

The hijacking of "Anne"

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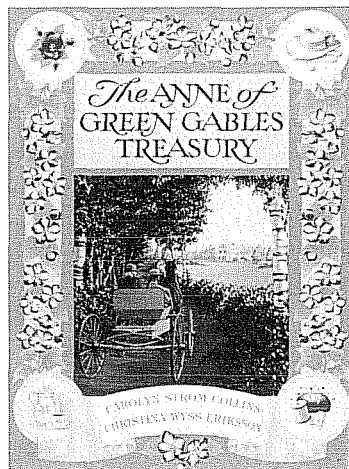
In the introduction to the *Anne of Green Gables treasury* the authors describe its modest beginnings: two mothers from Minnesota began researching the background of L.M. Montgomery's Anne books in order to explain Anne's world to their daughters. But questions proliferated and the task became a "five-year obsession," taking them to repositories in Minnesota, Ontario and Prince Edward Island, and culminating in this book.

True to its name, this *Treasury* contains various topics, and invites repeated reading. It starts with a biography of Montgomery, and next gives synopses of each book in the series. These synopses are accompanied by photographs of, apparently, the first edition book covers – an interesting study in themselves. Then we are taken into the world of the books with a look at the geography of P.E.I. and Avonlea, and a detailed description of the house, Green Gables. Maps of the relevant locales, and floor plans of the actual site illustrate the text.

Turning to the life that existed within these settings, the authors present a family tree of Anne and her relations. The birthdates in this were established by working from actual dates given in *Rilla of Ingleside* to identify events in the other volumes. According to this scheme, Anne was born in 1866, and is 53 at the end of the last book in 1919. A time chart following Anne's life year by year lists contemporary events, to put her "biography" in its historical context.

The *Treasury* continues by detailing many of the activities that Anne and her contemporaries experienced, including: school-life and playtime; chores indoors and out; church-going; concerts, holidays and other celebrations. In essence, the book attempts to recreate some of the culture of the past, always a difficult task because of the mass of information that exists to be processed. It is the more difficult here, for the life of women and children has long been poorly documented and infrequently studied. In effect, this is an exercise in historical ethnography.

Focussing on Anne's daily activities, the authors discuss various historical



domestic arts, with examples that readers can try themselves. There are recipes for a tea party and instructions for needlework, preserving flowers, and gardening. This approach is common in museum programming today: such "reconstructive history" recognizes how much people can learn by replicating past activities. Even if we only learn how much we don't know today of particular skills, we come to know more than we might have from merely reading about them.

The book ends by bringing the reader back to the present, and noting what is lasting in values even if outward forms of life change over time. This is a good technique, for it allows us to consider just what may be common to human existence then and now. The authors have done a great deal of work in pulling their material together. The book has attractive borders reminiscent of those used on the original book jackets. The authors' concern with accuracy extends to the pictures, as they claim that these were based upon historical sources. And the book's tone is friendly. It does not talk down to its readers, or lose them in the complexities of the different culture that the past comprises.

Nonetheless, although many good things may be said of the *Treasury*, I did find weaknesses in it, as well as mistakes; and these must also be addressed.

The many historical allusions in the Anne series cannot be ignored, and they do draw one into wondering about the times in which Anne lived. Indeed, it would be interesting to see how many people working in the material history field today had some early influence in this direction from reading Montgomery's books. Collins and Eriksson do not state whether they have done other historical work; and lack of experience in the field may have produced some of the problems that I found in this book. But their editors should at least be experienced, and could have taken some more pains to help where necessary.

The first problem is the absence of footnotes – the old undergraduate bug-bear. The biographical section in particular is full of opinions and conclusions about Lucy Maud's life. We know at least that her journals were consulted, as there is acknowledgment of them on the first page. But there is no specific reference to these or any other sources. Thus, we do not know what material has been used, and what is someone else's opinion, or the writers'. Montgomery's works are cited, and so we know that those producing the *Treasury* were not wholly unaware of proper procedure.

Similarly, there is no bibliography, and not even a general listing of the types of sources used. A deplorable result of this is that the reader can go no further on the topic of social and cultural life in the past than this book. The conventions of the historical method have developed for reasons, not just as tedious discipline. By ignoring those conventions, it is as if the authors have only given their audience a meal, but not the means to produce food of their own.

A problem that is concerned with historical content rather than methodology is raised by the family tree. Like the authors, I have tried to establish birthdates for Anne and her circle. My results differ from the *Treasury's* by at least three years, and in fact agree with Parks Canada's dating for Green Gables. The book has overlooked a very significant event in *Anne's House of Dreams*: the General Election won by the Liberals for the first time in 18 years (*Anne's House of Dreams*, chap. 35). Anne was 27 years old at the time, and was therefore born in 1869. That date is more in keeping with her longing for puffed sleeves in 1880, when she came to Green Gables. In 1877, her eleventh year according to the *Treasury*, such sleeves were not possible with the fashions then current.

