

OPUNTIA

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STEPHEN LEACOCK

by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

Canada's greatest literary humourist is generally recognized to be Stephen Leacock (1869-1944). Many of his humorous anthologies and novels are still in print. His day job was Professor of Economics at McGill University in Montréal, where he was affectionately known to his students as Leaky Steamcock because of his absent-mindedness. Like other academics at McGill, he published serious weighty tomes that are now obsolete and forgotten, but unlike the other academics, his name has not been forgotten.

Some of his phrases have passed into the English language, such as to ride "madly off in all directions", and his definition that a statesman is anyone who stayed out of jail until he was at least 80 years old. His particular forte was to take generally accepted truths at face value and make outrageous extrapolations from them. For example, stamp collectors assert that their hobby teaches geography. Leacock took them at their word and concluded that the major countries of the world were Somalia, Cochin China, and Pitcairn Island, because they were the major stamp issuers of his day.



In the early 1980s, I was a recent university graduate holding down my first permanent job and paying off a heavy mortgage. Nonetheless, I did not neglect the essentials of life such as books, and made regular rounds of the Calgary secondhand bookstores. Among other various collections, I built up one of Leacock in original hardcover editions, in those days available for about \$10 each. I hate to think what it would cost me to duplicate it today. The collection has been one of the best investments I have made, although I did not buy the books for any reason than to read them.

I won't review all his books, for he was a prolific author who turned his pen to numerous subjects. I have about two metres

shelf space of his books. His humour tended to a mix of exaggerated extrapolation, inversion, and mawkish sentiment. He knew how to draw characters from real life, and in reading through his books you will undoubtedly recognize your local minister or favourite uncle. He also tends to wander away from the main subject at times, taking the scenic route before getting back to the main plot.

Humorous Books.

His best work is agreed by all to be **Sunshine Sketches Of A Little Town** (1912), a roman-a-clef of Orillia, Ontario, thinly disguised as Mariposa. Orillia, in the lake resort country of backwoods Ontario, was where he summered, in a house on Old Brewery Bay. Leacock mentions in his foreword that "*Mariposa is not a real town. On the contrary, it is about seventy or eighty of them.*" This disclaimer is disingenuous because there are too many correspondences and similarities to believe otherwise. But having said that, Leacock has caught the life and times of a typical rural town, then and now. I recognize in Mariposa many features and people of my birthplace, the prairie village of Eckville, Alberta. Leacock begins by pointing out that to an outsider it may seem there's not an awful lot going on, but to a dweller it is a busy place.

(Pause for a digression. The most popular Canadian sitcom on television today is **Corner Gas**, set in the fictional town of Dog River, Saskatchewan. It is loosely based on the real-life town of Rouleau, in the heart of the treeless flatlands of southern Saskatchewan. The first four seasons are available on DVD; Amazon.ca or Indigo.ca will have them. If you want to start off small, I recommend the first-season set, which includes the famous scene on how the Dog River police set up radar traps where there are no trees or buildings to hide the cruiser. Dog River, Mariposa, Orillia, Eckville, and Rouleau are all as one.)

Leacock opens the novel with the troubles of Mr. Joseph Smith, hotel proprietor, who is about to lose his liquor license because he accidentally closed the bar before the local magistrate could have a nightcap. Leacock introduces into this chapter one of his favourite techniques: inversion. Smith did not lose his license for being open past hours, but because he wasn't open after hours. Now he awaits the decision of the county License Commissioners. Whether in Mariposa or Eckville, rural hotels do not make money from room rental, which is more in the line of a public service. They exist for their taverns. As Leacock writes: "*If you know anything of the hotel business at all, you will understand that as beside the decisions of the License Commissioners of Missinaba County, the opinions of the Lords of the Privy Council are mere trifles.*" Smith comes up with an unusual plan to get back his license.

