

# The Macro in the Micro: Local Colour in the Fiction of Duncan Campbell Scott, Lucy Maud Montgomery, and Stephen Leacock

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## Abstract

Local colour fiction was a particularly popular mode of writing in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Canada. As the name signifies, it emphasized the local: in settings, in dialects, in character types, but also in being humorous and in achieving hopeful (if not always 'happy') endings. Canadians, with our history of especially strong connection to community, have been very fond of local colour fiction because of its celebration of strong communal ties. Duncan Campbell Scott, Lucy Maud Montgomery, and Stephen Leacock were three prominent Canadian authors who chose this mode of writing in, respectively, *In the Village of Viger* (1896), *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), and *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). These celebrated books base their local-colour small towns on real small-town models: Scott's Viger on Aylmer (QC), Montgomery's Avonlea on Cavendish (P.E.I.), and Leacock's Mariposa on Orillia (ON). Each of these fictionalized communities epitomizes the local-colour vogue in its distinctive way. They point to a strong sense of place and community as an organic construct of interdependent relationships in both the authors and their Canadian readership, perhaps reflecting the anxieties resulting from the rapid demographic shift in Canada from rural and semi-rural living to urbanization. From about 1880 to 1920, local colour fiction dominated Canadian literary culture, and it has even become an enduringly popular mode of writing (as witness the success of Alice Munro). This project works towards answering the question: Why was there and is there such a need for local-colour fiction in the emergent and still developing Canadian culture?

## Introduction

Along with its aesthetic pleasures, literature offers readers the opportunity to recognize current and past social and economic problems. For Canadian authors of local colour fiction at the turn of the twentieth century, semi-rural and small-town life was often their focus. Each of the authors presented here created realistic fictional towns that seek to maintain the traditions of smaller communities, in a time when the process of urbanization in Canada was gaining momentum. Consequently, these works explore the tensions between Canadian rural and urban ways of living. Duncan Campbell Scott's *In the Village of Viger* (1896) represents his "anti-modern" apprehension over urbanization and the replacement of tried-and-true traditions, and, when he shows how the big city will eventually subsume Viger, the inevitability of so-called progress. In Lucy Maude Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Anne figures as a vessel carrying all that Montgomery cherished in Prince Edward Island's Cavendish: its places, its people, and its celebration of the simpler life. Stephen Leacock's life can be seen to represent the tension between rural and urban ways of living in that he lived both lifestyles (in Montreal and Orillia). In his *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Josh Smith, who personifies the nefarious city, takes control of small-town Mariposa socially and politically. Thus each of these authors analyzed in their fictions the implications of looming urbanization, which was set to become the dominant Canadian lifestyle.

### How was this project completed?

By gaining a comprehensive understanding of the local colour genre.

By analyzing the primary texts to see how they epitomize the Canadian local colour vogue.

By applying these observations in an essay and making connections to the anxieties involved with Canadian urbanization,

and to conclude with a provisional answer to the questions raised about the local colour vogue in a developing Canadian culture.

## Scholarly-Critical Reading

### In the Village of Viger

Duncan Campbell Scott presents the village of Viger as a disharmonious community that longs for the serenity it once had. The opening paragraph of the short story cycle exemplifies Scott's assessment that rapid urbanization is inevitable for Viger and, by extension, for Canada:

It was too true that the city was growing rapidly. As yet its arms were not long enough to embrace the little village of Viger, but before long they would be, and it was not a time that the inhabitants looked forward to with any pleasure. It was not to be wondered at, for few places were more pleasant to live in....The change was coming, however, rapidly enough. Even now, on still nights above the noise of the frogs in the pools, you could hear the rumble of street-cars...and when the air was moist the whole southern sky was luminous with the reflection of thousands of gas lamps. (Scott 1)

There is immediate tension between the "few places [that] were more pleasant to live in" and the "change [to urban living] ...coming...rapidly enough." Moreover, the noise of streetcars and the reflections of gas lamps signifies the hellish colonizing of the small town by the big city, its troubling "embrace." Thus Scott in the very first sentence of Viger signals his fiction's investment in the socio-economic state of Canada, arising from the looming destiny of such small-town communities as Viger.

### Anne of Green Gables

Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* focuses on Anne, an orphan girl, whose experiences epitomize life on Prince Edward Island. Throughout the novel, Avonlea is presented as an idyllic rural community celebrated for its local colour. William H. Magee provides interpretive context when he writes that perhaps "general problems in human living ...contrast to local colour ideals" (78). While emphasizing the idyllic nature of Avonlea, Montgomery also ironically acknowledges the problems of modern life in contrast to the rural ideal that Green Gables celebrates.

Throughout the novel Anne, whether from necessity or desire, leaves Avonlea. But in every instance loyalty brings her back to the small town, home, and family, a return that undoubtedly represents Montgomery's own loyalty to the small town lifestyle of local-colour fiction. The continuing popularity of *Anne of Green Gables* clearly shows the attractive persistence of a distinctive spirit of Canadian local colour.

### Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town

Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* epitomizes his ironic vision of the good life in this classic of Canadian local-colour fiction. The Mariposans' actions and experiences are revealed in the stories of the cycle as illustrations of a way of life that is representative of both Mariposa and Canadian small towns at the turn of the twentieth century. Individually and collectively the stories show the requisite tension between rural and urban ways of life while ironically preferring the interdependent organization of the human-scale community.