Working back from the *Rilla* dates does give a neat and consistent chronology, but it is one that does not faithfully represent the whole series. Montgomery alludes to other dates, like the visit of a premier with a prominent nose when Anne was eleven (*Anne of Green Gables*, Chap 18). John A. Macdonald visited P.E.I. in 1890. If he owned the nose in question, then Anne was born in 1879. Then too, in *Anne of Windy Poplars*, the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake is mentioned, when Anne was 23 years old (Chap. II-8). Accordingly, the earliest that she could have been born was 1883.

The time chart stemming from the family tree is hopelessly skewed if these dates are acknowledged. Even an 1869 birthdate leaves us with some real years to stretch out or collapse. But we should remember that Anne is fiction first, and not biography. There are more serious problems with this chart, however.

The most obvious feature of it, and objectionable I would imagine to many Canadian readers, is the predominance of American events. In both the text and the illustrations, the United States is the most represented of any region of the world. This situation may have resulted from the fact that the authors are American; and they wrote what they knew, or obtained from American sources. In the absence of a bibliography, we'll never know if the latter is the case. It may be because they saw their major market as American readers. One would suspect, however, that more Japanese than Americans might read this book, given Anne's huge following in Japan. But the publishers were Canadian, and one would think that they would insist upon more suitable material.

Were *Anne* written about Australia, surely readers would want to know more about the history of that country, whether the *Treasury* was written by Australians, Canadians or Japanese. This book afforded the perfect chance to the publishers, if not to the authors, to realize that people could learn about Canadian history, and about P.E.I. in particular. L.M. Montgomery's own strong feelings for her province and her country are distinguishing features of her books. She deliberately chose not to make Anne vague and generally "North American." She objected to the Stars and Stripes flying over the school in the first film made of *Anne of Green Gables* (Ridley 92). Her work ought to be set in the context that mattered to her.

Instead of the Riel Rebellion, we get the defeat of Custer. Instead of Mackenzie King's birth, we get F.D. Roosevelt, when more appropriate than either of them, for F.D.R.'s year, is the collapse of the Bank of P.E.I. That, both Anne and Lucy Maud experienced. Instead of Kitchener on the World War I poster, we get Uncle Sam; and why do we need to know about the American roller coaster at Coney Island? The very first date given in this section of the book is the American Civil War, for the year of Anne's supposed birth. Far more significant, and contributory to the very formation of Canada, were the Fenian Raids: those were, in fact, an instance of Americans directly affecting this country. The authors have stated that this work took them five years. It is unfortunate that in that time they were not able to become more conversant with Canadian history.

Similarly, although the Anne books are about women, intended mainly for female readers, and celebrate women's experience and the validity of their lives, two-thirds of the people noted in the chart are the traditional historical achievers: men at work, and men in power. The lack of information on women in the past is, of course, not limited to this book; and the authors do document some of the lives of ordinary women in the domestic activities that they describe. Collins and Eriksson further offer a chance for some direct experience of those lives in the instructions for the various crafts projects.

Here again, better knowledge of Anne's cultural background, and in particular the British tradition in Canada, might have averted some errors. For instance, with reference to the section on cooking: tea biscuits, or scones, are served before and not after the sandwiches at tea; fruitcake was regularly made and eaten, not just in the Fall; and the jelly tarts would have been pastries, not cookies. The authors give a recipe for plum puffs that consists of a *choux* pastry filled with cream cheese and plum jam. By coincidence, the newsletter *Kindred Spirits of P.E.I.*, a publication that comes from the home of L.M. Montgomery's cousins at Park Corner, last year gave the old Macneill family recipe for the same dish. (Lucy Maud's mother was a Macneill.) It was for a biscuit dough with a raisin filling. Peanut butter, melons and bananas as typical turn-of-the-century rural P.E.I. fare are, I think, stretching accuracy and the authors' credibility tremendously.

The needlework and dried flower projects are limited enough in the scope so as not to daunt those trying them, and simple enough to produce satisfying results. The instructions are clear, and illustrated in detail. I did feel some discomfort with them, however, in that they may be too close to what many people today think of as typically Victorian; and that by doing these crafts children tend to confirm our stereotypes of this period rather than experience something more strikingly different. The examples here are very much the kinds of things we see in nostalgic magazine photographs taken through a soft lens: lacy underwear, pot-pourri, and the ubiquitous straw hat on the wall. No right-minded Victorian lady ever decorated her house with her clothing.

