Lucy Maud Montgomery: Nature, Writer

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If you are a writer, Lucy Maud Montgomery won't let you off easy. She's a daunting taskmaster, goading serious writers. Yet her cajoling is overlaid with concern and willingness to engage through time and distance. Hers is a sharing endeavour.

Montgomery's authorial entreaties are backed by her lived experience. (See her correspondence, autobiography, journals,[1] and, of course her poetry, stories, and novels.) She experienced the full spectrum of authorial ups and downs, from persistent rejection and publisher interference, to the heights of literary success. She survived by practising what she preached. Habitual persistence is part of Montgomery's success. There's no easy way to "climb that Alpine path": "*So to work at once, stick to it*, write something *every day*, even if you burn it up after writing it" ("Collected Letters" 18611).

In addition, besides her faith in herself as a writer, *nature* figured large in keeping Montgomery on track as an ardent scribe. As she wrote in *The Alpine Path*, "I had always a deep love of nature. A little fern growing in the woods, a shallow sheet of June-bells under the firs, moonlight falling on the ivory columns of a tall birch ..." (*AP* 18840).

Thus, back in the early 1980s as a recent forestry grad, while collecting field notes and observations on York Regional Forest's Hollidge Tract north of Markham, Ontario, I became aware that the Canadian author of an old familiar book, *Anne of Green Gables*, might have a different, though no less authentic, take on nature than, say, American authors such as Henry Thoreau. Here was an author who was part of the sparse Canadian assemblage of literary nature writers, largely unacknowledged, hailing from Down East, stained red with the soil of Prince Edward Island.[2]

One of her principal Ontario residences as an adult lies just a few miles north from York Regional Forest, on Highway 48, in the town of Leaskdale. From the Forest, I made it my business to visit her house there, the Manse, now a National Historic Site, and to read her journals collated by Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston. I found that, wherever she was, nature sustained Montgomery through personal misfortunes—through thick and thin, actually. Her writings have unfolded like tapestries or long-lost scrolls full of secret paths into the natural world.

Through her (see, for instance, her *Emily* series) I have learned to anticipate, to search for, and to value moments of "active stillness" while working in parks and forests—whether preparing to wield a chainsaw or to fell "hazard trees" with heavy equipment. The senses and powers of observation assume centre stage during those moments. This certainly engenders carefulness in the work itself. Occasionally now, too, a colleague will have to call me back to the task at hand, from that long view into the forest's feathery hemlock boughs or draperies of maple leaves ... After work also, while walking forest trails or skirting meadows or edges of rivers and lakes, a similar potential expansiveness of time and place is experienced. One doesn't have to venture far, physically. The closer you look, more is seen.

Montgomery spent almost a decade in practical isolation while caring for her ailing grandmother on rural Prince Edward Island. There she honed her techniques of habitual, first-hand, close-up observations of the natural world. There were few buffers between the indoors and outdoors. Negligible electricity, limited transportation (largely horse-drawn), rudimentary plumbing. Food and drink were procured locally and independently. This hard work did not dissuade her from doing pirouettes along the Atlantic shore.

Her notes and books are paced by pages of writings describing an almost seamless personal blending with the natural world. She writes about using "averted vision" to view certain celestial phenomena—a technique familiar today to advanced amateur astronomers (*AHD* 2977).3 In her novels, stories, and poetry she incorporates botanical knowledge gained from first-hand observations of nature; for instance, the sequential flowering of different species of thistles or the variations of breezes playing through different species of trees.

Winters piled deep with snow. Storm winds and torrential rains. Moonlit nights infused with the human spirit, not as something apart or separate ... "The garden is white and still under the moon, all ebony of shadow and stillness of frosted now" (*EQ* 7446). Purple skies, blue waters, gardens blooming ... the welcoming fir-trees behind her Leaskdale home. Emerging from crisis, Montgomery found the sun still shining, flowers opening, apples ripening ... Through whatever trouble was at hand, nature kept busy behind the scenes sustaining the basics of *her* life.

