

STEPHEN LEACOCK ASSOCIATES

Awarding the Leacock Medal for the best in Canadian Literary Humour



HISTORY OF STEPHEN LEACOCK ASSOCIATES AND THE LEACOCK MEMORIAL MEDAL FOR HUMOUR

Close friends, colleagues and supporters of Stephen Leacock were the original members of the Leacock Associates (originally the Stephen Leacock Memorial Committee) when it was formed in 1946 under the guidance of **Packet** editor C. H. Hale. Membership was Orillia-based but quickly spread through North America and England.

The association had three immediate objectives: to set up a collection in the Orillia Public Library of books, letters and personal items relating to the life and works of Stephen Leacock; to commission a bronze bust of Leacock by Elizabeth Wyn Wood, a famous Canadian sculptor and native of Orillia; and most notably to establish a memorial medal to be awarded annually for the best book of humour written in the previous year by a Canadian.

Among the early supporters of the Leacock Associates were B. K. Sandwell, publisher of **Saturday Night** magazine and one-time student of Leacock at Upper Canada College; William Arthur Deacon, president of the Canadian Authors' Association; Thomas B. Costain, Canadian historian and novelist; and economist Eugene Forsey.

Paul Copeland, Q.C., was the first president of the Leacock Memorial Committee with an executive that included John Drinkwater, W. O. Tudhope, Maude Ardagh, Marg Tudhope, Geoff Beament and chief librarian of the Orillia Public Library, Mary Sheridan.

As contributions arrived from supporters and admirers, sculptor Emmanuel Hahn, another Orillia resident, designed the Leacock Memorial Medal. The first recipient was Harry Symons for his book, **Ojibway Melody**. The award was presented at a dinner in Orillia, June 1947. Elizabeth Wyn Wood's bronze bust of Leacock was completed in 1951 and was unveiled by the Premier of Ontario, Leslie Frost. The sculpture is displayed in the Orillia Public Library, where one may also find a collection of Leacock's books. Thus by 1951, all three immediate objectives had been reached.

The Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal has been awarded every year since 1947, with the exception of 1959. The number of entries has grown until, in 2020, a total of 84 books were

put forward for consideration. The award has attained an international reputation and is the only award of its kind for Canadian humour.

Cash prizes to accompany the medal were offered beginning in the year 1970 in turn by the Manulife Insurance Company (\$1,000) and by the Hudson's Bay Company (\$1,500). In 1984, J. P. Wiser Distillers offered the J. P. Wiser cash award of \$3,500 and in 1994, the Manulife Bank of Canada took over, offering a cash award of \$5,000. In 1995, the Laurentian Bank of Canada became the award sponsor, maintaining the cash award of \$5,000 to the winner. This was increased to \$10,000 for the year 2002. In 2004 the Laurentian Bank was purchased by Toronto Dominion, and the T.D. Financial Group took over sponsorship of the \$10,000 cash award. They offered a \$15,000 prize. At the time of writing (May, 2020), we have no sponsors, but are actively seeking them, as well as encouraging donations to an endowment fund.

In 1969, to mark the centenary of Leacock's birth, the Associates established a publication called **The Newspacket** that was published two or three times a year. In 2018 it was replaced by **Leacock Matters**. Together with our website at www.leacock.ca it serves not only as a vehicle of communication for Associates and Leacock fans around the world, but as a showcase for writers of humour.

In 1977, the Board formed a committee to administer a Student Award for Humour to encourage young writers. The committee sponsored an annual writing competition among secondary school students in Simcoe County. This competition was withdrawn in 1993. A successful revival of this competition took place in the fall of 2000 with two categories offered: Secondary Schools and Community Colleges. The contest carries on today with entries open to all Ontario high school students.

The Board of Directors of the Stephen Leacock Associates and the Stephen Leacock National Museum work in close cooperation to promote the legacy of Stephen Leacock and the authors of Canadian humour.