Although the authors explain their choice of a bib apron pattern, such items were made by girls well into the 1950s. A better example would be to make a pinafore. These were an important item in a girl's wardrobe from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, and would have provided more of a trip back in time.

To go from specific items of clothing to the issue of fashion in general, I found the treatment of this topic especially confusing. There are some details given, for example, in laundry, that do explain past processes. But, possibly because the history of fashion is so large and complex an area to grasp, it seems to have defeated the authors. They do not clarify, for instance, that Anne's period saw many styles in cut, colour, fabric, silhouette, and construction come and go. Instead, we get certain styles put together in the book and presented as contemporaneous when they never were in reality.

We also get "facts" presented that are, in fact, only expressions of today's ignorance and prejudice. The corset, for example, was not automatically "extremely uncomfortable." Corset styles varied over time from short to long, from ones which pocketed the stomach to ones which were flat in front. There were corsets for sports, and extra stays to wear on top of a corset in order to make heavy house work easier. Corsets did restrict movement in some directions, but the cut of the sleeve could resist it more.

A corseted body might not allow the wearer to control her shape by means of her own toned muscles; but many women today do not develop such control even though their clothing would permit them to do so. In some cases they might do better to have the artificial support that the corset gave. It was their tightness and incorrect lacing that caused the problems with corsets. But it is no more true that every woman then laced tightly than that every woman now wears the highest of spike heels. Future generations, however, might think of us if they approach our clothing as the *Treasury* approaches Anne's.

The illustrations must also be considered in terms of their accuracy. Although the authors carefully point out the pictures' basis in historical sources, such is not apparent in the finished work. One wonders why, for example, when cherry blossoms are usually white and the Snow Queen's name must surely bear some relation to its appearance, the tree outside Anne's window has pink flowers. The backs of the school benches as they are depicted would probably not hold together, and the stovepipe has an odd and unnecessary bend in it. The illustration for the tea time chapter heading is of a coffee pot.

The failure to live up to the claims of accuracy in the illustrations is the more serious – albeit sometimes amusing – where clothing is concerned. For one thing, it is odd that although the authors have been so precise about Anne's dates, as a child in the 1870s and '80s, the clothing and hairstyles shown are consistently those of the 1890s and early 1900s. One must conclude again that it is our stereotypes of the past that are being illustrated, and not the reality of history. Then too, although there are no references to Anne's having bangs

in any of the Montgomery books, she has them in the illustrations. This probably shows the influence of the musical of *Green Gables*, and the hairstyles that were popular for young girls when it was costumed. Cutting bangs was a momentous decision, often forbidden by one's family, as readers of *Emily, Pat* and biographical information on Lucy Maud herself are well aware. They would not exist without comment.

An example of the topsy-turviness of some of the illustrations is one showing Anne partly dressed, in her bedroom. She is in a bustle of the late 1880s, with her hair in the style of 1900. Some evidently bare skin shows above her waistband under the bodice, which detail can only mean that she has forgotten her chemise, corset and camisole! And how is she going to get her stockings and boots on now that she is so far advanced in her dressing? Similarly, the schoolroom illustration shows only two possible pinafores, although that is the one piece of clothing worn by almost every schoolgirl, no matter what the dress underneath it was like. And the scene is winter, as one sees through the window, so that the clothes pictured cannot be explained away as cotton for warmer weather wear.

The boys' clothes are frankly a conundrum: there are some that look no different from present-day ones, or no earlier than those in illustrations for school readers of the 1950s. There is even something that looks oddly like a modern denim vest. The boys would probably have been wearing wool, and less flamboyant fabrics and colours than appear in the picture. Furthermore, many of the illustrations in the section on fashion have line drawings in white on a cream background, of actual historic styles. Perhaps this is where the accuracy that the authors note is to be found. Unfortunately, the choice of colours is such that the contrast between them is very poor, and so it is difficult for one even when conversant with the styles to read them clearly.

In pointing out errors such as the above – and these are, unfortunately, not isolated examples – I am not just playing a game of demonstrating the reviewer's expertise. Nor is the issue here just that the book does not live up to its authors' claims. The matter is far more serious.

Information is being given to readers who do not know about life in the past: indeed, that is the justification for this book. Therefore, the readers have no independent knowledge of their own against which to measure what they are being told. Information is further being given in a way that prevents the readers from using the same sources as the authors and coming to their own conclusions, whether similar or different. No sources are listed for them to consult. There is an education at process at work, and in this case, wrong information is being taught. Not only have the "pupils" yet to learn what is correct, they will first have to unlearn what is wrong.

