Is "Anne of Green Gables" an American Import?

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Over the eighty years since its publication, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* has acquired the status of a Canadian cultural icon. Reflecting this fact, Sheila Egoff writes in *The Republic of childhood* that "to denigrate the literary qualities of *Anne of Green Gables* is as useless an exercise as carping about the architecture of the National War Monument."[1] Not only is Montgomery's book cherished within Canada, it is also "probably Canada's best-known fictional export,"[2] an archetypal example of the Canadian who finds fame and fortune abroad while remaining true to home. In this paper I will attempt to show that, however dear a Canadian symbol and success story *Anne of Green Gables* may have become, it is very probably patterned after a foreign work, the American children's classic *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, by American educator and author Kate Douglas Wiggin[3], was published in Boston in 1903, gaining immediate and widespread success among both adults and children. Lucy Maud Montgomery began writing *Anne of Green Gables* in 1905[4] and the final version of the work was published in Boston in 1908. Both books belong to a popular genre of works dealing with imaginative, relentlessly optimistic orphans;[5] a genre which Eleanor Porter would take to its sentimental height in 1913 with the immensely successful *Pollyanna*. It would not be surprising therefore, to find that *Anne* and *Rebecca* resemble each other, particularly as they are placed in similar settings: late nineteenth century small-town Prince Edward Island and small-town Maine.[6] Nonetheless, a careful comparison of the two books shows the resemblance to be too close to be merely circumstantial.

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm opens with eleven year-old Rebecca Rowena Randall's journey by stagecoach from her family's farm to her aunts' house in the Maine village of Riverboro. Rebecca's father has been dead for three years and her mother is unable to cope with the financial burden of raising seven children. Miranda and Jane Sawyer, her mother's spinster sisters, have offered to take the eldest child, a dull, sensible girl, into their home, but Mrs. Randall instead sends them Rebecca, "a thing of fire and spirit" (27).[7] Rebecca, who declares, "I haven't done anything but put babies to bed at night and take them up in the morning for years and years," (12) thus finds her life abruptly changed.

In *Anne of Green Gables* elderly Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, sister and

brother, of Avonlea, Prince Edward Island, send to an orphanage for a boy to help them on their farm. When Matthew goes to the train station in his buggy to pick up the boy, he finds that they have been sent instead eleven-year-old Anne Shirley, "full of spirit and vivacity," (12)[8] who has spent her childhood looking after babies in foster families.

The two girls present a similar appearance as they embark on their journeys to their new homes. Wiggin writes of Rebecca:

> The buff calico was faded, but scrupulously clean and starched within an inch of its life . . . . the head looked small to bear the weight of dark hair that hung in a thick braid to her waist. She wore an odd little vizored cap . . . . Her face was without color and sharp in outline (9–10).

Anne is described as,

> . . . garbed in a very short, very tight, very ugly dress of yellowish gray wincey . . . . She wore a faded brown sailor hat and beneath the hat, extending down her back, were two braids of very thick, decidedly red hair. Her face was small, white and thin . . . (12).

The outstanding feature of both girls is their large, expressive eyes (*Rebecca*, 10–11; *Anne*, 12,13, 25 et passim). Jeremiah Cobb, the stagecoach driver, says of Rebecca, "her face is all eyes" (42), while *Anne* describes herself as a baby as "nothing but eyes" (42).

Rebecca is introduced when Jeremiah drives her to her aunts' home, "the Brick House"; Anne when Matthew drives her to his, "Green Gables". Both Jeremiah and Matthew are plain and practical-minded (although Matthew is considerably more timid), and both are overwhelmed by the constant and extraordinary chatter of their respective passengers. Jeremiah "had a feeling that he was being rushed from peak to peak of a mountain range without time for a good breath in between" (13), while Matthew "felt as he had once felt in his rash youth when another boy had enticed him on the merry-go-round at a picnic" (18). Rebecca rhapsodizes on why she calls her family farm "Sunnybrook" (16) while Anne makes up names such as "Lake of Shining Waters" (21) for the places she passes en route. Jeremiah tells Rebecca, "I guess it don't make no difference what you call it so long as you know where it is" (15–16). Marilla will later admonish Anne for taking pride in her parents' first names with "I guess it doesn't matter what a person's name is as long as he behaves himself" (42).

Anne desperately wants to stay at Green Gables, while Rebecca longs for home; nonetheless, their responses to the cold receptions they receive in their new homes are the same. Alone in her room,

> . . . Rebecca stood her sunshade in the corner, tore off her best hat, flung it on the bureau . . . precipitated herself into the middle of the bed and pulled the counterpiece over her

head (40–41).

