

Memory and L.M. Montgomery

D.L. Davison

Editors' note: *The co-editors of The selected journals of L.M. Montgomery have received many letters supplementing the research notes on L.M. Montgomery's rich use of phrases memorized in her early childhood. Dr. D.L. Davison of Wolfville, Nova Scotia, was one of the correspondents who generalized about the phenomenal persistence of memory work. He agreed that we share parts of his letters with readers of CCL.*

Reading the journals of L.M. Montgomery makes one think it would have been a great deal of fun to have known her in person, perhaps as an uncle whom she included in "the race that knew Joseph". I don't think I would wish to have been one of the considerable number of suitors who pursued her and were eventually disappointed.

She had read a wide range of literature, had had a year at teacher's college in Charlottetown, had taught for 3 years, using her beloved *Royal readers*, and had studied English for a year at Dalhousie, in Halifax. The first hard cash she obtained for a story she spent on several books of poetry.

She had a keen memory and a sharp, sometimes cutting wit. She frequently quoted poetry to illustrate points, or sometimes just as part of the train of thought in her journals.

. . . . May I mention a few quotations I think might have been commented on in the notes?

November 29, 1910 [journal entry]: Thanking "whatever gods may be." This is a quote from the poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley. "Invictus" is a far cry from Presbyterian theology but it is stirring poetry and I'll bet L.M.M. had memorized it at some time. Even I, a practicing Baptist, with a poor memory for poetry, can recite the first two verses.

January 1915: "a reasonable amount of fleas is good for a dog." L.M.M. left off the punch line which is "--They keep him f'm broodin' on bein' a dog." She probably felt that the quotation was so familiar to her generation that adding the punch line would be redundant. This is from the novel *David Harum* by E.N. Westcott (published 1898). David Harum is one of the most humorous fictional characters I have ever run across. I would like to challenge you to pick up a copy of *David Harum* and read the first episode--it is short and if you don't find it amusing, you will not have wasted much time. If you do sign it out, a small warning: This was Westcott's only novel and he was better at writing humorous characterization than he was at spinning a love story; so I'll

forgive you if you skim furiously through the love story, watching for the next encounter between David and his sister, or David and the young man.

July 14, 1913: "Doubting, dreaming dreams No mortal have dared to dream before." Both my copies of this poem have the line "No mortal ever dared to dream before." This is from Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" and it was in the old Royal Readers that L.M.M. spoke about somewhere in this volume. My father had memorized "The raven" in school and when I knew him in his 50's and 60's, he could still recite the whole poem. It is interesting how close L.M.M.'s prose that precedes this quotation is to Poe's preceding line of poetry: "Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing,/Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before".

. . . . Like all others of my generation, memorizing poetry was part of the daily home work. I did it because it was required of me, but after I had memorized a poem I had a feeling of accomplishment, and it tended to stay with me.

I was always a bit frustrated because I had a brother who could learn a poem in half the time it took me. We were not in the same grade so at least he did not show me up in class. One time he memorized most of Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* just because he liked the poem. Sometimes he would memorize something like Service's "The killing of Dan MacGrew", and repeat it while we were doing chores together. . . .

I did not realize how much poetry would enrich my life until I was through school. I got my grade XII at age 17 and when I was 18 and 19 I worked in a lumber mill. It was great for building up my muscles but it was the most boring job in the world. There was nothing for my mind to do except be sure I didn't pull that slab saw through my thumb. The mill was too noisy to allow conversation with anybody; so I recited poetry to myself.

I must have gone over again, dozens of times, every piece of poetry I had ever memorized. I'm sure I relearned some of them with built-in mistakes because the only text I had was in my head, but even so it reinforced the poem in my memory--even L.M.M. made the occasional mistake.

If the present day scholars are not memorizing poetry they are losing a great deal!

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