

THE TRAVAILS OF THE CREATIVE SPIRIT

The selected journals of L.M. Montgomery, vol III: 1921-1929. Eds. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. Oxford University Press, 1992. 443 pp., \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 0-19-540936-1.

It is difficult to review the third volume of a series of fascinating journals. If you are familiar with the first two volumes of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Selected journals* you know how remarkable they are and you probably bought and devoured volume III the moment it appeared, as I did. If these diaries are new to you, you should start reading with the first or the second volume, approaching the third in sequence. You will soon become engrossed in a truly important literary document. The appearance of each new installment of the Montgomery journals further enriches Canadian letters.

The Anne of Green Gables industry on Prince Edward Island has reached such overblown proportions—the little redhead and her house now appear on all the P.E.I. licence plates—that it threatens to trivialize the works of a woman increasingly recognized as one of Canada's more significant twentieth-century writers (see, for example, E.R. Epperly's 1992 critical study, *The fragrance of sweet-grass: L.M. Montgomery's heroines and the pursuit of romance*). Montgomery was also, we now realize, one of our most dedicated diarists. I do not know of published journals by any other Canadian writer as valuable as Montgomery's. Only the politician, Mackenzie King, left diaries as detailed and intimate.

Someone will undoubtedly write a comparison of the King and Montgomery diaries because the two sensitive Presbyterians, both born in 1874, participated in similar intellectual journeys from orthodox Christianity to quasi-mystical spiritualism. But this is a relatively minor parallel. The central theme of Montgomery's journals, like that of most of her novels, is the interplay between an intensely creative imagination and a mundane, disappointing world. A world-famous novelist buries herself as a minister's wife in small-town Ontario and has intense difficulties coping with her predicament.

In 1911 Montgomery married a man she did not deeply love, partly, it seems, to avoid becoming an "old maid." A horrifying theme of volume two of the journals is her husband's descent into deep clinical depression in which he believed that he was predestined for eternal damnation. In volume three, covering the 1920s, the Reverend Ewan Macdonald has his recoveries and relapses, but it is increasingly clear that he is a soul-destroying burden to his wife. He has no interest whatever in literature and probably resents her success. She copes with the household, the children, and the tiresome parishioners, not to mention her greedy American publisher. The journals are often a tapestry of misery, sometimes richly interwoven with details of life in those times, occasionally a bit threadbare with self-pity.

Montgomery's imaginative life and its expression in her writing serve as her

escape. "I was free from my bonds and torments and roamed in an ideal world" she says of her time at her desk, "coming back to reality at the end of my three hour's 'stint' with renewed courage and 'grit'" (*Selected journals*, III, 168). Of her journals she writes, "When I feel that I have come to 'the end of my rope' I write it here—and find at the close of writing that the rope has lengthened a little and I can go on" (170).

Montgomery's situation naturally presents itself as a chapter in the history of twentieth-century women. She and her heroines are liberated enough to rebel in spirit, but do not feel free to bolt from real-life conventions. Like some of the later novels, the journals suggest that as Montgomery aged she became socially conservative, sometimes finding comfort, almost fulfillment, in the routines of housekeeping. "I am keeping one eye on my writing and the other on the filling for my lemon pie" (18). But when she writes "sometimes it seems to me as if my life now were little else than a search for anodynes" (209), she is also hinting at a growing reliance on chemical opiates, mostly sleeping pills. Future volumes of the journals, and/or the official biography, will reveal the degree to which Montgomery shortened her life as a result of drug dependency. When we think of male authors whose messed-up lives also contrast with their beautiful literary creations we remember that the problems of the artistic spirit are not necessarily gender-based.

The selected journals come with very good introductions and critical notes by their highly-professional editors, one of whom is writing the Montgomery biography. There is little doubt that L.M. Montgomery pre-edited her diaries for literary effect and, possibly, for personal aggrandizement (she sometimes comes across as the all-knowing innocent victim surrounded by boors and dolts). Diarists necessarily distort reality. The webs of relationships between Montgomery's novels, her journals, and the life she really lived will bear much more critical scrutiny. There was more to Lucy Maud Montgomery than most readers and latter-day "fans" would suspect. If you like the novels, you'll have trouble putting the journals down.

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NODELMAN'S FIRST NOVEL

The same place but different. Perry Nodelman. Douglas and McIntyre, 1993. 159 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-175-4.

Children forced to rely on their own untried and limited resources plus unexpected departures from an ordinary world of cause and effect are two devices regularly used by authors of children's literature to get things moving. Perry Nodelman in *The same place but different* shows that he is well aware of these conventional story-telling elements. In his novel set in Winnipeg (the ordinary)