

L. M. Montgomery: Canadian Authoress



Were Lucy Maud Montgomery alive today, she would be one hundred years old. She could look back on a very productive life: twenty-three books of fiction, one book of poetry, a book about courageous women, and an autobiography. Her works have been read and enjoyed by millions, both children and adults. The fiction still sells steadily in countries as diverse as Canada and Japan. In fact, Anne Shirley is probably Canada's best-known fictional export.

It is in recognition of L. M. Montgomery's work that this collection of articles has been assembled. It seems especially appropriate that the cover art for the collection is a reproduction of the Canada Post Office's own tribute to Montgomery's centennial: Peter Swann's portrait of Anne. He has depicted Anne as we first meet her, sitting on a pile of shingles while waiting with carpetbag for Matthew at the railroad station. The "faded brown sailor hat" is missing, and the "very short, very tight, very ugly dress of yellowish-gray wincey" is somewhat altered, but the red hair and large eyes are very much Anne's. Though Swann's conception may not be perfectly coincident with another reader's "mind's-eye" portrait, he has made a commendable attempt to reproduce in art the Anne he has seen in his imagination.

The body of this collection is comprised of seven articles. Elizabeth Waterston, in the initial article, presents a survey of Montgomery's life and work. She indicates the early childhood influences and the later adult career of L.M.M., as well as providing informative and perceptive comments on all the books.

The following pair of articles focuses on the Anne books. Mary Rubio discusses Montgomery's attitude to satire, realism, and imagination through careful comparison of *Anne of Green Gables* with Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Putting Montgomery's novel in the context of then-contemporary literature, Rubio reveals its particular quality and achievement. Gillian Thomas, in

contrast, looks at the later Anne books. She suggests reasons for their apparent decline from the level of the first novel.

Anne Cowan moves away from Anne and chooses to centre her comments primarily on the Emily trilogy, especially in regard to Emily's authorial talents--talents shared, of course, by Emily's creator. By considering both Emily Byrd Starr and L.M.M. as *Canadian* authoresses, she adds to our understanding of the intrinsically Canadian nature of Montgomery's work.

Muriel Whitaker, taking a different approach, deals with a variety of novels: the first Anne, Emily, and Pat books plus *The Blue Castle*. Her concern is with Montgomery's heroines, with what makes them--especially Anne and Emily--such memorable characters. Jane Fredeman's article also examines the heroines of various novels, but she puts the emphasis on the fantasy worlds that they create. She sees the conflict between fantasy and reality as a major tension in all the books, and she indicates how the situation is resolved in specific instances. Incidentally, like Cowan and Whitaker, she gives some emphasis to the Emily series in the course of her discussion.

The final article, appropriately, is by another well-known children's writer, Jean Little, whose books, like Montgomery's, have sold thousands and thousands of copies. Little divides Montgomery's children into four types: Stock Children, Non-Children, Exaggerated Children, and Real Children. In the last group her favourite is Jane of Lantern Hill because, unlike Anne and Emily who are *exceptional* real children, Jane is a comparatively *ordinary* real child.

The seven articles provide good coverage of the range of Montgomery's fiction. However, since only Elizabeth Waterston's survey mentions the non-novelistic *Watchman and Other Poems* (1916) and *Courageous Women* (1934), perhaps a few additional words on these books are in order. The former is a collection of previously published poems; some are interesting, but none are exceptional. Curiously enough, one of the poems is titled "At the Long Sault"--a title and topic Archibald Lampman had also used shortly before his death in 1899, though the poem was not published until 1943. There is, therefore, no question of influence one way or the other; in any case, Montgomery's treatment is much less dynamic and much more conventional than Lampman's. Still, *both* were sufficiently interested in that incident from Canada's past to make it the subject of poetry.

Courageous Women, which Montgomery wrote in collaboration with Marian Keith and Mabel McKinley, shares this concern with Canada's past. Though the twenty-one biographies include such world-renowned figures as Joan of Arc and Helen Keller, a full fifteen--over 70%--are about Canadian women: Madeleine de Vercheres, Laura Secord, Catherine Parr Traill, Ada May Courtice, Caroline MacDonald, Elizabeth Louise Mair, Anna Gaudin, Sadie Stringer, Madame Albani, Pauline Johnson, Aletta Elise Marty, Dr. Margaret Mackellar, Margaret Polson Murray, Lady Tilley, and Marshall Saunders. All made notable contributions to Canada and/or humanity in spite of many obstacles,

thus the appellation, "courageous". The book is valuable because it clearly affirms both Montgomery's Canadianism and her feminism. As she wrote as early as 1909 in a letter to Ephraim Weber,

But I *do* believe that a woman with property of her own should have a voice in making the laws. Am I not as intelligent and capable of voting for my country's good as the Frenchman who chops my wood for me, and who may be able to tell his right hand from his left, but cannot read and write?

So you wish 'married women everywhere were real companions to their husbands'. So do I--as heartily as I wish that married men everywhere were real companions for their wives. You can't, as Emerson says, cut this matter off with only one side. It has to have two. As for 'spheres', I believe anyone's sphere--whether man or woman--is where they can be happiest and do the best work. The majority of women are happiest and best placed at home, just as the majority of men are in the world. But there are exceptions to both. Some women are born for a public career, just as some men are *born to cook in a restaurant*. Yes, they are! And each has a right to fulfil the purpose of their birth. Sex seems to me to enter very little into the question. There is no sex in mind, I do believe, and--'let each one find his own', and her own, in business as well as matrimony.

During the last few years, new information about Montgomery and new stories from her hand have come to light. The source of the material is a trunkful of diaries, manuscripts, and other papers now owned by Montgomery's surviving son, Dr. Stuart MacDonald of Toronto. The diaries provided the basis for a recent CBC television special on Montgomery and revealed the inner passionate woman behind the outward conventional mask. The stories, originally assembled as an unpublished MS titled "The Blythes Are Quoted", have been reorganized and published as *The Road to Yesterday* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974). In spite of what one or two reviewers have contended, the volume contains some quite pleasant stories. There is, perhaps understandably, a little too much reference to the Blythe family as a standard of comparison, and a few of the stories tax credibility. However, as a whole, the stories are reasonably enjoyable--even humorous--and are quite consonant with Montgomery's other fiction. They also contain certain realistic events not commonly considered to be part of Montgomery's fictional world. In "A Commonplace Woman", for example, the protagonist--who has quite enthusiastically engaged in a secret love affair without any thought of marriage, who gives birth to an illegitimate child then surrenders her for adoption by a wealthy couple, and who later secretly murders her daughter's husband because he cruelly mistreats his wife and child--is allowed to live to the ripe old age of 85 and is quite content on her deathbed. Indeed, when she dies, her eyes are "triumphant and young"; and her last words assert "I have lived!"--an evaluation with which Montgomery seems to concur. This is a far cry from the Sunday school fiction of Montgomery's early career.

Taken together, the articles in this collection provide a fitting

commemorative tribute to L.M. Montgomery and to the child, woman, and author that she was. However, the best tribute is probably that which each of us gives in our repeated reading of the fiction. Anne, Emily, Marigold, Valancy, Pat, Jane and all the others--we prove--are alive . . . and living in Canadians.

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