

One more thing as I look for reassurance in my world of 1949. I think it springs from what we should like to call Christian charity in the individual. I am inclined to think it is also at the deepest roots of all art, all science, all religion, based in the sense of the mystery of man as man; in what is sometimes called, in the grand phrase, the brotherhood of man.

The thing is this: It's only a personal thing and only a private reassurance: I don't believe *we* are as bad as the Russians paint us. I don't believe the Russians are as bad as we paint *them*. . . . Just that . . .

If we could only go back and find the turning we missed, we might, we might even yet save a world in which to go on with our human experiment—a world for all of us, everywhere, all of us together. We might preserve for the common good of all both our achieved science and our Christmas carols.

Read first "My Financial Career" p.23 Bodley-LL 1910  
Following is from ESSAYS & LITERARY STUDIES, 1916

& see "The New Education" (Frenzied Fiction 1918)  
P. 323 Bodley V Head.

THE APOLOGY OF A PROFESSOR: AN ESSAY ON MODERN  
LEARNING

*Stephen Leacock (1869-1944)*

Known around McGill University as "Leaky Steamcock"

I KNOW NO MORE interesting subject of speculation, nor any more calculated to allow of a fair-minded difference of opinion, than the inquiry whether a professor has any right to exist. *Prima facie*, of course, the case is heavily against him. His angular overcoat, his missing buttons, and his faded hat, will not bear comparison with the double-breasted splendour of the stock-broker, or the *Directoire* fur gown of the cigar-maker. Nor does a native agility of body compensate for the missing allurements of dress. He cannot skate. He does not shoot. He must not swear. He is not brave. His mind, too, to the outsider at any rate, appears defective and seriously damaged by education. He cannot appreciate a twenty-five-cent novel, or a melodrama, or a moving-picture show, or any

eric-  
rom  
and  
tell.  
oba  
for  
r of  
has  
can  
ad  
ian  
vas  
ess,  
rge



of that broad current of intellectual movement which soothes the brain of the business man in its moments of inactivity. His conversation, even to the tolerant, is impossible. Apparently he has neither ideas nor enthusiasms, nothing but an elaborate catalogue of dead men's opinions, which he cites with a petulant and peevish authority that will not brook contradiction, and that must be soothed by a tolerating acquiescence, or flattered by a plenary acknowledgment of ignorance.

Yet the very heaviness of this initial indictment against the professor might well suggest to an impartial critic that there must at least be mitigating circumstances in the case. Even if we are to admit that the indictment is well founded, the reason is all the greater for examining the basis on which it rests. At any rate some explanation of the facts involved may perhaps serve to palliate, if not to remove, demerits which are rather to be deplored than censured. It is one of the standing defects of our age that social classes, or let us say more narrowly, social categories, know so little of one another. For the purposes of ready reckoning, of that handy transaction of business which is the passion of the hour, we have adopted a way of labelling one another with the tag mark of a profession or an occupation that becomes an aid to business but a barrier to intercourse. This man is a professor, that man an "insurance man," a third—*terque quaterque beatus*—a "liquor man"; with these are "railroad men," "newspaper men," "dry goods men," and so forth. The things that we handle for our livelihood impose themselves upon our personality, till the very word "man" drops out, and a gentleman is referred to as a "heavy pulp and paper interest" while another man is a prominent "rubber plant"; two or three men round a dinner table become an "iron and steel circle," and thus it is that for the simple conception of a human being is substituted a complex of "interests," "rings," "circles," "sets," and other semi-geometrical figures arising out of avocations rather than affinities. Hence it comes that insurance men mingle with insurance men, liquor men mix, if one may use the term without after-thought, with liquor men: what looks like a



lunch between three men at a club is really a cigar having lunch with a couple of plugs of tobacco.

Now the professor more than any ordinary person finds himself shut out from the general society of the business world. The rest of the "interests" have, after all, some things in common. The circles intersect at various points. Iron and steel has a certain fellowship with pulp and paper, and the whole lot of them may be converted into the common ground of preference shares and common stock. But the professor is to all of them an outsider. Hence his natural dissimilarity is unduly heightened in its appearance by the sort of avocational isolation in which he lives.

