

## The World of Lucy Maud Montgomery

*Julia Chapman & Duncan Day-Myron*

In a Sept. 20 essay published in the *Globe and Mail*, Kate Macdonald Butler, granddaughter to famed Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery, publicly admitted that her grandmother had committed suicide.

"It is known that she suffered from depression, that she was isolated, sad and filled with worry and dread for much of her life, but our family has never spoken publicly about the extent of her illness," wrote Macdonald Butler. "What has never been revealed is that L.M. Montgomery took her own life... through a drug overdose."

This essay ran just weeks before the University of Guelph held the major conference *The cultural influence of Lucy Maud Montgomery*, attracting the release of Professor Emerita Mary Henley Rubio's biography about Montgomery, entitled *Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings*.

Macdonald Butler had not seen Rubio's biography when she wrote her essay, nor had Rubio seen, or even been made aware of, Macdonald Butler's *Globe* piece until it was in print.

Interestingly enough, neither had the rest of Montgomery's family.

Montgomery was born in Cavendish, PEI and penned the beloved *Anne of Green Gables*, published 100 years ago in 1908. She married a minister, Ewan Macdonald, with whom she had two sons, Chester and Stuart, before settling in Toronto. But Montgomery's life was not so peachy. Her husband suffered from mental illness and she was unimpressed with son Chester, who was relieved from his duties at his Aurora law firm, had children out of wedlock, spent time incarcerated at Guelph Penitentiary, and lived the last few years of his mother's life in the basement of their Toronto home.

Stuart became a successful doctor, married and had children; Kate is his daughter.

"She was always Aunt Maud," said Lorraine Wright, who is third cousins to Montgomery. "She was just a delightful person to all of us, Aunt Maud."

At 91, Wright is the only remaining family member to live at Green Gables, the house made famous in Montgomery's *Anne* books.

Wright recalled that Montgomery loved cats and walks down Lover's Lane in PEI, one thing she would always do when she visited Green Gables in the latter part of her life. Wright also said her home was filled with the children's books from Montgomery's publisher, that she would then pass on.

Luella Macdonald, daughter of Chester and granddaughter to Montgomery, shared a similar memory. She recalled receiving a picture of Lover's Lane for Christmas, crates of books from publishers and being fond of her grandmother.

"I still have the carnival glass dish," Macdonald said of the second Christmas gift she received from Montgomery. "I had to eat all my food from that dish, because *she* gave it to me."

Kelly Crawford, whose grandmother, Marion, was cousins with Montgomery, said she's been told Montgomery was very energetic and enthusiastic, with a positive demeanor. Crawford, along with mother Elaine, has dedicated part of her life to publishing Montgomery's personal recipes in *Aunt Maud's Recipe Book*.

"I think she was very productive," said Crawford. "She had a job as an author, was a wife of a minister and had a family. She could really balance a lot in life."

While this was the demeanor Montgomery presented, she wrote a series of journals, spanning several decades, in which she was more honest about the life she lived. Edited into five volumes by Rubio and colleague Elizabeth Waterston, Montgomery described her troubles with her husband's illness, her distaste for Chester's life and her own battle with mental illness, which she was heavily medicated for.

"I remember this older lady, I remember her shaky hand," said Macdonald. "It was an effect of the medication. She was always getting an injection of something."

Macdonald said she was 8-years-old when her grandmother died. She discovered Montgomery's death by reading an article about her in the newspaper.

Despite a disconnected family and problems at home, Montgomery still made a profound cultural impact on Canada and the world.

"I met many people from lots of places," remembered Wright, of tourists who frequented Green Gables. "They would say, 'This is where Anne lived?'"

The cultural effects of Montgomery and her works are still being felt today. Carol Perry, Liaison Librarian with the McLaughlin Library, spoke about a program by the Lucy Maud Montgomery Research Centre concurrent with the exhibit, *Searching for Home: The Lives of Lucy Maud Montgomery* at the Macdonald-Stewart Art Centre.

"We created fully downloadable activities for different grade levels, so we have activities for primary, intermediate and senior level. They have teacher's guides, student instructions, and we have digital resources that they can access so they can either do the module right at the exhibit if they're in town, but any school anywhere would have access to digital resources to complete the module as well," said Perry.

One of the notable characteristics of this project is their efforts to cross curricula and use the life of Montgomery as an example in a variety of subjects.

"We have some that look at the process of creative writing and how you use imagery, we have a photography module, there's one on law that looks at copyright law," said Perry.

"One of our modules deals with women and their role in that time in Canadian history, so they can learn not only about good storytelling, but they can also look at her life and see how she changed things, how she expanded the role of women," she continued.

But studying Montgomery is not something that is specific to younger audiences. To that extent, Prof. Sandra Sabatini is currently instructing a course focusing on Montgomery's works.

