Stephen Leacock's Satire of the High Church: Dean Drone and the "Beacon on the Hill" in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*

by D.M.R. Bentley

In fond and grateful memory of Barbara Pell

> *I belong…to the Church of England.*
> – Stephen Leacock, "Preface," *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town, 5*

Sharing the central section of Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) with the three sketches devoted to the burgeoning love of Peter Pupkin and Zena Pepperleigh are three sketches devoted to the Anglican minister of Mariposa and the "New Church" (62) that is built at his urging and destroyed by arson during his incumbency. While a good deal has been written about "The Ministrations of the Rev. Mr. Drone," "The Whirlwind Campaign in Mariposa," and "The Beacon on the Hill," most notably by Gerald Lynch in his *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity*,[1] they still invite discussion in terms of their treatment of theological and ecclesiological ideas and practices associated with the nineteenth-century High Church (or Anglo-Catholic) movement, which began in Britain in the 1830s and soon after that spread to North America, where it remained controversial until well beyond Leacock's day. Beginning with a close look at the highly poetic passages in which the Reverend Dean Drone is introduced at the outset of the first sketch, this brief essay will examine the architecture and decoration of the New Church as a reflection of Dean Drone's religious orientation and training with a view to confirming that the High Church movement is an object of satire in *Sunshine Sketches*.

13

I

The scene is set for the passages in which Dean Drone is introduced by a careful description of the location of the "Church of England Church" and its rectory. As Lynch and others have observed, the position of the "driving shed"—a small, low building for storing a carriage or an automobile—is crucial to the climax of the three sketches because it is by demolishing the shed that Josh Smith is able to save the nearby buildings and the town itself from the fire that he has set in order to destroy the "New Church" and thus secure the resulting insurance money to pay off the enormous debts that the building has incurred. Significant as it is, however, the siting of the "driving shed" is only part of the symbolic geography of the opening paragraph, which begins by locating the site of the church—the site, that is, chosen by its founders for the first church and now occupied by the "New Church"—on a "side street, where the maple trees are thickest," which is to say peripheral to Mariposa and Mariposans but a long-standing component of their history and not entirely remote from them either physically or psychologically. Leacock also locates the "New Church" vertically as well as horizontally, and in doing so suggests that it has become distant from the association with mortality, and, by extension, eschatology, that characterized the much smaller church that it has replaced:

> The Church of England Church is…a little up the hill from the heart of the town. The trees above the church and the grass plot that was once the cemetery, till they made the new one…over the brow of the hill…, fill out the whole corner. Down behind the church, with only the driving shed and a lane between, is the rectory. It is a little brick house with odd angles. There is a hedge and a little gate, and a weeping ash tree with red berries. (56)

The fact that the site chosen for the original church is "a little up the hill from…the town" is arguably the detail that provides the theological key to the remainder of description of the church and its rectory, for it indicates that, at its inception, the Mariposa Anglican church was neither "low" nor "high," but occupied the traditional Church of England position midway between Geneva and Rome—that is, between the extremes of post-Reformation Christianity represented by, on the one hand, such Calvinistic denominations as Presbyterianism and, on the other, the Roman Catholicism towards which in the half century prior to the writing and publication of *Sunshine Sketches* the High Church movement had drawn many Canadian Anglicans and Anglican churches. In short (and in the terms of the well known, humorous characterization of the strata of beliefs and practices in the Church of England), the theology embodied in the original

church "a little up the hill" was "middle and fuzzy" and, indeed, much closer to "low and lazy" than "high and crazy," as soon appears to be the case with its "tower[ing]" replacement (62).

