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Genial Humour in Stephen Leacock

The true nature of Stephen Leacock's most durable humour, the humour which makes *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* his masterpiece, is not so much new to literature as new to criticism. Critics have discussed the similarly genial humour of Falstaff, my Uncle Toby and Micawber as it applies to them individually, but they have not isolated its distinctions sufficiently for easy generalization. Leacock has been called a satirist and an ironist,¹ but at his most typical and best he is neither. Although the tone of his humour varies considerably from sketch to sketch, particularly in his first collected volume, *Literary Lapses* (1910), its distinctive quality is genial from the first. The three overworked arithmetic men, Mr. A, Mr. B, and Mr. C, who do their chores in mathematics problems in "A, B, and C, the human element in mathematics", are a delightfully absurd reflection on the abstract nature of mathematicians, but they involve no satire and no irony. In fact their final pathos is sentimental, an emotion which Meredith rightly regarded as incompatible with both,² when the overworked Mr. C. wastes away and dies. More often this humour occurs in close context with satiric wit and conduct, in a mixture equally familiar to Sterne and Dickens. "My Financial Career" satirizes the inhuman pomp of bankers, but its intimate portrait of the timid new customer is entirely friendly. Here Leacock's genial humour climaxes in a flash of whimsical wit, as it so often does, when the flustered customer withdraws the whole deposit he has just made, the fifty in fifties at the six in sixes. It is this distinctive humour of style and occasionally of characterization and incident as well, which needs special analysis.

Twenty-five years and twenty volumes later Leacock defined *su- quips* as *exploded clichés* when he wrote his own book on the theory

humour: "words and phrases are rushed forward into a significance which they won't bear on closer inspection; in fact the significance involves a complete impossibility".³ This somewhat clumsy rush at definition reveals that like such major innovators as Defoe and Haliburton Leacock lacked full insight into his specialty. He failed to isolate it clearly enough to himself either to develop it consistently in practice or discuss it in theory. He explains as a single technique a style which ranges from the pun to the epigram, and from verbal nonsense to noteworthy flashes of characterization or ideas. With it Leacock can make even the extremely average citizen of *Literary Lapses* look distinct for a change: "From his earliest childhood John Smith was marked out from his comrades by nothing".⁴ The explanation of humour as a mere technique also provides a curiously narrow approach to his more profound quips: "It is only when carried to excess that this moderation becomes pernicious".⁵ There is more to the most distinctive wit of *Literary Lapses* than a technique of nonsense. Furthermore, the same absurdities identify humour of incident and humour of characterization as Leacock's own, as when the dying Mr. Doomer of *Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy* reads the Inheritance Tax Statute instead of the Bible on his deathbed, and as a final gesture signs the doctor's cheque to relieve his estate of the bill.⁶ Even with such expanded scenes of humour Leacock still defined its essence as a technique, the "incongruity and antithesis of circumstances and character".⁷ Although he had found a distinctive humour of considerable merit, he prevented himself from recognizing and fully exploiting its potential insight into life by defining it so narrowly. The subject of the technique varies in adjacent sketches from the trivial to the profound. To produce great literature with it Leacock had to combine it with a philosophy or a view of society through which he could give substance to his jests. Apparently he failed to recognize this need, or at least he ignored it much of the time. Consequently his books of humour remain ephemeral except when his technique happened to catch him in a moment of soul-searching.

In Shakespeare, Sterne and Dickens genial humour is not only a technique but a special view of life which can be as profound as a Rosalind lecturing on love in the Forest of Arden, an Uncle Toby compensating for his groin wound with his hobby horse, or a Micawber bringing joy to David Copperfield in his squalid London rooms with

lemon punch. All genial humourists respond to life as it is, and have to be, by relieving its routine miseries with little joys, just as Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* loves Mariposa despite its dull and pretentious main street because of the lovably human people who live on it. Like the persona in *Sunshine Sketches* the genial humourist typically adopts a stance of intimacy as opposed to the belittling perspective of satirists, accepting both characters and readers as equals whose amusing difficulties involve the author as well. He accepts the world as it is, the best and worst of all possible worlds rather than trying to correct and perfect it. But while avoiding impractical ideals, he insists on participating in the life around him as cheerfully as possible. The joyful participant may not feel so much that life is naturally funny as that laughter can make its shortcomings endurable, and may suggest some insights into its meaning. When most intense, genial humourists may well be laughing at life to offset its pain, gloom and pettiness, like Tom Sterne who in his dedication to Pitt would evaluate *Tristram Shandy* as a success "if I am ever told, it has made you smile; or can conceive how it has beguiled you of one moment's pain." Leacock noted this quality of himself in his preface to *The Garden of Folly*.