When Anne was left alone in her room,

> . . . she hastily discarded her garments . . . and sprang into bed where she burrowed face downward into the pillow and pulled the clothes over her head (30).

Rebecca's Aunt Miranda, "just, conscientious, economical, industrious, a regular attendant at church . . . " without "one likable failing" (34), treats Rebecca with the grim severity she believes necessary for the proper upbringing of a child. Her Aunt Jane is softer hearted and, although dominated by her elder sister, is often able to intercede on Rebecca's behalf.

In *Anne of Green Gables* Marilla, "a woman of narrow experience and rigid conscience" (5), is similar in character to Miranda, but not as dour: "there was a saving something about [Marilla's] mouth which, if it had been ever so slightly developed, might have been considered indicative of a sense of humour" (5). Matthew resembles Rebecca's devoted admirer Jeremiah Cobb, however, in relation to his sister, he plays the same submissive, tempering role as Jane with Miranda.

Miranda and Marilla keep Rebecca and Anne dressed in plain, dark clothes. Jane 968) and Matthew (208) respectively intervene to provide them with pretty dresses. Miranda tells Jane:

> "Handsome is as handsome does" says I. Rebecca never'll come to grief along of her beauty, that's certain, and there's no use in humoring her to think about her looks. I believe she's as vain as a peacock now . . ." (68).

Marilla scolds Anne, "You shouldn't think so much about your looks, Anne. I'm afraid you are a very vain little girl," and, when Anne protests that she can't be vain when she knows she's so homely, adds, "handsome is as handsome does" (80).

Although neither girl is conventionally attractive, both stand out against prettier girls. When Rebecca is spoken of as plain, Jeremiah exclaims, "Look at Alice Robinson, that's called the prettiest child on the river, an' see how Rebecca shines her ri' down out o' sight! (114), and Anne's neighbour, Rachel Lynde says, "when Anne and them [other girls] are together, though she ain't half as handsome, she makes them look kind of common and overdone . . ." (265).

In character, Rebecca and Anne prove to be even more alike than in appearance. Wiggin describes Rebecca as "full to the brim . . . of clever thoughts and quaint fancies" (55).

> She was willing to go on errands, but often forgot what she was sent for . . . her tongue was ever in motion . . . she was always messing with flowers, putting them in vases, pin-

ning them on her dress, and sticking them in her hat (65).

This portrayal applies equally well to Anne, who also brims over with imaginings (41), forgets her chores (128), chatters continuously (36), and 'messes' with flowers, putting them in vases and in her hat (84,127).

Both girls dote on romantic novels, act out stories with their friends, recite poetry to themselves, and delight in nature. Rebecca is said to be one of "the souls by nature pitched too high, by suffering plunged to low" (164). Montgomery writes that: "The downfall of some dear hope or plan plunged Anne into 'deeps of affliction'. The fulfillment thereof exalted her to dizzy realms of delight" (190). When Rebecca learns Jeremiah Cobb will take her on a trip to a neighbouring village she is ecstatic.

A thrill of delicious excitement ran through Rebecca's frame . . . she pressed Mr. Cobb's knee ardently and said in a voice choking with tears of joy and astonishment, "Oh, it can't be true . . . . It's like having a fairy godmother who asks you your wish and then gives it to you" (18–19).

Similarly, when Anne finds out there is to be a Sunday school picnic she grows "cold all over with excitement" (99).

"Such a thrill as went up and down my back, Marilla! I don't think I'd ever really believed until then that there was honestly going to be a picnic. I couldn't help fearing I'd only imagined it" (99).

Rebecca's adoring bosom friend is pretty, plump, rosy-cheeked, dull Emma Jane, daughter of a prosperous neighbouring blacksmith. Anne's adoring bosom friend is pretty, plump, rosy-cheeked, dull Diana, daughter of a prosperous neighbouring farmer. In *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* it is Rebecca who has the romantic name and black tresses, and her best friend, the sensible name and red hair. In *Anne of Green Gables* the situation is reversed. (Montgomery's inspiration for Anne's renowned red hair may have come from the character of Emma Jane, who reassures the plain Rebecca, "I was a dreadful homely baby, and homely right along till a year ir two ago when my red hair began to grow dark" 152). Rebecca's adversary is the smug, spiteful Minnie Smellie; Anne's is the equally obnoxious Josie Pye.

Rebecca has a suitor in her classmate, Seesaw Simpson, who can't keep his eyes off her "although she snubbed him to the verge of madness" (56). Anne is courted by her classmate Gilbert Blythe whose attempts at friendship she spurns (118).

