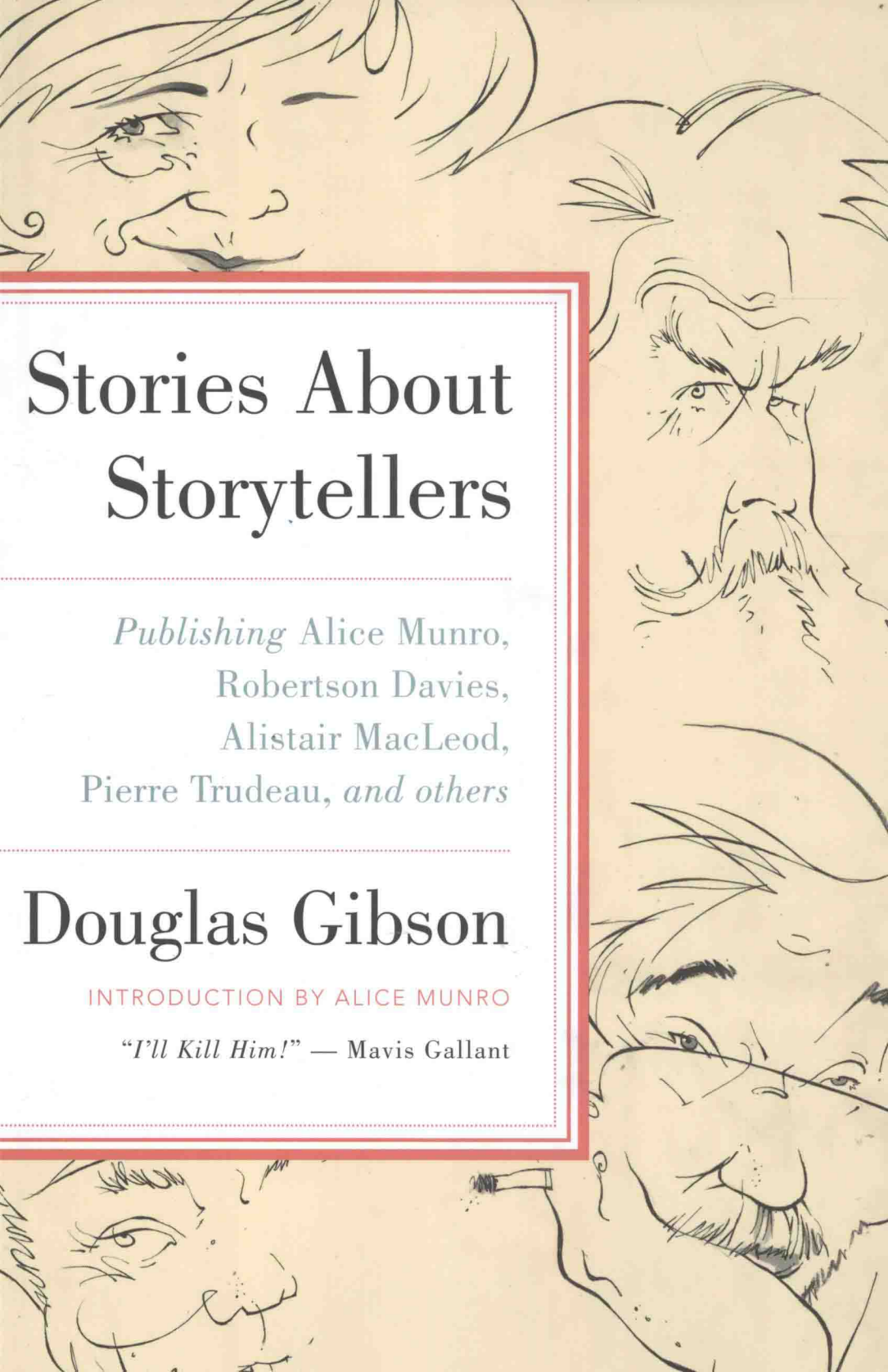

Stories About Storytellers

Publishing Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Alistair MacLeod, Pierre Trudeau, *and others*

Douglas Gibson

INTRODUCTION BY ALICE MUNRO

"*I'll Kill Him!*" — Mavis Gallant

STORIES ABOUT STORYTELLERS

Publishing
Alice Munro, Robertson Davies,
Alistair MacLeod, Pierre Trudeau, and Others

by Douglas Gibson

with illustrations by Anthony Jenkins

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To four Gibson Girls —

Jane, Jenny, Meg, and Katie

by Alice Munro

One of my favourite things to read is a tightly packed and punchy piece of biography, or, as you might call it, biographical observation. Finding out about people who seem to have become somewhat special — it's addictive. Maybe we think it will become instructive. I don't know. I do enjoy it.

