

LEACOCK WRITES FOR TRUTH

by
Alec Lucas

On July 16, 1923, a delighted Stephen Leacock sent a letter to Peter McArthur congratulating him on his book *Stephen Leacock*, which Ryerson Press had just then published as part of its series "The Makers of Canadian Literature." "First rate," the letter read. "Fine. Excellent. Of course it is too flattering but I don't object to that at all. You have really made me seem quite an interesting character & and I am correspondingly grateful." Leacock had every reason to express his pleasure, for McArthur's book was not only the first about him, but was a most perceptive commentary on Leacock's life and work. Indeed it speaks well of Leacock that he wrote as he did, since, if McArthur's study "flattered," it also criticized him for a tendency toward commercialism. Leacock really wanted more than pats on the back. He wanted intelligent criticism and got it in this little book that, despite the spate of recent books on Leacock, remains one of the very best.

Grateful as Leacock was for the book, he felt no less so for McArthur's past kindnesses and took the opportunity in his letter to thank him for them. The book, he says, "adds one further increment to the gratitude that began years ago when you gave me the first solid editorial encouragement I ever had." That Leacock was not himself engaging in flattery is made clear in a letter (to Lorne Pierce in January, 1923) that he knew McArthur would not see. "I may say," Leacock informs Pierce, "that it was Peter McArthur who helped me bring out my first book. Up to the time of meeting him I had only done short, casual stuff." Actually McArthur denies any meeting of the sort with Leacock. Writing to Pierce in January, 1923, he had this to say: "Stephen Leacock's letter comes as an agreeable surprise though it leaves me somewhat at a loss. If my memory serves me I met him only once, for about five minutes, in the billiard room of an hotel about thirty years ago. Of course I had considerable correspondence with him when I was editor of *Truth* in New York, but that correspondence closed twenty-six years ago." The help McArthur gave him, then, would seem to refer to the several pieces that McArthur accepted from his "star" contributor for the old New York weekly *Truth* (not to be confused with the magazines of the same name that were being published in Toronto and London, respectively, at the end of the nineteenth century) and that Leacock later selected for *Literary Lapses* (1910), his first book of humour.

Although Leacock considered McArthur's interest in his work of singular importance, his biographers have passed it over somewhat cursorily. Ralph Curry refers to McArthur as Leacock's "old friend," who as editor of *Truth*, "had accepted some of Leacock's attempts at humor." According to Curry, Leacock, "as a kind of parlor trick, . . . went through a copy of *Literary Lapses* . . . identifying which of the sketches had appeared in *Truth* and indicating by dates the issues in which they were printed." Unfortunately neither Curry nor Frayne, from whose article in *Maclean's* the information comes, give the names or dates referred to. Although a little more detailed on the McArthur-Leacock relationship than Curry, David Legate, Leacock's most recent biographer, makes few observations about *Truth*.

These two men had, up to a point, trod a common trail. Both were raised on Ontario farms. Both gained teaching certificates at the Strathroy Collegiate Institute . . . They shared the gift of humor and the wish to write. And both wrote snippets for the same magazines — *Judge*, *Life*, etc.

But by the time Leacock was eyeing a professional career, McArthur had become editor-in-chief of *Truth* of New York, a forerunner in style and flavor of today's *New Yorker*. Thanks to McArthur, there appeared in the pages of this periodical several of the sketches that were, in *Literary Lapses*, to make of Leacock an international figure.

McArthur had done more than write "snippets" for *Judge* and *Life*. He had been a reporter for the *Toronto Mail*, had worked for Bencough's *Grip*, and had established himself as a humorist of note in New York with "a joke output equalled only by two other practitioners of this exacting vocation; one of whom went mad and the other of whom committed suicide," according to the editor of *Life*.

