# The Timing of Lucy Maud Montgomery's Tragic Death and the 1942 Canadian Conscription Plebiscite

DOI
http://doi.org/10.32393/jlmms/2025.0008
Published on
Fri, 02/21/2025 - 10:00

The 27 April 1942 Canadian plebiscite on conscription could be a factor in the timing of Lucy Maud Montgomery's death on 24 April. She had already written that if conscription happened, she would "give up all effort to recover" because she would "have nothing to live for."

In a 23 December 1941 letter to her friend G.B. MacMillan, Lucy Maud Montgomery wrote: "This past year has been one of constant blows to me. My oldest son [Chester] has made a mess of his life, and his wife has left him. My husband's nerves are worse than mine even" (Montgomery, *My Dear* 204). Montgomery's concerns about her son Chester in her later years are well-documented, but the possible impact of Canadian conscription for the Second World War—particularly with respect to her younger son, Stuart—should also be recognized as an important factor in her psychological distress at this time. She makes other statements later in this letter that should carry special significance in this light. Montgomery writes: "The war situation kills me along with many other things. *I expect conscription will come in and they will take my second son and then I will give up all effort to recover because I shall have nothing to live for*" (204, my emphasis). This phrasing could be significant, because, as will be seen, not long after, there was a plebiscite (a direct but not necessarily binding vote on an important political question) on whether the government should introduce conscription in Canada. Both the plebiscite itself and Gallup polls about the vote received a great deal of media coverage and, therefore, could have been another contributing factor to Montgomery's despair in her final weeks.

In September 2008, Montgomery's granddaughter Kate Macdonald Butler revealed in a *Globe and Mail* article that Montgomery's death in April 1942 was by suicide (Macdonald Butler). Given this statement, the proximity of Montgomery's death to the date of the plebiscite should be given consideration. Montgomery died on Friday, 24 April 1942. The Canadian plebiscite on conscription was just three days later, on Monday, 27 April. Although we cannot know for sure how closely Montgomery was following the newspapers at this time, it is at least probable that she would have been able to see how the vote was trending—the vote in favour of conscription passed by a wide margin, at least in English Canada—long before the twenty-fourth. Given her explicit statements about giving up "all effort to recover" and having "nothing left to live for" if conscription came in (Montgomery, *My Dear* 204), we should seriously consider the possibility that there is a connection between the timing of her death and the imminent conscription plebiscite. At the very least, it could have contributed to her feelings of despair. The information about the plebiscite helps contextualize our understanding of Montgomery's depression and her views about her children and the war. It should also be noted that her fears about conscription were foreshadowed by another journal entry she wrote 1 January 1915 about her son Chester during the First World War: "I thank God that Chester is not old enough to go—and as I thank Him I shrink back in shame, the words dying on my lips" (Montgomery, *CJ* 3: 178).

The letter to MacMillan is not the only place where Montgomery expressed negative emotions in her last months. Montgomery conveyed similar downcast sentiments about her husband's condition and the war in a letter to Ephraim Weber on 26 December 1941 (Montgomery, *After Green Gables* 263). In a journal entry of 23 March 1942, almost exactly a month before she died, Montgomery also wrote: "My mind is gone—everything in the world I lived for has gone—the world has gone mad. I shall be driven to end my life. Oh God, forgive me. Nobody dreams what my awful position is" (Montgomery, *SJ* 5: 350). She does not mention conscription in these other two passages. Still, in the state of mind she was in, we can see that the possible conscription of her son Stuart would be yet another devastating blow—even if we did not know what she had already written to MacMillan. In fact, as far back as 4 April 1938, Montgomery had written in her journal: "Thank God for Stuart. He is all that gives me any will power to go on living" (Montgomery, *SJ* 5: 246). Even then, during a difficult period in May of that year, on 5 May Montgomery wrote in her journal: "I am possessed with a desire to *die*—I crave for death as a starving man for food" (Montgomery, *SJ* 5: 251).

There is other evidence of her distress. The week before she died, Montgomery met with Leaskdale resident Margaret Mustard, who "was one of several Leaskdale people who had stayed in touch with the Macdonalds." As Mary Henley Rubio narrates: "At the end of the visit, Margaret told Maud that she would drop back in a week. Maud responded that she had doubts that she would still be there in a week" (Rubio, *Lucy Maud Montgomery* 572). Likewise, on 22 April—two days before her death—on the surviving page of what appears to have been Montgomery's final journal—she wrote: "I have lost my mind by spells and I do not dare to think what I may do in those spells …. My position is too awful to endure and nobody realizes it" (qtd. in Rubio, *Lucy Maud Montgomery* 576). She did not explain exactly what she meant by that last sentence. Elsewhere, Rubio gives a list of things that Montgomery's "position" could have been referencing here, including her depression; her possible drug addiction; alternatively, her lack of understanding of how her medication was affecting her, which could have made her think that she was "'losing' her mind"; despair over her son Chester's dissolute life; her finances; "her fears for Stuart—for instance, that he might marry the wrong woman or be killed in the war"; and finally, "something else, leading to the conclusion that she had brought all her troubles on herself" (Rubio, "Uncertainties" 57). These last two points are most relevant to the present study; Montgomery's journals and letters at this time point to a defeatist attitude about many areas of her life, but it needs to be emphasized that her fears about Stuart could have been given greater urgency by the plebiscite.