Some are famous, it seems, because they always knew they would be. Others won't admit they are famous at all. (These are mostly Canadians, and over 50.) And there are rare people who just don't notice, because they are busy all the time doing something more worthy and exciting.

Doug Gibson has met a number of these people, and tells about it in this book. He is their editor and their publisher. He tells us something about what they're like, catching them in dire, or proud, or funny moments, when they are preparing for, enduring, enjoying, or living down whatever limelight falls on them. He's the man who helped them to get there.

He sees them in less fateful moments, too, if they have any. He deals with them, on these pages, with lots of good humour and observes them in ways that are acute, but mostly understanding. He is not easily dismayed.

People in this book have latched onto their fame in various ways, but it's the writers — fiction writers — that I go after. I don't care (much) who they might be having an affair with, or who they're not speaking to, and that's a good thing, because in this book I'm not going to find out. What I want to know is how they manage the separation — or the lack of it — between writing and life. What about their behaviour when they're recognized in public? The dismay when they're not? Do public readings throw them? Or buoy them up? Or both? Do they ever feel like a fraud? Is writing competing with real

life or could they not tell the two things apart? Did all of them have wonderful wives? (Yes. Yes.)

And here is a digression. I am noting that nearly all of them are of the gender that has wives, and the very stroke of my pen could get grumpy, but I have to tell you this was never Mr. Gibson's fault. He was as determined to spot, harass, encourage, and publish a female writer as anybody could possibly be. There just weren't many of us around.

Do I discover what I'm looking for about writers, do I get some idea of the everyday, unique person? Oh, yes. Some are bare-boned organizers, while some are ready to dance on tables, often showing that strange mix of humiliation and self-exposure that makes for a bumpy life and fine fiction.

There are the writers, of course, who go around marvellously disguised as perfectly normal human beings and are not much fun. There's another type of storyteller, too. They don't invent much. They pick up yarns and tales and pass them along as they go. Doug has some of them in his pocket as well. He has paid attention to the stories, the ways of life, belonging to those whose lives have meant a lot more to them than literature of any sort, who just like to tell you about something, then let it fall by the way.

A remarkable mix, this book.

And because of that, I have to break off from fiction, even though I believe it's in every breath we draw. Even in the story sworn as true, and provided with names, about the Mean-Daughter-In-Law that I heard in Tim Hortons the other day.

We have to bow to all the non-fiction writers here as well, prime ministers and others, and to all the accounts of events that really happened and maybe even changed the world forever. And make another bow to the once-living (or still-living) amazing characters, often beyond anything you'd get away within a mere story, faithfully produced in this book. As a former bookseller I know that here's what your father, your grandfather, or any other fiction-snooting fellow wants as a gift on important occasions. I have to say that the stories are interesting, sometimes compelling. Doug feels a powerful interest, and so will you. So do I.

Here I am, giving this book its due, and reading it with appetite and pleasure. How else would I ever know what the suave and delightful Charles Ritchie said to the thoroughly unpleasant Edward Heath?

So here is my prize read for people who are interested in books, writers, Canada, life, and all that kind of thing.

Thanks, Doug.

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CHAPTER 1 1869–1944

STEPHEN LEACOCK

Professor, Humorist, and Immigration Agent

It was Stephen Leacock who brought me to Canada. Not literally, of course, for he died in March 1944, when I was only three months old — which, I suppose, in a way makes us contemporaries. But his books set me giggling and snorting as a kid in Scotland spending the lunch hour sheltering from the Glasgow rain in our high school's library. There his *Nonsense Novels* and *Literary Lapses* were my favourite reading. I chortled — Lewis Carroll's invented word for "chuckle and snort" is exactly right — over people riding off madly in all directions, and at immortal lines like "'John!' pleaded Anna, 'leave alone the buttermilk. It only maddens you. No good ever came of that.'"