At its most common, verbal level genial humour appears as whimsical wit, exaggeration, banter and fanciful nonsense, which variously characterize Leacock's exploded clichés. Some other verbal humour, including puns, word play and parody, can also be genial rather than satiric, when its subject is being enjoyed rather than attacked. At the level of characterization genial humour includes happy enthusiasts like Pickwick and Leacock's persona, rogues of the open road like Autolycus and Huckleberry Finn, and absurd conformists like Alice in Wonderland and Leacock's Peter Pupkin. Incidents of genial humour are rarer, particularly in a writer like Leacock, who specialized in static rather than dynamic characters, but happy gatherings like Falstaff revels at the Boar's Head Tavern or Perdita's sheep-shearing feast are wholly genial. The wedding scenes in Shakespeare's romantic comedies are particularly positive examples, for they show experts like Rosalind and Touchstone creating a new social harmony of good-humoured peace with characters whom they have civilized with their genial laughter. For at its most profound, genial humour laughs at society not only with Sterne to beguile its victims of "one moment's pain" but also with Shakespeare to suggest a civilizing principle for all who will laugh at themselves.

Marriage has a double value for genial humourists like Leacock. It not only allows for a prolonged scene of positive living at the climax. It also provides a principle of unity not inherent in a humour like Leacock's for combining genial wit, characters and incidents into a comprehensive picture of a society. Leacock faced a challenge of craft as well as depth. Without a more probing purpose than saying funny things, his humour offered no natural way to unify anything more coherent than a sketch; that is, it provided no natural pattern for a short story or a book. The preparation for the more elaborate of his jests may take some pages, but the impact itself is momentary and static. Once the timid young man has fled from the bank in embarrassment, he has no obvious future; all we are told is that he keeps his money in a sock (is it forever \$56?). Leacock needed to hit on some unifying principle of plot or character development or theme or atmosphere to provide a framework with which he could elaborate his chief interest and still maintain unity and a sense of inevitability. The courtship and marriage plot which comic drama and the novel of manners have adopted as their unifying framework provided Shakespeare, Dickens and Trollope with such a principle. Its climax need not be an automatic proposal or a satiric marriage, as it usually is. It can be developed as genial and it can be shown in depth. The happy ending which is automatic and unexplored in the revised *Great Expectations* and belittlingly satiric in *Vanity Fair* can be as expansive a vista of civilized living as Elizabeth and Darcy experience at Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*. For unity as well as serious comment on life, Leacock needed such a principle for plot, theme, atmosphere and character development to elaborate his chief interest into sustained comments on life. No unity is inherent in his technique, for humour alone can hardly unify more than the briefest of sketches — in fact a joke.

In his second volume, *Nonsense Novels* (1911) Leacock sought the unity lacking in the forty unrelated stories, sketches, satires and jests of *Literary Lapses* by turning exclusively to parody, and, significantly, most often to courtship and marriage. In ten separate parodies he grossly exaggerated assorted fads in fiction, making them look like the nonsense they are to the man on the street by applying his exploded clichés and incongruities of circumstance and character to them. Parody can be satiric of course, and perhaps his quip on "The Defective Detective" is: "With the Great Detective to think was to act, and to act

was to think. Frequently he could do both together.”⁸ But parodies like Cervantes who admire and love the literature that they are mocking are often genial. When a satirist like Jane Austen parodies love at first sight, she ridicules and condemns it, as when she has Elizabeth Benn recant her instant fascination for the hypocrite Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*:

If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth’s change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defense, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill-success might perhaps authorise her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment.⁹

