Who Do We Think You Are?

—E. Holly Pike

Epperly, Elizabeth Rollins. *Imagining Anne: The Island Scrapbooks of L.M. Montgomery*. 100 Years of Anne. Toronto: Penguin, 2008. 170 pp. $39.00 hc. ISBN 0-670-06687-7.

Epperly, Elizabeth Rollins. *Through Lover's Lane: L.M. Montgomery's Photography and Visual Imagination*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007. 217 pp. $65.00 hc, $29.95 pb. ISBN 0-8020-3878-4, 0-8020-9460-5.

Gammel, Irene, ed. *The Intimate Life of L.M. Montgomery*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005. 305 pp. $70.00 hc, $29.95 pb. ISBN 0-8020-8924-0, 0-8020-8676-4.

MacLeod, Elizabeth. *Lucy Maud Montgomery*. Illus. John Mantha. Kids Can Read. Toronto: Kids Can, 2008. 32 pp. $14.95 hc, $5.95 pb. ISBN 1-55453-055-7, 1-55453-056-4.

Montgomery, L.M. *After Green Gables: L.M. Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916–1941*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006. 288 pp. $70.00 hc, $34.95 pb. ISBN 0-8020-3607-4, 0-8020-8459-1.

Montgomery, L.M. *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*. Ed. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. Vol. 5: 1935–1942. Don Mills, ON: Oxford UP, 2004. 410 pp. $37.95 hc. ISBN 0-19-542116-7.

The publication of Elizabeth MacLeod's biography of L.M. Montgomery for Kids Can Press (2008) marks a new era in the study of Montgomery's works and life. Because the book is categorized under "Inspiring Lives" (along with biographies of Alexander Graham Bell, Helen Keller, and the Wright Brothers) and is aimed at an audience of six- to eight-year-old children (generally too young to have read Montgomery's works, though they might be familiar with some of the television adaptations), there is a clear assumption that Montgomery's life has interest and significance beyond her readership and that she fits into the category of internationally-known names of the past that require no explanation. This idea can be justified by the numerous television adaptations, abridgements, and other productions that make Montgomery's stories and characters available outside the original novels and by the undeniable impact her work has had on the tourism industry in Prince Edward Island. As well, the publication of five volumes of selected journals over the last twenty years has generated an interest in her life that is quite independent of knowledge of her works. Additional recent works in Montgomery studies further support the notion that we have gone far beyond literary analysis of her novels. Publications are focusing on Montgomery's life with or without reference to her works, and more recent work on Montgomery seems to illuminate her time and place as much as her own experience and career. The six books under review here—concerned with Montgomery's letters, journals, scrapbooks, and photographs—move well outside Montgomery's published works, and, in various ways, both justify and call into question the inclusion of her biography in a series of "inspiring lives."

The first question, of course, is just what about Montgomery's life is supposed to be inspiring, and it is very clear in MacLeod's biography that it is the creation of the *Anne* books, more specifically the creation of *Anne of Green Gables*, that is of central relevance. The biography really covers Montgomery's life only to the publication of *Anne of Green Gables* in 1908, and then notes that "Maud went on to write many more books, and hundreds of short stories and poems" (30). Even in the "More facts about Maud" section (32), no mention is made of her marriage or children, and her years of struggling as a freelancer, which could be an excellent example of perseverance, are hardly touched on—perhaps reasonably if one considers the assumption that six- to eight-year-olds would be discouraged rather than inspired by the idea that success usually comes only after plenty of hard work. Given the intended audience, perhaps MacLeod cannot do justice to the

