

Stephen Leacock on political economy and the unsolved riddle of social justice

Robert W. Dimand, Brock University

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Stephen Butler Leacock (1869-1944)

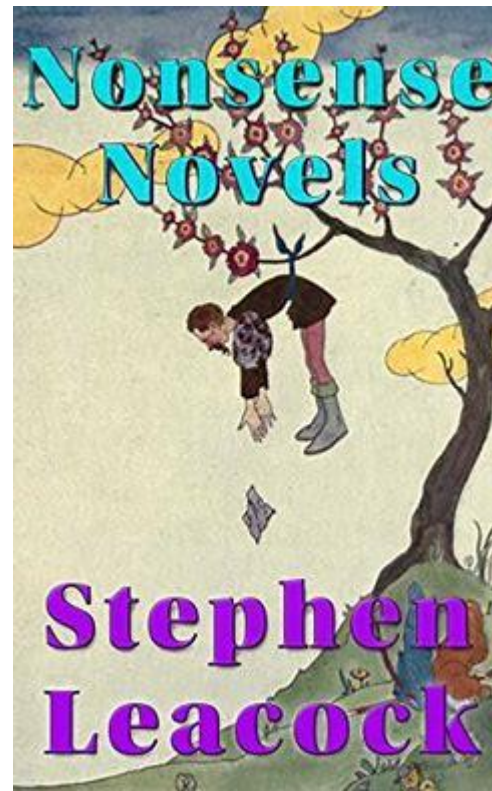
- “Canada’s Mark Twain” (but the International Mark Twain Society called him the modern Aristophanes when awarding the Twain Medal)
- -- the best-selling humorist in the English language 1910 to 1925
- -- head of McGill University’s Department of Economics and Political Science 1908 to 1936, succeeding Marshall’s student A. W. Flux
- Born in England, family moved to Canada when he was six
- U. of Chicago PhD in political economy 1903 – “The Doctrine of Laissez-Faire,” student of Veblen and Laughlin



- An incisive satirist and social critic like his teacher Thorstein Veblen
- Unlike Veblen varied the sharp, even bitter satire of *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914) *Hellelements of Hickonomics in Hiccoughs of Verse Done in Our Social Planning Mill* (1936) with the warmer humor of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), depicting the rural values abandoned by the urban plutocrats in the Mausoleum Club and the tame academics of Plutoria University
- Most widely read Canadian political economist of “Progressive era” but not a Progressive in either US or Canadian sense

- But Leacock was also a serious teacher and thinker:
- His bestseller was *The Elements of Political Science* (1906, 1921), translated into 18 languages, outselling even *Sunshine Sketches*
- *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice* (1920), based on six articles in the *New York Times* the previous year, from “Social Unrest After the War” (August 31) to “Socialism in Operation: A Prison” (October 5) – published with the same three US, Canadian and British publishers who published his *Winsome Winnie, and Other New Nonsense Novels* – of his two 1920 books, *Winsome Winnie* went to eight editions

- Because of his humorous writings, able to publish widely on politics and economics
- *Saturday Night* magazine (Dec. 10, 1910) had two Leacock articles: “Gertrude the Governess” (reprinted in his *Nonsense Novels*, 1911) and a piece on bimetallism, 5th of 25 weekly articles by Leacock on “Practical Political Economy” (1910-11, also collected as a book)
- but it was “Gertrude the Governess” that became famous when Theodore Roosevelt quoted the sentence about the lovelorn Lord Ronald who “flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions”

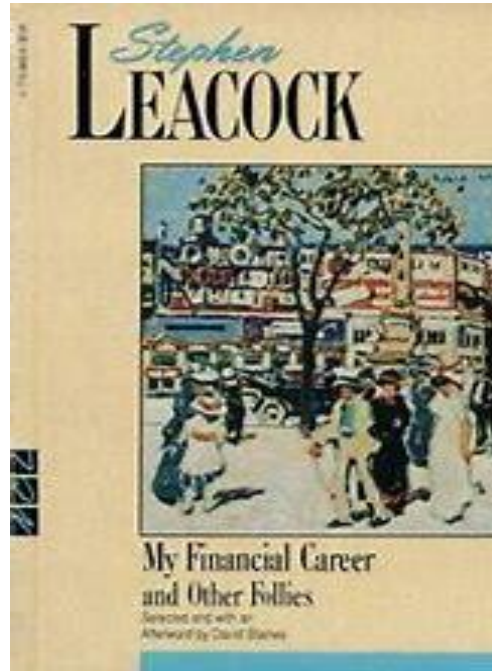


Lord Ronald said nothing; he flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions.
Stephen Leacock, "Nonsense Novels", 1911