Let us look further into the status and the setting of the man. To begin with, history has been hard upon him. For some reason the strenuous men of activity and success in the drama of life have felt an instinctive scorn of the academic class, which they have been at no pains to conceal. Bismarck knew of no more bitter taunt to throw at the Free Trade economists of England than to say that they were all either clergymen or professors. Napoleon felt a life-long abhorrence of the class, broken only by one brief experiment that ended in failure. It is related that at the apogee of the Imperial rule, the idea flashed upon him that France must have learned men, that the professors must be encouraged. He decided to act at once. Sixty-five professors were invited that evening to the palace of the Tuileries. They came. They stood about in groups, melancholy and myopic beneath the light. Napoleon spoke to them in turn. To the first he spoke of fortifications. The professor in reply referred to the binomial theorem. "Put him out," said Napoleon. To the second he spoke of commerce. The professor in answer cited the opinions of Diodorus Siculus. "Put him out," said Napoleon. At the end of half an hour Napoleon had had enough of the professors. "Cursed idealogues," he cried; "put them all out." Nor were they ever again admitted.

Nor is it only in this way that the course of history has been unkind to the professor. It is a notable fact in the past, that all persons of eminence who might have shed a lustre upon the academic class are absolved from the title of pro-



fessor, and the world at large is ignorant that they ever wore it. We never hear of the author of *The Wealth of Nations* as Professor Smith, nor do we know the poet of *Evangeline* as Professor Longfellow. The military world would smile to see the heroes of the Southern Confederacy styled Professor Lee and Professor Jackson. We do not know of Professor Harrison as the occupant of a President's chair. Those whose talk is of dreadnoughts and of strategy never speak of Professor Mahan, and France has long since forgotten the proper title of Professor Guizot and Professor Taine. Thus it is that the ingratitude of an undiscerning public robs the professional class of the honour of its noblest names. Nor does the evil stop there. For, in these latter days at least, the same public which eliminates the upward range of the term, applies it downwards and sideways with indiscriminating generality. It is a "professor" who plays upon the banjo. A "professor" teaches swimming. Hair-cutting, as an art, is imparted in New York by "professors"; while any gentleman whose thaumaturgic inter-communication with the world of spirits has reached the point of interest which warrants advertising space in the daily press, explains himself as a "professor" to his prospective clients. So it comes that the true professor finds all his poor little attributes of distinction—his mock dignity, his gown, his string of supplementary letters—all taken over by a mercenary age to be exploited as the stock-in-trade of an up-to-date advertiser. The vendor of patent medicine depicts himself in the advertising columns in a gown, with an uplifted hand to show the Grecian draping of the fold. After his name are placed enough letters and full stops to make up a simultaneous equation in algebra.

The word "professor" has thus become a generic term, indicating the assumption of any form of dexterity, from hair-cutting to running the steam shovel in a crematorium. It is even customary—I am informed—to designate in certain haunts of meretricious gaiety the gentleman whose efforts at the piano are rewarded by a *per capita* contribution of ten cents from every guest—the "professor."

One may begin to see, perhaps, the peculiar disadvantage under which the professor labours in finding his avocation



confused with the various branches of activity for which he can feel nothing but a despairing admiration. But there are various ways also in which the very circumstances of his profession cramp and bind him. In the first place there is no doubt that his mind is very seriously damaged by his perpetual contact with the students. I would not for a moment imply that a university would be better off without the students; although the point is one which might well elicit earnest discussion. But their effect upon the professor is undoubtedly bad. He is surrounded by an atmosphere of sycophantic respect. His students, on his morning arrival, remove his overshoes and hang up his overcoat. They sit all day writing down his lightest words with stylographic pens of the very latest model. They laugh at the meanest of his jests. They treat him with a finely simulated respect that has come down as a faint tradition of the old days of Padua and Bologna, when a professor was in reality the venerated master, a man who wanted to teach, and the students disciples who wanted to learn.