At the time Leacock wrote the book, the Precambrian Shield area of northern Ontario was just starting to be developed, and a mining boom was underway. The chapter "The Speculations Of Jefferson Thorpe", about the local barber in Mariposa who makes and loses a fortune in penny mining stocks, stands the test of time. It could just as easily happen in our modern times, which have seen the Bre-X scandal, the dot.com bust, and hedge funds paying \$78 for a barrel of oil. Thorpe, like many a small-town merchant, dreams of a better life sitting in a counting house adding up his millions, instead of selling shaves and haircuts at 5 cents each. But, like so many speculators, he buys into one project too many, and ends up back where he was among the lumpenproletariat. The only person who makes money is Mr. Smith, who had worked up north in his younger days and knew what it was like out on the land. While his townsfolk were buying and selling pieces of paper, Smith bought up the local potato crop and shipped it north for tremendous profit. During the Yukon gold rush, when fresh eggs sold for their weight in gold, a laying hen was worth as much as a producing mine, and Smith knew that well.

"The Marine Excursion Of The Knights Of Pythias" begins with a digression by Leacock that in small towns, everyone participates in local events, either working on the show committee or as a paying spectator. They have to, otherwise the town couldn't function for lack of sufficient population.

As the popular joke went in Eckville, the volunteer Fire Dept. would host its annual fund-raising barbecue with the slogan "If you come to our barbecue, we'll come to your fire.". Meanwhile, back at the excursion, there is the steamer Mariposa Belle, drawing a good 50 cm draft in the water when fully loaded, a veritable Titanic of the lake country. Off to the island they go for the day's activities, a picnic much like any picnic you've attended in the last century.

On the return voyage, the steamer seems to be riding a bit lower than before, and the passengers start to wonder. There isn't an awful lot of panic because the lake is only two metres deep at most, and the steamer settles down stuck fast in a mud bank. The emergency rockets are fired off to alert the townspeople, and the passengers use the rowboat on board to go ashore. None of this fancy business about sufficient lifeboats for all; on the lake you wait your turn to be rescued like a respectable citizen. Leacock has more fun here with his inversion technique. The only rescue lifeboat in town is quickly launched and puts out to the steamer to save the passengers. Unfortunately the lifeboat hasn't touched water since shortly after Confederation, and it leaks slightly more than a sieve. The rescue crew barely make it to the steamer before it sinks, but they are rescued by the passengers and all is well.

"The Ministrations Of The Rev. Mr. Drone" concerns the village minister who would rather be reading the classical Greek authors,

in the original Greek, under a shady tree instead of rushing about on visitations and worrying about the church budget. The story takes three chapters to unfold and is more sentimental than humourous. The financial troubles of the church and the minister are resolved in an unexpected twist. I defy anyone to read the last sentence without getting teary-eyed.

"The Extraordinary Entanglement Of Mr. Pupkin" details a young bank clerk's courtship of a judge's daughter. In small towns, where everyone knows everyone else's business, romance is more difficult to carry out. This was especially so for Mr. Pupkin, in the days when people didn't marry unless they had enough money to support themselves. Pupkin finally pops the question, having obtained courage after foiling a bank robbery in which shots were exchanged. Gunfire is not quite as frightening as asking a woman to be your wife, but is close enough that Pupkin was able to take the final step into matrimony.

"The Great Election" was Leacock's account of the days when you were Tory (Conservative) or Grit (Liberal), or possibly both ("Vote early and vote often" wasn't just a saying). The Liberal incumbent John Henry Bagshaw is up for re-election on the tariff question, campaigning against Joseph Smith, who is on the temperance platform. Smith wins because his supporters voted more often than did Bagshaw's supporters. Free whisky down at the hotel to celebrate!

The book ends with a sentimental piece about how you can't go home again, about a man sitting in his city club, the Mausoleum Club, reminiscing about the good old days back on the farm near Mariposa. It is best appreciated by the reader who is now a city slicker, and who keeps thinking that they really must get back there sometime soon to have a look at the little town basking in the summer sunshine. I know how it is; as a city slicker I only go back to Eckville about once every five years, usually for a funeral.

The sequel to this book was **Arcadian Adventures With The Idle Rich** (1920). It is set in a big city that is an obvious amalgam of Montréal and Toronto, mostly the former. The stories take place during the plutocratic era when the Golden Rule was "Those who have the gold make the rules". The Great Depression had not yet arrived, and millionaires were the rock stars of their time. This book, like a Hollywood movie sequel, is essentially a rewrite of its predecessor.

