The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery

VOLUME IV: 1929–1935

Edited by Mary Rubio & Elizabeth Waterston

Reviews / Comptes rendus

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Dark Days: The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery, Volume IV

The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery. Volume IV: 1929-1935. Ed. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. Oxford UP, 1998. 439 pp.

"It is getting to be such a ghostly world for me," wrote Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1932 (212), and readers of this fourth volume of selected journals will nod in agreement. We enter an autumnal world in these personal writings from 1929 to 1935. We hear of the deaths of friends and family members — as Montgomery sorrowfully reflects, "I suppose from now on, as long as I live, this is how things will be — old friends dropping off here and there every little while" (101). In Montgomery's view of the literary world during this period, too, there is a palpable sense of loss and decline; she castigates contemporary urban realism as "malodorous" (34), "reeking sex stuff" (232), and maintains that the world still wants and needs romantic idealism: "... it is fairy tales the world wants. Real life is all the 'real life' we want. Give us something better in books" (226-27).

Given the turn of events in Montgomery's own "real life," one can understand her aesthetic preference. During these years both of her fiercely-loved sons disappointed her in various ways and her husband's intense religious melancholia returned in 1934 (he experienced a breakdown early in their marriage, in 1919, during which he became immovably convinced that he had sinned an unpardonable sin and was damned). For days on end, Montgomery intones the sad statistics of this period: how much sleep Ewan got the night before; whether or not he had to take medication to help him sleep; how much sleep she got (usually precious little); how depressed or better he was in the morning; in the afternoon; in the evening. The litany is painful to read.

The editing of this volume maintains the high standards set in the previous volumes; as Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston write in their introduction, numerous challenges faced them in editing the later journals. For example, they needed to minimize the amount of repetition of the same event — a frequent tendency when a journal keeper grows older. Still, they appear to have done so judiciously, so that the passages that Montgomery wrote during the darkest days of her husband's mental breakdown retain their repetitive nature, sometimes recalling several times a specific piece of advice a medical practitioner has offered, for instance.

This kind of repetition is key in establishing Montgomery's mood of the time — her desperation, her own close approach to breakdown.

Social historians will be engaged by the wealth of detail about Montgomery's position as a minister's wife in a small Ontario town — details that recall the fictional treatment that Sinclair Ross gave her prairie counterpart, Mrs. Bentley, in *As For Me and My House*. Appearances must be kept up, and only in the pages of her journal can Montgomery disclose the real nature of her faith — "... I do not believe in the second coming or a literal garden of Eden" (71) — or her true feelings about difficult parishioners: "As a preacher's wife I cannot swear in public. But in this diary I do, in emergencies. This is one of them. Damn Mrs. George Davis!" (92). The leave-taking of the Macdonalds, after a misunderstanding about a letter turns the Norval congregation against them, is full of Ross-like social embarrassment: Montgomery describes going to various farewell events with a smile on her face and venomous bitterness hidden beneath it.

But while the journals present a picture of a long-suffering woman, they do not hide Montgomery's own capacity to harbour discriminatory or ungenerous thoughts. For instance, Montgomery reveals many of the Anglo-Saxon prejudices of her time, referring to "the peasant-like personality" of "the Island French girls" (6) or the "kink" in a particular man's personality — "perhaps because of his Indian blood" (72). On an excursion to Saskatchewan to rekindle old friendships and inquire about unpaid debts, Montgomery repeatedly complains about having to spend an hour in a railway station "full ... of French half-breeds" (84). Reflections such as these, for all their conventional appearance in a woman of Montgomery's ethnicity and class, make for some painful reading in a narrative of national rather than personal trauma.

Sexual difference receives no less conventional a handling; these journals detail an ongoing one-sided love affair that a young woman acquaintance harboured for Montgomery over a number of years. Montgomery, clearly exasperated, repeatedly notes that she feels "nauseated" by this "Lesbian horror" (211). In the wake of recent valuable criticism that has revealed how subversive Montgomery's texts could be particularly as regards gender, these journals are important for reminding us of the decided limits of her subversiveness.

In the later volumes of these journals, it is also enlightening to watch Montgomery react to her own fame — usually with characteristically caustic irony. Noting that her old PEI home has been torn down, Montgomery secretly gives thanks, for the old house "can never be degraded to the uses of a tea-room" (11). It's fascinating to see how aware Montgomery was of her own "degradation," the various uses to which she was — and continues to be — put as a literary commodity — another valuable cultural-studies focus of recent criticism.

In the midst of all of this painful reflection — her commodification, her losses, the traumas borne in public smiling silence, her growing sense that the literary world had somehow passed her by to pursue modern tastes — Montgomery's dedication to Romanticism ultimately held firm: "It has not mattered much what anyone else thought. I have always tried to catch and express a little of the immortal beauty and enchantment of the world into which I have sometimes been privileged to see for a moment" (43). For all of the pain she suffered in these years, for all of her own limitations as fairly conventional Anglo-Saxon woman of her class, Montgomery did capture and share this beauty and enchantment with

generations of readers. Now readers of her journals can share that momentary privilege — and wonder at its marvellous persistence in days that were marked by worry and despondency.

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Proceed with Caution: *Stormy Night*

Stormy Night. Michèle Lemieux. Kids Can, 1999. 232 pp. cloth. ISBN 1-55074-692-8.

This highly original book should have a warning label on the cover which reads "Caution: existential material contained inside, not necessarily suitable for children."

The plot: on a dark, stormy night, a young girl cannot sleep. Questions and comments about life and death run through her head. The author presents a question or comment on one page which is accompanied by a pen-and-ink drawing on the facing page. Unanswerable questions are posed, such as,

> Who am I?
>
> What exactly is fate?
>
> Is there anyone watching over me?
>
> Will the world come to an end someday?
>
> Will I know when it's time to die?

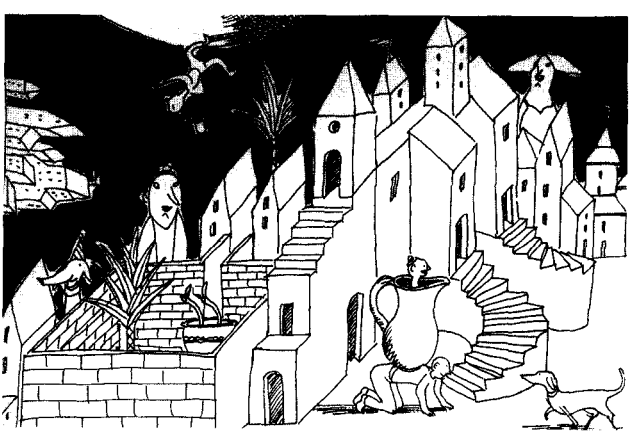

Illustration by Michèle Lemieux from ***Stormy Night***
"And what if life were just a dream ...
and dreams at night were really real?"