That the "New Church" is the product of the lamentable capacity of Dean Drone and his parishioners to disregard tradition is suggested not only by the relocation of the cemetery with, it transpires, scant respect for its contents ("the headstones [are] laid out flat" in or near the "grass plot" [58]), but also by two other details of the scene-setting description: the "odd angles" of the rectory, which suggest the eccentric and unsound perspectives of its builders and tenant (with a gesture, perhaps, towards Dean Drone's passion for angling rather than fishing for men);[2] and the nearby tree—"a weeping ash with red berries"—whose species and coloration are suggestive of penitence and sacrifice, and may even foreshadow the reduction of the "New Church" to ashes in the conflagration to come. Proof of the callous disregard for tradition by Dean Drone and his parishioners comes with the ensuing and near-plangent account of their demolition of "the quaint little building in red and grey stone" that was their Anglican church for some "forty or fifty years" and, after the evaporation of other plans, the sale of its stone to "a building contractor" and its eventual disappearance from memory (58, 61).[3] Nor is there any doubt of Dean Drone's eccentricity and unsoundness: in addition to preferring actual to spiritual fishing, he garbles and confuses biblical passages and references and, as might be expected by the presence of a "driving shed" between the New Church and the rectory, he prefers mechanical devices to spiritual matters and, in fact, spends much of his time constructing and playing with children's toys.

Also located between the New Church and the rectory is the setting in which Dean Drone is introduced: "a little grass lawn with low hedges and at the side of that two wild plum trees, that are practically always in white blossom" and, "[u]nderneath them…a rustic table and chair…[where] you may see rural Dean Drone, the incumbent of the Church of England Church, sitting in the chequered light of the plum trees that is neither sun nor shadow" (56). An early twentieth-century reader of this passage with an ear for literary allusions and ecclesiological resonances would have had no difficulty either in recognizing that the "white blossom" of the plum trees echoes the "cherry…Wearing white for Eastertide"(15) of A.E. Housman's "Loveliest of trees…" in *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) or in perceiving the resemblance between the "rustic table" at which Dean Drone sits and the wooden altar of a traditional Anglican church, which is denoted "the Lord's Table" in "The Order of…Holy Communion" in the *Book of Com-*

mon Prayer to indicate that the service is a commemoration of the Last Supper as well as of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. But what is to be made of the fact that Dean Drone sits near "two wild plum trees"? In Christian iconography, a single tree generally alludes to either the tree of the Cross or, if it is an apple tree, the Tree of Knowledge, but in this instance there are two trees, perhaps in reference to the crosses of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, an apt enough allusion in a narrative that climaxes in an insurance fraud perpetrated, in part, by Dean Drone's habitual pilfering of parish funds.[4]

The phrase "chequered light" in the opening description of Dean Drone is also worth noticing, for its resonates loudly with the "Checker'd shade" of a passage in Milton's "L'Allegro" (lines 83-99) that may derive specifically from one of Virgil's *Eclogues*[5] and, in any case, comes drenched in the eroticism of numerous classical Greek pastorals. In this way, the phrase anticipates the ensuing characterization of Dean Drone as a man much more inclined to Greek than Christian pastoral. The opening figure of that characterization is arguably the most enigmatic in *Sunshine Sketches*:

> Generally you will find him reading, and when I tell you that at the end of the grass plot where the hedge is highest there is a yellow bee hive with seven bees that belong to Dean Drone, you will realize that it is only fitting that the Dean is reading in the Greek. For what better could a man be reading beneath the blossom of the plum trees, within the very sound of the bees, than the Pastorals of Theocritus? The light trash of modern romance might put a man to sleep in such a spot, but with such food for reflection as Theocritus, a man may safely close his eyes and muse on what he reads without fear of dropping into slumber. (56)

A bee hive is in itself a symbol of the honied life of the classical Golden Age and, in Christian symbology, an emblem of the eloquence of such figures as St. Ambrose and Bernard of Clairvaux, and "a yellow bee hive with seven bees" is a not uncommon heraldic device that usually represents industriousness and endeavour. The specific reference here, however, may be to Masonic lore, where a bee hive surrounded by bees is "an emblem of industry…[that] recommends the practice of that virtue," "teaches… that…we should…never sit…down contented, while our fellow-creatures around us are in want," and cautions that "he that will so demean himself as not to be endeavouring to add to the common stock of knowledge and understanding, may be deemed a *drone* in the *hive* of nature, a useless member of society, and unworthy of our protection as Masons" (Moore 48). In all three senses—the classical, the Christian, and the Masonic—

Dean Drone's "yellow bee hive with seven bees" may be taken not merely as a reflection of his submersion in the pastoral literature of ancient Greece, but also as an ironic and proleptic commentary on other characteristics that soon emerge: his manifest lack of eloquence, his equally manifest failure to minister properly to his congregation, and the architectural *hubris* that results in the destruction of the "little stone church" and its replacement by the grandiose and unaffordable "New Church." It scarcely needs to be added that, besides being the greatest of classical Greek pastoral poets and Dean Drone's favoured author, Theocritus was by turns esteemed and reviled in the nineteenth century for his sensuality and eroticism: the lassitude of Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" is referred to his pastorals, Wilde composed a "Villanelle" in his honour, and he was generally held in high regard by writers of the aesthetic-decadent movement.