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Certainly, the few bare facts in MacLeod's biography bear little resemblance to the picture of Montgomery's life we have been given in the *Selected Journals*, and the fifth and final volume is by the far the darkest of them all. Beginning with leaving Norval after a painful rupture with her husband Ewan's congregation, and detailing some of the difficulties in her son Chester's first marriage and the decline of her own and Ewan's physical and mental health, this volume shows a woman trapped by her need to keep up appearances, by her sense of her own importance and what is due her, and by her negative assessment of almost everyone around her. Far from inspiring, it creates a clear impression that Montgomery was thoroughly self-centred, inclined to try to run other people's lives, and concerned more about herself than about anyone else's needs. Of course, the journals also show that she had cause to be unhappy. Montgomery's elder son struggled to find a career, and also struggled in his marriage, at a time when divorce was generally considered disgraceful, especially in the family of a clergyman; she was shut out of the Canadian Authors' Association executive, of which she had been an early and active member; the popularity of her type of writing was declining; and her husband continued to undergo periods of mental illness. Kate Macdonald Butler's recent revelation that Montgomery took her own life is not surprising to someone who has read the last few entries in this journal, which speak starkly of the writer's

despair, and Butler's account of her grandmother's depression goes a considerable way to explain some of the feelings Montgomery expressed. At least the sections recounting the difficulties of Montgomery's life are somewhat balanced by accounts of her pleasures and joys, including time with old friends, honours awarded, and her growing love of cinema.

Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston note in their introduction that they made very few deletions in this volume, "as the tendency to record the day's events comes less often" to Montgomery at this period in her life (xxvi). One cannot pretend that the journal is a spontaneous account of Montgomery's feelings as they arise, since entries are often made long after the events discussed, but, however calculated the presentation, this volume is largely an account of an emotional life. Each successive volume of the journal reads more like self-justification than self-exploration, as Montgomery feels more and more alienated from the Canadian literary mainstream and from her family and friends. The life described here is certainly not inspiring, but it is illuminating, and will no doubt inform future scholarship of Montgomery's last works as well as accounts of medical treatments, changing sexual mores (it is fascinating that Chester goes to church-sponsored events to meet "the other woman"), the growth of Toronto, and popular entertainment. Given that this volume of the journal recounts a low point in Montgomery's popularity and respect as a writer, reading it in conjunction with MacLeod's biography constitutes a lesson in the development of a literary reputation. While Montgomery certainly expected that a biography would be desired and that her journals would be published, a reader of this last volume of her journal would not guess that her life would be published as an inspiration, even given her statement to Ephraim Weber that biography is "a screaming farce" (*The Green Gables Letters* 58).

While it was because he considered her literary reputation important that Weber wrote about Montgomery after her death, he needed the help of an agent to find a market for his essays, published in the *Dalhousie Review* in 1942 and 1944. Weber felt privileged to provide an account of an aspect of Montgomery's writing that would not be available to the general public. It might be fair to say that his articles were the first step in the broadening of Montgomery studies from which we now benefit. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Paul Gerard Tiessen's *After Green Gables: L.M. Montgomery's Letters to Ephraim Weber, 1916–1941* republishes Montgomery's letters to Weber (first published as *L.M. Montgomery's Ephraim Weber* in 2000) with the addition of extensive notes and an expanded

introductory essay. The letters are interesting reading, of course, and, for anyone familiar with the journals, they offer a strange combination of parallel and disjunction. In many places, the letters and journals provide accounts of the same events or thoughts in exactly the same words. In other places, however, the letters make no mention at all of matters—usually distressing ones—that the journal accounts suggest are wholly occupying Montgomery's thoughts. For instance, Montgomery writes to Weber a letter begun June 18, 1937 and finished July 17, 1937, covering topics from the immortality of the soul to her own and Weber's writing to the scandal surrounding Edward VIII's abdication, without reference to the matters that occupy her journal for the same period—the recurrence of Ewan's illness, the disastrous anniversary services at Leaskdale and even worse drive home, and the failure of Chester's petition to rewrite failed exams. It is natural enough that Montgomery would not share her burdens with a correspondent with whom she has had little personal contact, but that fact adds to our understanding of Montgomery's methods of dividing her public and private worlds, with her letter writing being part of her public world. Although she acknowledges Ewan's mental health problems to Weber in a letter dated 26 December 1941 (Letter 24, 263), she generally gives Weber a cheerful account of her life and activities, perhaps as much out of consideration for him as to protect her reputation.