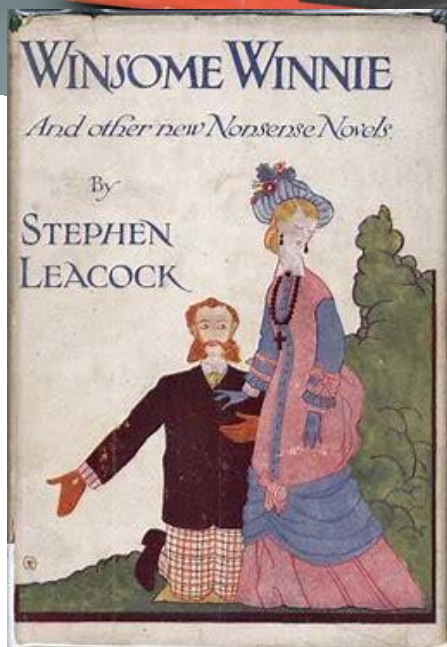
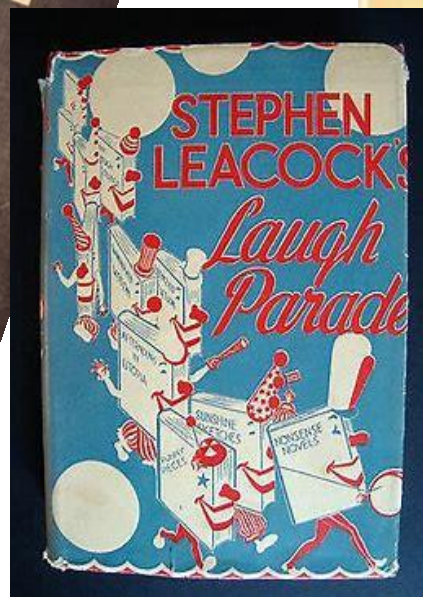
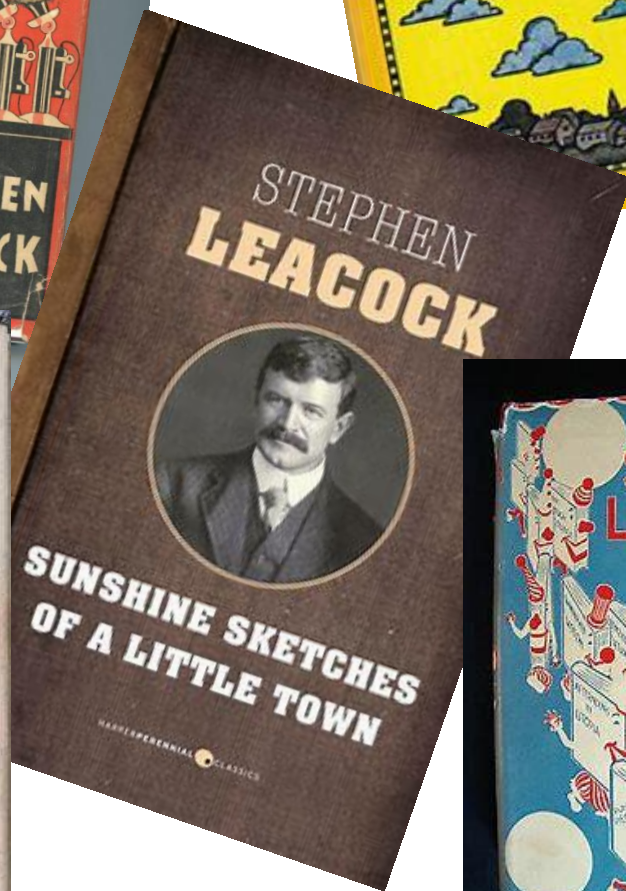
