L.M. Montgomery and the French

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Résumé: *Dans ce bref article, Gavin White nous fait découvrir que Lucy Maud Montgomery partageait, à l'égard des francophones, les préjugés du Canada anglais de son époque, soit un sentiment de supériorité raciale et sociale. Il ne faut donc guère s'étonner de trouver, dans toutes ses oeuvres, l'expression d'un dédain et d'une pitié volontiers méprisantes.*

"There's never anybody to be had but those stupid, half-grown little French boys; and as soon as you do get one broke into your ways and taught something he's up and off to the lobster canneries or the States" (AGG 7). On this sentence hangs the whole story of *Anne of Green Gables*, for Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert would not have sent for an orphan from Nova Scotia had hired help been reliable. But it was not reliable, it was French. And French meant half-grown and little, for the remaining French of Prince Edward Island had been pushed off their lands and into the bush when the colony was ceded to Britain in 1763, and they had not eaten well since. And French meant stupid, for the English-speakers of the Island only saw the French as servants, and they thought of them as the politically dominant races have all too often thought of dominated races. Prince Edward Island was little different in that respect from the American South. In nineteenth century P.E.I. the French were hired help, so they must be stupid or they would not be hired help. And they had to be stupid, or their position in society could not be justified.

Furthermore, to the citizens of Avonlea/Cavendish, the French lacked the normal virtue of gratitude. As soon as you broke one of them into your ways, and the verb is usually used of a horse, he would be off to the lobster canneries or the States. Would he realise that without the care and the nurture of the English-speaking farmer he might still be a primitive and quite unemployable? No, he would take advantage of the generosity of the farmer who gave him civilized ways, and instead of staying to repay some part of what had been given him, the hired-boy would be off to a job at much higher wages.

"Young Mary Joe, a buxom, broad-faced French girl from the Creek, whom Mrs. Barry had engaged to stay with the children during her absence, was helpless and bewildered, quite incapable of thinking what to do, or doing it if she had thought of it" (151-2). Every responsible person was off to Charlottetown to hear the Premier of Canada, and Minnie Mae had the croup, so it falls to Anne Shirley to nurse her through the night. You cannot expect a French girl, especially a broad-faced one (does this hint at Indian ancestry?), to think

anything out, or to do it even if she could think it out. Anne tells her to put more wood on the stove, "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but it seems to me you might have thought of this before if you'd any imagination" (152). But French girls couldn't have been expected to have imagination, though when properly led, they were clearly loyal and good-hearted and Young Mary Joe, "honestly anxious to do all she could, kept up a roaring fire and heated more water than would have been needed for a hospital of croupy babies" (152).

"A moment later Pacifique Buote came in sight" (AI-317). This happened when Anne wanted news of Gilbert who was possibly dying, and she called out so that "Pacifique turned with a grin and a cheerful good morning" (318). He then told her in broken English that Gilbert had turned the corner, and "resumed his walk and his whistle" (319). The impression given is that Pacifique has too little sensitivity to be aware of the seriousness of the illness, or of Anne's concern, or of her relief. "Never, as long as she lived, would Anne see Pacifique's brown, round, black-eyed face without a warm remembrance of the moment" (319). But he himself might as well have been something out of a minstrel show.

And in *Emily of New Moon* there are French boys "talking French when we couldn't understand a word of it. They did it just to make us mad. Such jabbering" (ENM 200). So Emily and her friend invented a new language to get back at them; it followed that Father Cassidy chided Emily gently for doing this to "poor French boys" (220). There is no suggestion that it might have been more useful to learn a bit of French instead; French was just jabbering. And the only reason that French boys talked French was to annoy the English-speaking residents. They could not do it to communicate; only English was suitable for that.

Nor could the French populace think through the consequences of their actions, as Dr. Burnley noted in regard to the measles: "Quite a number of the Derry Pond children have died of it. Mostly French, though—the kids would be out of bed when they had no business to be, and caught cold" (344). The best of doctors could not be blamed for the deaths of such patients! And, in *Emily of New Moon*, the French have no surnames: the wives take the first names of the husbands, except for "Jimmy Joe Belle" whose wife wears the britches, with the result that he takes her first name (344). Having no surnames is common among subject races, of course.