I knew that Leacock was Canadian, but recognized that he had a shrewd take on Scots and Scotland, and on the attitude that had long ago produced my favourite line of old Scottish poetry, "The English, for once, by guile won the day." For instance, in "Hannah of the Highlands," Leacock's opening lines describe a typical heathery landscape where various Scottish heroes had rested (in one especially heroic case, pausing to change his breeches) while escaping or hiding from the English. In the course of this story Hannah's father shows his Scottish pride when he learns that she has accepted a silver coin from a member of a rival clan with which he is feuding.

> "Siller!" shrieked the Highlander. "Siller from a McWhinus!"
>
> Hannah handed him the sixpence. Oyster McOyster dashed it fiercely on the ground, then picking it up he dashed it with full force against the wall of the cottage. Then, seizing it again he dashed it angrily into the pocket of his kilt.

Later, in Winnipeg in 1982, I was to see a real-life example of such pride. Ed Schreyer had used his vice-regal position to steer the Governor General's Awards ceremonies to his hometown, and I was there at the Fort Garry Hotel auditorium to receive the Governor

General's Award for Fiction (English) on behalf of Mavis Gallant, who was stuck in Paris with a broken ankle.

These were difficult days for federal supporters in Quebec, and the person accepting the French-language fiction award was clearly not among them. From the stage he made a fiery separatist speech, entirely in French, denouncing the event, Canada, English-speaking Canadians in general and the Governor General and the audience in particular, then showed his utter contempt for the award by taking the winner's cheque and dashing it angrily into his pocket.

The unilingual audience of polite Winnipeggers applauded him warmly.

As the next speaker, I tried to rise to the occasion. I gave the first half of Mavis's acceptance speech (for, as luck would have it, a book entitled *Home Truths*) in my harsh French. This, I like to think, was painful to my separatist predecessor's ears. Certainly, my *savoir faire* seemed to impress the Winnipeg audience. Polite applause again.

Leacock, of course, knew Winnipeg well. It was for that city that his father set off from the Old Homestead near Lake Simcoe with his fast-talking brother, E.P., to make their fortunes as land agents, only to return to Ontario flat broke. Many years later, after his own much more profitable visits as a speech-giving celebrity, Leacock produced his famous line about Winnipeg's challenging winter climate. He noted that when a man stands in winter at the corner of Portage and Main with a north wind blowing "he knows which side of him is which."

A twenty-minute walk from the Fort Garry Hotel, if you go via Portage and Main, lies the University of Winnipeg, where my friend Ian McDougall spent his career teaching Classics. It was Ian who, back in that Glasgow Academy library, hired me (at zero salary) to be an official lunch-hour librarian — thus, arguably, setting me stumbling towards a literary career.

I was not a good librarian. I kept sloppy records, and even resetting the date stamp remained an inky mystery to me, but I did read lots of Leacock. (And over the years, I should note, that school library has nourished authors all the way from George MacDonald Fraser — of Flashman and McAuslan fame — to historians Norman Stone, Walter Reid, and Niall Ferguson.) And in due course, like my

friend Ian, I went on to attend the University of St. Andrews, for four happy years.

There Leacock crossed my path again. Not only because of his witty remarks about golf, which were much-quoted in that Royal and Ancient town, "the home of golf." After a tour of Scotland (where he claimed that during two or three pleasant weeks spent lecturing there, he "never on any occasion saw whisky made use of *as a beverage*. I have seen people take it, of course, as a medicine, or as a precaution, or as a wise offset against a rather treacherous climate; but as a beverage, never") he noted that even in Sabbath-respecting Scotland, rules against Sunday sports did not apply to golf, since golf was not, strictly speaking, a sport, but rather "a form of moral effort." St. Andrews people agreed without question, especially after missing a short putt.

Another acceptable Sunday activity in St. Andrews was to attend the Film Society, which brought what we would now call "art house films" to the little university town, extending our education to include people like Antonioni, Kurosawa, and Eisenstein. Ingmar Bergman's films were a regular feature, often set beside the same sort of chilly seas that washed against our local beaches. Later these cold sands were to gain movie immortality as the barefoot runners at the start of *Chariots of Fire* splashed across them.

