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Anne of Green Gables and the Regional Idyll

In early May of 1907 L. M. Montgomery had some heady news for her literary pen-friend Ephraim Weber. She was going to have a book published! "I am blatantly pleased and proud and happy," she announced, "and I shan't make any pretence of not being so." Nonetheless, she modestly warned: "Don't stick up your ears now, imagining that the great Canadian novel has been written at last. Nothing of the sort. It is merely a juvenilish story, ostensibly for girls." But she quickly added: "I am not without hope that grown-ups may like it a little."¹ Indeed, the grown-ups did like her book. Soon after its publication, Montgomery commented on the respectful treatment that *Anne of Green Gables* had received from most of its reviewers: "I am surprised that they seem to take the book so seriously—as if it were meant for grown-up readers and not merely for girls."² And she boasted that Mark Twain had written to her describing Anne as "the dearest and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice."³

It is natural enough that young readers should like Montgomery's story of a high-spirited girl who gets into amusing scrapes but always wins adults over to her side in the end. Anne's appeal to adult readers may be harder to explain. Those who have not encountered *Anne of Green Gables* since childhood may remember the book just as a series of striking episodes: Anne's outrageous apology to Mrs. Rachel Lynde; Anne making Diana drunk; Anne cracking her slate over Gilbert Blythe's head; Anne's discomfort over her green hair; and so on. But Montgomery's novel is a good deal more than just a chain of linked comic scenes. In fact, *Anne of Green Gables* deserves to be acknowledged not just as a children's classic but as an essential part of the Canadian tradition in fiction. It has claims on our attention that rest both on its intrinsic merits and on its place in our literary history.

Wilfrid Eggleston rightly calls the post-publication history of Montgomery's novel "one of the most impressive success stories of Canadian authorship."⁴ So successful has the book been that its central

character has entered the mythology of North American popular culture. Anne has been turned into the heroine of two American movies and has starred in a British television series; a musical version of her story has become the centrepiece of an annual festival aimed at promoting the Prince Edward Island tourism industry; and Montgomery's childhood home has been transformed into a shrine for visitors seeking a reminder of the innocence and security of their own lost childhoods.

Such popular adulation is by no means a guarantee of literary merit. The opinions of critics—in contrast, say, to the opinions of politicians—are not coerced by the results of questionnaires, Gallup polls, or general elections. Nonetheless, critics may do well to take note of the enormous number of readers—adults as well as children—who have confessed their pleasure in Montgomery's book. The enduring popularity of Montgomery's best-known creation suggests that her writing has the capacity to evoke a strong and abiding emotional response in many readers. In fact, *Anne of Green Gables* is probably the best-loved and most widely read of all Canadian novels.

Surely Montgomery's accomplishment ought to earn her a secure place in any study of the development of English-Canadian letters. Yet it remains a fact that most critics outside the children's literature fraternity have felt uncomfortable when dealing with her work. The plain truth is that Montgomery's book has committed what comes close to being the unpardonable literary sin—*Anne of Green Gables* has attained a vulgar commercial success without first securing academic approval as "serious" art. Comments by E. K. Brown and Desmond Pacey illustrate the habitual academic uneasiness with Montgomery's work. Brown lists Montgomery among those turn-of-the-century authors who "were all more or less aggressively unliterary" and were "satisfied to truckle to mediocre taste."⁵ Pacey writes sternly of *Anne of Green Gables*, "it would be silly to apply adult critical standards to it," and he dismisses the book with patronizing compliments for its tone of "pleasant whimsy" and for sentimentalism that is "a little less cloying than is usual in books of its type."⁶

There is a syllogism implicit in these pronouncements. Major premise: Children's literature is different from, and inferior to, adult or serious literature. Minor premise: *Anne of Green Gables* is known to be a children's book. Conclusion: *Anne of Green Gables* should not be treated as a serious work of literature. Given the prevalence of this attitude, it is hardly surprising that Montgomery is not mentioned in the major studies of the Canadian literary tradition published by D. G. Jones, Margaret Atwood, Ronald Sutherland, and John Moss. The encyclopaedic *Literary History of Canada* does consider Mont-

gomery, but makes no distinction between her books and the work of many other turn-of-the-century writers of popular fiction. However, if *Anne of Green Gables* is Canada's most conspicuous contribution to the world's literary culture, perhaps it is time our critics gave Montgomery's work a more careful scrutiny. Admittedly, even the most sympathetic review of Montgomery's output cannot conceal the weakness of most of her fiction. But a study of her works does show that her best book holds its own with other works that are presently acknowledged as milestones in the development of our fiction.

