up volume, *The High Road*, in 2010. His win was astonishingly appropriate; Leacock's own success began with a self-published book, which he placed in outlets like railway stations. By a happy fluke, a British publisher, John Lane, was travelling in Canada and happened to pick up a copy of *Literary Lapses* to read on the ocean voyage home. The rest is publishing history, with Lane's firm, the Bodley Head, taking on the new author, to great worldwide effect.

Finally, two other examples of how Leacock continued to run my life. One of the most interesting books I ever published came from little Orillia, specifically out of the editorial office of the *Orillia Packet & Times* — which is not, by the way, a fictional Leacock title. The peaceful little inland town was a most unlikely source for *The Corvette Navy*, a personal account of the war waged on the wide Atlantic between German U-boats and corvettes manned by amateur Canadian sailors. As the editorial director at Macmillan of Canada in 1977, I was proud to publish this classic war story by James B. Lamb, and several other books from his pen. Later, Jim Lamb paid me the compliment of including a fictional character based on me — "Gib Douglas" is hard to dispute — in a spy novel he wrote, *The Man from the Sea*. I was, at least in the novel, a source of level-headed advice.

"Level-headed" does not apply to any aspect of the next story. In

the summer of 2001 I travelled to Geneva Park, near Orillia, to give a speech to those assembled at the annual Couchiching Conference on globalization and publishing, or something equally grand. At the conference was a member of the board named Jane Bartram, who was to my smitten eyes clearly The Most Fascinating Woman in the World. Our first date was a canoe ride together on Lake Couchiching, where we did not quite reach Leacock's Old Brewery Bay on the opposite shore. But having brought me to Canada he was still obviously running my life. Jane and I were married within the year.

Keep up the good work, Professor Leacock.