One day in school, through a remark of Seesaw's, Rebecca is forced by the teacher to stand beside the boy in a corner of the classroom. Wiggin writes:

Rebecca's head was bowed with shame and wrath. Life looked too black a thing to be

endured. The punishment was bad enough, but to be coupled in correction with Seesaw was beyond human endurance (58).

The teacher notes that her face is "pale save for two red spots glowing on her cheeks" (59).

As punishment for flying into a temper at a remark of Gilbert's, Anne is also made to stand in front of the class (119). The following day the teacher compels her to sit beside Gilbert, "heaping insult on injury to a degree unbearable . . . Her whole being seethed with shame, anger and humiliation"(122). A classmate describes her face as "white, with awful little red spots on it" (122).

The school day over, Seesaw's glance of penitence is "answered defiantly by one of cold disdain" by Rebecca (61). Gilbert's apology for his offending remark is likewise met with scorn: "Anne swept by disdainfully, without look or sign of hearing" (120).

The parallels continue throughout the works. Rebecca and Anne grow up into good, little housekeepers. Rebecca is encouraged and guided in her development by her sympathetic, intelligent teacher, Miss Maxwell; in Anne's life her teacher, Miss Stacy, does the same. The two go away for higher schooling, Rebecca hoping to complete the four-year course in three (250), Anne, the two-year course in one (295). They have both become attractive, stately girls; Rebecca is notable for "her tall slenderness, her thoughtful brow, the fire of young joy in her face" (301), Anne is "tall, serious-eyed" with "thoughtful brows" and a "proudly poised little head" (270).

Neither Rebecca nor Anne lacks male admirers in her adolescence. Rebecca, however, "was in the normally unconscious state that belonged to her years; boys were good comrades, but not more" (224). Similarly, "Boys were to Anne, when she thought about them at all, merely possible good comrades" (301). In *Rebecca* this innocence is contrasted with the worldliness of the flirtatious Huldah Meserve who has "merry eyes and a somewhat too plump figure for her years" (224). In *Anne*, it is beau-mad Ruby Gillis with "large, bright-blue eyes and a plump showy figure" (300) who plays the same role.

The girls do well at school (although Anne exceeds Rebecca in the brilliancy of her achievements), excelling in creative writing and public recitations. A firm in which Rebecca's aunts had invested goes bankrupt, leaving them with little money. Miranda suffers a stroke and dies soon after Rebecca's graduation. Shortly after Anne's graduation, Matthew learns that the bank in which he and his sister have their savings has failed and dies of the shock.

At the closing of the two books, seventeen year-old Rebecca sits on the front step of the Brick House possessed by a "sense of thankfulness and peace" (431) and sixteen and a half year-old Anne sits at the window of her room in Green Gables "companioned by a glad content" (329). Both are contemplating their futures. In the last line of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* Rebecca whispers, "God bless Aunt Miranda; God bless the brick house that was; God bless the

brick house that is to be" (342). The last line of *Anne of Green Gables* is, "'God's in his heaven all's right with the world,' whispered Anne softly" (329).

I have been aware of the striking similarities between *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Anne of Green Gables* for many years, but have only recently been prompted to make a detailed comparison of the two works by the controversy surrounding the close resemblance of Colleen McCullough's latest novel, *The Ladies of Missalonghi*, to another of Montgomery's works, *The Blue Castle*.[9] In light of the publicity following that disclosure it is surprising that the parallels between *Anne of Green Gables* and Wiggin's book have not received more public attention.

There are, in fact, few references to these parallels in studies of children's literature, although the two books are occasionally mentioned as belonging to the same genre. Two notable exceptions to the rule are found in the revised edition of John Townsend's *Written for Children* and in the study of girls' fiction *You're a Brick, Angela!* by Cadogan and Craig. Townsend comments on the "remarkable similarity" of *Anne of Green Gables* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, even down to their titles.[10] Cadogan and Craig go farther, bluntly stating that Montgomery "openly appropriated, or modified only slightly, a great many qualities for her heroine from the earlier book [*Rebecca*]."[11]

Most recently, in an article in *CCL* entitled "L.M. Montgomery and the literary heroine: Jo, Rebecca, Anne, and Emily," T.D. MacLulich notes that it seems unlikely "that the numerous and striking parallels between Anne's story and Rebecca's story are purely coincidental."[12] He provides two instances of what appear to be "verbal echoes" of *Rebecca* in *Anne*: both Miranda (154) and Marilla (77) use the expression "what under the canopy;" and at crisis points in the upbringing of Rebecca and Anne respectively, Miranda remarks "We have put our hand to the plough, and we can't turn back" (255), and Marilla, "I've put my hand to the plough and I won't look back" (106).[13]