The novel opens in the Mausoleum Club, a home-away-from-home for the self-made man and the idle rich. The first episode sees a group of robber barons awaiting the arrival of an English duke, hoping to relieve him of his fortune by selling him bonds. The Duke, unbeknownst to the financiers, is broke and actually coming across the Atlantic to float a mortgage on the manorial estates. Both fail in their pursuit of each other, owing to the Club's waiters and cooks going on strike, and forcing the

plutocrats to subsist on nothing but oysters and champagne. It is difficult to do a deal in such circumstances.

"The Wizard of Finance" is the story of a farm family, the Tomlinsons, whose hard-scrabble farm is the site of a short-lived gold strike, for which read Jefferson Thorpe. "The Love Story Of Mr. Peter Spillikins" is Pupkin's romance re-told, with a different young man and an older wife who is a gold-digger of a different sort. "The Rival Churches Of St. Asaph And St. Osoph" have different ministers than the Rev. Mr. Drone, but the plot could have come out of any Wodehouse novel about Jeeves. "The Fight For Clean Government" is simply the municipal version of the Great Election in Mariposa. The book reads well, especially if one hasn't previously or at least recently read **Sunshine Sketches**, but is not one of Leacock's better works. He was coasting here.

Somewhat Serious Books.

Leacock wrote a number of serious books, or at least as serious as he could get, which wasn't very. Some were compilations of his newspaper columns, and others were purpose written.

My Discovery Of The West (1937) was prompted by Leacock recalling how his father, uncle, and older brothers all tried their luck out on the prairies during the

settlement years from the 1880s to World War One. All came back broke to Lake Simcoe, Ontario. Leacock never got out west himself until he did a lecture tour in 1936, one result of which was this humourous look at the East/West divide which still plagues Canada. The book is not a straightforward tourist guide. He briefly introduces a topic in each chapter, and then uses it to discuss some related aspect of economics.

The boundary line between eastern and western Canada is the Manitoba/Ontario border. Leacock starts off with a look at the grain port of Thunder Bay, Ontario, at the head of Lake Superior. This actually isn't too bad of a choice, as from the eyes of western farmers this is the first important town when heading east. It is here that half of the prairie grain crop is shipped to market on the lake freighters. He makes a chapter out of discussing the economics of water transport along the St. Lawrence River (the Seaway didn't exist yet) and the Great Lakes. Bulk transport of commodities by freighters is ridiculously cheap. Canada sends grain to the other side of the world for a few dimes per bushel, and Arab countries ship oil to Japan for a dollar or two per barrel. The main cost is not the ship but the loading and unloading. A ship docked at a port, not burning any fuel, loses money. Profit is only made when it is underway with a cargo. Before Vancouver opened up as a grain port, Thunder Bay was the lifeline of the prairies. It still is, for when grain handlers go on strike, they back up the flow of grain all the way back to Saskatchewan.

By the third chapter, Leacock has finally gotten to Winnipeg, and begins by mentioning, not surprisingly, the cold weather they get. Winnipeg is the gateway to the prairies, positioned as it is in the geographic centre of the provinces. Manufactured goods from eastern Canada flow through its distribution warehouses. In those days, and until the NAFTA treaty of 1992, Canada had heavy tariffs on imported goods, routinely in the 15% to 25% range. This was to protect the manufacturers of Ontario and Québec, and for a century was a source of grievance for westerners who wanted to buy cheaper and better-quality goods from the USA, and who could only borrow money from the eastern banks at high interest rates. Bay Street (the Canadian equivalent of Wall Street) was the universal enemy of the prairie provinces, who resented having to support the sheltered manufacturers of Ontario and Québec. In Leacock's day, tariffs were a hot subject, because the jobs and people were in the east, but the rapidly growing part of the economy (until the Great Depression) was out west. NAFTA removed this grievance, although not surprisingly the easterners object to being pushed out from under the money tree.

