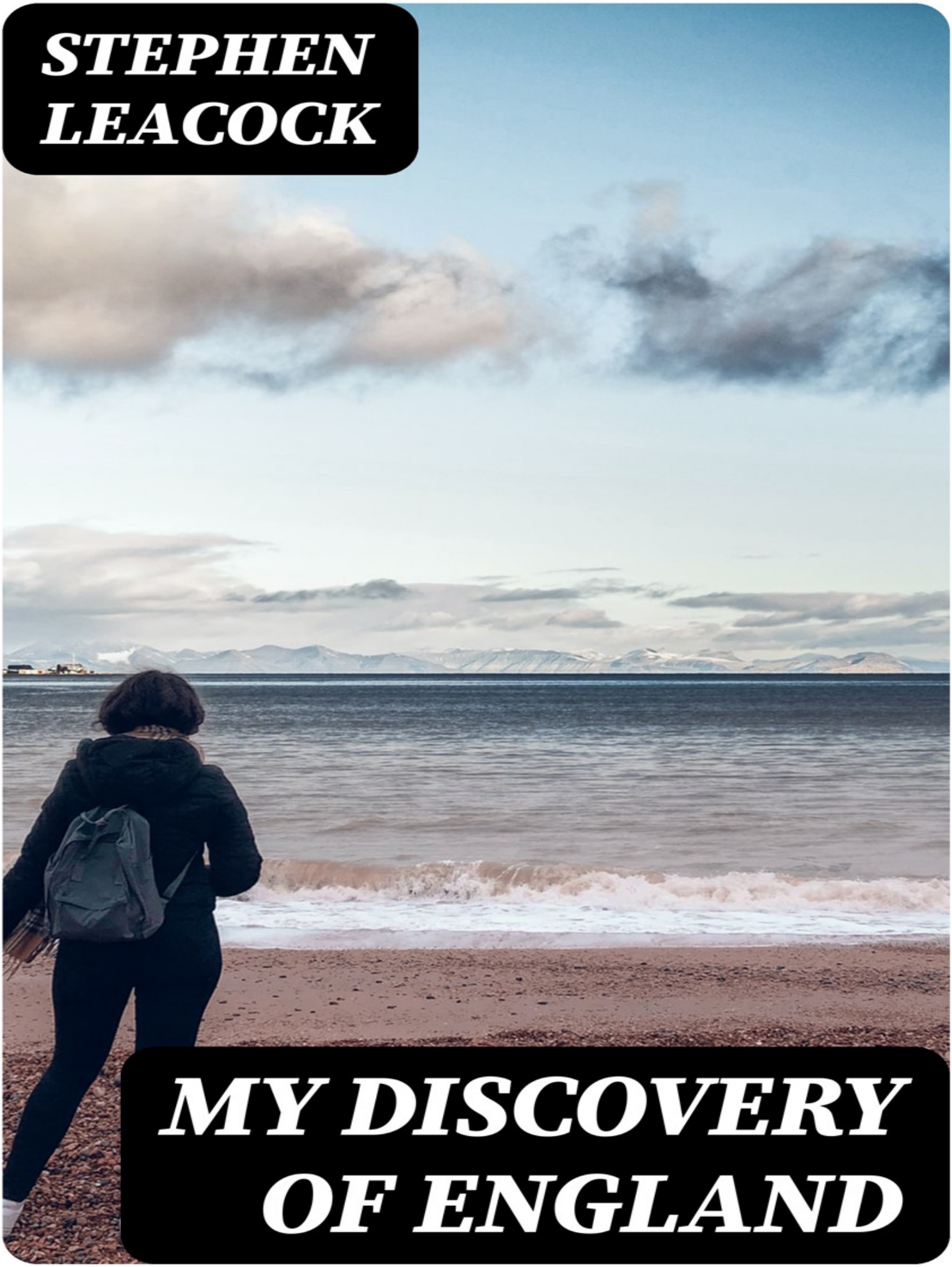
STEPHEN LEACOCK



MY DISCOVERY OF ENGLAND

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Introduction of Mr. Stephen Leacock Given by Sir Owen Seaman on the Occasion of His First Lecture in London

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: It is usual on these occasions for the chairman to begin something like this: "The lecturer, I am sure, needs no introduction from me." And indeed, when I have been the lecturer and somebody else has been the chairman, I have more than once suspected myself of being the better man of the two. Of course I hope I should always have the good manners—I am sure Mr. Leacock has—to disguise that suspicion. However, one has to go through these formalities, and I will therefore introduce the lecturer to you.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is Mr. Stephen Leacock. Mr. Leacock, this is the flower of London intelligence—or perhaps I should say one of the flowers; the rest are coming to your other lectures.