The satirist has a lesson to teach through his attack, and here Jane Austen is spelling out her lesson. In contrast, when Leacock spoofs love at first sight in “Guido the Gimlet of Ghent: a romance of chivalry”, he exaggerates preposterously in the fashion of genial humour. His lovers love one another madly long before first sight; when they achieve the first sight, their love vanishes. Then he was able to develop a quip into significant comment on life and love and achieve a glimpse of the insight lacking in *Literary Lapses*. More often the exploded cliché parody less significant and more technical conventions of the love story, like this description of Isolde the Slender, which mocks the perfect beauty routinely claimed for heroines in love stories: “willow and slender in form, she was as graceful as a meridian of longitude.”¹ Although none of these parodies develop much beyond such jests, the five which involve love stories prepared Leacock for perhaps his most crucial sequence for isolating a dominant tone of humour in *Sunshine Sketches*.

In this third and great book of his humour, *Sunshine Sketches of Little Town* (1912), Leacock’s friendly jest at love at first sight grows beyond parody to give a sense of durable perfection to the whole way of life in Mariposa town. Although it does not unify the whole book and turn it into a novel, it is more profound than the absurd exaggeration in “Guido the Gimlet of Ghent” without being bitter and didactic like Jane Austen’s. It is fanciful, rather, creating for a moment an air reminiscent of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies:

But, as I say, Pupkin met Zena Pepperleigh on the 26th of June, at twenty-five minutes to eleven. And at once the whole world changed. The past was all blotted out. Even in the new forty-volume edition of the "Instalment Record of Humanity" that Mallory Tompkins had just received — Pupkin wouldn't have bothered with it....

And, for Pupkin, straight away the whole town was irradiated with sunshine, and there was such a singing of the birds, and such a dancing of the rippled waters of the lake, and such a kindness in the faces of all the people, that only those who have lived in Mariposa, and been young there, can know at all what he felt.

The simple fact is that just the moment he saw Zena Pepperleigh, Mr. Pupkin was clean, plumb, straight, flat, absolutely in love with her.

Which fact is so important that it would be folly not close the chapter and think about it.¹¹

Here Leacock's special humour gives intimate life to what would otherwise be just a moment of sentimental fancy. The absurd detail of the exact time of the first moment of love combines with the whimsey of the exploded clichés about love blotting out the entire past and absorbing Pupkin in every trite way, "clean, plumb, straight, flat", to open up a vista on a new way of life. It deepens and universalizes the nostalgic local colour of the small Eastern Canadian town which unifies the twelve sunshine sketches.

A happy range of genial wit permeates the three chapters of the love story with this distinctive mood. In whimsical exaggeration Leacock describes the food consumed by the lovers on their many outings as "about two buckets of ice cream and perhaps half a bushel of chocolate" (p.176). When the parody mocks Pupkin's lovesick idea of suicide, Leacock turns to banter:

So the upshot of it was that instead of taking chloroform, Pupkin stepped up to the counter of the fountain and he had a bromo-seltzer with cherry soda, and after that he had one of those aerated seltzers, and then a couple of lemon seltzers and a bromophizzer.

I don't know if you know the mental effect of a bromo-seltzer.

But it's a hard thing to commit suicide on.

You can't.

You feel so buoyant. (p.202)

By suggesting that a bloated stomach must take precedence over so solemn and pretentious a plan as suicide, Leacock surmounts the

artificial convention with his humour of everyday trivia. Overa however, the tone of fancy dominates, and we are left with a vision the enchantment of love:

I don't know whether you know it, but you can rent an enchanted house in Mariposa for eight dollars a month, and some of the most completely enchanted are the cheapest. As for the enchanted princes, they find them in the strangest places, where you never expect to see them, working – under a spell, you understand, – in drug-stores and printing offices, and even selling things in shops. But to be able to find them you have first to read ever so many novels about Sir Galahad and the Errant Quest and that sort of thing. (pp.177-178)

There is a touch of sadness beneath that light humour. This way of life is very real to Leacock, and very dear. Independence and leisure were Leacock's philosophy of life, and he tells us in his "Preface" that he enjoyed "more in the four corners of a single year than a business man knows in his whole life". That is why he escaped from Montreal as often as he could to his country home near Orillia. Mariposa, like Orillia, represents for him all that a life of leisure and enjoyment can offer in this world. He sees its littleness and its shams and they make him sad, but he offers it as the best there is. The result is a near novel permeated with the unity of this atmosphere and deepened by the philosophical insight.