After her death, Montgomery's son Stuart did serve in the war, though not because of conscription. While conscription was not brought in until 1944, Stuart joined the Canadian Navy in 1943 as a doctor aboard the destroyer *Huron*. As Rubio explains: "Stuart returned safely from the war, but he was disturbed by 'survivor guilt' and occasional nightmares about his experiences for the rest of his life" (Rubio, *Lucy Maud Montgomery* 591). It is a tragedy that the war took such a toll on the family—as it did on so many others.

**Contextualizing Conscription**

To understand what happened to Montgomery, it is necessary to discuss the history surrounding the 27 April 1942 conscription vote in Canada. While in 1939 Canadian prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King had declared that Canada would not institute conscription for the war overseas, by the middle of November 1941, he was considering calling a plebiscite on conscription (Granatstein and Hitsman 133). As Granatstein and Hitsman put it:

If the country were against conscription then a plebiscite … would make this evident; if, on the other hand, the country wanted compulsory overseas service, then its verdict would provide a way for the government to back off from its pledges that overseas service would never be imposed. Clearly a plebiscite had some real advantages, and for Mackenzie King, pre-eminently a pragmatist, they were obvious. (163)

Furthermore, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 "heightened the demands for an increased war effort and altered its focus in Canada" (159). Likewise, Arthur Meighen—the leader of the official opposition Conservatives—was already "wholeheartedly in favour of compulsory service" especially because he saw that French Canadian military service lagged behind that of English Canada (160). King announced the plebiscite in his Speech from the Throne on 22 January 1942, and it was eventually scheduled for 27 April (165). When the vote took place, predictably, Québécois voted 72.9% against conscription, and French Canadians in New Brunswick, Ontario, and Manitoba similarly opposed it (171). In English Canada, the result was quite different; support for conscription was 82.4% in Prince Edward Island, 82.3% in Ontario, 70.4% in Alberta, and 69.1% in New Brunswick (171). Even with the low support in French Canada, in the final tally, 64.19% of Canadians voted in favour of conscription—and more Canadians voted in the plebiscite than in the previous federal election ("Final Figures on Plebiscite"). Nonetheless, as has been mentioned, King did not bring in conscription until 1944. Of course, Montgomery could not have known that in 1942. She did, however, live in one of the provinces that supported conscription most strongly.

Based on newspaper reports and Gallup polls at the time, there is clear evidence that the results of the plebiscite were not a surprise to the Canadian public. For example, just over three weeks before the vote, on 4 April 1942, Gallup polls were showing that the majority of Canadians favoured conscription ("The Gallup Poll" 17). As the day of the vote came closer and closer, popular support for conscription in English Canada only increased. Other polling data on 11 April 1942 predicted that the vote in favour of conscription would be 80% in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, 65% in New Brunswick, 88% in Ontario, 90% in Manitoba, 82% in Saskatchewan, 81% in Alberta, and 91% in British Columbia—even if just 26% in Quebec ("'Yes' Majority" 10). In the final days before the vote, the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion predicted that about two-thirds of Canadian voters would support conscription and stated that their data showed "a noticeable trend in favor of the 'Yes' vote in the final week before voting day" ("Gallup Poll of Canada").

We know that as early as December 1941, before the plebiscite was even called, Montgomery believed conscription was coming. It would have been hard for her to miss the fact that the majority of the country supported it, even though it took longer to happen in practice than the results of the plebiscite might have suggested. We also know that she had said in writing that she would give up trying to get better if conscription arrived. Knowing this information, is it likely to be just a coincidence that she died so close to the conscription vote, when it was already overwhelmingly clear that it would pass? The conscription vote was a major story in the newspapers and it would have been hard for any Canadian citizen to be unaware of it. Even so, it would be useful to know which newspapers Montgomery was reading at this time to know for sure how closely she was following it.