Truth was a literary phenomenon of sorts when McArthur was its editor, for it was and probably is the only instance of an American magazine that became a Canadian cultural enterprise. When McArthur joined the magazine on April 9, 1895, it had been in existence for only nine years. It had started publication on Pearl Street, near the City Hall, but had become so successful in the mid 90's that it moved to the thirteen-storey Mail and Express Building at 203 Broadway. *Truth* was published by The American Lithographic Company, which had been formed in 1890 when thirteen leading lithographic companies of New York, Buffalo, and Philadelphia combined into one corporation. The weekly paper that the company published had been taken over from one of the companies that had become part of the new organization, in reality a monopoly or "Trust," and had been placed under the management of a freshly-formed corporation, the Truth Company, as a branch of the American Lithographic Company.

Under McArthur's regime as editor (from July, 1895 — though his name did not appear on the masthead until November, 1896 — to July, 1897) *Truth* took on new life. The American Lithographic Company had just developed photo colour printing and used the magazine, the first to contain colour prints, to show their wares, and McArthur, who always fancied himself as an "idea man," made the most of his opportunities to display the beauty of colour printing. With big, glossy pages (10" by 13") filled with sketches, stories, and dozens of illustrated jokes, with a quippy editorial page, coloured covers and pictures, often even of advertisements, and above all a coloured centre-fold, *Truth* was meant to be irresistible at a dime a copy. For the annual rate of \$5.00 (but not for the quarterly or the half-yearly rates of \$1.25 and \$2.50, respectively), subscribers received a bonus, for their copies were mailed in "strong paste-board tubes, and not folded, insuring the receipt of a clean, smooth paper that will not be wrinkled or crumpled or otherwise damaged in the mails." For \$5.00 one could also purchase a folio of twenty centre-fold pictures "on heavy paper suitable for framing."

According to H. A. Bruce (*London Free Press*, December 3, 1966) the success of the magazine paradoxically spelled its doom, since the production of the coloured pictures became too costly a way of advertising the company's lithography, the *raison d'être* of the magazine. Eventually, then, the company lost all interest in maintaining it, and dropped it entirely in 1906. Its heyday was over. Indeed a recent letter to the only firm that seems to be all that remains of the "conglomerate thirteen" elicited a reply that it has no records of the magazine at all. Yet, for all that, it had its heyday and was a far more important publication than the casual treatment it now receives would indicate. Leacock was writing for one of the leading weeklies of New York when he appeared in *Truth*, for when McArthur edited the periodical he saw it as more than a vehicle for advertising photo-colour printing.

McArthur introduced theatre and book reviews and opened the door to many excellent Canadian artists. Jay Hambidge (1867-1924) did many of the centre-fold pictures, gaining his greatest renown with "The Draw on the Bowery." Charles G. D. Roberts contributed eleven poems; Carman, ten; Scott, four; Lampman, three; and Edwyn Sandys, two. Leacock contributed twenty-three sketches, for which, according to Sandwell, he got five, ten, sometimes twenty-five dollars, and even McArthur's former employer, Bengough, made an appearance in *Truth*. Of the American contributors only Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Bigelow Paine have names that have outlived the magazine of McArthur's time.

Leacock first appeared in *Truth* on June 29, 1895 (vol. 14, no. 428) with "An Experiment with Policeman Hogan" and last with "On Collecting Things," on August 14, 1897 (vol. 16, no. 539), very shortly after McArthur had left the magazine. These and Leacock's other publications in *Truth* are listed in Gerhard R. Lomer's *Stephen Leacock A Check-List And*

Index Of His Writings (1954), but since there are slips in the listings and since they, the listings, are not arranged chronologically, I have in the following table removed the slips and arranged the sketches in the sequence of their publication.

*"An Experiment with Policeman Hogan," June 29, 1895. v. 14, pp. 10-11.

"The Puppet Shop," August 3, 1895. v. 14, pp. 10-11.

"Home Again," October 26, 1895. v. 14, p. 4.

*"A Model Dialogue," December 21, 1895. v. 14, p. 9.

*"The Force of Statistics," December 21, 1895. v. 14, p. 14.

