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BOOK REVIEW


More a library than a series of books, Benjamin Lefebvre’s three-volume The L.M. Montgomery Reader adds a wealth of material, including many previously undiscovered primary sources, to an already considerable body of scholarship. Lucy Maud Montgomery was one of Canada’s greatest literary exports of the twentieth-century. Since its 1908 publication, Anne of Green Gables has never been out of print and Montgomery’s subsequent titles—she died in 1942—continue to sell. However, critical reception of her writing, a writing most often catalogued under children’s or sentimental fiction, has been divided. During her lifetime and for the first decades after her death, Montgomery’s oeuvre of 23 books, more than 500 short stories, and 250 poems was ignored by a fledgling Canadian critical establishment steeped in modernism. Lefebvre explains in his introductions to Volume One and Volume Two that her work became the subject of serious critical discussion only after the 1966 publication of Elizabeth Waterston’s chapter on Montgomery in The Clear Spirit: Twenty Canadian Women and Their Times, and even then with resistance. Since the publication in five volumes between 1985-2004 of The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery edited by Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, Montgomery’s importance to Canadian letters has been assured, and Lefebvre’s three-volume critical anthology The L.M. Montgomery Reader participates in a discussion that no longer needs to justify itself.

That someone would hold the position of being one of the foremost Montgomery scholars in the world would have been unthinkable in the decades following her death. As the director of L.M. Montgomery Online and editor of her last book, The Blythes Are Quoted (2009)—a work that was delivered to her publisher the day Montgomery died and then neglected—Lefebvre can claim that status. His publications include editing a restored and annotated edition of Rilla of Ingleside, jointly with Andrea McKenzie (2010), and editing a collection of essays, Anne’s World: A New Century of Anne of Green Gables, jointly with Irene Gammel (2010). The depth of his knowledge results in a work that is as comprehensible as it is comprehensive: the selections in all three volumes are introduced with thorough and cogent chapter introductions. Throughout the L.M. Montgomery Critical Reader Lefebvre describes the dramatic arc of Montgomery’s reputation—both critical and popular. The antagonist in the story is the “pattern of male dismissal” (Volume Three, 356, 367) that barred Montgomery’s entrance into the growing critical establishment after World War II. Lefebvre quotes from articles attacking Montgomery’s oeuvre, but does not include them.

Volume One: A Life in Print contains 80 articles that open with Montgomery’s first visit to Boston in 1908 and that conclude with a chapter entitled “Epilogue: Anne of Green Gables – The Story of the Photoplay,” which stands as an early example of what Lefebvre calls “an ongoing phenomenon: namely, of the creation of further Montgomery texts written without Montgomery” (411). Early chapters are reminders that the life of a famous author is repetitive. Beginning in Chapter 2, “Author Tells How He Wrote His Story,” a Montgomery so anonymous the writer for the November 21, 1908, edition of the Boston Journal does not know her sex, is quoted as saying the idea for Anne of Green Gables came from a note she had written in her teens: “Elderly couple decide to adopt a boy from an orphan asylum. By mistake a girl is sent them” (31). With only a few variations the same is quoted in five subsequent chapters (35, 38, 45, 55, 71). Chapter 37 includes the “most detailed account of Montgomery’s writing process that she ever recorded on paper” according to Lefebvre (189). Her views on female suffrage are likewise sought in several chapters, but the volume is not limited to articles on Montgomery’s creative
inspiration and on her views of society. Of particular interest are her four essays on “Seasons in the Woods” published in The Canadian Magazine in 1911 that would be recycled in later works beginning with The Golden Road (1913), her first book after leaving PEI and moving to Ontario, and concluding with the last major work published in her lifetime, Rilla of Ingleside (1939). The “borrowings” are important Lefebvre explains because they “reveal an attempt on her part to recapture a delightful ‘spot’ that lived on in her memory” (74). The Boston Herald’s notice of Montgomery’s marriage to Ewan Macdonald, a marriage that would lead to disappointment and crippling depression, is laden with irony: “We wish the author of The Story Girl and her husband a large measure of happiness, and we shall remain curious until her next novel appears. We surmise that a parson will figure as the hero of the story. Why not?” (103). Had Macdonald been the hero of a Montgomery novel there is little reason to believe he would have read it.

Throughout Volume One Montgomery produces a final draft of a life that changes significantly as a result of her marriage and the stress of other family complications. The Montgomery of 1908 who is cautious and agreeable and conservative does change and the changes can be seen, for instance, in her evolving attitude towards the new woman. In a 1910 article in the Boston Post, her views on suffrage are qualified at best. She agrees that “intelligent” women “should be allowed to vote” but adds, “I have no aspirations to become a politician. I believe a woman’s place is in the home” (51). However, the home has become the site and source of politics when she is quoted in a 1915 article in Everywoman’s World as saying, “I do hope that it [World War I] will in some measure open the eyes of humanity to the truth that the women who bear and train the nation’s sons should have some voice in the political issues that may send those sons to die on battlefields” (136). The volume is framed as a conversation twice in Lefebvre’s “Introduction” and, indeed, Chapter 53 is a conversation in letters. That the conversation throughout the first volume is repetitive does not prevent it from being compelling. Chapter 70 continues after Montgomery’s journals have stopped; the “Epilogue” is no longer a conversation with Montgomery but with her themes.