In the course of the ensuing paragraphs, the evidence that Dean Drone's grasp of classical Greek is as shaky as his knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine progressively mounts. When asked to translate some Greek into English, "he always refuse[s]," claiming that "[o]ne couldn't translate it.... It lost so much in the translation that it was better not to try. It was far wiser not to attempt it" (57). At "the Anglican college" where he was trained, "[t]hey had simply explained that Logos was a word" (rather than "the Word") "and Arithmos a number." Moreover, the distinction between "Hoson"—an expression of magnitude—and "Hoyon"—an expression of intrinsic nature or character—utterly eludes him (60, 64). Apparently he is capable of reading Greek aloud, however, for he does so with soporific results when "old Dr. Gallagher," whose interests lie in Canadian history and archeology, comes to visit him in the last of the scene-setting paragraphs of "The Ministrations of the Rev. Mr. Drone." The doctor is in the habit of bringing "Indian relics" to show to his friend, whose habitual and immediate response is "to reach for his Theocritus" and "read to him a passage or two" (57). On the particular occasion recalled by the narrator, Dr. Gallagher has brought an object—a recently discovered "Indian skull"—that might have been expected to interest Dean Drone, if not because of the recurring use of a skull as a *memento mori*, especially in depictions of St. Jerome, then as the remnant of a human being. This is not the case, however:

> ...on the day when Dr. Gallagher...placed...[the Indian skull] on the rustic table, the Dean read to him so long from Theocritus that the doctor, I truly believe, dozed off in his chair. The Dean had to wait and fold his hands with the book across his knee, and close his eyes till the doctor should wake up again. And the skull was on the table between them, and from above the plum

> blossoms fluttered down, till they made flakes on it as white as Dr. Gallagher's hair. (57)

No more as a scholar than as a theologian does Dean Drone resemble the St. Jerome that this tableau evokes: sitting with his hands folded in sleep rather than prayer, he is as oblivious to the symbolic significance of the skull as he is indifferent to the historical and human narrative of which it is a part, and he remains similarly detached throughout much of the drama of the construction, financial disaster, and deliberate destruction of the New Church that is about to unfold in the three sketches devoted to his dubious "[m]inistrations."

II

Although the "New Church" is not described in great detail in the three sketches, enough details of its interior and exterior are given to infer that it is a production of the High Anglican rather than the Broad or Low Church traditions. Seen "from the outside, it is a tall, sweeping building" with a "belfry" in its "open steeple," a structure whose "sweeping outline" and "tower[ing]" height stand in sharp contrast to the form and spirit of "the little stone church" that it has replaced (58, 79, 62, 68). Its belfry contains more than one bell, its roof is clad with "imported tiles…for the greater glory of Heaven," and its windows are "stained glass…for the exaltation of the All-Seeing" (62, 59). "[I]nside a great reach [later, 'sweep'] of polished cedar beams…r[u]n to the point of the roof…for the special glorification of the All Powerful" and an organ supplied by the "Hosanna Pipe and Steam Organ Co." doubtless serves a similar purpose (59-62). Not only are the lavish decorations and vertical form of the New Church consistent with the introduction of Gothic and Roman Catholic elements into Anglican architecture and worship by the High Church movement, but so, too, is the presence of an organ, as becomes clear when Yodel, the Mariposa auctioneer, attends a Roman Catholic service and comments indirectly on the musical ambitions of the "New Church" by remarking that "the music that he had heard there was music, and that…the chanting and intoning could not be touched" (64). The "little old stone church" was "a little up the hill from the heart of the town" and probably all but hidden by "maple trees," but the New Church "tower[s] above the maple trees":