She presented her factual natural history bound up in fables and myth-legends structured around themes of life, death, regeneration, and connection (or lack thereof) to the natural world.

Montgomery was also interested in invisible aspects of the living-world. Ghosts, spirits, hauntings, faeries emerging out of the wilds ... all populate her writings. She went farther in search of personal contact with some of those ethereal presences. Anyone who devotes a lifetime to edging into closer contact with the natural environment develops a sense of the world's mysteries. The unknowns are all around, hidden behind a proverbial veil. Montgomery asserts that it's a writer's business to push beyond that veil.

I remember a job-site in the wilderness of remote Northern Ontario. A contractor was preparing to harvest a stand of mature hardwood trees for firewood. The trees had been designated for removal by the Ministry of Natural Resources. At first, it was the typical rough-and-ready logging scene of skidders, chainsaws, and flasks of too-dark coffee, rarin' to go. However, something was delaying things. I saw that the hard-bitten, hard-hatted foreman was in what appeared to be a trance ... not doing anything. The heavy tasks of felling, limbing, and bucking those trees, waited in mosquito-haunted sunlight. Finally, he reluctantly explained that he had to first make peace with those trees—the "Tall Ones" he called them. It was weighty. He had to be sure within himself, as far as possible, that everything was okay with the Tall Ones before proceeding with the work. In retrospect, this unexpected workplace *stillness* on a forestry job-site is a prerequisite that Maud would approve of; as she wrote in *The Alpine Path*, "Dear old trees! I hope they all had souls and will grow again for me on the hills of Heaven" (18813).

Lucy Maud Montgomery should be more widely recognized as a Canadian literary naturalist, although progress has been made.4 She inspires us to put pen to paper when we come into contact with what too often now seems a vanishing natural world.

Bio: I graduated from the Forestry program at Sir Sandford Fleming College, Lindsay, Ontario, in 1975 and subsequently worked across the province for Ontario Hydro doing woodlot evaluations. I have worked as an Outdoor Educator, and for almost the past forty years in Parks' operations at the Kortright Centre for Conservation (still there full time). Along with this practical hands-on work, my vocation has always been

writing. I have published three books, *The Rouge River Valley*, *An Urban Wilderness* (Dundurn, 2000), *Nature Reserve on The City's Edge* (Lavender Leaf, 2018), and *Journeys into Algonquin Park* (Lavender Leaf, 2019). In addition, I've had many articles, reviews, and short stories published over the years in magazines such as *Nature Canada*, *Northward Journal*, *Waves*, *Brick*, *Books in Canada*, and *CVII*. I have recently completed writing a non-fiction book about the Scarborough Bluffs (Ontario) called, *The Lost Bluffs*, *Explorations of Scarborough Bluffs* and *Lake Ontario*, and a novel titled *Northern Silence* (title actually a Montgomery suggestion!), which I'm hoping will be published soon.

Banner Image: Photo by James E. Garratt.

- 1 *The Selected Journals* edited by Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston were published in five volumes by Oxford University Press, from 1985 to 2004, and seven volumes of the *Complete Journals*, edited by Rubio and Waterston or by Jen Rubio, have been published by Oxford University Press or Rock's Mills Press from 2012 to 2019.
- 2 Other early Canadian writers who forged literary connections with the natural world: Anna Brownell Jameson (1794–1860), Catharine Parr Traill (1802–1899), Charles G.D. Roberts (1860–1943), and Louise de Kiriline Lawrence (1884–1992).
- 3 Anne uses peripheral vision to view shadows cast on snow by the planet Venus. An online presentation of Montgomery's astronomy is David Hickey's description of his exhibit "Unearthly Pleasures: The Artful Astronomy of L.M. Montgomery," https://lmmontgomery.ca/guest-post-david-hickey-his-exhibit-unearthly-p….
- 4 See, for example, Rita Bode and Jean Mitchell, editors, *L.M. Montgomery and the Matter of Nature(s)* , McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018.

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