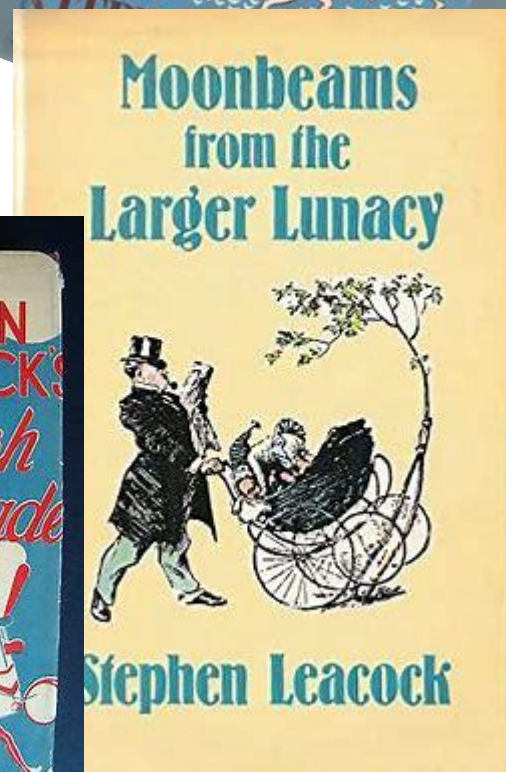
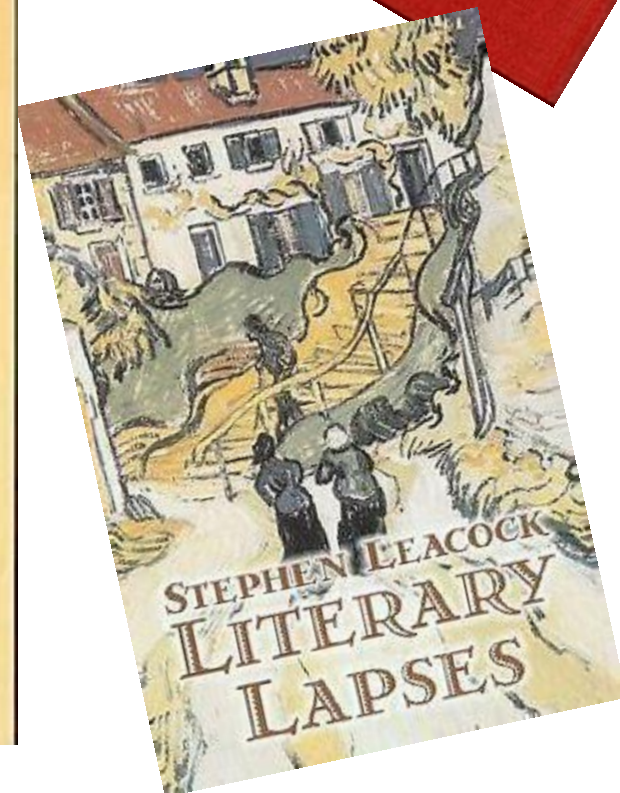
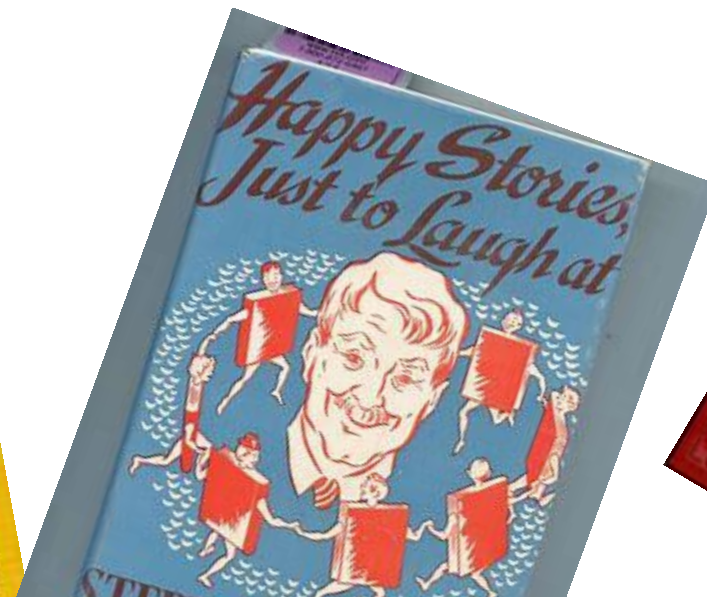
