

Profile

LUCY MAUD MONTGOMERY: “Mistress of the Manse”

by Elizabeth Waterston¹



From 1911, when she married a Presbyterian minister, L.M. Montgomery's life became centred, willy-nilly, on churchly concerns. She was already established as the author of four best-selling books, from *Anne of Green Gables* in 1908 to *The Story Girl* in 1910; but from the time she moved with Rev. Ewan Macdonald to small Presbyterian parishes in

Ontario she had to fit her writing into the interstices of the congregation's needs — in the Sunday School, the Women's Missionary Society, the choir, the Christmas concerts, and Young People's dramatic productions, not to mention parochial visitations and attendance at church services — at least two every Sunday. Incredibly, during these years, from 1911 to 1935, she wrote another fifteen effervescent, witty novels and published another pile of short stories and innumerable poems.

Before, during, and after her years as “mistress of the manse”, Montgomery also kept a sly, funny, tragic, private journal. In this confessional she revealed that besides the conflict generated between her outward roles as upbeat novelist and proper Presbyterian, she also endured inner struggles over faith questions.

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As a young woman in Prince Edward Island she had written in her journal:

Sunday is supposed to be a day of rest, but in reality . . . we dress with weariness to the flesh and tramp to church in the heat, sit a long and mostly very dull sermon out in a stuffy pew and come home not a whit better than we went – not as good indeed for we have got a headache and feel very vicious for our pains. . . I have an ideal Sunday in my mind. Only, I am such a coward. . . I must drift with the current of conventionality. But I would like to go away on Sunday morning. . . and sit down among the ferns. . . The local spinsters would die of horror (*Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery [SJLMM]*, I, 162-3).

Ten years later, she created the fictional child Anne, traipsing off to church on her first Sunday in the imagined community of Avonlea, bedecked with buttercups and wild roses, to the scandal of the righteous. At home in Green Gables, Anne announces “I never say my prayers . . . Mrs. Thompson told me God made my hair red *on purpose*, and I’ve never cared about him since.” Eventually, however, after livening her orthodox community with unpredictable attitudes and adventures, Anne will become a model of self-control and self-sacrifice, piously announcing, as her story closes, “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.”

Anne’s creator did not conform to community mores as easily or with such humour. Years later she recalled her early “deep-rooted repugnance to the name CHRISTIAN” and to “the name ‘Jesus’ itself, howled forth by unctuous revivalists and evangelists.” (*SJLMM*, III, 22).

If she could not respond to traditional religion, she could certainly glory in beauty. She could write, in a way that thrilled readers all over the world, about the “canopy of fragrant bloom” under which Anne rode toward her new Island home: “Below the boughs the air was full of a purple twilight and far ahead a glimpse of painted sunset sky shone like a great rose window set at the end of a cathedral aisle.” The simile is drawn from Montgomery’s reading, not from her experience. She confessed to her journal that Sunday School teachers had made her feel “that religion and beauty were antagonists”.

Why would a woman with such doubts marry a minister? Her journal explanations are frank: she wanted a home of her own; wanted children; dreaded loneliness; saw a university-trained (and good-looking) youngish man as a solution for her problems at home and in her community. She moved with Ewan Macdonald to Leaskdale.

“Yes, I believe the lady does write books,” Ewan had told his parishioners there when they inquired about his bride-to-be. They were impressed. He was not. He never read any of her subsequent works. Fortunately so, for they continued to be full of hilarious comments about ministers, sectarianism, and patriarchy. As Mrs. Macdonald, the bride settled into a round of parish duties; as L.M. Montgomery, she happily vented her feelings about the church and the dominance of men in it, mainly through minor but unforgettable characters, cheerfully gossiping.

In *Anne of the Island* (1915), when Anne asks, “Can’t a man laugh and laugh and be a Christian still?” an old lady answers, “A man, yes. But I’m speaking of ministers, my dear.” “Women can’t preach or be elders, but they can build churches and scare up the money for them,” Miss Cornelia says, in *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917). Through Miss Cornelia, Montgomery mocked not only sexism in the church but also sectarianism. When someone says, “The Methodists allow women to preach,” Miss Cornelia is unimpressed. “I never said the Methodists hadn’t common sense.... What I say is, I doubt if they have much religion.” She launches wonderful barbs against church rituals: “What I had against Mr. Dawson was the merciless length of prayers at a funeral. People said they envied the corpse.”

The rollicking opening of *Rainbow Valley* (1919) unrolls a farcical account of the way a minister could be “called” to an old-fashioned pulpit. But the biting wit in this book is modulated by Montgomery’s sympathetic treatment of the lonely, bewildered minister, who appears as an unusual hero of romance. This book was written in the time before Ewan became the victim of disturbing mental problems.

He increasingly suffered from what was then called “religious melancholy” — a depression in his case coming from his belief in the old, outdated doctrine of predestination. In his youth, as a member of a remote Gaelic-speaking community, he had absorbed sermons on hellfire and election; in mid-life he went down to darkness, believing himself to be doomed, not of the elect, but punished by the necessity to preach to believers more justified than himself.

Montgomery, though she could still move from the harsh actualities of her life into a fictional world, now lived not only in a house tormented, but in a world at war. As minister’s wife, she had to accompany her husband to recruiting meetings where, like other ministers, he urged young men to sign up “for God and country”. She had also to accompany Ewan on visits to homes torn by the loss of young sons overseas. Her response, as a novelist, was, “Thank God I can keep the shadows of my life out of my work. I would not darken any other life. I want instead to be a messenger of optimism and sunshine.”