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm is no longer widely read. However, at the time of *Anne of Green Gables*' publication it was at the height of its popularity and the similarities between the two books must have been noticed, if not particularly remarked on in the surfeit of like stories, by the readers of the day. An American reviewer, in fact, called *Anne of Green Gables* "a sort of Canadian 'Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm'.[14] Mark Twain, who knew how to build a story out of an imaginative child's rebellion against a repressive adult world himself, spoke in glowing terms of both works. He found *Rebecca* "beautiful and moving and satisfying,"[15] and called Anne "the dearest and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice."[16]

Lucy Maud Montgomery herself stated that the idea for her book grew out of an entry in her journal: "Elderly couple apply to orphan asylum for a boy. By mistake a girl is sent them."[17] This, in turn, she said arose out of her speculation about the identity of a girl who arrived at the home of the owners – sister and brother – of a neighbouring farm.[18] It appears probable that this idea

became linked in her mind with the story line of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* to form the basis of *Anne of Green Gables*.

Of course, some of *Rebecca's* influence may have reached Montgomery indirectly through spin-off stories on the same theme. Montgomery mentions just such a story in a journal entry of March, 1905:

> One story in a magazine brought vividly back an odd fancy of my early childhood. The story was of a lonely little girl who lived with two grim aunts; having no real companion she evolved one from fancy. This companion, whom she called *Elizabeth* "lived" in a grove on the hill, and the child shocked her unimaginative aunts by persistently relating "lies" to them concerning her talks and adventures with *Elizabeth*.[19]

She goes on to say that she too indulged in such fantasies as a child, a trait which would come to be attributed to Anne (63). It seems likely that Montgomery would have been able to identify with the character of Rebecca, as she did with the protagonist of the magazine story. One interesting point in common between the author of *Anne* and Wiggin's heroine is a love of colour. In a letter to a friend written in the summer of 1905, Montgomery states:

> Everyone likes color; with me it is a passion. . . . On my table is a color effect of yellow, California poppies that makes me dizzy with delight every time I look at it.[20]

Compare this to the following passage in *Rebecca*:

> "Does color make you sort of dizzy?" asked Rebecca.
> "No," answered Emma Jane after a long pause; "no, it don't; not a mite."
> "Perhaps dizzy isn't just the right word, but it's the nearest. I'd like to eat color, and drink it, and sleep in it"(142).

Montgomery's work had virtues of its own and is not simply a paraphrase of Wiggin's. *Anne*, with its sympathetic, idealized portrait of rural life with all its drawbacks, is a much lighter and sweeter work than *Rebecca* which is shot throughout with accounts of poverty, theft and dreary small-mindedness.[21] On the other hand, *Rebecca*, with its hard edges, rings truer than *Anne*, in which everything works out rather too well. For example, although Miranda grows to be proud of Rebecca, "never, to the very end, even when the waning of her bodily strength relaxed her iron grip and weakened her power of repression, never once did she show that pride or make a single demonstration of affection" (216). Marilla, however, is eventually completely won over by Anne, confessing to her, "I love you as dear as if you were my own flesh and blood and you've been my joy and comfort ever since you came to Green Gables" (316). (Even the redoubtable Mrs. Lynde, who at first finds Anne "terribly skinny and homely" (68), ends up gushing over the orphan's charms (303).) With regard to her protagonist's academic abilities, Wiggin remarks that "Rebecca came off with no flying colors – that would have been impossible in con-

sideration of her inadequate training" (250). Nothing less will do for Anne than to win one of her school's top prizes for academic excellence (307).[22]

Montgomery herself stated that "Anne's success at school *is* too good for literary art. But the book was written for *girls* and must please them to be a *financial* success."[23] However, it was precisely because Montgomery was more interested in entertainment than plausibility that she is able to place her heroine in situations which would be improbable for Rebecca in her more constrained setting. Anne breaks her slate on a classmate's head and refuses to return to school (118), she dies her hair green and has to have it cut off (229), she accidentally intoxicates her best friend (136), and so on. Rebecca, at her worst, can do little more than wear her good dress without permission (92) and throw her parasol down a well (122). Anne certainly has the edge over Rebecca when it comes to adventure.