Leacock then moves on to Saskatchewan, the breadbasket of Canada, which at the time he did his lecture tour was suffering from the Great Depression, drought, locusts, and low grain prices. He uses that province to discuss the problems of the Economy of Abundance. In 1936, agriculture was too efficient, with mountains

of wheat around the world, unsold despite the starving masses. Surplus milk was poured into drains as children withered away from the want of it. Everybody and their third cousin had a plan to solve the problem, ranging from Communism to Social Credit to Technocracy. Leacock's proposal was unusual. He suggested shipping all of Canada's surplus wheat to Britain and storing it there. Like everyone else, he knew a war was coming, so his idea was to ensure Britain would not only have sufficient food but would not need the cargo space for wheat when the shooting finally started. Pre-planning of this sort would enable Britain to feed its army and have one less thing to worry about. Unfortunately the main defect with that idea was not food but a certain Englishman waving a piece of paper and declaring peace in our time.

From Saskatchewan, Leacock doubles back to the Canadian Shield, whose mineral deposits and hydroelectricity were only just starting to be developed in 1936. He writes: "*The best that anyone could say of the place was that it was a sportsman's paradise, which only means a good place to drink whisky in.*" He uses this as a springboard to discuss the gold standard, which had failed in the Great Depression then underway. The American dollar and the pound sterling were, as he pointed out, technically equivalent to the Alberta Prosperity Certificate. Leacock's belief was that the gold standard worked automatically and reduced currency speculation. Today, money is a commodity like any

other, and speculation is the norm, but in his time there were still people who remembered that money is supposed to be a convenient method of accounting, not an end in itself.

This made for an easy step to the next chapter, on Alberta. We had just elected a Social Credit government. At the time Leacock made his lecture tour, the Socreds were tying themselves into knots over their issue of scrip money, officially called the Prosperity Certificate and unofficially called funny money. Alberta and Saskatchewan unilaterally reduced interest rates on debt, getting into a fight with the federal government, which claimed it had an exclusive right to banking laws. Amid shouts of "Ultra vires!" and "Moratorium!", the matter wended its way through various courts until the outbreak of World War Two made it all moot. There was no money for debt relief but suddenly there was ten times the money for war.

Leacock considers Social Credit theory by starting at the beginning with Thorstein Veblen and his theory of the leisure class. It happened that Veblen was also Leacock's thesis adviser when he was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. Veblen pointed out that money has nothing to do with economic production, and people who create money eventually control production. Leacock gives a brief look at Technocracy, parts of which found their way into Social Credit theory.

He points out that Veblan's theories were unknowingly restated and garbled by Major C.H. Douglas, the Scottish founder of Social Credit. During the Great Depression, many groups and activists independently arrived at the same two conclusions. Firstly, the economy could be improved by increasing the velocity at which money circulates. Secondly, money is created out of nothing by bankers, and this ability should be taken away from them and given to the people. Everyone seemed to agree on these points, but the shouting began over the problem of just how monetary reform was to be carried out as a practical solution.

Alberta and Québec are the two noisiest provinces in the Canadian Confederation. The third parties of Canadian politics all originated in one of those two provinces. Part of the reason is a clash of cultures. The myth developed that Canada had two founding cultures, the French and the British, but as Leacock points out, this is not true for the prairies. The West was settled differently than the East, with large numbers of Germanic, Slavic, and Scandinavian immigrants taking up homesteads. In Leacock's time, bishops and senators with too much time on their hands fussed and fumed that the West was being overrun by people with no basic loyalty to the King. Leacock pointed out that the flood of immigrants who did not speak English was nothing to be concerned with, since the children and grandchildren would quickly assimilate. Quite true, say I. My mother, Canadian-born of Finnish immigrants, spoke Suomalais with her parents but

never to her children, and my generation knows none. My father's family, four generations removed from Scotland, hasn't had anyone speaking Gaelic in a century.

Leacock briefly carries this discussion forward into the next chapter on British Columbia. This province evolved a different state of mind than the rest of Canada because it is walled off by the Rocky Mountains. From there, he somehow digresses to a history of the Panama Canal, which made Vancouver a major port, the Pacific coast equivalent of Thunder Bay. He then goes into the question of immigration again, suggesting that British Columbia could fill up with 50 million people if it had the same population density of Europe. (For comparison, Canada's total population in 2007 is 30 million, 90% of whom live within a day's drive of the American border.)