I think it is generally agreed that the two most accomplished works of fiction dating from the turn-of-the-century era are Sara Jeanette Duncan's *The Imperialist* and Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. Some commentators rank Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, the urban companion piece to *Sunshine Sketches*, at the same level of achievement. A few people might wish to put in a word for Duncan Campbell Scott's *In the Village of Viger* or Ralph Connor's *The Man from Glengarry*, although the latter book loses much of its intensity in its second half, after Ranald departs from the Glengarry settlement whose Scottish traditions Connor describes in such affectionate detail.

All of the books just mentioned, with the exception of *Arcadian Adventures*, are closely related to the sub-genre that predominated in Canadian fiction immediately prior to the First World War. The form Desmond Pacey calls the regional idyll⁷ was the Canadian version of the local colour and kailyard fiction that was popular in America and Britain just before the turn of the century. The regional idyll recreated a simple rural world, usually a heightened version of the author's childhood environment. Readers could join the author on a sentimental journey into the immediate past of their own country. The resulting blend of sentiment and nostalgia offered readers a welcome temporary escape from a world grown increasingly urban and industrial. Prominent among the writers of this sort of fiction are clergymen such as Robert Knowles and moralizing ladies such as Marian Keith and Nellie McClung. Typical examples are Knowles' *St. Cuthbert's*, Keith's *Duncan Polite*, and McClung's *Sowing Seeds in Danny*.

Neither *The Imperialist* nor *Sunshine Sketches* is a typical example of the regional idyll, but Duncan and Leacock nonetheless show a well-developed awareness of the conventions of the form. They deliberately create variations on the form's usual themes, so that their books become critiques of the values expressed in orthodox regional idylls. *Anne of Green Gables*, like the books by Knowles, Keith, and McClung just mentioned and like the books by Scott and Connor mentioned previously, is a thoroughly conventional regional idyll,

almost a definitive example of the form. The strength of Montgomery's book comes from her skillful but straightforward use of the literary conventions her age gave her to work with, not from her witty innovations on familiar themes.

The importance of the regional idyll in the development of Canadian fiction has never been adequately acknowledged. Our critics have tended until recently to agree with E. K. Brown's assessment of regionalism as "another force which tells against the immediate growth of a national literature."⁸ Today we are far more ready to look with approval on "regional" art, seeing it as an authentic expression of a particular culture's traditions and attitudes. However, we still tend to view the era of the regional idyll as simply an embarrassing phase that Canadian writing has outgrown. Rather, we need to recognize the pre-War vogue of the regional idyll as one more instance of the slow response to international literary developments that has characterized our literary past.

We need to remember that, for a new nation, the stages of cultural history may take on a significance that differs from their significance in the cultural history of the parent state, or even in the cultural history of an older neighbouring state. In the history of British fiction and probably of American fiction as well, the rise of the regional idyll must be considered a relatively minor event, important chiefly as an incident in the history of popular taste. In Canada, however, the literary tradition was still relatively undeveloped in the later years of the nineteenth century. The appearance of the regional idyll had a major effect on our embryonic literary tradition, marking an important step towards the use of local settings and local themes as the basis for literature.

Before the emergence of the regional idyll, the most significant form in Canadian fiction had been the historical romance. Earlier in the nineteenth century, Major John Richardson had taken a significant step towards the assimilation of native materials into fiction when he blended the influences of Scott and Cooper in several stories of love, adventure, and warfare set in the North American forest, above all in his best tale *Wacousta*. William Kirby relied heavily on Scott—and not at all on Cooper—when in 1877 he published *The Golden Dog*. Kirby wanted to show that Canadian history could furnish the materials for a monumental novel, which would lend dignity to the new nation. But Kirby felt compelled to set his story in what was, for Canada, the distant past. Specifically, he set *The Golden Dog* in pre-Conquest French Canada, whose history had recently been popularized by the publication of the first volumes of Parkman's history of the *ancien régime* in North America. That is, Kirby shied away from

using his own immediate time and place as the source material for his art.