> It stood so high that from the open steeple of it, where the bells were, you could see all the town lying at its feet, and the farmsteads to the south of it, and the railway like a double pencil line, and Lake Wissanotti spread out like a map. You could see and appreciate things from the height of the new

> church,—such as the size and the growing wealth of Mariposa,—that you never could have seen from the little stone church at all. (62)

In fact, the "New Church" is so far above Mariposa as to be conspicuous in Thorstein Veblen's sense of the word and consistent with the observations of T.J. Jackson Lears and others to the effect that the High Church movement in North America "was conspicuous consumption with a theological patina"—"a perfect religion for the man of affairs" (198, 200) such as Dean Drone's most loyal supporter, Henry Mullins, "the banker" (69).

Given his incompetence in almost every aspect of his life and work from arithmetic and finance to classical Greek and the Bible, it is difficult to credit Dean Drone with masterminding the conception and construction of the "New Church," let alone with understanding its underlying ecclesiological and theological principles. Nevertheless, the New Church is the fulfilment of an "aim" that he had harboured throughout his "twenty-five years" of "preach[ing] in the little stone church," and he was a driving force during its actual construction, throwing himself into the work with a Ruskinian enthusiasm that was not confined to "shovel[ling]" and "encouraging": "[h]e mingled with the stone-masons, advising, helping, and giving counsel…. He was among the carpenters, sawing, hammering, enquiring, suggesting…. And he was night and day with the architect's assistants, drawing, planning, revising…" (61, 64). Moreover, he was surely responsible for instituting "Lenten Services of Sorrow" "aimed at…businessmen" for the purpose of raising money for the "New Church," and changes to regular services that involved the insertion of the redolently High Church or Anglo-Catholic Athanasian Creed may well lie behind Lawyer Macartney's withering analysis of it for the benefit of Joe Milligan, the dentist (63, 64). The portrait of Dean Drone is known to have been based in part on the Reverend Richard Green, the incumbent of St. James Anglican Church in Orillia (which was destroyed by fire in 1905 and doubtless supplied part of the inspiration for the burning of the New Church);[6] but repeated references to Dean Drone's lamentable theological and practical education suggest that Leacock may have had a larger target in mind than ministerial incompetence.

Such as it was, Dean Drone's education as a clergyman took place "fifty-two years ago" at a "little Anglican college with…clipped hedges and…[a] cricket ground," an institution attended at the same time by Mullins' father (59, 60). Nowhere is the "little Anglican college" named or given a location, but the strong likelihood is that the college that Leacock had in mind was Trinity College, Toronto, which was founded in 1852 as an Anglican counterpart to the non-denominational University College and

is perhaps most remembered by Canadian literary scholars as the alma mater of Archibald Lampman, who studied classics there from 1879 to 1882. Between its inception and 1881, when it was under the provostship of the Reverend George Whitaker, Trinity College was repeatedly the target of "charges of ritualism and Roman teaching" and in 1882, five years before Leacock entered University College in November 1887, it constructed a chapel in the neo-Gothic style favored by the High Church movement and, moreover, created chairs in the names of two of the movement's leading lights, John Keble and E.B. Pusey, both of whom had supported an earlier appeal to increase the College's endowment (Headon 916, and Hayes 128-32; and see Reed 14-66, 71 and 88-89, and Westfall passim). (It is worth noting parenthetically that the Christian names of another of the High Church movement's leading lights, John Henry Newman, are given to one of the most slippery characters in *Sunshine Sketches*: the federal politician John Henry Bagshaw.)

All in all, it would appear the Leacock had no love for either the institutions, the advocates, or the practices of the High Church or Anglo-Catholic movement and that Dean Drone, far from being merely a figure of fun and, by the end of the three sketches devoted to him, an object of pathos, embodies a complex of theological and architectural ideas that Leacock considered to be in need of ridicule that in spots is harsh, if not harsher, than that aimed at other targets in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town.* Almost needless to say, Leacock's satire of the foibles and follies of religious leaders and their dupes did not end with Dean Drone but continued in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1916) and beyond, not least with the figure of the Reverend Dr. McTeague who has "spent fifty years in trying to reconcile Hegel and St. Paul" and succumbs to paralysis when asked "how he could reconcile his theory of transcendental immaterialism with a scheme of rigid moral determinism" (*Arcadian Adventures* 125, 138).[7] But that, of course, is another question, and as the master himself says at one point in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town,* "it would be folly not to close a chapter and think about it" (91).