All that is changed now. The supreme import of the professor to the students now lies in the fact that he controls the examinations. He holds the golden key which will unlock the door of the temple of learning—unlock it, that is, not to let the student in, but to let him get out—into something decent. This fact gives to the professor a fictitious importance, easily confounded with his personality, similar to that of the gate-keeper at a dog show, or the ticket-wicket man at a hockey match.

In this is seen part of the consequences of the vast, organized thing called modern education. Everything has the merits of its defects. It is a grand thing and a possible thing, that practically all people should possess the intellectual-mechanical arts of reading, writing and computation: good too that they should possess pigeon-holed and classified data of the geography and history of the world; admirable too that they should possess such knowledge of the principles of natural science as will enable them to put a washer on a kitchen tap, or inflate a motor tyre with a soda-siphon bottle. All this is splendid. This we have got.



And this places us collectively miles above the rude illiterate men-of-arms, burghers, and villeins of the Middle Ages who thought the moon took its light from God, whereas we know that its light is simply a function of  $\pi$  divided by the square of its distance.

Let me not get confused in my thesis. I am saying that the universal distribution of mechanical education is a fine thing, and that we have also proved it possible. But above this is the utterly different thing—we have no good word for it, call it learning, wisdom, enlightenment, anything you will—which means not a mechanical acquirement from without but something done from within: a power and willingness to think: an interest, for its own sake, in that general inquiry into the form and meaning of life which constitutes the ground plan of education. Now this, desirable though it is, cannot be produced by the mechanical compulsion of organized education. It belongs, and always has, to the few and never to the many. The ability to think is rare. Any man can think and think hard when he has to: the savage devotes a nicety of thought to the equipoise of his club, or the business man to the adjustment of a market price. But the ability or desire to think without compulsion about things that neither warm the hands nor fill the stomach, is very rare. Reflection on the riddle of life, the cruelty of death, the innate savagery and the sublimity of the creature man, the history and progress of man in his little earth-dish of trees and flowers—all these things taken either "straight" in the masculine form of philosophy and the social sciences, or taken by diffusion through the feminized form of literature, constitute the operation of the educated mind. Of all these things most people in their degree think a little and then stop. They realize presently that these things are very difficult, and that they don't matter, and that there is no money in them. Old men never think of them at all. They are glad enough to stay in the warm daylight a little longer. For a working solution of these problems different things are done. Some people use a clergyman. Others declare that the Hindus know all about it. Others, especially of late, pay a reasonable sum for the services of a professional thaumaturgist who

*writer of wonders*



supplies a solution of the soul problem by mental treatment at long range, radiating from State Street, Chicago. Others, finally, of a native vanity that will not admit itself vanquished, buckle about themselves a few little formulas of "evolution" and "force," co-relate the conception of God to the differentiation of a frog's foot, and strut through life emplumed with the rump-feathers of their own conceit.

I trust my readers will not think that I have forgotten my professor. I have not. All of this digression is but an instance of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. It is necessary to bring out all this back-ground of the subject to show the setting in which the professor is placed. Possibly we shall begin to see that behind this quaint being in his angular overcoat are certain greater facts in respect to the general relation of education to the world of which the professor is only a product, and which help to explain, if they do not remove, the dislocated misfit of his status among his fellow men. We were saying then that the truly higher education—thought about life, mankind, literature, art—cannot be handed out at will. To attempt to measure it off by the yard, to mark it out into stages and courses, to sell it at the commutation rate represented by a college sessional fee—all this produces a contradiction in terms. For the thing itself is substituted an imitation of it. For real wisdom—obtainable only by the few—is substituted a nickel-plated make-believe, obtainable by any person of ordinary intellect who has the money, and who has also, in the good old Latin sense, the needful assiduity. I am not saying that the system is bad. It is the best we can get; and incidentally, and at back-grounds, it turns out a by-product in the shape of a capable and well-trained man who has forgotten all about the immortality of the soul, in which he never had any interest any way, but who conducts a law business with admirable efficiency.

