

THE PLEA

Vol. 37 No. 2

Revisiting Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town

Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* has proven to be one of Canada's most venerable works of fiction. Written in 1912, this collection of interconnected short stories about small-town Canada has never been out-of-print. Mordecai Richler may have best-explained the book's longevity when he said that it is "as much good honest fun to read today as it was when first published."

Sunshine Sketches can be understood to be more than just a good-natured satire of small-town Canada. It can help us examine the roots, benefits, and limits of Canada's liberal democratic tradition. From prohibition debates to elections to reconciliation, this issue of *The PLEA* uses *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* to ask how have we succeeded as a liberal democracy? And how can we do better?



WELCOME TO MARIPOSA

Some time around New Year's Day 1912, the *Montreal Star* commissioned Stephen Leacock to write a series of interconnected short stories. Over the course of six months and for \$600, Leacock created *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. One chapter was published in the *Star* every second Saturday from February 17 to June 22, 1912. It was re-published in book form on August 9, 1912. Set in the fictional town of Mariposa, the first chapter opens by saying "I don't know whether you know Mariposa. If not, it is of no consequence, for if you know Canada at all, you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns just like it." However, there is little question that the setting and the characters of *Sunshine Sketches* are largely based on one particular town: Orillia, Ontario. About 100 kilometres north of Toronto, Orillia is where Leacock spent most of his summers.

Orillia's reaction to *Sunshine Sketches* was varied. Some residents appreciated being Leacock's inspiration. They even wanted in on the joke. For example, Leacock said that Orillia lawyer Mel Tudhope "wrote me a mock letter threatening to sue me for libel against these people." As well, a review of the book in the December 12, 1912 *Orillia News Packet* said "there is no room for resentment, in fact Orillians are rather proud to think that Orillia is the 'little town,' which has been immortalized as a type of Canadian life."

However, not everyone in Orillia was tickled. The local barber—who became a character in the book—told the *Globe and Mail* in 1951 that "I used to talk to the fellow while I was shaving... but I never thought he was going to put it all in a book." And one local in particular—Leacock's mother Agnes—was reportedly not happy with how *Sunshine Sketches* mocked Orillia's Canon Greene, even though she liked the book as a whole. Nevertheless, Canon Greene himself reportedly never resented Leacock's portrayal of him.

Regardless, it was clear to the people of Orillia that they were being mocked. This probably contributed to changes made to *Sunshine Sketches* when it was converted from serial to book. Several character names were changed to obscure Leacock's Orillian inspirations. According to Leacock, the "names were too transparent.... it was only in fun but it led the publishers to think it wiser to alter the names."

Even though Leacock was mocking his fellow Orillians in *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock most likely had good intentions. As he says in the preface to his book *Humor and Humanity*, "the essence of humor is human kindness." To be sure, there is a critique of people and a critique of society in *Sunshine Sketches*. Even so, Leacock portrays Mariposa as a community of kindly people with forgivable flaws. As D.H. Carr wrote in the introduction to the book's 1960 educational issue, Leacock "is having fun, but it is fun with something he loves—the life, in all its patterned variety, of a little Ontario town he knows with easy and perfect intimacy."

DISCUSS

1. Leacock wrote *Sunshine Sketches* in 1912. Given the time and the author:
 - a) What perspectives would be dominant in *Sunshine Sketches*?
 - b) What perspectives would be left out of *Sunshine Sketches*?
 - c) How would this shape the overall narrative of the book?



JUST SOME GOINGS ON IN MARIPOSA

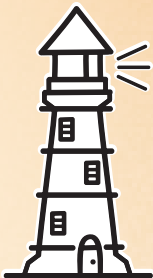
MARINE DISASTER!

When the Mariposa Belle sinks in less than six feet of water, a botched rescue effort ends with the rescuers needing to be rescued too. Once the passengers are safely off the ship, the Mariposa Belle floats free from the lake bottom and carries on to the dock.

Sunshine Sketches' marine disaster is an anagram of several steamboat sinkings on Lake Simcoe and Lake Couchiching in Leacock's time. However, the 1898 sinking of the Longford may be closest to the Mariposa Belle. The Longford got stuck on a Lake Couchiching sandbar. A lifeboat was sent, and once the passengers disembarked the boat floated free.

•

The rescue boat that was provided decades earlier to Mariposa by the Macdonald government sinks when trying to save the Mariposa Belle. This reveals that public safety plans can also have shortcomings. What should the role of the state be in ensuring public safety?



THE GREAT ELECTION!