In ordinary social life one stops at an introduction and does not proceed to personal details. But behaviour on the platform, as on the stage, is seldom ordinary. I will therefore tell you a thing or two about Mr. Leacock. In the first place, by vocation he is a Professor of Political Economy, and he practises humour—frenzied fiction instead of frenzied finance—by way of recreation. There he differs a good deal from me, who have to study the products of humour for my

living, and by way of recreation read Mr. Leacock on political economy.

Further, Mr. Leacock is all-British, being English by birth and Canadian by residence, I mention this for two reasons: firstly, because England and the Empire are very proud to claim him for their own, and, secondly, because I do not wish his nationality to be confused with that of his neighbours on the other side. For English and American humourists have not always seen eye to eye. When we fail to appreciate their humour they say we are too dull and effete to understand it: and when they do not appreciate ours they say we haven't got any.

Now Mr. Leacock's humour is British by heredity; but he has caught something of the spirit of American humour by force of association. This puts him in a similar position to that in which I found myself once when I took the liberty of swimming across a rather large loch in Scotland. After climbing into the boat I was in the act of drying myself when I was accosted by the proprietor of the hotel adjacent to the shore. "You have no business to be bathing here," he shouted. "I'm not," I said; "I'm bathing on the other side." In the same way, if anyone on either side of the water is unintelligent enough to criticise Mr. Leacock's humour, he can always say it comes from the other side. But the truth is that his humour contains all that is best in the humour of both hemispheres.

Having fulfilled my duty as chairman, in that I have told you nothing that you did not know before—except, perhaps, my swimming feat, which never got into the Press because I have a very bad publicity agent—I will not detain you longer

from what you are really wanting to get at; but ask Mr. Leacock to proceed at once with his lecture on "Frenzied Fiction."

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I. The Balance of Trade in Impressions

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FOR some years past a rising tide of lecturers and literary men from England has washed upon the shores of our North American continent. The purpose of each one of them is to make a new discovery of America. They come over to us travelling in great simplicity, and they return in the ducal suite of the Aquitania. They carry away with them their impressions of America, and when they reach England they sell them. This export of impressions has now been going on so long that the balance of trade in impressions is all disturbed. There is no doubt that the Americans and Canadians have been too generous in this matter of giving

away impressions. We emit them with the careless ease of a glow worm, and like the glow-worm ask for nothing in return.

But this irregular and one-sided traffic has now assumed such great proportions that we are compelled to ask whether it is right to allow these people to carry away from us impressions of the very highest commercial value without giving us any pecuniary compensation whatever. British lecturers have been known to land in New York, pass the customs, drive uptown in a closed taxi, and then forward to England from the closed taxi itself ten dollars' worth of impressions of American national character. I have myself seen an English literary man,—the biggest, I believe: he had at least the appearance of it; sit in the corridor of a fashionable New York hotel and look gloomily into his hat, and then from his very hat produce an estimate of the genius of Amer ica at twenty cents a word. The nice question as to whose twenty cents that was never seems to have occurred to him.

I am not writing in the faintest spirit of jealousy. I quite admit the extraordinary ability that is involved in this peculiar susceptibility to impressions. I have estimated that some of these English visitors have been able to receive impressions at the rate of four to the second; in fact, they seem to get them every time they see twenty cents. But without jealousy or complaint, I do feel that somehow these impressions are inadequate and fail to depict us as we really are.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Here are some of the impressions of New York, gathered from visitors' discoveries

of America, and reproduced not perhaps word for word but as closely as I can remember them. "New York", writes one, "nestling at the foot of the Hudson, gave me an impression of cosiness, of tiny graciousness: in short, of weeness." But compare this—"New York," according to another discoverer of America, "gave me an impression of size, of vastness; there seemed to be a big ness about it not found in smaller places." A third visitor writes, "New York struck me as hard, cruel, almost inhuman." This, I think, was because his taxi driver had charged him three dollars. "The first thing that struck me in New York," writes another, "was the Statue of Liberty." But, after all, that was only natural: it was the first thing that could reach him.