To lighten this solemn highbrow fare ("The horses are slipping on the ice!" one famous subtitle ran, while another had a sad Swedish woman confiding to another, "I hate the smell of semen"), the program always included short films. And the greatest of these was Stephen Leacock's *My Financial Career*. From the opening line, "When I go into a bank I get rattled," this was a faithful, deadpan rendering of Leacock's classic story, which I knew almost by heart. I watched it with delight — and with amazement, when I saw that this witty cartoon had been produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

It struck me then that any country that spent public money producing fine pieces of comedy based on a local writer's work must be something special. As a subtle piece of advertising for a country's culture, it worked on me then, and it still does. I began to think seriously about heading off to Canada after graduation, to see this place for myself.

For a Scot, moving to Canada was hardly a stretch. My grand-

mother's sister had left Ayrshire in 1903 to homestead with her new husband on the open prairie northwest of Saskatoon, a couple of years before Saskatchewan became a province. As a result, my father's cousins were spread across the West, so that Arelee, Lethbridge, and Fairview rivalled Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver in importance in our mailbox. One cousin, Ian Robertson, spent his RCAF leaves at my parents' house in Dunlop, until a bombing run over Germany swallowed him up.

Now, courtesy of Stephen Leacock, Canada was in my sights.

A graduate scholarship to Yale in September 1966 brought me within striking distance. Towards the end of the year that earned me an M.A., some of my Yale friends returned to Connecticut wide-eyed from a spring visit to Expo in Montreal, confirming the wisdom of my plan. So I left New Haven and set off across the continent in a great clockwise loop that would take me to Canada's west coast. For almost ninety-nine days I used my ninety-nine-dollar Greyhound bus pass, learning tricks like the best seat in the bus to sleep free from oncoming headlights, how to find a good café near a bus station, and the best way to stow a battered suitcase and a smelly rucksack.

This was the summer that American inner cities burned, but much more important to me, it was also the Summer of Love. So instead of Stephen Leacock my inspiration came from Bob Dylan and Joan Baez as I drifted hopefully around Haight-Ashbury and the Golden Gate Park in my very hip black cord jacket (later to be worn, ironically, to their Toronto high school by my disrespectful daughters). Eventually I arrived in Victoria in my role as a Scottish immigrant with a very poor sense of direction. I was the only passenger on the ferry from Seattle who planned to immigrate — people stared when I spoke up and was led away — and it turned out that I was very unprepared, lacking medical papers and other prudent evidence of sensible planning for such a big step.

But my immigration officer was wonderfully reassuring. Leacock, you recall, once wrote that a person gains an Oxford education by sitting with his or her tutor and being "smoked at" by the tutor puffing on his pipe. I gained admittance to Canada amid a tableful of teacups, being "drunk at" by a kindly immigration man in his shirt-sleeves who helped me to fill in the unconsidered forms. And I mean

helped. "It doesn't matter if you don't have an address in Fairview . . . it's a small enough place we don't need it." At one point he asked me about what sort of career I had in mind. I realized that with a couple of degrees, my summer jobs stacking bales of hay, rowing boats, and shovelling wet cement were not really worth mentioning, and hesitantly suggested that I was interested in working in journalism, maybe, um, even in book publishing. He grunted, encouragingly, and wrote something down. He was, as I say, a kind man.

The only crisis arose when he looked at his watch in alarm and said, "Hey, if you're heading on to Vancouver, there's a bus going in fifteen minutes. Let me just show you the way to the bus station. It's very close."

And so it was, and I caught the bus, missing the chance to roam around Victoria, where I would probably have found Munro's Books, with a good chance that a young, still-unpublished writer named Alice might have been behind the counter. It took a few years for us to meet, but in the end we got together. We've now worked with each other on twelve books, and counting.

The story leaps across half a continent, where about thirty hours east of Winnipeg I noticed that the endless lakes and rocks and pines outside the Greyhound bus window were giving way to fields and farms and maple trees, and soon we were approaching a sunny little town of orange brick named, according to the signs . . . Orillia. I wasn't at my most alert. Wait a minute! Surely this was the place that Leacock had . . . and of course it was, and in a sense I had arrived at the Canada I was seeking, even though we spent only a few minutes there, loading the bus for the remaining stages to Barrie and Toronto. But we got to stretch our legs, and the sun was shining, and the little town did indeed look like a scene "of deep and unbroken peace" — although I knew that, in reality, the place was "a perfect hive of activity."

