

## L. M. MONTGOMERY'S "ANNE"

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NOT until early in this century did Canadian writers of fiction quite have the realistic eye to see what literary material might be gathered from our commonplace farms, lonely villages and remote frontiers, provided one had the knack of selecting and "processing" it—without over-processing. "They began to realize that life around them was as interesting as Barrie's Thrums or Bret Harte's California," says *Highways of Canadian Literature*. The same writer points out that on reading Ian Maclaren's *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*, Adeline M. Teskey declared, "I know just as interesting people in Canada"; and so stimulated, she wrote her *Where the Sugar Maple Grows*—readable sketches of Canadian village characters.

The above authority calls 1908 the real beginning of the Second Renaissance in Canadian fiction, for in that year were published three "community novels" of note: L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, Marian Keith's *Duncan Polite*, and Nellie McClung's *Sowing Seeds in Danny*. So strong a start in this experiment doubtless soon brought publishers a grievous lot of manuscripts; though in L. M. Montgomery's case the publishers' trouble later on was not to read more of her manuscripts but to get more of them fast enough. The five sadder and wiser publishers who had rejected *Anne of Green Gables* evidently saw no future in the community novel, at least when written by an obscure stranger. Out of her twenty-one novels it is the six or seven *Anne* books we are now to re-read and appraise.

To write with third-rate interest about the common people and their daily doings is easy; to write about them with second-rate interest is not extra hard; but to do it with first-rate interest is surprisingly difficult. L. M. Montgomery has depicted the common people of Prince Edward Island with first-rate interest; for, having grown up among them, she knows their ways, their traditions, their souls, as Dickens knows *his* islanders. And yet some of her critics are not won over; one of them, reviewing the later Canadian literature some years ago, called the Montgomery novels "the nadir of Canadian fiction". Of course the thrilling romantic plot is missing. To a reader of the old school, addicted to those far-spun yarns of romance vibrating with heroic excitement, the humbler affairs of the community novel

may well be piddling neighborhood fusses. But many of the best late novels, highly rated and widely read, are quite without large-scale plot interest. What, no terrific tenseness between mighty antagonistic forces! No Himalayas scaled in pursuit of the villain! No war over the duchess! Well then, has the community novel any compensating substitute? The compensating substitute in the first-rate community novel is the interest of *reality*.

The interest of reality in the new Canadian novel is mainly *character* interest, heightened by concentrated regional setting; and not far behind is the interest of *incident*. To make up in this way for lack of plot structure is obviously no easy assignment. Before you know it, you have the dry rot of dullness—unless you scrape into unsavory realism. Then, too, this kind of fiction, far more than the heroic romance, attracts the spoiling imitator. Even so, if your author knows his kind and knows his art, the interest of reality fills the bill excellently.

Every day we meet people who have read a few of the Anne books, and there are those who have made a clean sweep of the Montgomery shelf, or have re-read parts of it. As for favorite volumes, many have read *Anne of Green Gables* two, three, and "I don't know how many" times. An ex-collegiate student of ours, now a mother, wrote recently:

Please do not say I used to devour the Montgomery books. It is only a few days ago that I contemplated reading them once more. I have lost count of how many times that would be, but each time I get more and more from the reading. . . Did you know Guthrie [husband] has been a Montgomery fan for years?

A German Mennonite girl of eleven comes to my study these times twice a week for a next Anne story, because "At the public library Anne books are always out, and the last one I had was all worn out and dirty". I quiz her a bit on these stories; her knowledge is surprising. What is there in them that fascinates this child, who is being brought up in a different social world and on a different language? It is surely her heart's response to the author's friendly human note and the living vividness of it all. "Montgomery girls", reported a bright tenth grade lass I was quizzing, "act just like we girls act; they're just so many of us. They just step out of the book and are with us." Her gusto in saying it showed how this middle-teener enjoyed the illusion of reality. Herein is our author's opportunity: her upward trend and idealization of life is so

naturally veiled as entertainment that our girls are off guard against being made better, and so are made better. "They just step out of the book and are with us" Is it any wonder that of the hundreds all over the world who wrote their thanks and appreciation to the author, a number of younger girls addressed *Anne Shirley*, Green Gables, Avonlea, P. E. I.?

