

My Recollection  
of  
Chicago

Stephen Leacock  
Circa 1943

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# My Recollection of Chicago

Stephen Leacock

This manuscript was acquired by the University of Chicago Library in 1964 from Stephen Leacock's niece, Barbara Nimino. It was not printed until 1998, by the University of Toronto Press. Researchers believe it to have been written in 1942 or 1943.

Leacock's autobiography *The Boy I left Behind Me* (1946) was unfinished at his death, and was published posthumously. It is believed that *My Recollection of Chicago* was intended to be a chapter of that autobiography.

Transcriber

I look back with very great gratitude to the help that the University of Chicago gave me towards a real start in life. That was forty-three years ago. I was twenty nine years old when I entered the graduate school as a student in Political Economy and Political Science.

I had taken my B.A. degree years before (at Toronto 1891) and was so completely educated, so full of languages,—living, dead and half-dead,—that I was badly damaged and had to teach school as an undergraduate and after graduation. I had ten years of it. I say nothing against school teaching, still less against teaching as a resident master, as I was. For those who like that kind of thing, it is just the kind of thing they like. There are those who stay at school and never grow old; for them, each year, the same youthful faces, the games, the team, the home-for-the-holidays,—and for that the world well lost. For such men ‘business’ seems as who should sell his soul to the devil.

For me not so. School teaching meant drudgery; the status humiliation; the future nothing. Just as to me college teaching, even on the lowest grade, is the greatest profession in the world. The one means the boy; the other means the book.

So after ten years, like Artemus Ward’s prisoner, I opened the window and got out. Chicago was my window. I had decided to abandon languages forever. At Chicago they made a genial pretense that I was fit for the graduate school in economics. It is a little hard to see why, except that I was obviously not fit to die.

I had selected Chicago because of the arrival there on the staff (1899) of Dr. Gordon Laing. He and I had been fellow students, Damon and Pythias,—or is it, Scylla and Charybdis,—at Toronto. He beat me at graduation by thirty seconds. He had taken classics,—an even heavier load of it. But he had stuck to it, attended Johns Hopkins, studied at Rome and Athens, dug excavations, read inscriptions, wrote papers,—in short never let on that he didn’t really know anything and kept it up for fifty successful years. I understand that Chicago only recently got on to him and asked him for his resignation.

But for me Chicago was an *alma mater* indeed: it led me on through a few stringent years to all the good fortune and success that I had the luck to get later.

Of course the great disadvantage of the Chicago graduate school of those days, long since corrected, was the lack of faculties for intercourse and life in common among the students. The Hall in which I lived had a theological name but no community of saints. There were no common eating places, no common sitting rooms, no way of being together except in the classrooms or in the saloons. As a consequence there were no graduate student club or organisation, as you can organise in a saloon. As a matter of fact, very few of the students (this was before

prohibition) ever drank.

Years and years later, when I visited Oxford, I realized this lack all over again with a sort of wistful jealousy and regret. At Oxford the 'life' is everything; so much so that you don't need to learn anything. That is why the Oxford men carry such an abiding sense of the superiority of their education over all others. An Oxford man feels himself in class of a smoked ham or a pickled walnut. An Oxford man is a 'brand': a Chicago man, of my day, was just something out of a box.

I said there were no clubs. That is not quite so. There was *one* that I remember, the Political Science Club, that met in the little reception room of the Hall once a month. That room was small but the club was smaller. But it made up for this by the width of the subjects it investigated. I remember that I presented a paper on 'China, Her Past and Her Future,' which I knew to be good as I had taken four evenings to prepare it. I recall the paper of a fellow student on 'A Century of Right and Wrong in South Africa' (this was in 1899), on which he had worked all afternoon. I recall also with affection the endless patience of Professor Judson (the later President) in attending our meetings, and his untiring courtesy under what, I realize now, must have been unspeakable boredom.

There were, I believe, other similar clubs on a much larger scale than ours. The Classical Club, which permitted beer-drinking at its meetings, was notorious for its success.

But I must not imply that there was no real scholarship at Chicago. I remember once asking a graduate student in history what he had been doing all summer. He answered that he had worked on the tenth of August. I said,—'Just that one day.' He answered 'Yes, and quite enough too; I only got part way through it.' Later I understood that he meant the Tenth of August, with the capital letters that hook it to the French Revolution.

Of my instructors, I saw very little of Dr. Laurence Laughlin, the head of the department. This was largely my own fault as I was very slow in selecting and starting a thesis and Dr. Laughlin was too busy a man to waste time in mere colloquy with students. We, the students, did not at the time think much of Laughlin's work on money. But later on I have come to think that his books of succeeding years, especially his *Credit of the Nations*, among the best work on the economics of peace and war.

Dr. Judson I specially admired. His method of lecturing, a forward advance with pauses of casual questions, struck me as so good that I stole it and never used any other. Later on when he was President I had the honour of knowing him very well by reason of the marriage of his daughter with Dr. Gordon Laing.

I took many lectures from Thorstein Veblen and was deeply impressed by him. He had no manner, no voice, no art. He lectured into his lap with his eyes on his waistcoat. But he would every now and then drop a phrase with a literary value to it beyond the common reach. In the first lecture I heard, he happened to say, 'Hume, of course, aspired to be an intellectual tough.' That got me, and kept me; the art of words is almost better than truth, isn't [it].

Veblen's only failing was weakness for lecturing on the Navajo Indians. We had a whole course on their 'culture.' I don't recall who these people were and never understood where their culture came in. The lectures, I suppose, were a beginning of what has grown into behaviour economics, and institutional economy, which, I thank God, I am too old to learn.

All that is long ago, with the evening light of retrospect to soften the colour of anything awry or amiss and to leave nothing but gratitude.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *My Recollections of Chicago* by Stephen Leacock]