In the *Selected Journals* there are similar views. That L.M. Montgomery once said "bloody" as a child was because "The French 'hired help' of those days were given to swearing" (SJ II 351), not because English-speakers ever stooped to such depths. On going to the train in 1909 she writes, "The driver is always some stupid French boy" (SJ II 349), and on the children of Cavendish school, "There are only about a dozen in the district and half of those are French" (386). But the following year, when Montgomery wanted to go to Boston and needed to find someone to take her place at home, "Judy Gallant is a steady trusty French girl" (SJ II 19). She is not credited with intelligence, but at least she is described in a favourable sense. It is interesting and perhaps ironic that Judy Gallant comes from the little French settlement in the hills which is called "Toronto."

After moving to Ontario Montgomery's view became sharper, if anything. In 1923 she wrote in her *Journals* of someone who had "broken his parents' heart by suddenly without a word of warning presenting them with a French Canadian Catholic wife whom he picked up in the mining regions up north" (SJ III 132). The offence is partly religious and partly racial, and partly a matter of suddenness, but it does sound rather like miscegenation in the American South. Then, in 1928, she had a dream of her dead friend Frede having lost her memory in a rail-crash, having been cared for by a "simple kindly French family," and then her memory restored (368). This is not anti-French, but it has parallels with all kinds of tales of travellers adopted by barbaric tribes around the world and lost to civilization for years, not to mention Tarzan of the Apes. Finally there is a comment of 1925 about books she might have written. "One centred around the fortunes and misfortunes of a young French Canadian—whose name was Louis—who was 'only a hired man' but had endowments and aspirations beyond the rank and file of his race. He was to fall in love with his employer's daughter and she with him and the course of true love was to run deviously and turbulently and alas, to no happy haven. For in the end he was to go back to the forsaken sweetheart of his own race" (239). The plot might have been taken from Kipling, whose Mowgli must return to the village from life in the jungle, or whose Kim must be reared as a "sahib."

Of course all of this derives from her experience of the French of Prince Edward Island. They were a down-trodden race, and since the French were supposed to have left the Island when it was ceded to the British, it was possible to maintain that they had no right to live there except through the good-will of the English-speaking population. And since there were not many of them, they had no political power and could do little about their position. But Quebec was different. There a French-speaking population enjoyed political power and owned land. They might have an inferior position in some respects, but they could not be disregarded as were the French of Prince Edward Island. Until 1830 these last did not, as Catholics, have the vote, and democracy only took root slowly in a colony dominated by absentee landlords for so much of its formative period.

The contrast between the French of P.E.I. and the French of Quebec was noted by L.M. Montgomery during the First World War. In 1917 she wrote in her *Journals* that a new election mattered, "not only because it will or will not show Quebec that her long day of domination is over, but because I have a vote" (SJ 2 230). And shortly afterwards, that Sir Wilfrid Laurier "is an old man and he has outlived his glory and betrayed his country. Why ? Senility—superstition—base political cunning ?" But she then has a sleep "untroubled by three o'clock visions of a rejoicing Kaiser and a Quebec-bossed Canada" (235).

She shared with countless other English-Canadians the view that Canada had been held back by the French vote, which represented an underclass incapable of responding to higher ideals. But in time of war, it was necessary to show Quebec that the toleration given to French Canadians must no longer stand in the way of survival. As for Laurier, L.M. Montgomery was a life-long Liberal but she probably saw him as an exception to the rule, a French Canadian of real gifts.

Yet in the critical hour he was hesitating over Conscription when it was his duty to teach French Canadians that they must support their country. That he was trying to hold the country together would not have occurred to her; Canada was English, and the French were lucky to have been allowed to live in it after the conquest. Laurier must either be too old to know what he was about, or his rational mind was overcome by his racial tendency to superstition, or he had some deep and questionable aim in view.

How are we to judge this aspect of a famous writer who normally receives our affection and respect? We should regret that she held such views, and yet we should recognize that they were commonplace. We see in L.M. Montgomery's voluminous writings the views which were held by many, and perhaps most, English-speaking Canadians of her day. If she did not rise above the average of her day, she did not sink below it either. And by considering those views, unarticulated in the case of the average citizen but seen clearly in the case of L.M. Montgomery, we may come to know more of Canada and the attitudes which will be a divisive force as long as they linger in some of its people.

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