*Anne of Green Gables* is getting to be used as story material at school from grade three to first year high-school. In Saskatchewan it is supplementary reading for grade IX, in Manitoba for grade VII, in Ontario for the upper public-school grades, in Alberta for grade VIII and division II of the elementary school, and in practically all the provinces it is recommended for school libraries, though in New Brunswick all the L. M. Montgomery books are thought suitable only "for very young children". In Prince Edward Island, *Rilla of Ingleside* is supplementary reading for grade VII; also in Manitoba, as well as *Magic for Marigold*. The wide age range is striking, and indicates fine literary elasticity in these Anne books. These, Protestant Quebec reports, are all in the school libraries and are quite popular in the high-school grades, *Rainbow Valley* being a favorite. From *Anne of Green Gables* dialogues and scenes are sometimes played in the class-room; here in Saskatoon we have seen it acted full stage throughout, slightly abridged, by a collegiate cast before a large public audience. Small boys read these books above board, big ones on the sly, "to see what scrape this Anne-girl gets into next". Boys with changing voices croak against "that gushy-mushy sentimental stuff about kindred spirits 'n fairies 'n poetry dope", but sometimes sneak back to pick up the discarded volume again. Grandmas absorbed in *Anne* stories brighten up with understanding smiles at spots where their granddaughters giggle. A neighbor borrowed our *Anne of Green Gables* (needs patching and dry-cleaning) for her bed-ridden mother, aged ninety-four, who still is sport enough to fancy she's Marilla; for in a reading circle long ago they said she took the part so well. And here is a trailer: soon after *Green Gables* was published, a missive came to the author from Mark Twain's secretary, a copy of Mark's note to Francis Wilson, famous actor:

*Anne of Green Gables* is the sweetest creation of child life yet written.

How the great humorist felt Anne's spell! When L. M. Mont-

gomery died, a newspaper pointed out a quotation from him in a booklet on this author:

Anne Shirley, the heroine of *Anne of Green Gables*, is the dearest and most moving and delightful child since the immortal Alice.

Reviewing *Anne of Ingleside*, a belated sequel to several sequels to *Green Gables*, Jane Spence Southron said: "Mark Twain, had he been alive, would have approved of the later Anne. She has worn well; or rather, there is no sign of wear about her."

Not only from the United States came such praise. For the excellence of her literary work and the pleasure it has spread in various lands and languages, King George V, 1935, decorated Lucy Maud Montgomery with the O.B.E. An equal distinction came from another British source. When attending the British Empire Conference at Ottawa, Rt. Hon. Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister of Great Britain, asked to meet this gifted woman who had so delighted himself and his wife by her literary creations.

Looking back through the years to that great day when she received *Green Gables* from the publishers, L. M. Montgomery wrote:

I did not dream that *Green Gables* would be the success it was. I thought girls in their 'teens might like it, but that was the only audience I hoped to reach. But men and women who are grandparents, boys at school and college, old pioneers in the Australian bush, missionaries in China, monks in remote monasteries, and red-headed girls all over the world have written me telling how they loved Anne and her family. . .

The very day on which these words are written has come a letter to me from an English lad of nineteen, totally unknown to me, who writes he is leaving for the front and wants to tell me before he goes how much my books, especially *Anne*, have meant to him. It is in such letters that a writer finds meet reward for all sacrifice and labor.

L. M. Montgomery was rewarded not only by appreciation:

*Green Gables*, she wrote (*Everywoman's World*, 1917) "has been translated into Swedish and Dutch. My Swedish copy always gives me the inestimable boon of a laugh. The cover design is a full-length figure of Anne wearing a sunbonnet, carrying the famous carpet-bag, and with hair literally an intense scarlet!"