Rilla of Ingleside, written in 1919, celebrates the courage of those who “kept the home fires burning” and lived to see the return of at least some of the boys who had marched away with such patriotic zeal. But at the moment of concluding the composition of the book, Montgomery confessed in her journal her despair. Victory, she had come to believe, “goes often to the evil”. “I believe in a God who is good and beautiful and just — but not omnipotent” (*SJLMM*, II 371).

After the war, as she wrote two *Emily* books and *The Blue Castle*, Montgomery returned to a mood of affirmation — in her fiction at least. She celebrated the transcendent moments of creative vision and of love.

Yet she still rejected the older epiphanies of religion. As a mother, she was teaching her young sons to question the vision of God presented in the Catechism — “a monstrous egoist” concerned with His own glory. Instead she assigned to God feelings she herself experienced and revered. God “made all things”, she taught her boys, “for the love and pleasure of creating them — of doing good work — of bringing beauty into existence.”

Privately, she also rejected the church as institution. “The spirit of God no longer works through the churches. Today it is working through science....The Church as it exists today is doomed, though something that has lived 2000 years will take a long time in dying” (*SJLMM* II, 238). In 1921 she wrote of Christ as “that unique and wonderful Personality with its lofty aspirations, its pure conceptions of truth, its radical scorn for outworn conventions and laws” (*SJLMM* II, 22).

How had the mockery in her novels and the bitter questioning in her journals affected her minister husband in the first decade of their marriage? Very little, in direct terms, since he punctiliously avoided reading her diary and still ignored her novels (even though the world-wide royalties from them provided comforts, and would help his family survive the Depression of the 1930s). But we can speculate about the indirect effect of her singular theological scepticism on a man of simpler faith. His mental health continued to deteriorate. During his breakdowns, Montgomery had to find substitutes for him on Sundays, and that meant putting up strange ministers over the weekends — another infuriating burden.

Church Union in the mid-1920s worked to the Macdonalds’ advantage. Since many Presbyterian ministers had opted to become part of the newly-formed United Church, the “continuing” Presbyterians were short of incumbents. The call to the Norval Presbyterian Church in 1926 was a step up, to a bigger congregation and a handsome manse.

Montgomery’s work in fiction took several new turns. She wrote about a very young child in *Magic for Marigold* (1929), and about a very old lady in *A Tangled Web* (1931); then she returned to nostalgic stories about Prince Edward Island in two “*Pat*” books (1933, 1935). Her success, both in terms of critical praise and of world-wide sales, was unabated, and she had the pleasure, now that she lived closer to Toronto, of spending a good deal of time at meetings of the Canadian Authors Association. The Norval congregation could still count on her, however, to direct plays, lead women’s societies, entertain in the manse gardens, and in general work as hard as ever at the business of the church.



In these later years, however, the Macdonalds suffered blows of disappointment in their sons, both of whom had become entangled with Norval girls. These young women did not appear to Montgomery as appropriate mates for her boys. Since both were from old Norval families, this disapproval may have contributed to the build-up of bad feelings in

the congregation. The major cause of disaffection, however, was Ewan's continued mental illnesses and consequent inattention to his duties. Eventually he faced sharp treachery (as he saw it) among the Elders in the Norval congregation, and felt compelled to resign.

After her husband was slyly ejected from his ministry in 1935, the formal demands of the church ended, but Montgomery continued to wrestle both in her late novels and in her final journals with the questions of belief and religious practice which had always troubled her.

In her last years, Montgomery's vision of the future of the church no doubt reflects her disillusionment with the particular parish that had ousted her husband from his place. "In a hundred years — if Sunday services are held at all — they will not be held in little country churches. There will be a few central churches in large cities and the services will be broadcast from there....[the] Union Church, if it exists, will be given over to owls and bats and wandering winds.... There will be something else to take its place" (*SJLMM*, IV, 221).

Her final works of fiction are fascinating in their oblique revelations of final changes in her beliefs and unbelief. In her second-to-last novel, *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937), Jane is led by her father into a new reading of the Bible as literature; there are no

references to the formality of churches in Jane's new world. But Jane keeps — as firmly as Anne ever did — an ability to respond to beauty:

A wave of fragrance broke . . . from the lilac hedge. . . . The poplars. . . were shaking in green laughter. An apple tree stretched out friendly arms. There was a far-away view of daisy-sprinkled fields across the harbour where white gull were soaring and sweeping. The air was moist and sweet after the rain.

This is the power of response to nature that had delighted Montgomery's international audience for a hundred years. These are the flourishes that still make readers in Japan and Sweden, Iran and Brazil, want to come to Prince Edward Island.

The final novel, *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) presented harsher ironies about family life and a sour mockery of creativity. Yet even in this dark novel Montgomery's fans could still count on her to make them laugh at the glorious absurdity of humanity. They could also still delight in her predictable provision of a happy ending that would dissolve every tragic-comic blockage.

For less enraptured readers, L.M. Montgomery throughout her life had offered a powerful study in polarities: not only between the proper mistress of the manse and the turbulent creative writer, and between the upbeat novels and the darker, probing journals, but also within the novels themselves, where a contrary voice always raises questions about the central affirmations.

In her last years Montgomery offered no jaunty laughter at the church or its ministers. Instead she tilted in her late life and work against different adversaries: the new mores that let her sons slip into ways unacceptable to her, and the new literary criticism that insisted on assigning her work to the children's shelves, as "provincial" and "sentimental". Yet until her death in Toronto in 1942, in spite of her growing bitterness, her sharpness of vision could still find biting expression in her journals, even while her vivid response to the world flowered into complex, funny, romantic fictions, celebratory in defiance of darkness.