Unlike Kirby and unlike Kirby's more popular successor Sir Gilbert Parker, the authors of regional idylls looked to their own experiences to furnish the subjects of their books. There is still a historical aspect to most regional idylls, but usually the authors are looking back to their own childhood, not to an historical era outside their own experience. Despite the sentimentality of most of their books, the authors of regional idylls helped to create a sense that their new nation did have a cultural identity of its own. The self-conscious and sophisticated exploration of the past in search of collective and personal myths, as happens in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, is a more recent development in our fiction. But the emphasis on acknowledging a Canadian ancestry that is so prominent in recent fiction continues the process of self-scrutiny that was begun by the writers of the turn-of-the-century regional idylls.

One early writer of a Canadian regional idyll, Adeline M. Teskey, reported that her book *Where the Sugar Maple Grows* originated in response to her reading of Ian MacLaren's *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*. After reading MacLaren's book, she realized "I know just as interesting people in Canada."⁹ Montgomery apparently experienced a moment of insight similar to Teskey's, for she projected a similar idea into her fiction on several occasions. In *Anne of Green Gables*, for example, Montgomery first tells how Anne organizes a "story club," whose members must every week compose a far-fetched tale of love or murder, in which, as Anne says, "All the good people are rewarded and all the bad ones suitably punished."¹⁰ As Anne grows up, however, the story club is disbanded, and Anne's implausible story-telling is disciplined. Her new teacher, says Anne, has curbed her pretentious vocabulary and "won't let us write anything but what might happen in Avonlea in our own lives" (p. 271).

Although Montgomery was not among the first authors to write regional idylls set in Canada, her fiction did affirm to the world at large that Canadian materials could be used as the basis for art. As a child, Montgomery invented tales of sentiment or piety, perhaps modelled on the polite fiction she read in *Godey's Lady's Book*, in which "villains and villainesses were all neatly labelled and you were sure of your ground."¹¹ One of her finest early efforts was a lugubrious saga titled "My Graves," which detailed the sufferings of a Methodist minister's wife as she buried a child in every one of her husband's postings on a journey that took her from Newfoundland to British Columbia. As she grew older, Montgomery learned that fiction could be built around the ordinary doings of the people of her native island,

and in her twenty novels she created a pastoral image of Prince Edward Island that endures to the present day.

In other words, Montgomery quite deliberately attempted to do what the major figures of the next generation of Canadian writers have been praised for accomplishing, the making of serious literature out of materials that are unmistakably and unashamedly Canadian. If she did not fully succeed in attaining her artistic goals, she nonetheless helped to chart a path for her successors. Her discovery that fiction could be written about her own Prince Edward Island and its people anticipates similar discoveries of the artistic potential of their native place that were made by later writers such as Hugh MacLennan and Margaret Laurence.

There are also important strands of thematic continuity extending from Montgomery's work to later books that are recognized as Canadian classics. In particular, *Anne of Green Gables* presents a benign version of the generational conflict that is central to books such as MacLennan's *Each Man's Son* and several of Margaret Laurence's novels. Montgomery's surrounds Anne with older members of the same sort of puritanical and emotionally reticent society that MacLennan and Laurence depict in much bleaker terms, and that is still conspicuous in more recent works such as Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Percy Janes' *House of Hate*, and Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*.

Montgomery's novel stands, in fact, at the head of a tradition that has given rise to some of the most memorable works of Canadian fiction. Many of the central works of the Canadian tradition, such as Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and my House*, MacLennan's *Each Man's Son*, Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, Laurence's *A Bird in the House* and *The Stone Angel*, and even Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*, are lineal descendents of the regional idyll. These books examine the darker side of life in rural, church-centred communities that bear many resemblances to the Prince Edward Island communities Montgomery depicts so sunnily in *Anne of Green Gables* and in her other fiction. Moreover, books such as W. O. Mitchell's *Jake and the Kid* and *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and more recently Alden Nowlan's *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brian* and Dennis T. Patrick Sears' *The Lark in the Clear Air* show the continuing vitality of the form.