## II

So, are these Montgomery tales not nearer the zenith than the nadir? Can so many people of so many kinds in so many lands be charmed by *cheap* fiction with its anaemic reality? The adverse critics can still keep their souls in clover on ripping adventure, dashing romance, bigwig intrigue and unlimited realism.

Though it is still the Creator's secret how a talent produces its precise effects, let us visit the Montgomery study and see at least what distinguishing elements, what salt and savor, this creator puts into her characters. No, this is not an interview. Delicately sensitive to personality, she gets sharp impressions of people's inner selves, and is downright happy in exercising her resourceful inventiveness on all kinds of circumstances in which to show their behavior in action and to let us feel their atmosphere. To get us perfectly acquainted with her Island folks, she treats us to a liberal range of incidents, all the more engaging for their local color: Scotch Presbyterian and such. The reason her machinery does not creak is that she never proceeds by a technique she is learning, but just by an original instinct for her characters. Warm with emotion and animated by zest, she enters into them like a dramatist.

How she understands Matthew Cuthbert of *Green Gables*! When this lonely, taciturn soul speaks, he has something to say; his few words, so coolly spoken, make impressions. About such self-suppressing persons there emanates an aura of pathos, which we feel in this rude Scotchman, long-haired old farmer bachelor with a refined soul, a fair type of our pioneering bush-whackers. He has no one to love but a freckled, carrot-haired little thing of an orphan—and is afraid it may be discovered! "For the sweet old-fashioned flowers his mother had planted in the homestead garden in her bridal days he had always had a secret, wordless love." Seldom seen, his presence was felt in the background. But once, "for the first time, this shy quiet Matthew was a person of central importance: the white majesty of death had fallen on him and set him apart as one crowned". The orphan, "in her tearless agony", gathered of the hallowed flowers to put on his coffin; and for years she kept his grave trim and blooming, giving his memory a solitary communing visit there, the last thing on moving away from Green Gables.

Quite as convincing a reality is Marilla, his old-maid sister. Are there, or have there ever been, such stern, dour, uncom-

municative Scotch Presbyterians? Well, isn't this their very race-brand back a generation or two? Not on their sleeves but in their deep dense interiors they wear, or wore, their hearts. Added to years of the orphan's softening presence, it took Matthew's funeral to make Marilla confess she loved the child, loved her like her own flesh and blood; and in spite of her crabbed discipline she managed to tell her, "You've been my joy and comfort ever since you came to Green Gables". Her Scotch stubbornness—or shall we graciously call it her dogged consistency with her original grudge against the child for being a girl?—was sturdy stuff, backed up by the traditional asceticism, which supported her hard attitude; backed further by Matthew's secret love of the girl. The complexity is left nicely veiled, and makes good reading for those who know the old Scotch temperament. Though Marilla's earlier scoldings and denials give us heartache, we do not find it hard to forgive her in the end: "It's never been easy for me to say things out of my heart." Even some of us not exactly Scotch might give the old spinster a brotherly handshake on that if we could get ourselves to do it. But what a clean job she made of it once she got round to it! What a mother heart now has room to expand in her bosom! A reader told the author she regretted Matthew's early death; the author replied she had come to feel the same way, explaining her object had been to bring Anne a needed sacrifice. Right or wrong, one fine thing accomplished by it is the highly-due humanization of Marilla.

And now the orphan: the Anne of Green Gables, the Anne of Avonlea, the Anne of the Island, the Anne of Windy Poplars, the Anne of the House of Dreams, the Anne of Ingleside, the mother of Rilla of Ingleside. After a closer look at her, all this about Marilla and Matthew needs to be re-read. Let us see what kind of energy, what sweetness and light, we can find in this World-Anne, whose major early troubles, next to her homelessness, were her carrot hair, her freckled nose, and the abomination of seeing her name without an *e*.