When a federal election is called, the campaign in Mariposa sees facts being pushed aside in favour of meaningless statistics, candidates embracing shady electioneering tactics, and voters throwing the public interest aside and casting their ballots purely out of self-interest.

Historian Jack Granatstein called the election campaign in *Sunshine Sketches* "the definitive analysis" of Canada's 1911 federal election. This election pitted Sir Wilfred Laurier's Liberal government against Robert Borden's Conservatives. That election's debate largely focussed on trade with the United States and government patronage.

•

The voters of Mariposa view their own personal gain as more important than the broader interests of society. What is the risk to society as a whole if citizens fail to consider the common good when casting ballots?



CHURCH FIRE!

The nearly-bankrupt Church of England Church in Mariposa burns to the ground under suspicious circumstances. Fortunately for the congregation, the church is insured for twice its replacement value. The insurance company goes to court to halt the payout, but Judge Pepperleigh throws out the case and saves the church from insolvency.

Just like in *Sunshine Sketches*, St. James' Anglican Church in Orillia suffered a fire in 1906. However, unlike Mariposa's church fire, St. James did not burn to the ground. And unlike Leacock's story, the fire at St. James was not insurance fraud. In fact, St. James was forced to make financing plans to fund the church's restoration.

•

The insurance company tries to get out of paying the congregation's claim. Do insurance companies want to maximize their client's benefits? Do they want to minimize their own payouts? Or is the truth somewhere in between?



PROHIBITION AND LIQUOR REGULATION

Stephen Leacock was a fierce opponent of prohibition. In his 1919 essay “The Tyranny of Prohibition” he claims that “the fundamental fallacy of prohibition is that it proposes to make a crime of a thing which the conscience of the great mass of individuals refuses to consider as such.” For Leacock, the heavy regulation of liquor was draconian because people would find it regardless of whether or not the government tried to restrict it. Leacock’s hostility towards over-regulation of liquor can be seen in *Sunshine Sketches*.

Josh Smith, Mariposa’s hotelier, refuses to close his bar at the regulated hours. Smith’s “moral code was simplicity itself,—do what is right and take the consequences.” To Smith, doing what is right is locking the bar’s doors after all the regulars are inside the bar, being served. The regulars in Smith’s beverage room include the town’s Judge Pepperleigh. Unfortunately for Smith, he mistakenly locks the doors one night before Judge Pepperleigh is inside the bar. The enraged judge then saw to it that the law would be followed: Smith is found guilty by Pepperleigh’s court for serving liquor after hours. Smith saves his liquor licence through an elaborate scheme to rally the locals to his cause.

A HISTORY OF PROHIBITION

Societies in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have been consuming alcohol for at least 5,000 years. Alcohol in North America is a different story. On Turtle Island—the land we now call Canada—Indigenous people did not brew alcohol. Alcohol was introduced to the land by Europeans. For most of the time since alcohol’s introduction, government has been regulating it. While the government’s reasons for regulation are varied, two overriding themes can be seen: alcohol causes harm to individuals and to society when misused, and alcohol is a source of revenue for the government.

Government regulations on alcohol have not always been applied equally. Historically, these regulations have been most discriminatory towards Indigenous people, and Canada’s race-based alcohol laws only began to be unravelled in the 1950s. One of the first discriminatory laws was the *Selling of Strong Liquors to the Indian Ordinance* of 1777. Issued by the British governor in Quebec, this law banned the private sale and distribution of liquor to Indigenous people. The Indian Department became the sole supplier of alcohol to Indigenous people. The *Indian Act of 1876* went further. It completely prohibited Indigenous people from buying or drinking alcohol unless they gave up their Indian status. Though these laws were said to be a response to the negative effects that alcohol had on Indigenous people, the laws were underpinned by the false and racist “firewater myth,” described by University of Nevada researcher Joy Leland as a tendency throughout history to view Indigenous



people as “more constitutionally prone to develop an inordinate craving for liquor and to lose control over their behaviour when they drink.”

The *Indian Act*’s prohibition did not stop Indigenous people from drinking alcohol. It merely pushed drinking into the shadows. A bootlegging trade popped up to supply alcohol on reserves, and Indigenous people who visited cities and towns were often able to find suppliers in town.

