

THE PEOPLE OF MARIPOSA

Some time around New Year's Day 1912, the *Montreal Star* commissioned Stephen Leacock to write a series of interconnected short stories for a Canadian audience. 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, Stephen Leacock opened the first chapter 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" (1). Even if Leacock said Mariposa was like a dozen towns, there is little question that the setting of *Sunshine Sketches* was largely based on one particular town: Orillia, Ontario. About 100 kilometres north of Toronto, Orillia is where Leacock spent most of his summers.

What makes the creation of *Sunshine Sketches* even more interesting—or perhaps more controversial—is that not only was Mariposa based on something quite real, but so too were its citizens. Despite Leacock's claim that "I must disclaim at once all intentions of trying to do anything so ridiculously easy as writing about a real place and real people" (x) many of his characters—at least in part—are modelled after real-life Orillians. Notes he made when drafting the book confirm this.

The reaction to *Sunshine Sketches* by the people of Orillia 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"³. 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"⁴. However, not everyone in Orillia was tickled. As the *Globe and Mail* reported in 1951:

Jefferson Thorpe's real name was Jeff Shortt and he shaved Stephen regularly. "I used to talk to the fellow while I was shaving," Jeff remarked indignantly, "but I never thought he was going to put it all in a book."⁵

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 whole⁶. Nevertheless, Canon Greene himself reportedly never resented Leacock's portrayal of him⁷.

Regardless of who liked it and who didn't, it was clear to the people of Orillia that they were being mocked. This probably contributed to Leacock's decision to make some changes to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* before its final publication in book form. When modifying *Sunshine Sketches* for its transition from serial to book, many characters' names were changed to obscure

3 qtd. in Sandwell, B.K. "Leacock Recalled: How the 'Sketches' Began." *Saturday Night*, vol. 67, issue 46, n.p.

4 qtd. in Spadoni, Carl. "Introduction." In *Stephen Leacock's Mariposa*, by Daphne Mainprize, Dundee Press, 2012, p. 20.

5 "Identifying Characters in the Sunshine Sketches." *The Globe and Mail*, 22 September 1951, p. 10.

6 Davies, Robertson. *Stephen Leacock*. Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1970, p. 26.

7 Anderson, Allan. *Remembering Leacock*. Deneau, 1983, p. 151.

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"⁸. Some of those changes from serial to print included:

- Mariposa Exchange Bank Manager George Popley (based on Orillia's George Rapley) became Henry Mullins;
- Judge McGaw (based on Orillia's Judge McCosh) became Judge Pepperleigh; and
- Canon Drone (based on Orillia's Canon Greene) became Reverend Drone.

Interestingly, one name that stayed the same in the serial and the book was the central character: Mariposa's hotelier Josh Smith. Leacock based Josh Smith on Jim Smith, the proprietor of Daly House on Mississaga Street in Orillia. The character was a "joshing" representation of Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century philosopher who is regarded as the father of "invisible hand" free-market economic theory.

Even though Leacock was mocking his fellow Orillians in *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock most likely had good intentions. As he said in the preface to his book *Humor and Humanity*, "the essence of humor is human kindness"⁹. To be sure, there is a critique of people and a critique of society in *Sunshine Sketches*. But even so, Leacock portrays Mariposa as a community of kindly people with forgivable flaws. As D.H. Carr wrote in the introduction to the 1960 educational issue of *Sunshine Sketches*, 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"¹⁰.

8 qtd. in Spadoni, Carl. "Introduction." In *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, by Stephen Leacock, Broadview Press, 2002, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

9 Leacock, Stephen. *Humor and Humanity*. Henry Holt and Company, 1938, np.

10 Carr, D.H. "Biographical Note." *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, by Stephen Leacock, 1931. Chariot Literature Text, McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1960, p. x.