The Tiessens do not draw attention in their notes to these divergences, but they do track similarities to passages in Montgomery's letters to her other significant correspondent, George Boyd MacMillan, and provide extensive detail on the people, places, books, movies, and events that are mentioned. They also cross-reference these letters with Weber's letters to Wilfred Eggleston and Leslie Staebler, giving a fuller picture of Weber than would be available otherwise. The notes are also interesting reading on their own, drawing attention to the breadth of Montgomery's reading, the consistencies and inconsistencies in her self-presentation, the intellectual world Weber inhabited, and currents of thought and feeling of the period—making use of the full range of scholarship available on Montgomery's time and life. The Montgomery who emerges here is a much happier, less self-centred personality than the woman in the journals. The world she inhabits is one where literature is valued and discussed, where she is regarded as an important person, and where current and historical events are canvassed for their significance; although she complains about the lot of a minister's wife, the real drudgery of that existence and the stress

of meeting community expectations are not revealed. The persona of the letters is similar to the heroine of MacLeod's biography—the life Montgomery presents here is intended to attract admiration rather than sympathy, and the Tiessens place it in the contexts both of her other pen-pal correspondence and of her pen pal's other correspondence in order to fill in some of the background, but that background cannot be adequately known without recourse to the journals.

While these works deal with Montgomery's output for an identified audience, it could be argued that the aspects of her production that Elizabeth Rollins Epperly deals with in two recent publications are not meant for an audience other than Montgomery herself. In *Imagining Anne: The Island Scrapbooks of L.M. Montgomery*, Epperly analyzes pages from Montgomery's scrapbooks, owned by the Lucy Maud Montgomery Birthplace Trust (held by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum). As Epperly points out, "Montgomery kept two kinds of scrapbooks. She preserved clippings of her . . . published stories, poems, and articles—and, later, reviews of her novels. She also kept personal scrapbooks filled with souvenirs . . ." (3). The scrapbooks Epperly deals with here are the latter. In *Through Lover's Lane: L.M. Montgomery's Photography and Visual Imagination*, Epperly mines another aspect of Montgomery's production that was not for the/a public, although, as Epperly notes, Montgomery undoubtedly shared photographs with friends and relatives and also took community photographs (40). Under Epperly's handling, the scrapbooks and photos become a field for psychological study of Montgomery as well as for filling out details of her private and community life. In her analysis of the scrapbooks, Epperly identifies clippings, calling cards, announcements, and souvenirs, correlating them to events described in the journals and to passages in the letters, and also seeks significance in the placement of items on a page and in the obvious removal and replacement of some items.

The scrapbooks, like the journals, were revisited and revised during Montgomery's life, perhaps, as Epperly suggests, with the intent of more carefully preserving some items, but perhaps because some items had become "irksome" (5). It is noteworthy that the reasons Epperly finds for the removal of items are emotional reasons: she sees the preservation or destruction of material as a salve to Montgomery's own feelings, not an attempt to hide information or to create a different version of events. Certainly, the accumulation of the minutiae that mark events that were important at the time but forgotten later is far more personal than the collation of publications and reviews,

and should be more revealing. The selected pages of the scrapbooks reproduced here are visually interesting, though the clippings are sometimes difficult to read despite the large format of the book (approximately ten by twelve inches). As well as containing information about Montgomery's activities, they reveal a great deal about the tastes of the time in decoration, fashion, jokes, and amusements. Some clippings refer, sometimes obliquely, to successes that Montgomery had at the time, such as having one of her poems set to music by an American organist (118–19). The selected pages do not follow a particular narrative of Montgomery's life, but sample various periods, illuminating aspects of Montgomery's tastes and activities. Epperly's speculations on the significance of various items are informed by her own familiarity with Montgomery's life and writing and by the expert knowledge of other scholars.