For the settlers in Canada, alcohol laws were also omnipresent. However, they were seldom as draconian as the laws that applied to Indigenous people. Generally governments had little interest in banning alcohol from settlers altogether, largely due to the revenue created by liquor licenses and alcohol sales. However, prohibitionists succeeded in making laws more restrictive. Prohibitionists were a powerful political force in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were made up of a peculiar alliance of people: capitalists who did not want their workers drinking due to effects on productivity, women’s groups who were frustrated with abusive husbands who spent their earnings on alcohol, and religious groups that rejected alcohol altogether. Together, they pressured the public and lobbied various levels of government to limit or halt alcohol sales. As a result many places in Canada became “dry” in the late 1800s and early 1900s. However, much like the attempts to prohibit Indigenous people from drinking, attempts to prohibit settlers from drinking

were an exercise in futility. Some people made their own alcohol or imported it from other jurisdictions. And because alcohol was still available in pharmacies for medicinal use, some people simply obtained prescriptions from their doctors to buy alcohol. For example, in 1920 Ontario doctors prescribed 650,000 bottles of liquor. There was a 50% rise in prescriptions over the Christmas holidays.

In communities where prohibition was not in place, alcohol was tightly regulated. The regulations proved hard to enforce, and were often ignored. For example, saloon-keepers regularly served alcohol after the regulated closing hours. When saloon-keepers were caught in the act, commissioners often had trouble getting witnesses to testify because the witnesses did not want their local bar to close.

The excessive liquor regulation during the late 1800s and early 1900s shows how difficult it is for laws to be enforced when they are strongly opposed by many members of a community. Even though alcohol was very strictly regulated or banned in many places across Canada, people who wanted it would find it. And because governments wanted the revenues from alcohol sales, they had little incentive to limit or ban the sale of alcohol. These realities not only help explain the progressive loosening of liquor regulations over the past 100 years, but can also bring some insight into the evolution of laws surrounding marijuana today.

DISCUSS

1. Josh Smith was breaking the law.
 - a) Was he doing “what is right”?
 - b) What can you do if you believe a law runs against the moral compass of your community?
2. What similarities are there between liquor prohibition and regulation in the time of *Sunshine Sketches* and the regulation of marijuana or other substances in Canada today?
3. What role should the law have in regulating substances?



FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN CANADA

When the Church of England in Mariposa finds itself in financial difficulty, local banker Henry Mullins organises a Whirlwind Campaign to raise money. With nobody actually raising funds, the Whirlwind Campaign eats through its meagre donations and ultimately winds down with an empty bank account. The fundraiser is a disaster, and the church ends up with only \$100.

While the Whirlwind Campaign is meant to benefit the Church of England, members of the Presbyterian Church are welcomed into the campaign. As it says in *Sunshine Sketches*, “Anyway it would have been poor business to keep a man out of the lunches merely on account of his religion. I trust that the day for that kind of religious bigotry is past.”

This belief in *Sunshine Sketches*—that people are entitled to their own views and should not be discriminated against because of them—is consistent with Leacock’s views on freedom of association. In *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*, Leacock’s 1920 book on regulating and redistributing wealth to ensure fairness for workers and the poor,

Leacock discusses people’s rights to believe what they wish:

A man has just as much right to declare himself a socialist as he has to call himself a Seventh Day Adventist or a Prohibitionist, or a Perpetual Motionist. It is, or should be, open to him to convert others to his way of thinking. It is only time to restrain him when he proposes to convert others by means of a shotgun or by dynamite, and by forcible interference with their own rights.

Leacock’s view is largely consistent with the rights now enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The *Charter* guarantees Canadians the following fundamental freedoms:

- freedom of conscience and religion
- freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication
- freedom of peaceful assembly
- freedom of association

These freedoms mean that Canadians are free to believe things, free to organise groups, and free to try to change people’s minds. However, the *Charter* says that “reasonable limits” can be placed on these freedoms. Freedoms may be limited if to do so is demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society. This is why, for example, hate speech is not allowed in Canada.



DISCUSS

1. Why are these freedoms vital for a functioning society?
2. What kind of limits to these freedoms do you believe are justified in a free and democratic society?
3. Are there ever circumstances where violence is justified as a means to bring about change?



HISTORICAL WRONGS AND RECONCILIATION

When Europeans arrived in North America, they considered Indigenous peoples to be “savages” and inferior civilisations. To Europeans, their land was virtually empty or “terra nullius,” an idea used in international law to justify taking over land. The racist view of a few “savages” scattered about an empty land was the basis of the European approach to Indigenous peoples for hundreds of years: it was the accepted view in respectable intellectual circles, it was upheld in court cases, and it was assumed to be the truth by the vast majority of Europeans.