Nor is it only the impressions of the metropolis that seem to fall short of reality. Let me quote a few others taken at random here and there over the continent.

"I took from Pittsburg," says an English visitor, "an impression of something that I could hardly define—an atmosphere rather than an idea."

All very well, But, after all, had he the right to take it? Granted that Pittsburg has an atmosphere rather than an idea, the attempt to carry away this atmosphere surely borders on rapacity.

"New Orleans," writes another visitor, "opened her arms to me and bestowed upon me the soft and languorous kiss of the Caribbean." This statement may or may not be true; but in any case it hardly seems the fair thing to mention it.

"Chicago," according to another book of discovery, "struck me as a large city. Situated as it is and where it is, it seems destined to be a place of importance."

Or here, again, is a form of "impression" that recurs again and again-"At Cleveland I felt a distinct note of optimism in the air."

This same note of optimism is found also at Toledo, at Toronto—in short, I believe it indicates nothing more than that some one gave the visitor a cigar. Indeed it generally occurs during the familiar scene in which the visitor describes his cordial reception in an unsuspecting American town: thus:

"I was met at the station (called in America the depot) by a member of the Municipal Council driving his own motor car. After giving me an excellent cigar, he proceeded to drive me about the town, to various points of interest, including the municipal abattoir, where he gave me another excellent cigar, the Carnegie public library, the First National Bank (the courteous manager of which gave me an excellent cigar) and the Second Congregational Church where I had the pleasure of meeting the pastor. The pastor, who appeared a man of breadth and culture, gave me another cigar. In the evening a dinner, admirably cooked and excellently served, was tendered to me at a leading hotel." And of course he took it. After which his statement that he carried away from the town a feeling of optimism explains itself: he had four cigars, the dinner, and half a page of impressions at twenty cents a word.

Nor is it only by the theft of impressions that we suffer at the hands of these English discoverers of America. It is a part of the system also that we have to submit to being lectured to by our talented visitors. It is now quite understood that as soon as an English literary man finishes

a book he is rushed across to America to tell the people of the United States and Canada all about it, and how he came to write it. At home, in his own country, they don't care how he came to write it. He's written it and that's enough. But in America it is different. One month after the distinguished author's book on The Boyhood of Botticelli has appeared in London, he is seen to land in New York very quietly out of one of the back portholes of the Olympic. That same afternoon you will find him in an armchair in one of the big hotels giving off impressions of America to a group of reporters. After which notices appear in all the papers to the effect that he will lecture in Carnegie Hall on "Botticelli the Boy". The audience is assured beforehand. It consists of all the people who feel that they have to go because they know all about Botticelli and all the people who feel that they have to go because they don't know anything about Botticelli. By this means the lecturer is able to rake the whole country from Montreal to San Francisco with "Botticelli the Boy". Then he turns round, labels his lecture "Botticelli the Man", and rakes it all back again. All the way across the continent and back he emits impressions, estimates of national character, and surveys of American genius. He sails from New York in a blaze of publicity, with his cordon of reporters round him, and a month later publishes his book "America as I Saw It". It is widely read—in America.

In the course of time a very considerable public feeling was aroused in the United States and Canada over this state of affairs. The lack of reciprocity in it seemed unfair. It was felt (or at least I felt) that the time had come when some

one ought to go over and take some impressions off England. The choice of such a person (my choice) fell upon myself. By an arrangement with the Geographical Society of America, acting in conjunction with the Royal Geographical Society of England (to both of whom I communicated my proposal), I went at my own expense.

It is scarcely feasible to give here full details in regard to my outfit and equipment, though I hope to do so in a later and more extended account of my expedition. Suffice it to say that my outfit, which was modelled on the equipment of English lecturers in America, included a complete suit of clothes, a dress shirt for lecturing in, a fountain pen and a silk hat. The dress shirt, I may say for the benefit of other travellers, proved invaluable. The silk hat, however, is no longer used in England except perhaps for scrambling eggs in.