Having gone as far west as he can without drowning in the Pacific Ocean, Leacock then turns around, faces east, and considers the possible breakup of Confederation. The three most popular sports in Canada are hockey, curling, and constitutional reform. Leacock, being the easterner that he was, came out in favour of a strong centralized federal government, proving that he learned nothing during his tour of the West. Since his time, Canada has evolved into a looser confederation, where the provincial premiers have equal status with the Prime Minister, who is forced to take note of them. Collectively they are known as the First Ministers,

and about the only thing that unites them is mutual hatred of Toronto, Canada's financial capital.

Having abandoned the book's main topic, Leacock then goes on to discuss the railroad crisis, a crisis long since made obsolete by the semi-trailer and the airplane. Another chapter returns to the issue of immigration, where he makes a valid point that the nature of it has changed but the government response has not. In both halves of Canada, immigration was originally done by land companies and homesteaders, and settlers arrived in groups who gave mutual support to each other. Today, immigration is single person or single family style. The modern immigrants receive poor help from the government in adjusting to their new home, hence doctors working as janitors because the CMA won't help them get certification.

The book dwindles to an end with Leacock reminiscing about Arctic explorers he knew personally, who were all of the big names of his time. This was mainly because they kept hitting him up for donations or fund-raising help for their next expedition. McGill University was known as a soft touch.

This book is on the borderline between an obsolete tour guide and equally obsolete humour about Canadian politics. What is noticeable to western eyes is how Leacock could go out West and still not comprehend our point of view. He was an easterner

through and through, and while some of his other works are timeless stories of interest to everyone, this book shows him with his blinders on.

While There Is Time (1945) was written during World War Two but not published until a year after Leacock's death. Its subtitle is "The Case Against Social Catastrophe". The book deals with Leacock's worries about what might happen after the war when private enterprise collided with state control. It had not escaped anyone's attention that private enterprise did nothing to alleviate the Great Depression, while wartime government bureaus sloshed money around like water. As Leacock notes, there was no money for poor people but plenty for dealing with the Nazis. Nor had Canadians forgotten that after World War One the soldiers came back to working class poverty. Leacock feared open class warfare would break out as it had in 1919 when blood flowed in the streets of Winnipeg during the General Strike and the Toronto capitalists were terrified of the militant labour group One Big Union.

Leacock remarks that property and money are not inherent evils in themselves, but their inequitable distribution is. He pointed out that the reactionaries who denounced the cost of social insurance didn't understand that the world was not prepared to go back to a life of toil in poverty. Nor would concentration of natural resources be allowed: "*People hungry within sight of food, cold within sight of fuel.*"

It is said that primitive tribes do not have a word for poverty. Leacock doubted that some revolutionary ideas would ever come to pass after the war, such as the five-day work week. It is well to remember that most post-war employees would work Monday to Friday plus Saturday morning until the 1960s.

In the face of militant socialism and reactionary capitalism, Leacock pointed out that both private enterprise and state control are good and necessary. Both are only bad when carried to excess. There is little difference between robber barons gunning down striking coal miners and Soviet commissars shipping someone to the gulag. The problem is that most people believe the two systems are contradictory and cannot co-exist.

Leacock considers out that the greatest enemy of private enterprise are the large corporations, and the greatest enemy of socialism is human nature. Capitalists refuse to admit that unrestricted private enterprise ends in greed, and socialists insist that humans will work hard cheerfully and willingly for the good of the state.

For an economist, Leacock had some blind spots. He insisted that Canada could feed the world because we only use a fraction of our arable land and "*Of our coastal fisheries there is no limit*". As a prairie farm boy, I can assure the reader that opening up arable land is considerably more work than just seeding and harvesting.

The Newfoundlanders learned the hard way in the 1990s that the coastal fisheries did have a limit. The cod went away and never came back.

Leacock winds up the book with a call to a greater and more centralized British Empire, an idea that wasn't working even in his time. Neither Albertans nor Kenyans then and now have any nostalgia for England.

My Remarkable Uncle And Other Sketches (1942) has several sections, both biographical and literary. The former will be mentioned further on; I will discuss the latter here. The literary section starts off with the mathematics of the Lost Chord. The legend goes that a pianist was doodling on the keyboard one day, and randomly hit a chord of such stunning beauty that he spent the rest of his life trying unsuccessfully to recreate it. Leacock has some fun by suggesting that musicians get systematic about re-finding the Lost Chord. He calculates that if a pianist works 40 hours a week, excluding vacation time, he could sound out 500,000 chords a year. There are 5,156,227,011,439 possible chords on the piano, so the player could locate the Lost Chord within 10 million years. Sooner, of course, if other players join in the hunt. With 10 million pianists at the job, the thing would be done in a year.