Notes

1 The present essay is largely my own exploration of some suggestions regarding the ecclesiological aspects of the three sketches that Gerald Lynch developed in his thesis and then book on Leacock. It is apposite to observe here that my own interest in such matters was fostered by Malcolm Ross, who supervised my M.A. thesis at Dalhousie in 1969-70 and later gave me a memorable tour of the Anglican Cathedral in Fredericton

and showed me the houses in which Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, and others lived. This essay is thus part of discussions and a continuity that goes back many years and, as such, a reflection of all three participants in the conversation.

2 "If the Dean ever did snatch a half-day from his incessant [and largely trivial] work, he spent it in fishing," observes the narrator, who later records that Drone draws heavily on a fishing trip to Mackinaws for baffling analogies and illustrations in his sermons (57, 65).

3 For a discussion of the mnemonic aspects and implications of the demolition and disappearance of the old church, see my *Mnemogataphia Canadensis* 1: 6.

4 As the financial problems of the parish mount, it becomes evident that Dean Drone has been appropriating funds for, among other things, "boarding-school fees for the littlest of the Drones" (60).

5 Milton's phrase has been seen as an adaptation of a desire expressed by Corydon in *Eclogue* 7:46-47: "et quae vos rara viridis tegit arbutus umbra, / solstitium pecori defendit": "and the green arbutus that shields you with its scant shade, ward the noontide heat from my flock."

6 See Albert Moritz's and Theresa Moritz's *Stephen Leacock* 155-6.

7 See Lynch's chapter on "Religion and Politics in Plutoria," especially 153-61, and the earlier critics that he cites. No doubt Lynch and others are correct in seeing the merger of St. Osoph's and St. Asaph's as a reflection of the talks that led to the creation in 1925 of the United Church of Canada, but Leacock may also have had in mind the talks generated in the Anglican Church by the Lambeth Conference of 1888, which endorsed the union of Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, but was opposed in varying degrees by High Churchmen, who feared that, among other things, such a union would threaten the episcopalian system. One of the more moderate bishops at the time of the writing and publication of *Arcadian Adventures* was John Cregg Farthing, who was Bishop of Montreal from 1909 to 1939 and a possible target for the Reverend Uttermost Dumfarthing in the book's satire of religious institutions and attitudes. See also the chapter entitled "Questions about Anglican Church Style" in Alan L. Hayes' *Anglicans in Canada* 115-42.

Works Cited

Bentley, D.M.R. *Mnemographia Canadensis: Essays on Memory, Community, and Environment in Canada, with Particular Reference to London, Ontario*. 2 vols. London, ON: Canadian Poetry Press, 1999.

Hayes, Alan L. *Anglicans in Canada: Controversies and Identity in Historical Perspective*. Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1994.

Headon, Christopher Fergus. "George Whitaker." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 11: 916-18.

Housman, A.E. *Poems*. Ed. Archie Burnett. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997.

Leacock, Stephen. *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. Ed. D.M.R. Bentley. Ottawa: Tecumseh, 2002.

——. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. 1912. Ed. D.M.R. Bentley. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2006.

Lears, T.J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

Lynch, Gerald. *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1988.

Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey Press, 1957.

Moritz, Albert, and Theresa Moritz. *Stephen Leacock: His Remarkable Life*. Markham, ON Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2002.

Moore, Charles W. *The New Masonic Trestle-Board, Adapted to the Work and Lectures as Practised in the Lodges, Chapters, Councils, and Encampments of Knights Templars, in the United States of America.* Boston: C.W. Moore, 1856

Reed, T.A. ed. *A History of Trinity College Toronto, 1852-1952.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1952.

Virgil. Ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. Rev. ed. 2 vols. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1960.

Westfall, William. *The Founding Moment: Church, Society and the Construction of Trinity College*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002.