It may be that *Imagining Anne* is not an appropriate title, however, since the material selected does not necessarily directly illuminate the process by which Montgomery came to write *Anne of Green Gables*. While it is true, as Epperly notes, that "Montgomery's youth was recaptured in the scrapbooks and later was re-created in Anne's life" (4), and the pastimes, activities, fashions, and keepsakes contained in the scrapbooks are consonant with Anne's Avonlea life as Montgomery imagined it, the commentary on the scrapbook pages is about Montgomery, and, after the introductory material, references to Anne are secondary at best, and often no more than a speculation, as in "Would young Anne Shirley's ideal of beauty have looked like this?" (48) in reference to a portrait of a society woman Montgomery had pasted in the scrapbook; or an indication that something happened while Montgomery was writing *Anne of Green Gables*, as in reference to the opera program (18). It is, of course, difficult to make direct assertions as to the process by which an author creates a fictional world and character and to make direct connections between documented activities and events and possible fictional correlatives; by presenting speculations and questions, Epperly avoids overstating the case, but may have gone too far in the other direction. Again, there is little obvious connection between this Maud and the Maud of MacLeod's biography, since what is seen through the scrapbook pages is a socially active, academically successful young woman who has achieved some modest success in writing for magazines.

In *Through Lover's Lane: L.M. Montgomery's Photography and Visual Imagination*, Epperly is treading even more slippery ground in using Montgomery's favourite photographs to understand

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how her visual imagination worked and then using that understanding as a basis for analysis of descriptions and metaphors in her fiction. Epperly's handling of the dominant patterns she sees in Montgomery's photography—arches, circles, "curving lines and bends in roads" (8)—is very persuasive, as she suggests that "The shapes organize her compositions and suggest her ways of seeing through (arches), into (circles and frames), and beyond (around a curve) what is present, recalled, and created" (8). Arguing that "Montgomery's ideas about Nature, nature, and home speak through her preferred shapes and patterns; these patterns shape the photographs and the written descriptions into metaphors for belonging and home" (8), Epperly's version of Montgomery is explicitly Romantic, as was the case in her earlier study, *The Fragrance of Sweet Grass* (1992). Like other recent work on Montgomery, however, this work focuses as much on Montgomery herself as on her work. The chapter titled "Montgomery's Photography" convincingly analyzes a selected group of photographs that Montgomery took over the years in order to suggest what meaning Montgomery might have been creating in the compositions and in the shapes and patterns she photographed. The chapter "Image as Threshold" analyzes the descriptions of houses in some of the novels to suggest what they reveal about the central characters and to demonstrate how Montgomery uses primarily metaphoric, rather than detailed physical, descriptions of the houses to arouse the desired response in the reader: "Montgomery's fictional homes, like her Prince Edward Island landscapes, are symbolic physical places and states of mind" (86). The more detailed discussions in subsequent chapters of "Anne's Green Arches" and "Emily's Memory Pictures" examine the series in detail and link the images of the novels to the metaphoric stories Epperly sees encoded in Montgomery's photographs. The weight of Epperly's analysis is on how Montgomery appeals to the emotions of readers. She includes an anecdote about a man describing his own unexpected emotional response to "the beauty of her words.

And the feelings! The powerful emotions she captured and called out!" (117). For that reader, as for Epperly, Montgomery's achievement would probably be inspiring enough to justify the MacLeod biography's inclusion in "inspiring lives," since his response to her writing allows him to step outside the stresses of his life. For some readers, it seems, Montgomery has improved the quality of life just as much as the Wright brothers or Alexander Graham Bell did. But this is one version of Montgomery, and for other readers who think of Montgomery more as a writer of pleasant stories about interesting and energetic heroines than a Romantic creator of metaphor, Epperly's reading of the works might seem strained.

The Intimate Life of L.M. Montgomery, edited by Irene Gammel, might more properly be titled *The Intimate Lives of L.M. Montgomery*, since one effect of this diverse set of approaches is to emphasize how Montgomery created versions of herself and how the worlds with which she was connected differed from one another. This collection of essays, linked under four themes, covers various approaches to Montgomery's journals, letters, and scrapbooks, and links her less public writing to her fiction, to journals of her contemporaries, and to the writings and experiences of other women. The inclusion of the text of the diary kept by Montgomery and her friend Nora Lefurgey in 1903 broadens our perception of Montgomery as well as introducing her friend's voice. The level of playfulness in the shared diary does not exist in Montgomery's own journal, perhaps understandably, since jokes work best with a responding audience. The inclusion of Nora Lefurgey's side of their jokes does much to explain the level of intimacy and habits of interaction that many years later so effectively shut Isabel Anderson out of the fun when she and Nora were visiting Montgomery at the same time. Mary Beth Cavert effectively brings together the different versions these three women present of themselves and each other through their writing, and also accesses family recollections through interviews to flesh out the portraits. Elizabeth Epperly connects some of the jokes in the diary to items in the scrapbooks, as well as showing how the scrapbooks refer to and illuminate passages in the journals. In an analysis of the Herman Leard story in Montgomery's journal as Montgomery's assertion of sexual competence, Irene Gammel identifies the rival that Montgomery does not mention, Leard's fiancée Ettie Schurman. Thus, it seems that one of the projects of this work is to fill in gaps in our knowledge of Montgomery's private life and world as well as to consider the connections between fiction and life writing and the narrative choices made in life writing. Elizabeth Epperly's