Volume Two: A Critical Heritage is a collection of twenty critical articles, opening with Waterston’s “Lucy Maud Montgomery 1874-1942” and concluding with “Archival Adventures with L.M. Montgomery; or, ‘As Long as the Leaves Hold Together’” by Vanessa Brown and Lefebvre. Lefebvre notes in his “Introduction” the contrast between the celebration of the 1974 centennial of Montgomery’s birth and the 2008 celebration of the centenary of Anne of Green Gables. The former passed without much ado while the latter, coming as it did after a growth of popular and critical interest in Montgomery, aided by the 1985 publication of the first volume of The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery and the premiere that same year of Kevin Sullivan’s enormously popular television miniseries Anne of Green Gables, generated considerable interest. Of the articles, only three were published before 1985. Lefebvre agrees with Irene Gammel that today Montgomery is read “through the lens of the journals” and Volume Two bears that out (27). Only two of the collected essays published after 1995 omit the Journals, and one of these, “Anne of Green Gables / Akage no An: The Flowers of Quiet Happiness” by Emily Aoife Somers is about Japanese translations of Montgomery. The forty-six years of scholarship bring Montgomery’s work into sharper relief and chart shifts in critical interest. Waterston’s article quotes largely from Montgomery’s letters to Ephraim Weber. She explains that “The basic assumption in this revaluation is that L.M. Montgomery was probably not conscious of the forces she was releasing. She was, however, honest enough to use the patterns her memory suggested. Furthermore, she was a good enough craftsman to lift the stories from the level of clinical confession to that of archetypal statement” (71). T.D. MacLulich’s “Anne of Green Gables and the Regional Idyll” argues the intrinsic merits of Montgomery’s celebrated first novel. MacLulich, like Waterston, employs Montgomery’s letters as sources before proceeding to a close reading of Anne of Green Gables. Mary Rubio, co-editor with Waterston of Montgomery’s journals, describes nine strategies by which Montgomery subverts the conservative conventions of sentimental fiction for aims that are more consistent with the Montgomery of the journals, a woman oppressed by the conventions her fictions endorse.

Volume Three: A Legacy in Review brings together responses from twenty-four titles published in Montgomery’s lifetime and includes an “Epilogue: Posthumous Titles, 1960-2013.” The collection, while
large—there are twenty-two articles relating to *Anne of Green Gables* alone—is by no means exhaustive. In a September 10, 1908 letter to Weber quoted by Lefebvre, Montgomery refers to sixty reviews (51). Lefebvre, in his “Introduction,” notes that “Montgomery’s books are now assumed to be part of children’s literature exclusively—at least according to where they are shelved in most bookstores and libraries, as opposed to the focus of much of the recent scholarship” (7). Until the 1920s, however, Montgomery was not seen as an author of children’s books but as a writer of what can best be described as family literature. The categorical shift in Montgomery’s understood genre “is important,” according to Lefebvre, “because the distinction between ‘adult fiction’ and ‘children’s literature’ pertains not only to perceived audience but also to the conventions of genre: after all, Anne as a character reads entirely differently if she is assumed to be a role model for actual girls than if she is an embodiment of childhood exuberance for the entertainment of adults” (7-8). The collection begins with what is thought to be the first response to Montgomery’s writing: a negative review in the *New York Times Saturday Review* claiming “The author [of *Anne of Green Gables*] undoubtedly meant her [Anne Shirley] to be queer, but she is altogether too queer” (52). The reviews that follow are generally favorable including one by a critic in *The Montreal Daily Herald* who is unaware Montgomery is Canadian. Lefebvre’s “Introduction” divides the criticisms that follow into distinct periods: “‘A Story of Character’: *Anne of Green Gables, 1908*”; “After *Anne: 1909-1915*”; “The Great War and Other Conflicts, 1916-1921”; “Emily Interrupted, 1923-1927”; “Great Depressions, 1929-1935”; “Return to Anne, 1936-1939.” Reviews of the six books following *Anne* chart Montgomery’s ascendance into an understandable commodity. If the 1908 reviewer of *Anne* in the *Montreal Daily Herald* was unclear about Montgomery’s nationality, no one would be by the publication of her second book, *Anne of Avonlea*. “Epilogue: Posthumous Titles, 1960-2013” appropriately ties together the material of the preceding three volumes.

While Lefebvre’s *The L.M. Montgomery Reader* is a vital resource of primary sources from and secondary assessments of one of Canada’s most popular twentieth-century authors, it is his insightful and knowledgeable analysis that shapes and gives meaning to the collection.

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