

# Notes and Comments

## Leacock Enters McGill

Marcel Caya

*McGill University Archivist*

Stephen Leacock taught in the Department of Economics and Political Science at McGill University for thirty five years, from 1901 to 1936, serving as Chairman of his department for twenty five. We know from his comments and certainly can infer from his unwillingness to retire that he considered his role of educator very seriously.

In spite of the length of his service at McGill and the prominent position he held, relatively few administrative records remain to tell of the development of his department or assess his role in governing it. The files he maintained as Chairman no doubt have been destroyed, as most of them probably dealt with routine matters. It is also likely that, in the informal McGill's administration of those days, most communications were effected *viva voce* within the relatively small body of administrators.<sup>1</sup> The only records left of Leacock in the Archives of the University mainly consist of letters and memoranda addressed to senior administrators, particularly deans and principals. Of this small official correspondence with the McGill administration, Leacock's letters and memoranda following his forced retirement are cited the most often, leaving the impression that they are the only ones extant to be of interest.

Much of what we know about Leacock at McGill has been drawn from anecdotes and reconstructed from interviews with contemporaries<sup>2</sup> and the few glimpses that he offered in his writings.<sup>3</sup> The lack of archival records explains why none of his biographers has given any extensive account of his life at McGill. It also explains in part why the story of such an important biographical element as his appointment to McGill is repeated from one biography to another without revisiting the basic documentation that a search of the archival records would have provided.

Although they have never been quoted, Leacock's letters of application to Principal Peterson prove interesting in that they reveal how the aspiring professor undertook to persuade the Principal to hire him. This correspondence was initiated in January 1900 as a result of a suggestion by Henry Neville Sanders, a McGill professor in Classics and Sanskrit. The fact that it is so dated, at the very beginning of the second term after he started at University of Chicago indicates that the contacts with McGill's Principal, William Peterson, were established at a very early stage, even before Leacock's wedding. It may correct the impression left by some of his biographers that he only considered McGill after being rejected by University of Toronto Professor of Economics James Mavor.<sup>4</sup> His letters to the Principal are interesting also in that they illustrate how Leacock introduced himself and planned to reconcile his graduate studies at University of Chicago with the beginning of his academic career at McGill.<sup>5</sup>

Jan 17 1900

Principal Peterson  
McGill College  
Montreal

Dear Sir —

Mr Sanders of your faculty writes me that there is a possibility of a lectureship being shortly established at McGill in Political Economy — In such an event I should like to apply for the position. I am at present doing Post Graduate work in the department of Political Economy at

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Chicago University — I did not take political economy as an undergraduate at Toronto: the course was not yet founded. Previous to coming here I did five years of private study and did enough work to be easily admitted to the graduate school here — In my undergraduate course at Toronto I took classics and modern Languages. I graduated in 1891. My standing in my course was very good. I took the first proficiency scholarship on entering the university: did not write in the first year exam: was first in first class in Modern Languages (scholarship) and second in first class in Classics at the end of my second year: first in first class in modern Languages at the end of my third year: in the final exam in modern Languages the ranking was alphabetical in the classes.

I am asking the Professors here to write to you as to my competency to undertake the work. Of course it would not suit me very well to leave Chicago just at present as it would involve dropping the work I have in hand, but I presume there is no intention on your part of engaging anyone until the autumn — My present degree is B.A., but I believe it would be quite possible for me if I came to Montreal to arrange to presently get my degree of Ph.D. from Chicago. I am thirty years of age. This is my first year at Chicago.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Leacock

P.S. In the event of an appointment, I could, if necessary, come to see you personally to make arrangements as to courses to be given and so forth.

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Jan 18 — 1900

Principal Peterson  
McGill College  
Montreal

Dear Sir.

In my letter to you of yesterday in regard to a position at McGills in Political Economy, I should have referred you to Professor Cashar Miller, and D' Veblen of this University. I have done most of my work with them, and thought it better to ask you to write to them for full information instead of merely asking them for the usual testimonial.