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article dealing with the scrapbooks covers some of the same ground covered in *Imagining Anne*, while Cecily Devereux argues that "Montgomery's assembling of her life story in her journals has produced a compelling 'real-life' system within which Montgomery, her imagined heroine, her novel, and the geophysical space of her childhood all signify in relation to one another" (254).

This takes us full circle to the choices made in the children's biography of Montgomery. Who gets to decide what constitutes the important parts of the life of a subject? For the six- to eight-year-old audience, the important part is identifying Montgomery's achievement (the writing of a work with international popularity lasting over a century) with a version of her experience that both links her to the audience (she is a small-town Canadian) and suggests that the audience can achieve too (by emphasizing her hard work). For other audiences, what is important may be Montgomery's emotional life, her sexual being, her relationships with women, her family life, or her career. As Epperly's analysis of Montgomery's scrapbooks and Montgomery's own journal comments show, however, even what the subject considers important enough to preserve at one point may be forgotten later (see *Selected Journals* 3:314). Considering how much we all forget about our own lives, it might seem that we are accumulating a ridiculous amount of detail about Montgomery's life. We have some understanding of some of the jokes in her scrapbooks, know the name of the fiancée of the man she thought she loved but would not consider marrying, have some understanding of her preferred images, know something of the tastes and feelings of one of her pen pals, and know more than she seemed to know about some of her friends and acquaintances.

Elizabeth Waterston writes, "It has been said that *all* writing is life writing, and we would concur, based on our study of Montgomery"

(*Intimate Life* 289), and these recent works support that notion. No matter what aspect or subset of Montgomery's writing is being studied, the discussion seems to come around to her life. The scholarship has moved away from questions of what she is saying to why she is saying it and why she is saying it the way she does. While this trend in scholarship shows clearly that there is no longer any difficulty in justifying the study of Montgomery's work for an academic audience, there is a risk in the repeated treading of this ground of creating orthodoxies of interpretation and of seeking and publishing information about Montgomery and her connections without a theoretical basis for its use. There is also the risk, with great popularity and widespread but shallow knowledge, of oversimplification of some aspects of Montgomery's life and career. This emphasis on the study of Montgomery's life and her productions for a limited audience also makes it easier to take Montgomery studies out of the discipline of children's literature, where the serious study of her work began. In the thirty or so years that there has been a reasonable amount of scholarly consideration of Montgomery's works, the range of approaches has expanded enormously, largely thanks to the interest created by, and the information made available through, the publication of the selected journals, and this is both the strength and the weakness of current criticism. Over the last fifteen years, publications on Montgomery's work have reached into the arenas of Canadian culture and popular culture as well as various themes, so the movement away from the study of her work as children's literature is not surprising, though it is ironic in light of the publication of a children's biography for such a young audience. Perhaps that publication is an attempt to reclaim Montgomery for her original audience, and it is striking that the only way it can achieve that is by suppressing much of the information that Montgomery preserved about herself and that scholars have generated since then.

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E. Holly Pike (Ph.D. SUNY Buffalo) is associate professor of English and Acting Principal at the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College of Memorial University of Newfoundland, Corner Brook, NL. She is the author of *Family and Society in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell* and has previously published on L.M. Montgomery in *Harvesting Thistles: The Textual Garden of L. M. Montgomery; L.M. Montgomery and Canadian Culture*; *Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture*; *Storm and Dissonance: L.M. Montgomery and Conflict*; and the online philosophy journal *Animus*.