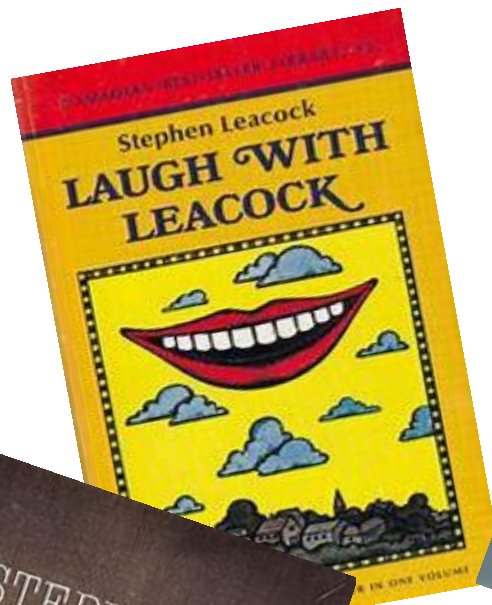
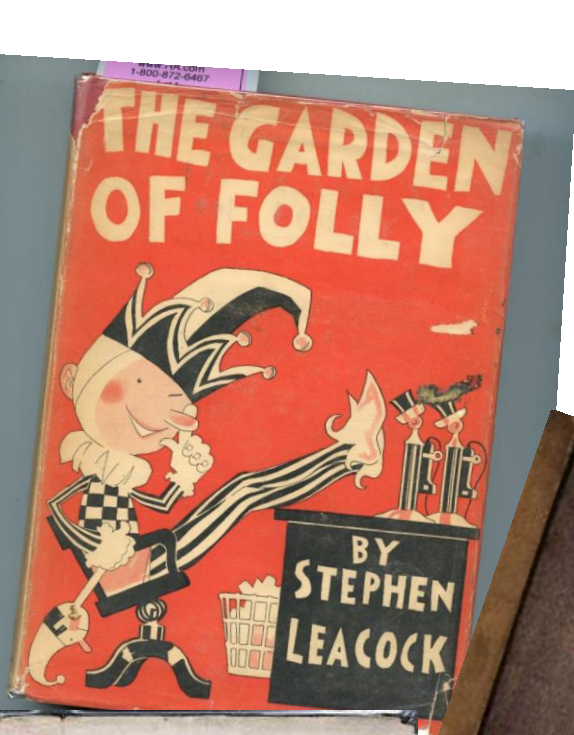
“ quotesplanet.com