The result, then, of this odd-looking system is, that what ought to be a thing existing for itself is turned into qualification for something else. The reality of a student's studies is knocked out by the grim earnestness of having to pass an examination. How can a man really think of literature, or of



the problem of the soul, who knows that he must learn the contents of a set of books in order to pass an examination which will give him the means of his own support and, perhaps, one-half the support of his mother, or fifteen per cent of that of a maiden aunt. The pressure of circumstances is too much. The meaning of study is lost. The qualification is everything.

Not that the student finds his burden heavy or the situation galling. He takes the situation as he finds it, is hugely benefited by it at back-grounds, and, being young, adapts himself to it: accepts with indifference whatever programme may be needful for the qualification that he wants: studies Hebrew or Choctaw with equal readiness; and as his education progresses, will write you a morning essay on transcendental utilitarianism, and be back again to lunch. At the end of his course he has learned much. He has learned to sit—that first requisite for high professional work—and he can sit for hours. He can write for hours with a stylographic pen: more than that, for I wish to state the case fairly, he can make a digest, or a summary, or a reproduction of anything in the world. Incidentally, the *speculation* is all knocked sideways out of him. But the lack of it is never felt.

Observe that it was not so in Padua. The student came thither from afar off, on foot or on a mule; so I picture him at least in my ignorance of Italian history, seated droopingly upon a mule, with earnest brown eyes hungered with the desire to know, and in his hand a vellum-bound copy of Thomas Aquinas written in longhand, priceless, as *he* thinks, for the wisdom it contains. Now the Padua student wanted to know: not for a qualification, not because he wanted to be a pharmaceutical expert with a municipal license, but because he thought the things in Thomas Aquinas and such to be things of tremendous import. They were not; but he thought so. This student thought that he could really find out things: that if he listened daily to the words of the master who taught him, and read hard, and thought hard, he would presently discover real truths—the only things in life that he cared for—such as whether the soul is a fluid or a solid, whether his mule



existed or was only a vapour, and much other of this sort. These things he fully expected to learn. For their sake he brought to bear on the person of his teacher that reverential admiration which survives faintly today, like a biological "vestige," in the attitude of the college student who holds the overcoat of his professor. The Padua student, too, got what he came for. After a time he knew all about the soul, all about his mule—knew, too, something of the more occult, the almost devilish sciences, perilous to tackle, such as why the sun is suspended from falling into the ocean, or the very demonology of symbolism—the AL-GEB of the Arabians—by which  $X+Y$  taken to the double or square can be shown after many days' computation to be equal to  $X^2+2XY+Y^2$ .

A man with such knowledge simply *had* to teach it. What to him if he should wear a brown gown of frieze and feed on pulse! This, as beside the bursting force of the expanding steam of his knowledge, counted for nothing. So he went forth, and he in turn became a professor, a man of profound acquirement, whose control over malign comets elicited a shuddering admiration.

These last reflections seem to suggest that it is not merely that something has gone wrong with the attitude of the student and the professor towards knowledge, but that something has gone wrong with knowledge itself. We have got the thing into such a shape that we do not know one-tenth as much as we used to. Our modern scholarship has poked and pried in so many directions, has set itself to be so ultra-rational, so hyper-sceptical, that now it knows nothing at all. All the old certainty has vanished. The good old solid dogmatic dead-sureness that buckled itself in the oak and brass of its own stupidity is clean gone. It died at about the era of the country squire, the fox-hunting parson, the three-bottle Prime Minister, and the voluminous Doctor of Divinity in broadcloth, imperturbable even in sobriety, and positively omniscient when drunk. We have argued them off the stage of a world all too ungrateful. In place of their sturdy outlines appear that sickly anaemic Modern Scholarship, the double-jointed jack-in-the-box, Modern Religion, the feminine



