



STEPHEN LEACOCK AND THE I.O.D.E. AT THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

By H. David Vuckson

Many Canadians know of Stephen Leacock (1869-1944), the famous humourist and prolific writer, and those who live in Simcoe County are also probably aware of his former summer home on Old Brewery Bay in Orillia, now a Museum and National Historic Site of Canada. More than seventy years have passed since his death and, because of this passage of time, few may be aware that, from early in the 20th Century, for more than three decades his “regular” job was as a professor of economics and political science at McGill University in Montreal. His tenure there ended in 1936 because he had reached the mandatory age for retirement. I remember a university lecture in the 60’s in which we were told the definition of economics as being “what

economists talk about”. Perhaps he preserved his sanity from the dry statistics of economics and politics with the humour that flowed from his pen and typewriter. Of well over four dozen literary works, he is best remembered in Simcoe County for his *Sunshine Sketches Of A Little Town* (1912) in which the town of Orillia and its citizens is thinly disguised as a place called Mariposa.

My grandmother’s younger sister was Kate Olivetta O’Brien (1890-1979), a spinster public school teacher. We all called her “Aunt Vett”. At some time in early May 1917 Aunt Vett, then a young woman of 27, wrote to Stephen Leacock in Montreal on behalf of Collingwood’s Major E. L. Knight Chapter of the I.O.D.E. (Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire) to see if he would do a speaking engagement in Collingwood. The I.O.D.E. was founded in 1900 to promote patriotism, loyalty and service to others when Canadian troops headed off to the Boer War. During the First World War one of their immediate concerns was that of providing comforts to the troops and to this end, the ladies knitted tens of thousands of pairs of socks. It was said at the start of the war in 1914 that “the boys would be home by

Christmas”. Ivor Novello’s song “Keep The Home Fires Burning”, first published in early October of 1914 expressed that same sentiment that the War was just a quick policing action and the boys would soon be back home; perhaps the I.O.D.E. knew better.

Leacock’s transcribed handwritten reply to my great aunt follows:

“M Gill [sic] My [sic] 4/17 Dear Miss O’Brien: Monday May 28—all right. I will give Readings from my Books; I prefer that to lecturing, but I will mix up reading & talking—from want of label call it FRENZIED FICTION A mixture of TALK AND READING. I’ll have some “publicity material” as we call it sent to you from New York. Please send me a card as a reminder to reach me in Orillia, Ont. on Sat. May 26. Stephen Leacock”

The “publicity material” Leacock mentioned to my great aunt was essentially the story of his life—a self-deprecating, hilarious account of his education and employment which was read out to the audience by Mr. John Birnie, K.C., chairman of the event. This same material can be found in the preface to *Sunshine Sketches*.

Leacock's topic for the evening, as he had requested, was publicized as "Frenzied Fiction a New Subject!" in which he "laid bare the weaknesses of the modern novel as compared with that of the earlier days of novel writing", illustrating differences in style, the inclusion of thrills and unlikely happenings and the defect in making plain the anticipated ending of all love and no sorrow.

Between three and four hundred Collingwood residents turned out to hear Leacock in the Grand Opera House. One of the local papers stated that he was coming to town at his own expense, for the ladies of the I.O.D.E. were devoting the proceeds of the evening to "patriotic purposes" which included funds for the relief of the children suffering in Belgium because of the Great War. One account says that this event raised \$105.00, not an insignificant sum one hundred years ago.

The ladies of the I.O.D.E. continued their patriotic efforts for many years thereafter. I was present at one of those events when, in the mid 1950's, we left our classrooms at Victoria Public School on Maple St. to gather at the flagpole for the presentation to the school of a new Union Jack flag. Presenting the new flag on behalf of the

I.O.D.E. and reading from a prepared speech was my Aunt Vett O'Brien, then in her sixties. This event was just a few years into the reign of Elizabeth II and we watched with pride and solemnity as the new flag was run up the pole followed by the flag of Elmer the Safety Elephant.

I well remember the fundraising efforts of the I.O.D.E. in the 50's. For years they had an annual "Peanut Drive" during which they blitzed the town's residents with Planters Peanuts products. There were tins of peanuts, mixed nuts, peanut clusters with milk chocolate, etc. all sold door-to-door. One destination for the funds raised from these activities was the bursaries that were given to deserving C.C.I. students at the yearly Commencement.

Although the days of the British Empire are long past [although in Victoria, there are still echoes of Colonial times and the Empire and we can watch the sun set on it every day], the I.O.D.E. remains active today with chapters in all ten provinces and the Yukon with emphasis on citizenship endeavours and educational support in the form of bursaries, awards, and scholarships among many other activities. The three Collingwood Chapters (Moberly; Major E.L. Knight;

Admiral Collingwood), however, are apparently no longer extant.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C .where he works as a piano tuner while maintaining a keen interest in the history of his hometown.