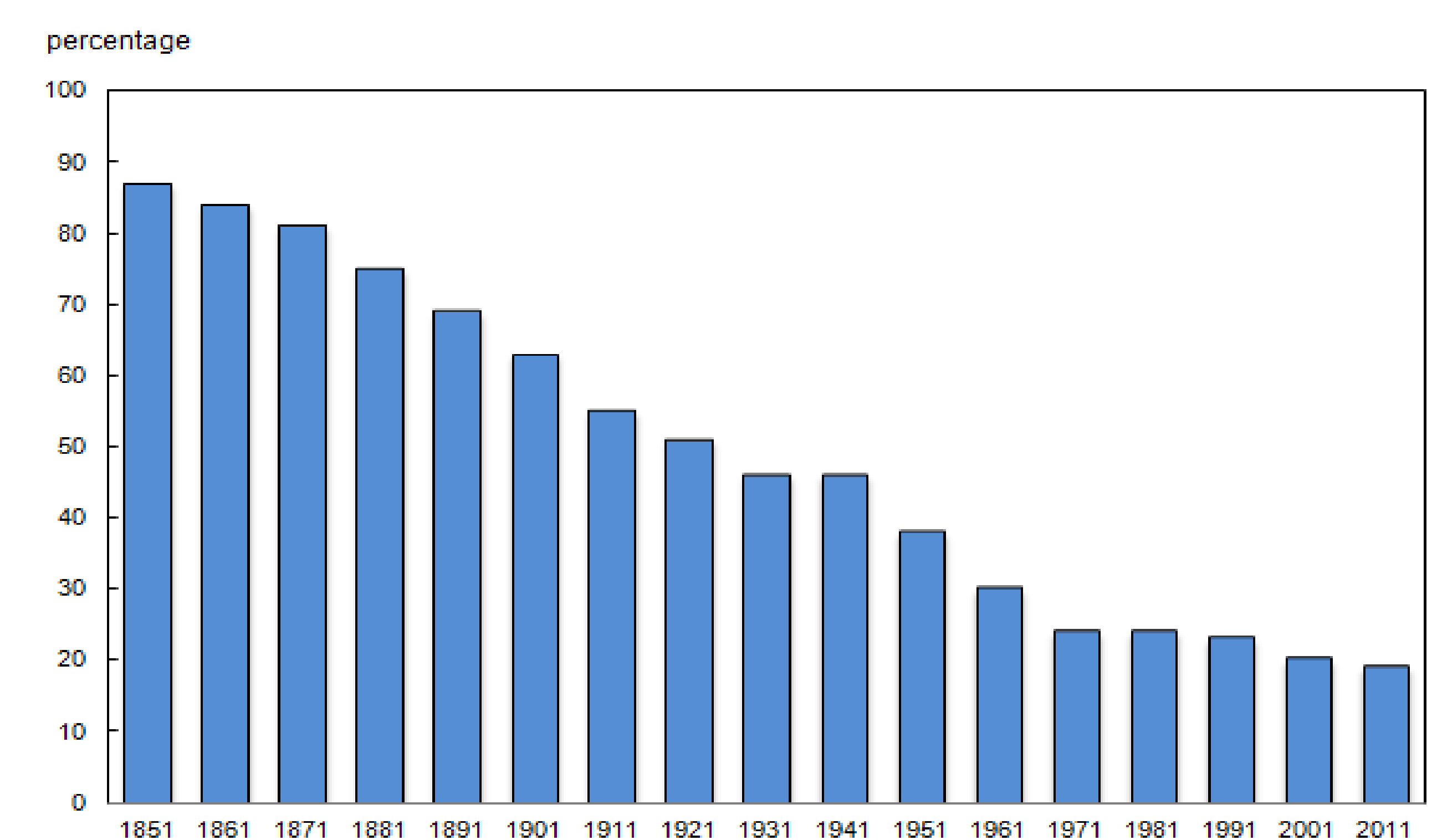
In contrast, hotel-owner Josh Smith personifies the values of the unnamed city. He acts according to a business ethic. He exploits Mariposa's troubling emulation of the city both to gain wealth and ultimately to become its member of parliament (and so leave for the big city of Ottawa). As such, Josh and his material greed may represent the inevitable end of evanescent Mariposa.

The closing sketch, "L'Envoi: The Train to Mariposa," perfectly conveys Leacock's nostalgia for places like Mariposa that so admirably represent Canadian local-colour fiction (see the quotation below).

## Conclusion

The three examples of local-colour fiction employed in this project illustrate the idiosyncratic styles of three of Canada's most cherished authors. This project sought to answer one central question: What need was served in the emergent Canadian culture by these three iconic writers exploring this particular mode of writing? As has been discovered, the vogue of local colour fiction can be seen to express Canadian anxieties over the coming of modernity and metropolitanism in a time when Canada was undergoing a seismic demographic shift from rural and small-town living to big-city dwelling (see Figure 1 below).

**Chart 1**  
Proportion of the population living in rural areas, Canada, 1851 to 2011



**Note:** The data presented for the censuses from 1851 to 1951 are based on the definition of rural areas in use at that time.  
**Source:** Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1851 to 2011.

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## Contact

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"And as we listen, the cry grows fainter and fainter in our ears and we are sitting here...talking of the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew"

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