angularity of Modern Morality, bearing a jug of filtered water, and behind them, as the very lord of wisdom, the grinning mechanic, Practical Science, using the broadcloth suit of the defunct doctor as his engine-room overalls. Or if we prefer to place the same facts without the aid of personification, our learning has so watered itself down that the starch and consistency is all out of it. There is no absolute sureness anywhere. Everything is henceforth to be a development, an evolution; morals and ethics are turned from fixed facts to shifting standards that change from age to age like the fashion of our clothes; art and literature are only a product, not good or bad, but a part of its age and environment. [So it comes that our formal studies are no longer a burning quest for absolute truth.] We have long since discovered that we cannot know anything. Our studies consist only in the long-drawn proof of the futility for the search after knowledge effected by exposing the errors of the past. Philosophy is the science which proves that we can know nothing of the soul. Medicine is the science which tells that we know nothing of the body. Political Economy is that which teaches that we know nothing of the laws of wealth; and Theology the critical history of those errors from which we deduce our ignorance of God.

When I sit and warm my hands, as best I may, at the little heap of embers that is now Political Economy, I cannot but contrast its dying glow with the generous blaze of the vain-glorious and triumphant science that once it was.

[Such is the distinctive character of modern learning, imprint with a resigned agnosticism towards the search after truth, able to refute everything and to believe nothing, and leaving its once earnest devotees stranded upon the arid sands of their own ignorance. In the face of this fact can it be wondered that a university converts itself into a sort of mill, grinding out its graduates, legally qualified, with conscientious regularity? The students take the mill as they find it, perform their task and receive their reward.] They listen to their professor. They write down with stylographic pens in loose-



leaf note-books his most inane and his most profound speculations with an indiscriminating impartiality. The reality of the subject leaves but little trace upon their minds.

All of what has been said above has been directed mainly towards the hardship of the professor's lot upon its scholastic side. Let me turn to another aspect of his life, the moral. By a strange confusion of thought a professor is presumed to be a good man. His standing association with the young and the history of his profession, which was once amalgamated with that of the priesthood, give him a connexion at one remove with morality. He therefore finds himself in that category of men—including himself and the curate as its chief representatives—to whom the world at large insists on ascribing a rectitude of character and a simplicity of speech that unfits them for ordinary society. It is gratuitously presumed that such men prefer tea to whisky and soda, blind man's buff to draw poker, and a freshmen's picnic to a prize fight.

For the curate, of course, I hold no brief. Let him sink. In any case he has to console himself with the favour of the sex, a concomitant perhaps of his very harmlessness, but productive at the same time of creature comforts. Soft slippers deck his little feet, flowers lie upon his study table, and round his lungs the warmth of an embroidered chest-protector proclaims the favour of the fair. Of this the ill-starred professor shares nothing. It is a sad fact that he is at once harmless and despised. He may lecture for twenty years and never find so much as a mullein stalk upon his desk. For him no canvas slippers, knitted by fair fingers, nor the flowered gown, nor the clock-worked hosiery of the ecclesiastic. The sex will have none of him. I do not mean, of course, that there are no women that form exceptions to this rule. We have all seen immolated upon the academic hearth, and married to professors, women whose beauty and accomplishments would have adorned the home of a wholesale liquor merchant. But the broad rule still obtains. Women who embody, so St. Augustine has told us, the very principle of evil, can only



really feel attracted towards bad men. The professor is too good for them.

Whether a professor is of necessity a good man, is a subject upon which I must not presume to dogmatize. The women may be right in voting him a "muff." But if he is such in any degree, the conventional restrictions of his profession tend to heighten it. The bursts of profanity that are hailed as a mark of business energy on the part of a railway magnate or a cabinet minister are interdicted to a professor. It is a canon of his profession that he must never become violent, nor lift his hand in anger. I believe that it was not always so. The story runs, authentic enough, that three generations ago a Harvard professor in a fit of anger with a colleague (engendered, if I recall the case, by the discussion of a nice point in thermo-dynamics) threw him into a chemical furnace and burned him. But the buoyancy of those days is past. In spite of the existence of our up-to-date apparatus, I do not believe that any of our present professoriate has yielded to such an impulse.