I pass over the details of my pleasant voyage from New York to Liverpool. During the last fifty years so many travellers have made the voyage across the Atlantic that it is now impossible to obtain any impressions from the ocean of the slightest commercial value. My readers will recall the fact that Washington Irving, as far back as a century ago, chronicled the pleasure that one felt during an Atlantic voyage in idle day dreams while lying prone upon the bowsprit and watching the dolphins leaping in the crystalline foam. Since his time so many gifted writers have attempted to do the same thing that on the large Atlantic liners the bowsprit has been removed, or at any rate a notice put up: "Authors are requested not to lie prostrate on the bowsprit." But even without this advantage, three or

four generations of writers have chronicled with great minuteness their sensations during the transit. I need only say that my sensations were just as good as theirs. I will content myself with chronicling the fact that during the voyage we passed two dolphins, one whale and one iceberg (none of them moving very fast at the time), and that on the fourth day out the sea was so rough that the Captain said that in forty years he had never seen such weather. One of the steerage passengers, we were told, was actually washed overboard: I think it was over board that he was washed, but it may have been on board the ship itself.

I pass over also the incidents of my landing in Liverpool, except perhaps to comment upon the extraordinary behaviour of the English customs officials. Without wishing in any way to disturb international relations, one cannot help noticing the rough and inquisitorial methods of the English customs men as compared with the gentle and affectionate ways of the American officials at New York. The two trunks that I brought with me were dragged brutally into an open shed, the strap of one of them was rudely unbuckled, while the lid of the other was actually lifted at least four inches. The trunks were then roughly scrawled with chalk, the lids slammed to, and that was all. Not one of the officials seemed to care to look at my things or to have the politeness to pretend to want to. I had arranged my dress suit and my pyjamas so as to make as effective a display as possible: a New York customs officer would have been delighted with it. Here they simply passed it over. "Do open this trunk," I asked one of the officials, "and see my pyjamas." "I don't think it is necessary, sir," the man

answered. There was a coldness about it that cut me to the quick.

But bad as is the conduct of the English customs men, the immigration officials are even worse. I could not help being struck by the dreadful carelessness with which people are admitted into England. There are, it is true, a group of officials said to be in charge of immigration, but they know nothing of the discriminating care exercised on the other side of the Atlantic.

"Do you want to know," I asked one of them, "whether I am a polygamist?"

"No, sir," he said very quietly.

"Would you like me to tell you whether I am fundamentally opposed to any and every system of government?"

The man seemed mystified. "No, sir," he said. "I don't know that I would."

"Don't you care?" I asked.

"Well, not particularly, sir," he answered.

I was determined to arouse him from his lethargy.

"Let me tell you, then," I said, "that I am an anarchistic polygamist, that I am opposed to all forms of government, that I object to any kind of revealed religion, that I regard the state and property and marriage as the mere tyranny of the bourgeoisie, and that I want to see class hatred carried to the point where it forces every one into brotherly love. Now, do I get in?"

The official looked puzzled for a minute. "You are not Irish, are you, sir?" he said.

"No."

"Then I think you can come in all right." he answered.

The journey from Liverpool to London, like all other English journeys, is short. This is due to the fact that England is a small country: it contains only 50,000 square miles, whereas the United States, as every one knows, contains three and a half billion. I mentioned this fact to an English fellow passenger on the train, together with a provisional estimate of the American corn crop for 1922: but he only drew his rug about his knees, took a sip of brandy from his travelling flask, and sank into a state resembling death. I contented myself with jotting down an impression of incivility and paid no further attention to my fellow traveller other than to read the labels on his lug gage and to peruse the headings of his newspaper by peeping over his shoulder.

It was my first experience of travelling with a fellow passenger in a compartment of an English train, and I admit now that I was as yet ignorant of the proper method of conduct. Later on I became fully conversant with the rule of travel as understood in England. I should have known, of course, that I must on no account speak to the man. But I should have let down the window a little bit in such a way as to make a strong draught on his ear. Had this failed to break down his reserve I should have placed a heavy valise in the rack over his head so balanced that it might fall on him at any moment. Failing this again, I could have blown rings of smoke at him or stepped on his feet under the pretence of looking out of the window. Under the English rule as long as he bears this in silence you are not supposed to know him. In fact, he is not supposed to be there. You and he each presume the other to be a mere piece of empty space. But