“Who Canonizes The Classics?” is a discussion on how certain books and poems withstand the test of time, while others fade away despite being bestsellers in their day. Leacock’s conclusion is that such literature has the quality of universality. It speaks to all classes of humanity in all times. He then proceeds to a prescient conclusion that there won’t be any more classics that stand head and shoulders above others. His reasoning is that the original classics reached their heights in the 1800s when the written word was supreme. In his day and age of radio and the movies (no television in his time) the cacophony was so broad and so loud that eminence lasted but a short time.

Leacock essentially predicted what Andy Warhol said decades later, that in the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. Today, the Internet is atomizing culture. In the 1950s, an SF fan could reasonably keep up with most of the literature and broadcast media. Today even a specialized fan, say a Trekkie for example, is hard-pressed to keep up. In the 1950s, SF magazines were cutting edge for teenagers. Today’s teenagers are downloading videos from You Tube, watching the Basket Girl do a backflip through a basketball hoop. Leacock’s point was that the definition of a classic is something that cuts across all subcultures, but Internet users do not share a single common culture. One advantage of few channels or newspapers of mass media was that it forced people to notice things they might not otherwise want to.

“Migration In English Literature” is a theme that Leacock took special interest in. He and his family were migrants, and as an economics professor he studied the issue of settling the Canadian prairies and boreal forest. He opens this essay with a Charles Dickens scene about Mr. Micawber, who emigrated from England and became a large frog in a small pond in Australia. Many emigrants were seeking the same sort of thing. Leacock points out that emigration didn’t become a common theme in English literature until the 1800s. Before that time, those who went to sea expected to return home some day. In the 1800s, emigration was permanent exile. The cost of return was too high and too dangerous for all but a few. Emigrants knew when they left that they would never again see their parents or siblings who stayed behind. This horror of permanent separation made itself felt in an entire genre of sentimental fiction and poetry. The emigration genre died out in the early 1900s when most of the world’s empty lands were inhabited and wanted no more arrivals, and because return passage via steamship was relatively easy to get, reducing the horror of permanent separation.

Biographical.

My Remarkable Uncle And Other Sketches, an anthology of varied pieces, begins with the biography of Leacock’s flamboyant uncle, Edward Philip Leacock, known as E.P. to all.

He was a world traveler, a flim-flam man,

and the type of hail-fellow-well-met man who could walk into a roomful of strangers and be on a first-name basis with everyone within an hour. Stephen Leacock was an 8-year-old farm boy on an isolated farm in the backwoods of Ontario when he first met E.P., who obviously made a strong impression on the boy. Ontario in 1879 was in economic decline. E.P. convinced his brother that the star of the British Empire was glittering over Manitoba. The Leacock farm was sold for a pittance, and the two men headed west to make their fortune. E.P. did very well in Winnipeg real estate, was elected to the Manitoba legislature, went bankrupt and ran out of creditors. He floated away on a sea of unpaid debts and eventually ended up in England, where he finished out his days. He settled into a monastery as their general manager, where he helped out the monks and bamboozled the British government into paying out some huge claim to them. In gratitude, the monks kept him on as a lay brother, and he spent his remaining years terrifying Whitehall bureaucrats and pompous village councilors.

The chapter "The Old Farm And The New Frame" is a relation of Leacock's trip back to the old farm fifty years after he left it. In his boyhood days, it took an hour to get from the farm to the village by horse and buggy on muddy trails dignified with the name of 'road'. Fifty years later, he made the trip on a paved highway in three minutes by car. This emphasizes that the greatest change in agriculture wasn't new crop varieties or more

efficient methods of animal husbandry, but rather the telephone, the radio, and better roads. Farmers of yore were isolated in a way we can never understand, we who have cellphones, we who complain if it takes a full ten seconds to download a Web page.

Puff Pieces.