The genial humour of the Pupkin romance permeates *Sunshine Sketches* from the first and quickly expands to control the mood of the whole book. In the opening sketch, "The Hostelry of Mr. Smith", it jostles with satire and the odd macabre quip on death¹² until it envelops them and diverts their cold perspective to friendly intimacy. The opening banter on small town pride in the comparative size of the streets and buildings introduces a genial tone, and exploded cliché continue it through the chapter: "Forty brass beds were imported from the city, not, of course, for the guests to sleep in, but to keep them out" (p.20). It also establishes a mood of the positive peace which is the civilizing ideal of extended scenes of genial humour: "To the careless eye the scene on the Main Street of a summer afternoon is one of deep and unbroken peace" (p.5). It is as peaceful to the wise as a searching eye by the end of the book, but in the opening sketch a satire of small town hypocrisy about alcohol catches the careful eye. The School Board refuses a raise only to the teacher who drinks at Jos Smith's hotel and Judge Pepperleigh threatens Smith's license because

he was shut out of the bar after hours. Like the School Board, the judge is satirized as prejudiced and time-serving, both when he convicts Smith and when he later supports him: "Judge Pepperleigh learned that Mr. Smith had subscribed a hundred dollars for the Liberal party and at once fined him for keeping open after hours" (pp.24-25). Later when Smith fights the threatened closure by importing a French chef who serves gourmet meals at a loss, including a game pie for the judge, "Pepperleigh had the common sense to realize it was sheer madness to destroy a hotel that could cook a thing like that" (p.32).

What offsets and overcomes this satire is the treatment of Smith himself. For a while the tone with him is equivocal, for when introduced he could well be a force for evil:

When you meet Mr. Smith first you think he looks like an over-dressed pirate. Then you begin to think him a character. You wonder at his enormous bulk. Then the utter hopelessness of knowing what Mr. Smith is thinking by merely looking at his features gets on your mind and makes the Mona Lisa seem an open book and the ordinary human countenance as superficial as a puddle in the sunlight. After you have had a drink in Mr. Smith's bar, and he has called you by your Christian name, you realize that you are dealing with one of the greatest minds in the hotel business. (pp.11-12)

Despite the good-natured tone, this is a portrait of a calculating hypocrite. Only the devotion of the genial persona to Smith and the extension of small town pride to this great innkeeper divert the tone from satire. Smith is always a hypocrite in a hypocritical town, only keeping his liquor license by dispensing "philanthropy" to everyone from children on the merry-go-round to the hostile judge. But the genial humourist differs from the satirist and ironist in accepting hypocrites as potentially lovable. Smith may threaten to close his gourmet cafe after the renewal of his license, but in the end he cannot do so: "I ain't going to do it. It ain't right and I won't do it. They got me the license for to keep the caff and I'm going to keep the caff" (p.35). As always sentimentality destroys the perspective of satire. Perhaps the hypocrite has a heart of gold; perhaps the "deep and unbroken peace" has captivated him. Certainly by this late point in the opening sketch the tone of genial humour has come to dominate *Sunshine Sketches*.

Once established, the genial humour controls the remaining sketches, in which whimsical quips pinpoint a series of the lovable characters in

happy gatherings needed for extended scenes of it. In the second sketch, "The Speculations of Jefferson Thorpe", an initial quip suggests the conversion of unsociable city men into acceptable newcomers in small town society: "From early morning, when the commercial travellers off the 6:30 express got shaved into the resemblance of human beings, there were always people going in and out of the barber shop" (p.39). In the process these visitors learn how to enjoy everyday life as only small town citizens know how:

You see, in Mariposa, shaving isn't the hurried, perfunctory thing that it is in the city. A shave is looked upon as a form of physical pleasure and lasts anywhere from twenty-five minutes to three-quarters of an hour. (p.42)