The term regional idyll usually has dismissive connotations in critical usage, implying both sentimentality and lack of skill on the part of the author who is stigmatized as producing one. This adverse judgment is not entirely a fair reaction to Montgomery's best book. Certainly *Anne of Green Gables* tells a sentimental story: Montgomery

creates an outcast child who happily acquires the secure home and the loving guardians she feared she had lost forever when her parents died. But great novels—Dickens's *Great Expectations* is one example—have been built around similar and equally sentimental themes. The strength of Montgomery's novel comes from the originality and piquancy of many of the separate incidents, and from the psychological insight she displays in constructing her characters and her story.

Anne of Green Gables is built on compassionate understanding of human emotional needs. Although Montgomery does not look into the darker recesses of human nature, she reveals herself to be an astute observer of the petty quarrels and everyday joys that make up the texture of life in a relatively untroubled community. She displays a flair for revealing the humorous side of everyday incidents, and her dialogue shows a good ear for vigorous colloquial turns of phrase. Her plotting is simple but serviceable: although her control slips a bit in the loosely connected middle chapters, the novel does move to a satisfactory conclusion.

Young readers undoubtedly experience the novel mainly from Anne's perspective. They identify with Anne, and take vicarious comfort in the fulfillment of Anne's desire for parents who will love her for herself, and will not view her simply as a household drudge. Some young readers, however, may not appreciate the irony contained in Anne's more extravagant speeches, in which Montgomery both exposes Anne's immaturity and satirizes the excesses of the romantic popular fiction of her day. Adult readers of Montgomery's book will also pay considerable attention to the characters around Anne, and will relish the satirical viewpoint animating some of Montgomery's portraits.

The best example of Montgomery's skill as a satirist is the superbly rendered opening vignette of Mrs. Rachel Lynde, who embodies the restrictive standards of Avonlea, Montgomery's fictionalized version of her home community. Avonlea is governed by well-understood social conventions, and Mrs. Rachel acts as a self-appointed guardian of communal standards. Montgomery tells us what to expect from Mrs. Rachel when she describes the small stream that flows so sedately past Mrs. Rachel's door. As Montgomery archly puts it, "not even a brook could run past Mrs. Rachel Lynde's door without due regard for decency and decorum" (p. 1). Indeed, decency and decorum are Mrs. Rachel's consuming passions. Everyone in the community, says Montgomery, knew "that Mrs. Rachel was sitting at her window, keeping a sharp eye on everything that passed, from brooks and children up, and that if she noticed anything odd or out of place she would never rest until she had ferreted out the whys and wherefores

thereof" (pp. 1-2). Mrs. Rachel is herself a perfect embodiment of the domestic industry and circumscribed virtue that pass for perfection in Avonlea: "She was a notable housewife; her work was always done and well done; she 'ran' the Sewing Circle, helped run the Sunday school, and was the strongest prop of the Church Aid Society and Foreign Missions Auxiliary" (p. 2). Moreover, Mrs. Rachel's household exemplifies the superior moral authority held by women in this community. Her husband, Thomas Lynde, is described as "a meek little man who Avonlea people called 'Rachel Lynde's husband' " (p. 2).

When Mrs. Rachel sees Matthew Cuthbert taking an unexplained buggy ride, we glimpse her prying mind at work. She reasons: "he wore a white collar and his best suit of clothes, which was plain proof that he was going out of Avonlea; and he had the buggy and the sorrel mare, which betokened that he was going a considerable distance" (p. 3). But try as she may, Mrs. Rachel cannot fathom the purpose of Matthew's errand. She reflects to herself, "if he'd run out of turnip seed he wouldn't dress up and take the buggy to go for more; he wasn't driving fast enough to be going for a doctor. Yet something must have happened since last night to start him off" (p. 3). She concludes, in language that reveals her officious personality, "I'm clean puzzled, that's what, and I won't know a minute's peace of mind or conscience until I know what has taken Matthew Cuthbert out of Avonlea today" (p. 3). This is exactly right. There is a colloquial informality, combined with self-dramatization, that captures Mrs. Rachel's self-righteous conception of herself. This is exactly how a woman such as Mrs. Rachel Lynde *would* talk to herself.