Leacock's son was born a cripple, and he worried constantly how his son would manage after his death. Consequently, Leacock did a tremendous amount of hack writing to build up a trust fund for his son. One such item was **Other People's Money**, a pamphlet written in 1939 for the Royal Trust Co., but due to the war it was not published until 1947, three years after Leacock's death. It was aimed at convincing people to have their inheritances managed by trust companies instead of doing the work themselves or relying on their local accountant. Leacock asks a rhetorical question why you should let a trust company handle your affairs, then answers it by saying that they can provide a better return than a family member investing it cautiously. As befits his usual style, Leacock quickly addresses the point and then wanders off to discuss other things that interest him, such as how England paid off its enormous debts incurred during the Napoleonic Wars. I imagine Royal Trust must have had to swallow hard before publishing it, and any modern advertising hack writer would denounce it as way too soft and off target. But that was Leacock for you.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Christine Baese 2007-06-22
Box 624
Northville, Michigan 48167

[Re: Sherlock Holmes pastiches] We sometimes get so involved with a character or group that they become like our close friends or families. Sometimes we live them more than our own families, whether it's because of their fictional characteristics or the fantasy worlds they inhabit.

FROM: Lloyd Penney 2007-06-22
1706 - Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

Even though it's not canon, or in Holmes fandom's case, Conan, the additions of depth to the characters and surroundings of Holmes and Watson add to the legends. Two Mrs. Watsons, the fleshing out of other characters like Inspector Lestrade, and other supporting cast add a dimension. I don't much like the crossovers like Holmes and Fu Manchu, or Bram Stoker, or any other character. They unfix Holmes from the timeline.

FROM: Brant Kresovich 2007-06-14
Box 404
Getzville, New York 14068-0404

Reading about the Lestrade stories made me think about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle being the actual inventor of the modern spy story. Somerset Maugham's Ashenden stories are based on his experiences on His Majesty's secret service. They are often credited with originating a style of sophisticated international espionage fiction that has remained popular for decades, but I wonder if some of the credit should go to Doyle. The Holmes stories hinge on some secret plan, suspense is heightened by lost and found properties, the chance of revelation, and the tension builds on Holmes' ability to think it through.

[Re: failed zine distributors] Though I never used a disty for my zine, I feel the pain of the loss of Tower Records. The only one I ever frequented was the Tower outlet in Harajuku, the fashion capital of Tokyo.

[Re: cultivating a sense of history] I think this is a laudable sentiment, but little in my daily interactions tells me that ordinary people take an interest in either the past or the future.

I think most folks in North America would agree

2007-06-22

with actress Pamela Anderson, who said *"I don't really think about anything too much. I live in the present. I move on. I don't think about what happened yesterday. If I think too much, it kind of freaks me out."* If people think this way about their own lives, and I'm pretty sure they do and it's mostly a benign thing, no wonder they can't draw analogies ...

[On the proverbial other hand, sometimes one can go too far in remembering history, which is why the Balkans and Arabic countries are fighting wars that began several centuries ago over who stole whose chicken. And many prophecies about the future fail to pan out, say, for example, predictions since Hurricane Katrina about how each succeeding season will be a record season for hurricanes and never is.]

FROM: Bruce Meyer 2007-07-21
84 Browning Road
Arlington, Massachusetts 02476-7052

My wife was trying to understand why anyone would write a blog. The same reason as why anyone would write a zine, to be able to express and read informed opinion.

[I'm not sure about the opinion being informed. Zinedom in this day and age has pretty much selected out the crudzines, the

authors of which have migrated to blogs and social sites such as Facebook. I don't read any blog on a regular basis, only if a Google search takes me there. My observation is that the cacophony of the Web ensures that few if any bloggers will be studied as Great Literature generations from now. To be fair, many bloggers aren't interested in fame; they use their blog as a method to keep family and friends posted on what is happening with the new baby or their horse breeding farm. Such blogs are basically Christmas letters written in electrons.]

FROM: Joseph Nicholas 2007-06-21
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The standard argument in favour of electronic storage is that it's more permanent, and can't wear out or break down. All I wonder, however, is what will happen to electronic storage when the power goes off, the oil reserves shrink, the gas supplies have been burned, when all the world's limited uranium has been mined, when there's no more electricity. It won't matter then whether the jpeg or the pdf are still universal formats because we won't be able to access any of them.