A partial truth is not a truth. At best, it is perplexing and misleading. Given the power that visual images have, it is particularly necessary that the pictures be accurate. A lesser, but no less valid consideration with this book is that the

number of illustrations, colourful and enjoyable as they are, probably added to the price. There is more reason, therefore, to ensure that the \$30.00 that a young reader spends for the *Treasury* is buying something of high and consistent quality.

Although some of the errors noted here could be corrected, there is a more fundamental concern underlying the question of what was Anne's historical period, and is this or any book accurate about it. This concern goes back to a point raised here earlier: is Anne fiction or biography? *The Anne of Green Gables treasury* attempts to treat Anne as a real person, and the information in her series as fact. The many historical details in the Anne books certainly do encourage such an attitude, as does the love that readers have for Anne. This acceptance of the reality of Anne attests strikingly to L.M. Montgomery's success in creating her.

Yet, when looked at closely, Montgomery's own apparently historical features are sufficiently vague as to suggest that they were not meant to be too identifiable. Green dresses and hairstyles with a dip over the forehead appear in various books from Anne to the *Pat* series of the 1930s. Even Anne's beloved puffed sleeves are not well defined. Film versions of *Green Gables* have tended to interpret them as the huge 1890s leg-of-mutton shape. Montgomery, however, described that period's sleeves as "monstrosities" (Montgomery, Macmillan Papers). "Puffed sleeves" as a diagnostic term is too uncertain: there were such sleeves at least as far back as Medieval times. In more recent years they were popular – although varying in size, silhouette, and number of puffs – in: the 1830s, the 1880s, the 1890s, the 1900s, and on up to the 1950s and 1970s. The term creates a certain atmosphere, but not a clear picture.

Montgomery drew upon her own experience for her writing, and it is not surprising to find Anne a child in the years that Montgomery was herself. But she also wrote for the audience that would read Anne when the book was published, and would need to have references with which they could identify. An example of her doing this is in Anne's talking of pompadour hairstyles, which came into vogue in the late nineteenth century and were still popular when *Green Gables* was published in 1908. This is terribly anachronistic when most of the other details place Anne as a child in the 1880s.

By insisting that the Anne books adhere to a strict chronology, we are faced with a dilemma when they do not conform. What is the solution then? That the chronology is correct, because it is consistent with the normal progression of time? But the chronology is based upon, and only exists, because of the fiction. A more obvious confusion arises when there are actual locations and physical structures involved, such as the environs of Cavendish/Avonlea and the site of Green Gables. The house is real and has real structural features that may or may not agree with the books. The authors of the *Treasury* have recognized this situation in having the building drawn with one storey in the kitchen wing, although it now actually has two.

But Montgomery was not necessarily true to that building in her writing. Although the two-storey living quarters are on the south side of the house, she has Mrs. Lynde in the "north gable" (*Anne of Avonlea*, chap. 26). She has a fireplace in the sitting room (*Anne of Green Gables*, chap. 8), while the floor plan has a stove. The kitchen has windows facing east and west according to her (*Green Gables*, chap. 1), although the floor plan shows an inner wall on the west side with entry into two different rooms and the porch. Indeed, Montgomery does not seem to be consistent even with herself. Anne's bedroom in *Green Gables* has dainty apple blossom wallpaper (*Green Gables*, chap. 33), and then, following that description, is twice referred to as being white (*Green Gables*, chaps. 34, 36).

To be sure, the *Anne* books were produced from c. 1905 to 1939, and were not written in chronological order. Montgomery can be forgiven inconsistencies under these circumstances. But more crucial here is the fact that *Anne* is fiction: she is created, and in reifying her we may be damaging her as a creation. As an author, L.M. Montgomery used events, objects and personalities for literary effects as well as for factual details. They are devices to advance a plot, develop comedy or drama, express symbolism, and so forth. We may be destroying the art in *Anne* if we insist too literally upon her as history.

Does the fact that *Anne* is fiction mean, then, that works like the *Treasury* are out of place? Certainly not, as long as the fictional base of this book, and contradictions that occur in the original, are pointed out and dealt with. Does this mean that one cannot criticize the *Treasury* for its failures in historical research, when it is not dealing with an historical reality? No, once more, for what is being criticized is the treatment of aspects of real life in the past, life that *Anne* would have experienced had she actually lived. The authors are attempting to do history, and it is on this that they are being assessed.

In sum, *The Anne of Green Gables treasury* was an ambitious undertaking, more so than Collins and Eriksson may have realized at the outset. It does gather and present a wealth of material. Its drawback is that with so much effort put into the work, more care was not taken in areas like those discussed here to make it truly a gem for the bookshelf.

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