"It's a joint history and English fourth-year seminar called The Montgomery Effect and it's being offered as part of Special Studies in English because of the hundredth anniversary of *Anne of Green Gables*. It's meant to support the conference and the event itself which is being celebrated across Canada," Sabatini said about the course.

Covering eight different novels, the course spans most of Montgomery's literary career. The course highlights how her works, while popular with children, should not only be read by them.

"Because a large part of her concern has been to delve into the lives of developing writers and young women and sort of what has been traditionally been viewed as more feminine concerns, she has been relegated to juvenilia," said Sabitini. "People associate her work with writing for children, whereas there's no indication--in fact quite the opposite--that when she wrote the stuff and when it was initially received that it was considered to be writing for young people. It was state-of-the-art."

Even putting aside this aspect, Montgomery's works stand up. She is a supremely relevant Canadian author, whose works were important in forming a Canadian literary identity in the early years of the nation.

"She's gone, over the past century, in and out of favour, but she truly helped to shape Canadian literature and she's a huge figure in Canadian literature, as widely read in her time as Dickens," said Sabitini. "She grapples with issues like infant mortality and obviously World War I suffragettes. Like, there's huge historical references going on in those books, and they're immensely valuable for their rendering of Canadian life in their time."

Of any school to be offering such a course, it is most appropriate that it is the University of Guelph. Over the years, it has come to possess the largest archival collection of Lucy Maud Montgomery paraphernalia.

"We have over 1,000 items, and about close to 40 shelves worth," said Lorne Bruce, head of Archives and Special Collections at the McLaughlin Library.

In addition to continuing to collect and preserve the collection, the Library has begun to digitize it, scanning and photographing the individual pieces so they can be read or otherwise appreciated electronically.

"We started digitizing about six years ago. We have digitized all of the written journals--10 volumes or about 5,000 pages, and four scrapbooks, about 1,200 photographs, and we have digitized some manuscripts for conservation, and some needlework," said Bruce.

There are many advantages to having the collection digitized.

"You can make them much more accessible, so people can actually see the artifacts, people who would never be able to get here; you can conserve things, so for example you can make a copy for preservation [of the original]; and you can research things at a distance," Bruce said.

Even though digitization has been a work in progress for six years, it is as yet incomplete. Photographs were the first part of the archives to be digitized, with the rest following suit. Bruce has hopes that, eventually, the entirety of the archives will be available digitally, but they are making headway.

"Certainly that's the intent, to try and do as much as possible, so of the original archives of things done in her own hand we've got quite a bit done, we've past the midway point," Bruce said.

Part of the advantage of having these archives at our disposal is that studies can be done with Montgomery's journals without damaging the original texts and allow scholars to better understand the writer and her troubled life.

Montgomery was found dead in her Toronto bedroom on April 24, 1942. In her speech at the conference, Rubio revealed that in 1981 while doing research for her novel, Stuart handed her a note he pocketed at her deathbed.

"He told me I could do what ever we wanted and went on to say it was her suicide note," said Rubio. "I was surprised and embarrassed, to say the least. But, I could see the relief in his face. He was ridding himself of responsibility when he handed it to me."

Rubio has her own theory about Montgomery's death. After researching her life for 30 years, she said the note was the last page of her journal, labeled at the top with the missing page '176'. She said her death can likely be attributed to the cocktail of medications Montgomery was prescribed to deal with her mental state.

"It was easy to overdose by accident," said Rubio. "If dependant on prescribed drugs, she likely would have taken another dose thinking it was needed... [It's possible] that the drugs themselves caused her mental demise."

Rubio does admit that, "she actively thought she wanted to die. She had spent the last 20 years covering up."

But one thing would have kept Montgomery from taking her own life.

"Her love for Stuart would have prevented her from suicide, if she was lucid," said Rubio.

Whatever the cause, the family was shocked at Macdonald Butler's secret actions, publishing the *Globe* piece without anyone's knowledge.

"It was a very public, very bold, very indelicate thing for Kate to have said," said Kelly Crawford. "I'm not saying that she's wrong, just that it's unfortunate."

"Today was disconcerting," said Luella Macdonald, after listening to Rubio speak about her grandmother's death.

"The essay took away from everything and focused on one small part of her life," said Luella's daughter, Karem Allen. "Based on Mary's explanation, I think it was accidental... I don't think she committed suicide."

But they do recognize that Montgomery had a tougher life than one could imagine.

"With what she lived with, no one could have blamed her," said Lorraine Wright.

Regardless, Montgomery's legacy is lasting and her contribution will be imprinted on Canadian history and culture for eternity.

"Does it matter how Maud died?" said Rubio, towards the end of her speech Saturday. "I don't think it does. What matters is that she brought creative people together."