As a local centre for leisurely chats about the abiding non-business interests of Mariposans, the barber shop creates the intimate social life which genial humour promotes: "The conversation, of course, was the real charm of the place. You see, Jefferson's forte, or specialty, was information" (p.43). As the catalyst who crystallizes this positive social pleasure Jefferson is an agent of genial humour. As he chats about major league baseball games, horse races and stock market fortunes, he creates a mood of gentle melancholy. Daydreams of far-away excitement combine with the immediate ease of the barber shop and the small town to create a wistful longing for a more significant and grander life. When Jeff makes his own brief fortune on the stock market and suddenly starts talking about banana plantations in Cuba, the humour gives way to sentimentality:

It seemed to spoil one's idea of Jeff that copper and asbestos and banana lands should form the goal of his thought when, if he knew it, the little barber shop and the sunlight of Mariposa was so much better. (p.58)

Though Jeff loses his fortune he really wins, for society as it is gives the genial humourist all the happiness he can expect in life. He may regret the inadequacies of the society around him, but he knows that none better exists, and that he must share in it to enjoy it. By laughing and lamenting with Jeff in close context, Leacock rounds out the portrait with a mixture of moods which is compatible only in genial humour.

The most widely social scene in *Sunshine Sketches* occurs in the third chapter, "The Marine Excursions of the Knights of Pythias". In describing a happy gathering of the whole community on an annual

picnic, it offers a rare example of genial humour developed at length in an incident, comparable to the sheep-shearing feast in *The Winter's Tale* or Christmas at Dingley Dell. With everyone who can go going, whether a member of the Knights of Pythias or not, and all determined to eat and especially drink to the full, the scene is the ideal festival for the genial humourist. Sir Toby Belch would share the eager anticipation for Josh Smith's "huge basket of provender that would feed a factory. There must be sandwiches in that. I think I can hear them clinking" (pp.66-67). Only the hour would shock him, as the crowd gathers aboard the *Mariposa Belle* at six thirty of a summer morning, with whiskey instead of cakes and ale: "the Mariposa Knights of Pythias are, by their constitution, dedicated to temperance and there's Henry Mullins, the manager of the Exchange Bank, also a Knight of Pythias, with a small flask of Pogram's Special in his hip pocket as a sort of amendment to the constitution" (p.67). Perhaps the crew shared too heartily in those material pleasures; certainly the genial persona recognized that distress lurks behind the happiest joy. It is only fitting that the jolly day end with the *Mariposa Belle* sinking, and equally fitting that the mishap cause discomfort rather than disaster. As the "rescued" passengers walk home around the lake, and in their heavy absence Josh Smith seals the leaks and floats the boat, a note of sentiment again blends into the tone of genial humour, in the singing of the national anthem, which "is good enough for those of us who know Mariposa" (p.84). To Leacock the genial humourist Canada may well offer the best life he knows in a sorry world, but the only sane response is to laugh about it while joining in its little joys.

The remaining nine chapters of *Sunshine Sketches* deepen and perfect the dimensions of an intimate and laughable society which by now includes the author and reader. The three which tell of Dean Drone and the building of a new church develop the amused tolerance for incompetence which genial humour allows. Although Leacock recognized and recorded the minister's incompetence and utter stupidity, which would have infuriated a Dickens, he did not attack him for them, and without attack there can be no satire. Though he is a wholly impractical "mugwamp", dull in the pulpit and hopeless with accounts, he looks lovably human because Leacock treats him as his equal instead of belittling him with satire:

I have known him, in his little study upstairs, turn over the pages of the "Animals of Palestine", looking for a mugwamp. But there was none there. It must have been unknown in the greater days of Judea. (p.115)

It was widely enough known in the Mariposas of Canada, and a general tolerance for the Drones means no more than accepting their inadequacies as the common denominator in the sum of small town success. Indeed the church building campaign flounders because the good people of Mariposa raise just enough money to pay for the fund-raising dinners. Even about these fund raisers Leacock is typical genial: "solid men who can tell you to a nicety how many cents there are in a dollar" (p.127). The context of the book keeps the whole incident genial. When Josh Smith assures the success of the campaign by burning the old church building down for the insurance money, as Judge Pepperleigh orders the "infernal skunks" of the insurance company to pay up (p.145), even hypocrisy serves the genial effect. The fire itself is glorious:

What was that? That light in the sky there, eastward? — near or far he could not say. Was it already the dawn of the New Jerusalem brightening in the east, or was it — look — in the church itself, — what is that? — that dull red glow that shines behind the stained-glass windows, turning them to crimson?... (p.142)

Here the effect of arson is fanciful, friendly, positive, like the burning of Fishbourne High Street in *The History of Mr. Polly*. As Smith the illiterate hypocrite once again reveals his curious altruism, Leacock assimilates him fully into the determinedly happy world of Mariposa. For tolerant laughter must accept the hypocrite as well as the incompetent. Perhaps as a reward, perhaps as a monument to Mariposa, the arsonist turns the wistful widower into the best of ministers — for the Infant Class — and the clearest head for Greek — in Mariposa: "And sometimes — when his head is very clear, — as he sits there reading beneath the plum blossoms he can hear them singing beyond, and I hear my wife's voice" (p.151). The bemusing pathos of this last glimpse of the Drone characterizes the closing mood of the book.

Sunshine Sketches culminates in such a wistful longing for the life of Mariposa itself as the least distasteful society in a country of over-ambitious and bored urban citizens. In Mariposa Peter Pupkin, whose courtship and marriage occupy the next three chapters, can perpetuate

the gentle town life in his "enchanted house", but only with a smile of compromise: "if you step up to speak to him or walk with him into the enchanted house, pray modulate your voice a little — musical though it is — for there is said to be an enchanted baby on the premises whose sleep must not lightly be disturbed" (p.220). In such a society the urge for happy times must seduce even the Drone who cannot write even a letter of resignation or the Pupkin who would kill himself for love: "The point is that you can't prevent people having a good time, no matter how hard you try" (p.201). When it comes to the election of Josh Smith as member of parliament for Missanaba County in the next two chapters, the leading candidates know very well that above all the electorate insists on enjoying a political campaign. Although these sketches touch on satire, Smith naturally wins in a community in which hypocrisy can be good fun. So it is fitting that our last glimpse of him is the genial humour of his method of running elections, on the same principle as shooting bear:

"Hold back your votes, boys," he said, "and don't be too eager. Wait till when she begins to warm up and then let 'em have it good and hard." (p.257)

As *Sunshine Sketches* ends in "L'Envoi. The Train to Mariposa" with the yearning daydream of former Mariposans exiled in the city, the genial humour gives way completely to nostalgia. The old boys sit in their dotage in the Mausoleum Club "talking of the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew" (p.275). The humour which has destroyed the unemotional perspective of satire and reveled in the warmth of the genial culminates in this sad longing for the life of Mariposa as the best that is practical.

After *Sunshine Sketches* Leacock confined his genial humour to generally light and disunified sketches in a score of volumes. Only once again, in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, did he repeat the comprehensive treatment of a single setting, here describing city rather than small town life. In this book there is little love, for Leacock found the citizens pursuing only a hectic materialism like the bankers in "My Financial Career", in contrast to the affable leisure which he idolized. Here the satiric attack presents the financial tycoons as wholly ruthless; the university president Dr. Boomer as a windy glad-hander, and a "successful" minister like the Rev. Uttermost Dumfarthing as a

hypocrite who prays for God's guidance until his salary demands have been met. None is lovable. This satire is in fact a bitter attack on the opposite way of life to that which is lauded in *Sunshine Sketches*, perhaps too bitter to be properly *satiric* instead of sarcastic. No reform is contemplated. In the later books Leacock's typical humour lacks the unifying force of even such a negative theme, but it is usually much more urbane. The anthologists do well to represent these later books by isolated sketches containing the best exploded clichés. The spy of *Frenzied Fiction* horrifies the chancellor over a word:

"What did you find?" asked the Chancellor as I laid aside the Russian disguise in which I had travelled. "A *Rapprochement!*" I said. He groaned. "They seem to get all the best words," he said.¹³

The "stupid" persona of *My Discovery of England* arranges with the geographical societies to travel at his own expense. It is for such moments of genial wit that the later Leacock is remembered.