Among the strongest features of the book are the portraits of Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert, whose constricted lives are opened out by their contact with the vivacious Anne. Matthew Cuthbert "was the shyest man alive and hated to have to go among strangers or to any place where he might have to talk" (p. 3). He takes refuge in farm work from the trials that even ordinary social life imposes on his retiring nature. Marilla Cuthbert distrusts anything that smacks of frivolity or self-indulgence. She has severely disciplined the lighter side of her nature, in conformity with her belief that the world is "meant to be taken seriously" (p. 5). As a result, "She looked like a woman of narrow and rigid conscience, which she was" (p. 5). But Montgomery adds, "there was a saving something about her mouth which, if it had been ever so slightly developed, might have been considered indicative of a sense of humour" (p. 5).

Into the drab lives of this pair comes the irrepressible Anne. Anne's unflinching vitality and enthusiasm may be overdone by Montgomery, but they do present an effective image of the adult's remembered picture

of childhood as a time of uncompromised joy. Anne is not quite a real child, but she embodies the essence of childhood, seen as a time of innocence before knowledge of failure or limitation sours the child's outlook. And Anne's appetite for life is contagious. Her quick response to natural beauty, her spontaneity, and her intensity of feeling are healthy correctives to the inhibited, cramped existence of the Cuthberts. Matthew soon finds that he "kind of liked her chatter" (p. 17), and Marilla quickly finds herself defending Anne against criticism voiced by Mrs. Rachel. "But we must make allowances for her," Marilla insists. "She's never been taught what is right. And you *were* too hard on her, Rachel" (p. 70). Under Anne's influence, Marilla rediscovers her sense of humour, and Matthew starts to take notice of the world around him. As Mrs. Rachel remarks: "That man is waking up after being asleep for over sixty years" (p. 212).

Matthew and Marilla, in their different ways, break out of the shell of restraint they have imposed on themselves. Above all, they eventually learn to express their feelings. Matthew takes Anne's part when it comes to letting her participate in the community's social life, alongside her peers. He favours letting her go to the Debating Club's Christmas concert, when Marilla feels such gatherings are the height of frivolous dissipation; and he can understand the importance of puffed sleeves, the lack of which has painfully marked Anne off from her school companions. Just before his fatal heart attack, Matthew tells Anne: "Well now, I guess it wasn't a boy that took the Avery Scholarship, was it? It was a girl—my girl—my girl that I'm proud of" (p. 311). And Marilla, under the shock of Matthew's death, overcomes her reluctance to voice her private feelings: "I've been kind of strict and harsh with you maybe—but you mustn't think I didn't love you as well as Matthew did, for all that. I want to tell you now when I can . . . 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" (p. 316).

Anne too is changed by the life she finds at Green Gables. When Anne first arrives she is described as "a lonely, heart-hungry, friendless child" (p. 32). She has spent most of her young life, since being orphaned, as a household drudge in the homes of families who gave her no real affection, no feeling of being wanted for herself. To escape from a consciousness of her drab existence, Anne has developed a rich fantasy life, based largely on the inflated clichés of phrase and action that she finds in popular sentimental fiction. Her absorption in this fictional world has given her speech a precocious fluency, yet she remains a child with a child's need for affection. When she is first told that Matthew and Marilla had expected a boy rather than a girl, she exclaims: "Nobody ever did want me. I might have known it was all too

beautiful to last. I might have known nobody really did want me. Oh, what shall I do? I'm going to burst into tears!" (p. 26). Anne's language may be sentimental and stilted, but her feeling of rejection is plainly conveyed. Matthew is right to describe her as "one of the sort you can do anything with if you only get her to love you" (p. 52). Emotion is the keynote of Anne's nature. She has an unused reserve of strong feelings that can be released by any sign that she is liked for herself.

From the first time we meet her, Anne is portrayed as different from the usual "Avonlea type of well-bred little girl" (p. 16). These well-trained young ladies, as Matthew has noticed, have a way "of sidling past him timidly, with sidewise glances, as if they expected him to gobble them up at a mouthful if they ventured to say a word" (p. 16). That is, these girls defer to their elders in an obsequious way that seems to point at something approaching a climate of fear. Certainly, children are not expected to assert themselves before adults. Anne, however, confronts adults squarely, especially when they presume that their "adult" status entitle them to patronize her, or ignore her feelings.

