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Stephen Butler Leacock 1869-1944

On Sunday, June 28, 1970 at 2 p.m., a provincial plaque was unveiled to commemorate Stephen Butler Leacock – distinguished author and humorist – at St. George's Church, Georgina Township, Lake Simcoe. St. George's is located at the junction of the Sibbald Point Provincial Park Road and the Lakeshore Road, about 3½ miles from Sutton (5.6 kilometers). Stephen Leacock is buried in the churchyard.

The plaque is one of a series erected throughout the province by the Department of Public Records and Archives, acting on the advice of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario (now the Ontario Heritage Trust).

The ceremony was sponsored by the Lake Simcoe South Shore Historical Society, whose president – Mrs. K.C. Marsden – supervised the arrangements for the occasion. Mr. John D. Sibbald, Warden, St. George's Church, was the program chairman. Among those who were invited to participate included: Mr. E.G. Rixon, Reeve, Georgina Township; Dr. Matthew B. Dymond, MPP; Miss Grace Crooks, Chairman, Stephen Leacock Associates; Mr. B.T. Richardson, Chairman, Stephen Leacock Centennial Committee; Mr. W.H. Cranston, Chairman, Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario; and Mr. Joseph Sedgwick, QC, L.L.D. Mr. Stephen L. Leacock, son of Stephen Leacock, joined with The Honorable James A.C. Auld, Minister of Tourism and Information and Public Records and Archives, in unveiling the plaque. The Rev. Dr. M.J. Roberts, M.A., Ph.D., Rector, St. George's Church, pronounced the dedication.

The historical plaque reads:

STEPHEN BUTLER LEACOCK 1869-1944

This internationally-known Canadian author and humorist was born here December 30, 1869, and, at the age of six, emigrated with his family to Ontario. Graduating from the University of Toronto in 1891, he taught at Upper Canada College and, in 1901, began lecturing in political science at McGill University, heading that department, 1908-1936. Though Leacock wrote extensively on political science, economics, and history, he achieved his greatest distinction as a humorist. Some of his best work, essentially Canadian in character and spirit, may be found in "Literary Lapses," "Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town" and "Arcadian Adventures with the

Idle Rich." Leacock's many humorous books, in English and in translation, have won world-wide recognition.

Historical background

Many observers have noted that Canadians tend to be a rather serious, sober, industrious lot, and that a man who sees life in humorous terms may well be viewed askance. Nevertheless, it is a Canadian humorist – Stephen Butler Leacock – and not a poet or novelist, who, in this century, has become our most distinguished literary figure. Leacock's humorous writings, the best of which some critics consider distinctively Canadian in character and spirit, brought him an immense popularity with the English-speaking peoples and world-wide recognition.

Stephen Leacock was born at Swanmore, Hampshire, England, on December 30, 1869 – noted by Leacock as the mid-year of Queen Victoria's reign. He was born of gentry stock, his great-grandfather having made his fortune in the wine trade. Stephen's father, Peter, though born into a well-to-do family, was a younger son, destined for the colonies. In 1876, after previous attempts to locate in South Africa and Kansas, Peter brought his wife Agnes, six-year-old Stephen and other children from England to a farm in Georgina Township, in the Sibbald's Point area of Lake Simcoe.

Stephen lived on the farm until he went away to school at approximately age 12. Later, in referring to these early years, Leacock said: "The Canadian countryside in those days was dark and solitary, and life there had little converse and less amenity. Yet it bred, unconsciously, a love of the open air, or early hours, of the remembered stillness of the woods. This, to people lucky enough to get out of it, was coloured with the mellow hues of retrospect."

Though Peter Leacock evidently had little success as a farmer, Stephen's mother – with the help of a small private income – was able to send Stephen away to Upper Canada College. He showed a marked aptitude for academic work and, in 1887 (his last year there), he became head boy. In his piece, "I'll Stay in Canada," published in 1936 on his retirement from McGill University, Leacock himself summarizes, with some omissions, his post-school years:

I worked at teaching. I taught for three months, in training, eighteen years old, at the old Strathroy High School with General Sir Arthur Currie, our greatest Canadian, as my pupil. Then I taught for a year at Uxbridge High School. Then I taught ten years at Upper Canada College. Then I got quite a good job at McGill University and held it for thirty-five years. My

life has been as simple as one of Xenophon's marches. But at least my jobs grew longer. The next, I think, will be what you'd call permanent.

Leacock does not tell us here that he graduated from the University of Toronto in 1891, before returning to his old school as teacher from 1891 to 1899. By the latter year, Leacock had become thoroughly disenchanted with teaching school at the secondary level. Having acquired a serious interest in economics and political science, he decided to take a PhD at the University of Chicago. He entered the University in September 1899 and did so well that he was granted a fellowship in political economy for the next year. On the strength of this success, he married Beatrix Hamilton of Toronto in New York in August 1900. They were to have one child, a son, Stephen Lushington Leacock, born in 1915. While still studying for his doctorate, Leacock obtained an appointment at McGill University in Montreal as a sessional lecturer in economics and political science. He gave his first lecture at McGill on January 21, 1901, the day before Queen Victoria died. He was fond of recalling that his long and distinguished association with the university began in the reign of the queen. For the next two school years, he was teaching part-time at McGill and taking courses at Chicago. In 1903, Leacock was granted his PhD and was appointed to the full position of lecturer at McGill. He headed the Department of Economics and Political Science from 1908 until he was retired, much against his wishes, in 1936.

Leacock's niece, Barbara Nimmo, tells us that he never wanted to be principal or dean of a faculty, that he was content with small administrative duties to perform. Though he had evidently hated teaching high school, he was recognized at the university as an inspiring and brilliant teacher and was quite happy in this role, viewing his humorous writings as something of a profitable pastime. During a distinguished academic career at McGill, Leacock published almost 100 scholarly articles and more than two dozen serious books on subjects such as political science, economics, history, literature, sociology and education. His most notable scholarly work, *Elements of Political Science*, was long a standard textbook and made him considerable money.



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