- Leacock's standing as a public intellectual boosted by Earl Grey (Governor General of Canada), as a bestselling humorist by the English publisher John Lane (father of Alan Lane, founder of Penguin)
- 1905 Lord Grey asked McGill for someone to give 6 lectures in Ottawa about the British Empire – Leacock endorsed Imperial Federation, rejected Monroe Doctrine, called for a Canadian navy
- Aside from finding Leacock's lectures too anti-American, Grey proposed “turning Dr. Leacock loose ... as an Imperial missionary”
- McGill gave leave 1907-1908 (1/2 of what Grey had asked) for lectures in Montreal, London, Oxford, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa

- Leacock's lectures hailed by Rudyard Kipling as just what was needed
- described by Winston Churchill (then a Liberal, undersecretary at Colonial Office) as "offensive twaddle"
- 1908 Leacock returned from lecture tour, Flux left McGill for British Board of Trade, succeeded by Leacock as Dow Professor of Economics and Political Science – had published *Elements of Political Science* and in *APSR*, member of executive council of American Political Science Association – but Flux had doubted Leacock's credentials to teach economics, had written asking Veblen who was amused to give evasive answer



- In 1910 John Lane bought a copy of *Literary Lapses* at a Montreal newsstand to read on ship back to England
- A collection of humorous sketches published at Leacock's own expense after rejection by Houghton Mifflin, publisher of his politics textbook
- Included "My Financial Career" on Leacock's attempt to open a bank account
- Led to literary career of sixty or so books, many hundreds of articles



- Success as humorist won Leacock space in press for his serious writings – e.g. *My Discovery of the West* (1937, against Social Credit in Alberta) also as 27 articles in *The Globe and Mail*, 12 in *Montreal Star*, Governor General's Award for Nonfiction
- But: "When I stand up before an audience to deliver my serious thoughts, they begin laughing. I have been advertised to them as funny, and they refuse to accept me as anything else"
- In 1933 refused \$1,000 plus expenses to entertain American Bankers Association in NYC but offered to speak at own expense "on the restoration of the gold standard or some equally important subject"

- Returned to speak at University of Chicago in 1917, 1920, 1923, 1925 – but only invited to speak about literature, **never** economics nor political science
- Reprinted by New York Review Books, but only his *Nonsense Novels*
- Galbraith: “Humor is richly rewarding to the person who employs it. It has some value in gaining and holding attention. But it has no persuasive value at all.”

- “To avoid all error as to point of view, let me say in commencing that I am a Liberal Conservative, or, if you will, a Conservative Liberal with a strong dash of sympathy with the Socialist idea, a friend of Labour, and a believer in Progressive Radicalism” – Stephen Leacock
- Canadian context for *Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*:
- Winnipeg general strike 1919 (also Seattle general strike, Boston police strike) – in wake of World War I (more Canadian than US casualties, although US pop. 14 times as large), influenza pandemic
- Canadian participation in Allied intervention in civil war after Russian Revolution
- United Farmers of Ontario in office 1919-23, United Farmers of Alberta 1921-35, Progressive Party plus Labour in coalition Manitoba from 1922
- Wartime referendum on conscription (Quebec versus rest)

- “the obvious and glaring fact of the money power, the shameless luxury of the rich ... The plutocrat, unfettered by responsibility, seems as rapacious and remorseless as the machinery that made him” – e. g. Casa Loma, the never-completed Toronto castle of his wife’s uncle Sir Henry Pellatt
- “only a false medievalism can paint the past in colors superior to the present”
- “The real truth is that prices and wages ... are the outcome of a complex of competing forces that are not based upon justice but upon ‘economic strength’”



- “Socialism is a mere beautiful dream ... Our present lot is sad, but the frying pan is at least better than the fire” (referred to Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*)
- But: public support of aged and infirm, sanitation, housing, education and children’s nutrition, funded by wartime levels of taxation on high incomes
- Production to be privately organized but publicly regulated, including working conditions, minimum wages
- Make-work projects to guarantee jobs for all (with wages low enough not to compete with private employment)

- In 1935, in Great Depression, many of these ideas (minimum wages, regulated working conditions, regulation of business, gov't. responsibility for unemployed) in "Bennett New Deal," proposed in five radio talks by (Conservative) Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, published with preface by Leacock – who wisely declined Bennett's invitation to stand for Parliament in 1935 election
- In 1930s Leacock (like Beaverbrook) urged Empire Free Trade
- Keynes called Leacock's *Economic Prosperity in the British Empire* (1930) "extraordinarily commonplace" and recommended against publication by Macmillan (already published by Macmillan of Canada)

- Leacock, after garbling an attempt to quote Keynes on investment multiplier: “now I do not know what all that Delta and Y stuff just quoted means, but I am certain that if I did I could write it out ... plainly and simply ... Mathematical economics is what in criminal circles is termed ‘a racket’” (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1936)

- A British Imperialist, “red Tory”, progressive (but not Progressive) reformer – satirist like his teacher Veblen
- Political scientist heading a Department of Economics and Political Science, so mistaken by public -- and by himself -- for an economist
- Bestselling humorist and renowned “character” (e. g. public lectures with water jug of gin) so had a much wider audience than any other Canadian social scientist, including international publication of series of serious articles from *New York Times* to the *Morning Post* – but the audience assumed that he was going to be funny