Young readers simply enjoy Anne's rebellions against grown-up authority. Adult readers, however, will have a subtler appreciation of Montgomery's sharp eye for exposing the injustices that adults can inflict upon children, wittingly or unwittingly. She knows that adult condescension can grievously offend a child's tender sense of selfhood, and she remembers how an unfeeling remark, passed in a child's hearing, can leave a deep emotional wound. In short, she knows the many ways in which adults infringe on the individuality of children. Anne refuses to submit quietly to such treatment, and her rebellious moments arouse Marilla's sympathy, for Marilla can remember how she herself had once "heard one aunt say of her to another, 'What a pity she is such a dark, homely little thing.' Marilla was every day of fifty before the sting had gone out of that memory" (p. 72).

Adults are also drawn to Anne in her role as truth-teller, the naive child-observer who dares to puncture adult pretentiousness. Anne says of the mean-spirited Mrs. Blewett: "She looks exactly like a—like a gimlet" (p. 51). She tells Mrs. Rachel Lynde: "How dare you say I'm freckled and red-headed? You are a rude, impolite, unfeeling woman!" (p. 69). Anne's directness and naivety also enable her to voice some of Montgomery's own reservations about the more formal and rigid aspects of Avonlea's religious practises. When Marilla is aghast that Anne knows no prayers, Anne asks:

"Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or into the deep, deep woods, and I'd look up into the sky—up—up—up—into

that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just *feel* a prayer." (p. 55)

Soon afterwards, Anne excuses herself for daydreaming during Mr. Bell's prayer by saying: "He was talking to God and didn't seem to be very much interested in it, either" (p. 86). In this speech, and elsewhere in the novel, Anne expresses feelings of rebellion that Marilla has never dared to let herself fully acknowledge: some of the things Anne had said, especially about the Minister's sermons and Mr. Bell's prayers, were what she herself had really thought deep down in her heart for years, but had never given expression to. It almost seemed to her that those secret, unuttered critical thoughts had suddenly taken visible and accusing shape and form in the person of this outspoken morsel of neglected humanity. (p. 87) In other words, Anne represents everything that Marilla has kept suppressed within herself, greatly to her cost.

Of course, there are weaknesses in Montgomery's portrayal of Anne, and defenders of "serious" fiction will undoubtedly be happy to point them out. One basic difficulty in Montgomery's conception of Anne arises from a discrepancy between Anne's ebullient personality and her unhappy childhood. Anne ought to have been emotionally scarred to a much greater extent than she is. Her disposition is unrelievedly sunny, and she expresses no bitterness against those who have deprived her of a normal childhood, refused her emotional warmth, and turned her into an unpaid servant. When Anne is allowed to remain with the Cuthberts, she fits into life at Green Gables with unlikely smoothness. She never rebels against Marilla's disciplinary measures, nor is she ever willfully disobedient. In short, Montgomery's vision of Anne's nature is entirely too roseate for complete plausibility.

But Montgomery does not portray Anne as entirely perfect. Most obviously, Anne is prone to excessive self-dramatization, and is overly fond of imagining herself in the role of a long-suffering romantic heroine. In consequence, one of the unifying themes of *Anne of Green Gables* concerns the disciplining of Anne's hyperactive imagination. What she learns involves more than simply managing not to daydream while she is mixing a cake. She must learn not to confuse fantasy with reality, as she does, for example, in the affairs of the Haunted Wood. She must learn that thoughtless indulgence in fantasy may even become dangerous, as it does when she almost drowns during a disastrous reenactment of an episode taken from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

Anne has presumably developed her tendency to fantasize as a compensation for the poverty of her early circumstances. As she grows

more secure at Green Gables, and becomes assured of Matthew and Marilla's affection, she needs her imaginative world less and less. Instead, her imaginative faculties are channelled into her school-work. She vies with Gilbert Blythe for academic honours in the provincial Entrance examinations, thereby gaining self-confidence, and she continues the competition during her year at Queen's College. With the aid of the scholarship she gains for her work at Queen's, she forms a plan to cultivate her intellectual abilities further by pursuing university studies at Redmond College. In the end, however, she gives all of this up in favour of a life of service to Marilla.