Yours faithfully

Stephen Leacock

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Graduate Hall  
University of Chicago  
May 5 — 1900

Principal Peterson  
McGill University  
Montreal

Dear Sir

I am just in receipt of your letter of the third instant. In answer I may say that I am taking Political Science in connection with my work in Economics. My work in Political Science both before Xmas and at present, has been entirely with Professor Judson, the head professor of the department — I expect to continue my courses with him next year. I should be most happy to make application for such a temporary position as you speak of as it would work in very well with my course here. I believe it is customary here to allow temporary work in high teaching in one's own department to count as part of a graduate course. With many thanks for your courteous letter.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Leacock

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[letterhead of] The University of Chicago

June 12. 1900

Principal Peterson  
McGill University  
Montreal

Dear Sir : —

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of June the 9<sup>th</sup>. In reply to it I may say that I should, in the event of my coming to Montreal, be most happy to give any help I could to students wishing it out of lecture hours. In the matter of remuneration, the arrangement suggested would be entirely satisfactory to me. In case of your having anything further to communicate to me, my address from June 20, until Sep 28 will be, Orillia, Ontario : after that I hope to return to Chicago.

Very sincerely

Stephen Leacock

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1. When Leacock arrived in 1901, McGill College had a student population of close to 1,050; in 1936, when he left, it had grown to a little more than 3,000 full-time students.
2. Allan Anderson, *Remembering Leacock* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1983) provides interesting accounts and testimonials from students and colleagues documenting his teaching and various idiosyncracies.
3. Except Moritz and, to a lesser extent, Legate, his biographers have not consulted the administrative records produced by Leacock when communicating with the McGill administration.
4. According to R. Curry, Leacock saw his application rejected by Mavor in 1901. Ralph L. Curry, *Stephen Leacock. Humorist and Humanist* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 69; Moritz (p. 93) and Legate (p. 37-38) also consider McGill as Leacock's second choice.
5. McGill University Archives, *Records of Principal Peterson*, File No. 9, (1892-1904), LA-LE. (RG 2, ...)

## McLennan Library: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary

Peter F. McNally

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On Friday, June 6, 1969 at 3:00 p.m. following the Spring Convocation held earlier that day, there was a short ceremony when the Principal Dr. H. Rocke Robertson, the Chairman of the University Library Committee Dr. Stanley Frost, the Director of University Libraries Mr. Keith Crouch, and the Chancellor Mr. Howard I. Ross, after delivering brief speeches, officially opened the McLennan Library.<sup>1</sup>

This short and subdued ceremony, held in the Library's main hall, contrasts too vividly with the impressive and lengthy opening ceremonies held, seventy-six years earlier in 1893 for Redpath Library, to go unmentioned.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, only university officials participated. There was no participation by representatives of the deceased benefactor, Isabella Christine McLennan (1870-1960) after whom the library is named, or the alumni or the larger civic community beyond the University's gates. By contrast, in 1893 there had been speeches from the benefactor Peter Redpath, the Governor General, the Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, and other distinguished guests in addition to the Principal and a representative of the Chancellor. Another major difference from 1893, is that no commemorative book accompanied the opening of McLennan Library in which the speeches were recorded and intentions of the architect set forth. The tenor of the late 1960s, however, with its strong social opinions and student unrest militated against ceremony, celebration, and commemoration.

Yet McLennan Library, sitting as prominently as it does at the corner of Sherbrooke and McTavish streets, is probably the most visible building on the lower campus. In addition, it has proven to be a remarkably effective main library. Despite the enormous growth in collections, enrollment, and research activity at McGill during the last quarter century, the building has proven capable of handling them with great ease.

At some time, a full scale description of McLennan Library, its design and construction, will be needed along with a discussion of the people involved. The main elements of the story are as follows. In the late 1950s the crowded conditions in Redpath Library had made it obvious that a new library building would soon become necessary. Miss McLennan, who died in 1960 and whose family had long been benefactors of McGill, left the bulk