One other point remains worthy of remark in the summation of the heavy disadvantages under which the professor lives and labours. He does not know how to make money. This is a grave fault, and one that in the circumstances of the day can scarcely be overlooked. It comes down to him as a legacy of the Padua days when the professor neither needed money nor thought of it. Now when he would like money he is hampered by an "evoluted" inability to get hold of it. He dares not commercialize his profession, or does not know how to do so. Had he the business instinct of the leaders of labour and the master manufacturers, he would long since have set to work at the problem. He would have urged his government to put so heavy a tax on the import of foreign professors as to keep the home market for himself. He would have organized himself into amalgamated Brotherhoods of Instructors of Latin, United Greek Workers of America, and so forth, organized strikes, picketed the houses of the college trustees, and made himself a respected place as a member of industrial society. This his inherited inaptitude forbids him to do.



Nor can the professor make money out of what he knows. Somehow a plague is on the man. A teacher of English cannot write a half-dime novel, nor a professor of dynamics invent a safety razor. The truth is that a modern professor for commercial purposes doesn't know anything. He only knows parts of things. ]

It occurred to me some years ago when the Cobalt silver mines were first discovered that a professor of scientific attainments ought to be able, by transferring his talent to that region, to amass an enormous fortune. I questioned one of the most gifted of my colleagues. "Could you not," I asked, "as a specialist in metals discover silver mines at sight?" "Oh, no," he said, shuddering at the very idea, "you see I'm only a metallurgist; at Cobalt the silver is all in the rocks and I know nothing of rocks whatever." "Who then," I said, "knows about rocks?" "For that," he answered, "you need a geologist like Adamson; but then, you see, he knows the rocks, but doesn't know the silver." "But could you not both go," I said, "and Adamson hold the rock while you extracted the silver?" "Oh, no," the professor answered, "you see we are neither of us mining engineers; and even then we ought to have a good hydraulic man and an electric man." "I suppose," I said, "that if I took about seventeen of you up there you might find something. No? Well, would it not be possible to get somebody who would know something of *all* these things?" "Yes," he said, "any of the fourth year students would, but personally all that I do is to reduce the silver when I get it." "That I can do myself," I answered musingly, and left him.

Such then is the professor; a man whose avocation in life is hampered by the history of its past: imparting in the form of statutory exercises knowledge that in its origin meant a spontaneous effort of the intelligence, whose very learning itself has become a profession rather than a pursuit, whose mock dignity and fictitious morality remove him from the society of his own sex and deny to him the favour of the other. Surely, in this case, to understand is to sympathize. ] Is it not possible, too, that when all is said and done the professor

But



is performing a useful service in the world, unconsciously of course, in acting as a leaven in the lump of commercialism that sits so heavily on the world today? ] I do not wish to expand upon this theme. I had set out to make the apology of the professor speak for itself from the very circumstances of his work. But <sup>in</sup> these days, when money is everything, when pecuniary success is the only goal to be achieved, when the voice of the plutocrat is as the voice of God, the aspect of the professor, side-tracked in the real race of life, riding his mule of Padua in competition with an automobile, may at least help to soothe the others who have failed in the struggle.

[ Dare one, as the wildest of fancies, suggest how different things might be if learning counted, or if we could set it on its feet again, if students wanted to learn, and if professors had anything to teach, if a university lived for itself and not as a place of qualification for <sup>students as</sup> the junior employees of the rich; if there were only in this perplexing age some way of living humbly and retaining the respect of one's fellows; if a man with a few hundred dollars a year could cast out the money question and the house question, and the whole business of competitive appearances and live for the things of the mind! But then, after all, if the mind as a speculative instrument has gone bankrupt, if learning, instead of meaning a mind full of thought, means only a bellyful of fact, one is brought to a full stop, standing among the littered debris of an ideal that has passed away. ]

In any case the question, if it is one, is going to settle itself. The professor is passing away. The cost of living has laid its hold upon him, and grips him in its coils; within another generation he will be starved out, "evolved" out by that glorious process of natural selection and adaptation, the rigour of which is the only God left in our desolated Pantheon. The male schoolteacher is gone, the male clerk is going, and already on the horizon of the academic market rises the Woman with the Spectacles, the rude survivalist who, in the coming generation, will dispense the elements of learning cut to order, without an afterthought of what it once has meant.