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm is the more period-bound of the two works. Its passages of cloying sentimentality and depictions of missionary meetings and puritanical repression are apt to try the sympathy of the modern reader. *Anne of Green Gables*, on the whole, deals with subjects (school rivalries, concern over personal appearance, etc.) which remain accessible to the reader of today. Montgomery's book undoubtedly has a more fluid story line than Wiggin's, which is broken up, in the manner of the day, by intrusive elements such as letters written by the characters. As well, the sheer extravagance of Anne's flights of fancy, the piquant characterizations, and the idyllic descriptions of rural life, combine to give *Anne* a freshness and charm lacking in *Rebecca*.

Notwithstanding these original elements in Montgomery's work, a comparison of *Anne of Green Gables* with *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* leaves little doubt that the former was strongly influenced by the latter, and that "our best-known fictional export" had as its model an American import. Although, at first glance, this might appear a blow to Canadian cultural autonomy, perhaps Canadians can take some satisfaction in it as an early and exceptional inversion of the usual state of affairs whereby Canada provides the raw materials for American productions.[24]

NOTES

1 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967).

2 John R. Sorfleet, "L.M. Montgomery: Canadian Authoress," *Canadian Children's Literature* 1 (Summer 1975): 4.
In "Red-haired Anne in Japan" Yuko Katsura states that since 1952 "*Anne* has been one of the most popular books among children and young people in Japan." *Canadian Children's Literature* 34 (1984): 57. For an account of the popularity of *Anne* and Montgomery's other works in Poland, see Barbara Wachowicz, "L.M. Montgomery: at home in Poland," *Canadian Children's Literature* 46 (1987): 7–36.

3 Wiggin said that the idea for *Rebecca* came to her in a dream. Wiggin, *My garden of memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923): 351–52.

4 Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, eds. *The selected journals of L.M. Montgomery: Vol 1, 1889-1910* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985): 330.

5 For a description of this genre, see the chapter "Orphans and Golden Girls" in M. Cadogan and P. Craig, *You're a brick, Angela!* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976): 89–110.

Anne, who has lost both her parents, is more completely an orphan – and therefore more completely dependent on the world's mercy – than Rebecca, who has lost only her father and remains inserted within a familial network.

6 One American review of *Anne of Green Gables* stated: "There is nothing in the book distinctive of the place. The scene might as well be laid in any New England village." Wilfred Eggleston, ed. *The Green Gables Letters for L.M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber: 1905-1909* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1960): 72.

7 All page references to *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* are from the edition of 1917, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

8 Page references are from *Anne of Green Gables*, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, Paperback Edition, 1968).

9 Chris Wood, "A Tale of Two Spinsters," *Maclean's* 15 February 1988: 59.

10 (Harmondsworth, England: Kestrel Books: 1974): 84.

11 p.94.

12 *Canadian Children's Literature* 37 (1985): 10.

13 *CCL* 37 (1985): 10.

14 *The Outlook* 89 (22 August 1908): 956, cited by MacLulich, p. 11.

Period reviews of *Anne* are not easy to come by. Montgomery's scrapbooks, which are at the University of Guelph, do not contain any reviews of *Anne*. (Mary Rubio, personal communication.)

15 Nora Archibald Smith, *Kate Douglas Wiggin as her sister knew her* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925) 134.

16 *The Green Gables Letters*, p. 80.

17 Hilda M. Ridley, *L.M. Montgomery* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1956), p. 89.

18 Ridley, *L.M.M.* p. 89.

19 Rubio and Waterston, p. 306.

20 F.L.P. Bolger and E.R. Epperly, eds., *My Dear Mr M.: Letters to G.B. MacMillan* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980) 13–14.

21 I cannot agree with MacLulich that Montgomery "shows a greater sociological acuity than Wiggin does in depicting the sometimes oppressive nature of life in a small rural community" (11). I find the inhabitants of Avonlea only superficially oppressive; actually they are amazingly tolerant of Anne's antics. Montgomery's Avonlea, in fact, reads like a child's paradise in comparison to Wiggin's deadening Riverboro where Rebecca has to contend with an aunt whom she irritates with every breath she draws (65).

22 In "The Bogus Ugly Duckling: Anne Shirley Unmasked," Lesley Willis writes; "What L.M. Montgomery really wants is to engage for Anne the same kind of sympathy which might be given to a fairy-tale heroine, but without making her undergo the same trials." *Dalhousie Review*, 56 (1976) 251.

23 *The Green Gables Letters*, p. 73.

24 The Americans did their best to re-establish order, however. In the 1921 Hollywood film version of *Anne*, Montgomery was indignant to see the Stars and Stripes flying over Anne's school. Ridley, p. 92.

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