In Toronto I spent a fair number of weeks in a sleeping bag on friends' floors, looking for work that would give me the essential "Canadian experience." I found my first job in Hamilton, working in the McMaster University administration for the registrar, Jack Evans. (McMaster was so good to me that I was glad to donate my publishing papers to Archivist Carl Spadoni when the time came, forty years later.) Then in March 1968, after replying to a *Globe and*

Mail want ad for a "Trainee Editor," I started work in downtown Toronto at Doubleday Canada — and very soon found myself at work on my first non-fiction book already under contract. It was, of course, a biography of Stephen Leacock.

The author was David M. Legate, a legendary figure in the Canadian book world as the literary editor at the *Montreal Star*, at that time a major newspaper in a city with two thriving English daily rivals. He had signed a two-book contract with the man who had hired me, the amiable and energetic David Manuel, and had gained the contract on the strength of three things: his reputation, his fund of fine tales of the book world and its denizens, and his long association with Leacock, which began in 1923, when young Legate signed up for Professor Leacock's course in Political Economy at McGill.

David Legate was born in Australia, as the title of his first book of memoirs, *Fair Dinkum* (which might be translated as "the real stuff") indicates. But I know that my boss was disappointed that Legate had chosen to hold back some of his best literary stories from that first, only fairly dinkum volume, in order to bolster a second volume. The fact that no second volume ever appeared is a lesson for all those who write their memoirs.

One story that never appeared — though Legate, a good, cackling raconteur, delighted me with his verbal account — described the time when as an undergraduate he managed to get the perfect summer job for a *McGill Daily* writer with literary aspirations. He was hired by a major Montreal newspaper to assist in the book review section that was run with an iron hand by a Great Canadian Literary Authority. After a few weeks of learning the ropes, young Legate was allowed to take over the section, inserting the reviews written by the G.C.L.A. as required, while the Great Man went on vacation.

The Monday after a major review ran in the paper, an indignant lady showed up at the newspaper office, demanding to see the Great Man. Young Legate received her in his absence and was appalled when she produced the Great Man's recent signed book review, and also a review by another hand from a London magazine some months earlier, which matched the Montreal book review word for word.

Legate was flabbergasted. He lost sleep over how on earth to handle this undeniable case of plagiarism (almost a capital offence in the newspaper world, then as now) by his legendary boss. Finally, the

day of reckoning arrived, the day a great and honoured career would perhaps collapse in . . . who knew?

"Anything happen while I was away?" asked the tanned Great Man, settling into his office chair.

"Well . . . this," squeaked Legate, pushing the two dated reviews across his desk.

The Great Man looked at them. His brow darkened. He rose, smashed a fist on the desktop and bellowed. "Why wasn't I informed about this?"

Then he stormed out of the office, leaving Legate agape.

Later, when it became clear that nothing further was to be said or done about the incident, Legate absorbed a valuable life lesson, that attack is often the best form of defence.

Not that Legate really needed instruction in this matter. The last lines of his preface to the 1970 book, *Stephen Leacock: A Biography*, catch the man's combative side. "A final note. This book was written without any assistance from the Canada Council, which refused my application for a grant-in-aid."

Earlier, the preface speaks of his youthful fascination with Leacock, thanks to his father, a Presbyterian minister in New Brunswick. Since his old man was so clearly delighted by Leacock's work, Legate

> quickly developed the habit of visiting the local public library every Saturday morning to borrow a Leacock volume. My judgment of my father's judgment was soon confirmed. Here was sparkling fun. But along came a black Saturday. As usual, I had blindly pulled off the shelf a Leacock title and taken it home. What I read dismayed me. It was deadly dull. Leacock had lost his touch. I informed my father, who hastened to point to the title, *Elements of Political Science*.

It was Stephen Leacock who brought him to McGill University (and who later enjoyed hearing the story of young Legate's textbook case of reader's disappointment). *Fair Dinkum* records that making an application to this university in distant Montreal, "where the teaching staff included a person I devoutly wanted to meet in person, Stephen Leacock," was not easy. "Since I had not sat for my matriculation (Principal Miles of the Saint John High School dismissed the