*"Telling His Faults," December 28, 1895. v. 14, p. 15.

*"The New Food," January 11, 1896. v. 15, p. 7.

*"The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones," January 18, 1896. v. 15, p. 10.

*"The Conjuror's Revenge," February 8, 1896. v. 15, p. 10.

*"Hints to Travellers," February 22, 1896. v. 15, p. 10.

"How Gorillas Talk," April 18, 1896. v. 15, p. 17.

*"A Manual of Education," November 7, 1896. v. 15, p. 6.

*"Reflections on Riding," November 14, 1896. v. 15, p. 7.

*"A Lesson in Fiction," December 5, 1896. v. 15, pp. 10-11.

(Lomer's entry for this sketch omits *Truth* altogether.)

"On the Old Homestead," December 12, 1896. v. 15, p. 12.

*"Saloonio," January 1, 1897. v. 16, p. 10.

*"Self-Made Men," January 28, 1897. v. 16, p. 11.

*"Getting the Thread of It," February 18, 1897. v. 16, p. 11.

"A New Winter Game," March 25, 1897. v. 16, p. 11.

*"Boarding-House Geometry," April 15, 1896. v. 16, p. 3.

*"Borrowing A Match," April 22, 1896. v. 16, p. 6.

*"Helping the Armenians," May 13, 1896. v. 16, p. 10.

*"On Collecting Things," August 14, 1896. v. 16, p. 12.

Of the twenty-six sketches Leacock included in *Literary Lapses*, he took eighteen (marked here with asterisks) from *Truth*. Whatever may be said of his selections, he showed good judgement in omitting the five that are unmarked in the list above, although "A New Winter Game," which ridicules street-car travel, is not far below the level of "An Experiment with Policeman Hogan." "The Puppet Shop" is a heavy-handed satire on type characters in which an inventor creates dummies with pumpkin heads, wooden heads, not to mention a Dummy Chaperone, a being "almost sightless and without ears," "an angular framework of sticks" that comes with directions "for planting it at picnics or nailing it to the seat of a vehicle." "How Gorillas Talk" is much the same kind of obvious satire, except that gorillas, rather than dummies, represent mankind. There is one touch of Leacock at his best (perhaps the only example in all five skits)

or close to it in the conclusion of the professor's discussion. "'And suppose, my dear professor,' I said very pleasantly, 'a gorilla met a friend in a street car, and became anxious to effect a temporary loan of seventy-five cents, how —' But the bell of the street car rang sudden and loud, and the professor vanished from sight." "On the Old Homestead" makes an obvious butt of farmer Oatcake, and "Home Again" is a simple anecdote in which the tables are turned at the end on those who see themselves as superior, rational beings, and reveals something of the double focus that characterizes the attitude of the narrator in *Sunshine Sketches of A Little Town*.

All in all, however, Leacock's contributions to *Truth* are much more than what Curry dismisses lightly as "attempts at humor." "The Awful fate of Melpomenus Jones" and "Boarding-House Geometry" stand witness to the fact. Yet Wilfrid Egglestone, another admirer of Leacock, errs, too, in his "Causerie" (*Winnipeg Free Press*, March 25, 1950) in this comment: ". . . in the annual issues [of *Truth* of] 1895-97 it is possible to trace the evolution of Leacock from the first awkward and self-conscious efforts to the assured impudence of "Boarding-House Geometry" No fewer than 15 signed contributions by Leacock appeared in the magazine during the months when McArthur was editor; and there were in addition a good many, it may be surmised, of slighter anecdotes and jokes which were used unsigned." The surmise is indeed doubtful, the number misleading, and, as for tracing Leacock's humour as mentioned, the case does not hold up. "Boarding-House Geometry" was not the climax of Leacock's contributions to *Truth*, chronologically at least as Egglestone implies. More important is the fact that one of Leacock's finest sketches, "My Financial Career," appeared in *Life* on April 11, 1895, several weeks before Leacock had even sent any of his work to *Truth*.

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