Concerning the conclusion of her first novel, Montgomery once wrote: "If I had the book to write over again I would spare Matthew for several years. But when I wrote it I thought he must die, that there might be a necessity for self-sacrifice on Anne's part."¹² Fortunately, Montgomery's second thoughts came to her only long after the book had been committed to print. Matthew's death, combined with the failing eyesight that makes Marilla unable to carry on alone at Green Gables, does make a satisfying conclusion to Anne's story. Anne is chastened and matured by her first encounter with what Montgomery calls the "cold, sanctifying touch" of sorrow (p. 312). And then, after Anne has decided to remain at Green Gables, we are told that she "had looked her duty courageously in the face and found it a friend—as duty ever is when we meet it frankly" (p. 322). But the true significance of Montgomery's conclusion does not reside in the religious moral she appends to her story. Rather, the conclusion is appropriate because it completes Anne's emotional education in the meaning of having a home. She learns that membership in a family brings duties as well as pleasure.

Anne of Green Gables was published during a period described by Desmond Pacey as "without doubt the age of brass" succeeding the "golden age" of the Confederation Poets and their contemporaries.¹³ Once I was prepared to agree, but I am no longer entirely convinced that this judgment holds good. It is based on comparing pre-War fiction with a highly selective version of subsequent literary history. Pacey, and most other academic critics of Canadian fiction, have looked for instances of novelty and rebellion on the part of our writers. They have singled out for praise the authors who introduced new modes such as naturalism or symbolism and new themes such as personal alienation into Canadian letters. In other words, the academic critics have assigned a special value to the rather belated and tentative outcroppings of Modernism that begin to appear in Canadian writing during the twenties and thirties.

Our critics, then, have usually judged our literature entirely by the canons of Modernism. Yet, despite the critics' earnest attempts to unearth a significant early avant garde movement, the mainstream of Canadian fiction has remained remarkably conservative both in technique and in philosophy. Is it possible that our academic critics have let their preference for Modernism influence their judgments unduly? They have been trained to value works in which an individual rebels against social forces. Perhaps they have also been conditioned to undervalue works in which the individual is not seriously at odds with the community. They may not have learned to appreciate works, such as Montgomery's, that celebrate communal solidarity.

Montgomery accepted most of the values that prevailed in her time, and by the end of her novel the narrative voice has endorsed the fundamental values held by the residents of Avonlea. In consequence, Montgomery is a more typical representative of her era than are Duncan and Leacock, who deliberately adopt an ironic, at times satiric, perspective towards the societies they portray. The pervasive irony of the narrator's voice is probably the feature that modern readers find most attractive in both *The Imperialist* and *Sunshine Sketches*. Montgomery's straightforwardness and simplicity have little appeal for many of today's readers. Yet to neglect Montgomery's book is to disavow an important part of our literary past. In a doom-shadowed age, Montgomery's sunny outlook may no longer be fashionable. Nonetheless, we owe it to her, and to ourselves as well, to acknowledge the validity of her accomplishment.

NOTES

1. L. M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber, 2 May 1907, *The Green Gables Letters: From L. M. Montgomery to Ephraim Weber, 1905-1909*, ed. Wilfrid Eggleston (Toronto: Ryerson, 1960), p. 51.
2. L. M. Montgomery to G. B. Macmillan, 31 August 1908, *My Dear Mr. M.: Letters to G. B. Macmillan*, ed. Francis W. P. Bolgar and Elizabeth R. Epperly (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1980), p. 39.
3. Montgomery to Weber, 22 December 1908, *The Green Gables Letters*, p. 80.
4. Wilfrid Eggleston, introduction to *The Green Gables Letters*, p. 2.
5. E. K. Brown, "The Problem of a Canadian Literature," in *Masks of Fiction*, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 41.
6. Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada*, rev. ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1967), p. 106.
7. Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada*, pp. 91, 102-103, 196-97.
8. Brown, "The Problem of a Canadian Literature," *Masks of Fiction*, p. 51.
9. Quoted in John Daniel Logan and Donald G. French, *Highways of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland, 1924), p. 299.
10. L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968), p. 224. Subsequent page references are given in the text.

11. L. M. Montgomery, *The Alpine Path: The Story of my Career* (Don Mills, Ont.: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1974), p. 48.
12. Montgomery, *The Alpine Path*, p. 75.
13. Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada*, p. 89.