Anne Shirley, a tall skinny thing of eleven, was so temperamental and emotional that her big light-gray eyes sometimes showed green-gray or a kind of amber glint, according to mood—a fit of anger or a spell of rapture over natural scenery. Imagining things was meat and drink to her soul. The beauty of Green Gables at first sight made her want to live there forever. So here at the very start of the Anne fiction we have first class interest between humble character and humble circumstance:

the anguish this sensitive child endures because she is a mistake and is to be driven out of her Eden to make room for a boy. An insipid character in this fine suspense would be boring. At the above-mentioned dramatization of *Green Gables* the audience felt the power of this scene, for already we were all tenderly affectioned toward this individualistic little heroine, and getting adjusted to her. Then her ecstasy on learning she was to stay swung our emotions the other way. Next comes the process of mistress bringing up ward—and ward “bringing up” mistress. “Father” had been brought up while listening to Anne’s charming chat during the long buggy ride home. The old ascetic restraint and the new rebellion against it carry on the action, until by degrees the mistress is nine-tenths conquered and doesn’t know it, at least hates to own it, even to herself. Not that the ward plotted it; her unconscious influence brought it about. Not Anne’s outbreaks, but her quiet innate force liberalized the old-school Calvinist into healthy discipline. Still, the early strictness, though marred by harshness, had the effect of giving the child a compensating appreciation of life’s blessings. Interesting reciprocity!

Anne is charming when she gets stormy. The abuses she suffers win her our tender feelings, which make her outbursts all the more startling. When the too neighborly Mrs. Rachel Lynde discharged her blunderbuss at her over her freckles, skinniness and carrot hair, she was “properly horrified” at the response she got; and nobody who was at Avonlea School the day Gilbert Blythe made fun of Anne’s hair before the whole room when school was on will ever forget the scene she put up in dealing with him. Small events, these, but character and incident co-operate to make appealing young people’s literature of them in their contexts; and appealing young people’s literature makes no dull reading for older generations.

The Anne series of the Montgomery novels has as its main interest the development of this scrawny, sensitive orphan into a toughened and enlightened mother. To those who have not read *Green Gables*, the initial volume, this may sound blank and bleak, but only to those. Across the territory of these volumes her personality runs like a power line, distributing energy and light and love, right and left, wherever there is human material that can take the current. Naturally and satisfyingly her presence dominates the whole sequence. In letting such a mite evolve to such a power, the author has nowhere strained the laws and ways of reality to contrive an

artificial perfection. Evolution has no grudge against the unlucky. To see Anne through her girlhood, 'teens and mature life is a great way for a girl to learn what unfading satisfaction can be got out of life without either sinking into drudging ambitionlessness or chafing to soar into flighty careering in public life and high society. Here we have that basic middle course which circles enduringly and fulfillingly about a woman's centre of gravity: a childhood home with nature's health and refinement playing about; enough choring to learn housekeeping; preparatory school, then college with its enlarging culture; a spicily nip of public life (school principal); a lovely courtship—such letters!—a fine married life &c. with its creative mystery; and in time that pleasant easing-off into lighter duties.

Logan and French, quoted below, call *Green Gables* a classic and Anne an entirely new character in fiction. A startling statement—no geographic or other limits; but after close study it sounds less wild. Anne's unique originality, live imagination, precocious wisdom, optimistic energy, versatile hearty serviceableness—all these in peculiar combination may well make her stand out:

"The introduction of Anne into the community—Anne, so unconventional, so imaginative, and so altogether different from the staid, prosaic, general attitude of the neighborhood—proved to be the invasion of a peculiar ferment, and the incidents which discover the process of fermentation are most delightfully odd and mirth-provoking. . . . Others can write plot stories, but most other writers do not hold before us the mirror of Canadian country life."

With her delicate comprehension Anne has unlimited sympathy, and so becomes a helpful confidante to young and old in a variety of predicaments. The catalogue of her own youthful predicaments is long and ridiculous enough to have made her a wise tongue-holding counsellor. Such a woman can hardly help becoming an incurable match-maker. The intrigue it takes to put hard cases over is irresistible to this active brain, but she never undertakes a match without believing it means happiness, and her successes sweetly reward her. But her major triumph, Alden and Stella, upon which she expends her slickest tact, suddenly suffers such a sheepish deflation that she is cured forever: she learns the pair were blissfully engaged beforehand!