**Interacting with Rubio**

Rubio's outstanding 2008 biography of Montgomery, *Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings*, was the first major work to address the manner of Montgomery's death. Rubio observes that both Montgomery's son Stuart and the examining doctor (Richard Lane) believed at the time her death was a suicide (Rubio, *Lucy Maud Montgomery* 575). Yet, as Rubio explains, Lane "did not tick the box that listed suicide as a possible cause of death" because he "knew that Stuart's medical career would be damaged if people thought his famous mother committed suicide—suicide then brought a terrible stigma to the family—so he would not have ticked this box in any case" (575). This is partly why it took more than half a century for the world to know the manner of Montgomery's death. Rubio makes other relevant observations. Based on Montgomery's last conversation with Mustard, Rubio believes that Montgomery's death was premeditated: "there is little question that Maud was suffering unbearable psychological pain. Death would have been welcome" (578). In addition, Rubio sees a connection between Montgomery's passionate imagination and her depression and death and even speculates that Montgomery's "need for artistic completeness in her journals … might have played a part in making her

want to end her own life" (579). Rubio wonders if Montgomery's last note on 22 April was referencing her dependency on drugs and then asks: "Or was she referring to Chester? Or both? In any case, she was still a rational and lucid woman who knew that she had come to a very sad state" (578).

Rubio discussed these issues further in an essay in the 2013 collection *Anne Around the World* (Rubio, "Uncertainties"). In that article, Rubio is less definitive about the nature of Montgomery's death, as she says:

We will never know with certainty the exact cause of L.M. Montgomery's death. Did she die of an overdose of medication? If so, was it accidental or intentional? Or did she die from natural causes, either those her doctor wrote on her death certificate or something else? There was no autopsy after she was found dead in her bed on 24 April 1942, in her sixty-eighth year, and the circumstances surrounding her death are ambiguous. (45)

Rubio is unsure about whether Montgomery's death was a suicide after all. Although she admits that Montgomery's last journal can certainly be read that way, Rubio also suggests that "she would not have wanted to destroy either son, nor to bring humiliation to her extended family, especially her innocent little grandchildren" (55). Thus, with reference to Montgomery's last note, Rubio asks: "Could she have been merely expressing her emotions in a dramatic way at a time when she felt too weary to continue writing in her journals, or was too disoriented with medications to be fully rational?" (55). Rubio dissects the statements in Montgomery's last note and wonders what Montgomery meant about losing her "mind" or whether her statement asking for God's forgiveness was a reference to suicide or something else (57). Rubio poses other unanswered questions as well. She wonders whether or not Montgomery's son Stuart and Dr. Lane saw "any other clear evidence that Montgomery's death was a suicide *before* reading the note and assuming that it was a suicide," or if they came to that conclusion too soon. In addition, Rubio is unsure if the note was found by the family's maid or by Stuart himself; the answer to this question would shed light on when the note was written and put there (59). Then, Rubio asks: "did he [Stuart] notice that the note was dated and numbered, and that it referred to itself as a 'copy' that was 'unfinished' and that he was not to publish the tenth volume of her journals? Could one surmise that she might have placed this single sheet on her bedside table to show that her life was written to the end? Finished life story, finished life" (59). Rubio questions the lack of an autopsy in Montgomery's death and wonders what Chester was doing that day (60). Thus, here Rubio concludes: "we will never be certain about Montgomery's final thoughts and emotions on the last day of her life" (61). Having said all this, Rubio also mentions Montgomery's fear that Stuart "would soon be sent overseas as a doctor in the Second World War" (50).

Rubio's analysis in this article offers some probing questions about the nature of Montgomery's death, and the questions are indeed unanswerable. Even so, the fact that Montgomery's son accepted the death as a suicide immediately is still a weighty consideration. The note reads naturally as a suicide note. Furthermore, the despairing tone of her journals and letters in her final months fits with that conclusion. Finally, Montgomery's conversation with Mustard remains a compelling piece of evidence.

Rubio's analysis of Montgomery's death is extremely helpful. Her insights can be expanded further by connecting these details to the aforementioned conscription plebiscite. Rubio is certainly right that Chester's affairs and Montgomery's drugs played a role in Montgomery's feelings of despair. Montgomery's letter to MacMillan also could be a key point for understanding the timing of Montgomery's tragic death. This is not to say that the conscription vote is the *reason* she died. Rather, it may have been one of several factors that affected her state of mind and could help explain the timing. Furthermore, the experience of interacting with bereaved families from the First World War would likely have made an impression on her, since her own children were now old enough to be sent abroad. By April 1942, Montgomery was in psychological despair for a variety of reasons. Although we cannot be certain about what happened, especially in light of her exact words about conscription to MacMillan four months before her death, the timing of the conscription vote should not be

overlooked.

**Banner Image:** *Maud in the Garden*. Statue at the Historic Leaskdale Church in Leaskdale, Ontario. Used with permission of the Lucy Maud Montgomery Society of Ontario. Photo taken by Kate Revington.

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Peer reviewed
No

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**Funding Details:** This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) under Grant 756-2023-0166.