[Setting aside the fact that we have centuries of petroleum, coal, and uranium left, we would never be without electricity because

hydroelectricity, solar power, wind power, wave power, and tidal power would still be around. Costs would be higher in those far-future days but so what? I think the greatest threat will be new formats that don't accept the old ones.]

This is without considering the rare metals which modern computing and other devices require, and which by definition are in short supply. Once they've run out, what then?

[Substitution is the most common method of dealing with this problem, replacing existing metals with other types. Also, our garbage landfills will be mother lodes to future generations seeking to recycle all those computers, handhelds, TV sets, and so forth that were buried in one convenient location. It doesn't pay right now, but as sources of supply become more expensive, the landfills will be mined for metals, just as now they are being drilled for methane gas.]

I Also Heard From: Dan Sutherland, Sinoun, Phlox Icona, John Held Jr, Guy Miller, Eric Davin, John Hertz, Henry Welch, Guy Lillian, Donny Smith, Mark Strickert, Franz Zrilich, Sheryl Birkhead

THIS JUST IN.

In Winnipeg, Chester Cuthbert's house full of SF and fantasy books has been donated to the University of Alberta Library. U of A librarian Randy Reichardt, an SF fan, arranged the transfer at the end of 2007. Chester turned 95 on 2007-10-15, so it is a relief that the collection will find a place where it is wanted.

This makes Alberta one of the top places for SF collections. Several years ago the University of Calgary Library received the Bob Gibson collection, an equally massive library of SF.

BOOK REVIEW

by Dale Speirs

Dishwasher by Pete Jordan (2007, trade paperback). Newly-minted zinesters will not recognize the name Dishwasher Pete, but those of us who were in the Papernet during the 1990s will know him as the zinester who wanted to wash dishes in each of the 50 American states. Pete was raised in a working-poor family, and as a young man decided that hard work would never get him anywhere, so he should take it easy.

He discovered by accident that dishwashing was the best job for him. No dealing with customers, no pressure to produce results, and usually off in a corner by himself. Invariably there was free food as well. He ended up drifting, crashing at friends on floors and sofas, and keeping all his worldly possessions in a duffel bag. A chance meeting with another dishwasher who talked of his travels gave Pete an idea; he would wash dishes in every state. Another friend told him about zines.

From there it was a random zig-zag across the USA. A salmon cannery in Alaska, where salmon in every variation was always on the canteen menu. A ski resort in Montana where there was no place to walk because everyone drove to the slopes and then skied, so why bother with sidewalks? A lobster house in Maine. An oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Pete was unsuccessful in being hired as a dishwasher in New Orleans, where the restaurant owners only wanted Mexicans and Negroes as dishwashers, and all the white boys were expected to work as waiters.

Pete's zine, despite its microscopic circulation, began attracting mass-media attention as its reputation spread by word of mouth. The reporters were only interested in "Hey, look at the freak" stories. Pete learned this early; he counted 46 errors of fact in one newspaper story. He soon learned not to respond to the media. Better yet, in one famous episode, he sent his friend Jess to impersonate him on the Letterman show. They weren't too happy

afterwards when they learned of the deception, but they forgot to tell Accounting, and Jess got a \$500 cheque for his appearance.

Pete spent some of his time in libraries, thinking to write a history of dishwashing. What mostly was recorded in newspapers was union organizing and strikes, and the struggle for public health and clean kitchens (never watch how food is prepared in restaurants). Famous dishwashers he uncovered were Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, in their college student days.

In his travels, Pete also stayed at some communes, to see how they handled the most vexatious of their problems, such as who will wash the dishes and clean the toilets. Most utopian visions fail at this point. Lots of people are willing to be doctors or herdsmen, but someone has to unplug the toilet. Pete didn't stay long at the communes as he quickly discovered why they don't succeed without discipline and compulsory job rotas.

Pete eventually tired of the constant travel and began to think of settling down after ten years of dishing. A bad injury from a bicycle accident sped up the decision, and the prospect of trying to finish off the last few states ended it. From there to university, marriage, fatherhood, and life as an expatriate in Amsterdam. It was time for him to make changes and so he did.