## III

Reporting to the author on my complimentary copy of *Anne of Ingleside*, I noted how my wife and I were further impressed by her understanding of children, and how at spots our mellow smiles became 'teenish laughs; for the story was a delightfully undulating streak of entertainment. She replied I needn't have been so nice with my compliments: the yarn, spun to order as a fill-gap in Anne's life, was mainly padding. "But yarn and eiderdown, not hay," I retorted, bound to have the last word, "make nice padding." If this story lacks strict organic unity, it has at any rate the continuity of family raising, and such a family! Anne's, of course. One must know them, see them in action, overhear their remarks, be asked their questions, and feel the atmosphere, to get all there is.

As to gap-fillers: the Montgomery novels falls mainly into the *Anne*, the *Emily*, and the *Pat* groups. The first in each is written out of fascination for the dominating heroine, succeeding ones came at the insistence of readers and publishers of the first. L. M. M. did not experience heavenly joy in writing them all. "That detestable Anne!" she wrote on receiving her publishers' demand for a second Anne volume. "I'm her slave already. The idea makes me sick." She wrote not one more Anne volume but six, and wrote some of them *in reverse*: not in chronological order as lived by Anne, but as the publishers kept finding that more Anne books were wanted. So from time to time a gap was discovered in Anne's career big enough to accommodate a book. In *Rilla of Ingleside* Anne is a settled housewife, mother of six, three at the front in World War I. Fancy the awkwardness of having to go back several Anne books and reduce her to an unmarried school principal in *Anne of Windy Poplars*. Again, preparing to write *Anne of Ingleside*, a year before World War II, she mounts a magic mantle and rides annihilatingly backward through the years and through her books to invent Anne-life lived before World War I. It is hard to think the author got no enjoyment out of the writing once she got warmed up to it; there is a live glow in it all.

How tempting it would be to show up the charming style of these tales, which adds so much to the interest, but our conclusion is elbowing in.

At L. M. Montgomery's funeral, Rev. Dr. Frank Baird said of her:

Kingdoms which others laboriously seek to enter and cannot, she came into as by natural inheritance, and there. . . she reigned as queen endowed with genius and grace, with shining ability and marvellous gifts; and while her sales ran into millions, there is nowhere a line that is unworthy, a syllable that can offend. She waved her magic wand, and the ugly things fled away.—*Presbyterian Record* June '42.

Are not these Anne stories as interesting as the coarse thrillers—to all but the sophisticated Smart Set and their following? The characters, Dog Monday and all, are normal and walk the plane we tread. After re-reading the books, can you imagine Anne as *fiction*? This Anne whose unconscious influence liberated, liberalized Marilla, Mrs. Lynde, Miss Barry; who stood her ground against the Pyes, the Sloanes, the Pringles; who meant so much to groping little Elizabeth and Paul, to gray-haired lonely Matthew, rugged Captain Jim, love-sick Charlotta the Fourth, gruff old Rebecca Dew; this Anne who, while making herself pluck roosters, roamed the Milky Way—can you doubt that if your daughters got to know her well, they would feel a stimulating lift from her toward becoming the girls they would like to be?

## NOTE

*Anne* Books in Order of Events—

(Not as Written)

*Anne of Green Gables*: Anne arrives and grows up.*Anne of Avonlea*: She teaches Avonlea School.*Anne of the Island*: Attends Redmond College.*Anne of Windy Poplars*: Principal at Summerside—Love letters to Gilbert Blythe.*Anne's House of Dreams*: Settles down married—Jem born.*Anne of Ingleside*: Five more Blythes born.*Rainbow Valley*: They grow up with the manse children.*Rilla of Ingleside*: Anne's three boys in World War I.

(In these last two Anne recedes to the background)