Like far too many Canadians of the past, Stephen Leacock held many of these views. *Sunshine Sketches* makes this evident in the passage “You get that impression simply because the judge howled like an Algonquin Indian when he saw the sprinkler running on the lawn.” As well, Leacock’s 1914 book *The Dawn of Canadian History* referred to Indigenous people as “savages,” and repeated the claim that there were only 20,000 Indigenous people across Canada at the time of contact. With the big picture, Leacock was wrong. Conversely, Anderson’s *Remembering Leacock* shares stories of him being kind to Indigenous people. Ralph Curry’s Leacock biography mentions that his mother Agnes—a guiding force in Leacock’s life—was highly regarded by the people of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation. And Leacock was friends with Jake Gaudaur, the Métis Nation of Ontario world champion rower who Leacock lionised in his essay “Bass Fishing on Lake Simcoe.”

Nevertheless, Leacock’s kindness in person does not negate his problematic views. As historian Margaret MacMillan says, “history reminds us that deeply held beliefs can often be deeply wrong, and they often can be held by very clever, very powerful people who have sources of all sorts of information and they still get it wrong.” For MacMillan, this reality can help

give us all a sense of humility as we look to the past, the present, and the future.

One way society is now looking to the past, present, and future is with the help of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They tell us:

reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.

Passages such as Judge Pepperleigh’s description—possibly referring to a war cry given that the Algonquins were embroiled in many famous wars—perpetuated false views of Indigenous people in general and Algonquin people in particular.

Algonquin is an umbrella term for a cultural and linguistic group of Indigenous peoples that include the Mississauga, Ojibwe, Cree, Abenaki, Micmac, Malecite, Montagnais, and Blackfoot. They have lived for at least 8,500 years on the land commonly known today as southern Quebec and eastern Ontario. Algonquin was considered a root language for many Indigenous languages. Learning it was key knowledge for fur traders pressing deeper into North America. Far from being a cry of anger, Algonquin language was important for building relationships between Europeans and Indigenous people.

Despite the deep history and cultural importance of the Algonquin and other Indigenous languages, at least ten Indigenous languages have gone extinct in the past century. Of the 90 or so that remain, almost all are endangered.

DISCUSS

1. What kind of harm could passages like the one in *Sunshine Sketches* cause?
2. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommends funding be put in place to preserve and teach Indigenous languages. How would expanding language instruction help build a mutually-respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?
3. How else can we change our actions to atone for past wrongs?



MORE TO LEARN!

Extraordinary Canadians, an 18-volume biography series edited by John Raulston Saul, includes a volume on Stephen Leacock. According to Saul, “Stephen Leacock set a pattern for Canadian comics and comic writers that goes on to this day.” Consider more recent comedic portrayals of Canadian communities, such as the CBC’s *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, *Schitt’s Creek*, and *Kim’s Convenience*, CTV’s *Corner Gas*, APTN’s *Mohawk Girls*, or Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass*.

1. What characteristics do recent examples share with *Sunshine Sketches*?
2. Do the similarities between recent examples and *Sunshine Sketches* tell us anything about what defines us as Canadians?
3. Do the similarities between characters from recent examples and characters from *Sunshine Sketches* tell us anything about human nature?

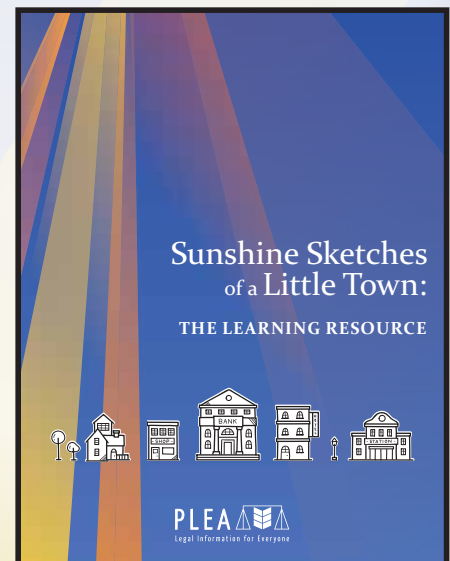
NEW FROM PLEA

These pages have only introduced a few ways to think about *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. For high school teachers, PLEA has a new, full-length learning resource dedicated to Stephen Leacock’s book. Reading questions, in-depth discussions of pertinent issues, and critical writing topics are developed for each of the book’s sketches. Ideal for high school English or cross-curricular units of study!

FIND IT ONLINE OR ORDER YOUR COPY AT PLEA.ORG

SUBSCRIPTIONS

To subscribe to or keep your subscription to *The PLEA* up-to-date, contact us at plea.org.



FREE CLASS SETS
PLEA.ORG

Graphics credit
Shutterstock.

PLEA 
Legal Information for Everyone

© 37.2 2017-12

ISSN: 0715-4224