Stephen Leacock developed his own blend of humour, which provides a unifying tone for anthologies which bring together sketches from his many differing volumes. Any specific ancestry is hard to determine. The writer whom Leacock would most liked to have emulated was Lewis Carroll, as he declared in the preface to *Sunshine Sketches*, but his spoofs do not at all resemble the hectic mirror world of Alice in Wonderland. His professional career in political economy brought him into intimate contact with the writings of Adam Smith and Thorstein Veblen, but even his satire does not resemble theirs. His own discussion of the theory of humour offers no help in tracing ancestry. Indeed his comments seem neither perceptive nor convincing, as when he suggests that humour has become more and more civilized over the centuries (but where can we find a Falstaff or an Uncle Toby in Twentieth-Century literature?).¹⁴ Lorne Pierce has suggested that Leacock derived his genial humour from the Canadian novelist James De Mille,¹⁵ and the spoof of *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* shows some similarity, as when the authenticity of the floating manuscript is debated with reference to Grimm's Law. Yet the resemblance is general rather than specific. Ultimately, it seems best to describe Leacock's humour as his own creation and development, first emerging from a background of puns and satire in *Literary Lapses*, but made dominant in parody in *Nonsense Novels* and in a study of Canadian small town life in *Sunshine Sketches*.

At his greatest, Stephen Leacock was imbued with the friendly insight of genial humour, and in *Sunshine Sketches* he perfected several charming vignettes of lovable characters in delightful scenes, brought to life with the style of his exploded clichés. Perhaps, as Leacock said, his humour involves what is in a practical sense "a complete impossibility", but then metaphoric language usually does. An image achieves its communication by forcing the mind to recognize a similar meaning in scenes that are incompatible. The power of his humour at its best results from its poetic quality, for it forces the mind to pass through what is intellectually a dead end into the free range of the imagination. The effect of the apparent "complete impossibility" in which the humour begins is to vitalize a sentence, a character, or a situation, as when the buoyant drinks at the soda fountain in the Mariposa drug store distract the lovesick Peter Pupkin from buying chloroform to kill himself. The effect of the familiar in cliché or scene is to universalize the implications. The tone of spoofing makes the point of view friendly rather than patronizing or ironic, and the reaction of a loud guffaw provides a community of feeling among the author, the subject and the reader, avoiding the caustic perspective of satiric humour. Nevertheless, Leacock seems neither to have understood the significance of his specialty nor to have restricted himself to its excellence. His rough satire and crude irony jar the genial tone of even his best books, and only too often his exploded clichés are no more than verbal nonsense. He was profound only when integrating his genial humour with some serious comment on life. Apart from *Sunshine Sketches* he is most durable in such odd sad-happy sketches as "A, B, and C" and "My Financial Career".

Footnotes

1. Cf. Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada*, revised edition, Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1961, p.108; D.A. Cameron, "The Enchanted Houses. Leacock's Irony", *Canadian Literature*, no. XXIII, pp.31-44 (Winter 1965).
2. George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, ed. Lane Cooper, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956, p.9.
3. *Humor. Its Theory and Technique*, Toronto: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935, p.35.
4. *Literary Lapses*, London: John Lane, 1910, pp.138-139.
5. *Literary Lapses*, p.179.
6. "The Spiritual Outlook of Mr. Doomer", *Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy*, New York: John Lane Company, 1915, pp.78-79.
7. *Humor. Its Theory and Technique*, p.94.
8. *Nonsense Novels*, London: John Lane, 1911, p.14.

9. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R.W. Chapman, London: Oxford University Press, 1932, p.279.
10. "Guido the Gimlet of Ghent", *Nonsense Novels*, p.45.
11. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1948, pp.170-171.
12. Cf. p.17, "No man had ever grasped the true principles of undertaking more thoroughly than Mr. Gingham. I have often heard him explain that to associate with the living, uninteresting though they appear, is the only way to secure the custom of the dead."
13. *Frenzied Fiction*, London: John Lane, 1917, p.15.
14. *Humour. Its Theory and Technique*, ch. IX.
15. Lorne Pierce, *An Outline of Canadian Literature*, Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1927, p.164.