



Muskoka Dream

© by Mary Beth Cavert

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The Vacation

Canadian author L.M. Montgomery took a rare two-week vacation at Bala, Ontario in July 1922. Maud Macdonald, husband Ewan, and sons Chester and Stuart, stayed at Roselawn Lodge on the river by the waterfalls from Lakes Muskoka and Rosseau. They ate meals at Mrs. Pykes, now the Bala Museum. They played in and on the water – they sailed, had picnics, and took drives and boat trips. Maud read, edited her manuscripts, did “fancy work” and looked at views so lovely that they “hurt.” But best of all, she spent a nearly perfect late afternoon and evening along and created what she called a “dream-built castle.”

On the evening of July 31, 1922, Montgomery sat alone for two hours on the veranda of Roselawn with an injured foot while her family went on a boating trip. This was a gift for her. One day earlier, an acquaintance, Mr. Mustard, had interrupted her solitude on a veranda at a friend’s cottage. He had been her high school teacher and bored her as a suitor in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan almost 30 years earlier.



But on this day in Bala no one intruded and she created for herself a glorious vacation of dreams. Maud Montgomery Macdonald had a simple formula for happiness: kindred spirits, conversation from the heart, laughter, great food, a cozy fire, a beautiful setting with pine trees and the sound of water and wind. Add moonlight, a dramatic storm, a happy homecoming and she would be pretty nearly perfectly happy.

The Dream

Her daydream was this: on an evening of magic where the river reflected the light from the moon, cottages and flickering bonfires, she imagined a summer cottage and boat dock on a beautiful island. She peopled it with her dearest kindred spirits.

For family, she included Ewan and her own two sons plus her aunt Annie Campbell and daughters Stella and Frede, Maud’s sisterly cousins and friends. For romance, she added another close cousin, unmarried Bertie McIntyre, whom she paired with her bachelor pen pal and friend of 19 years, George Boyd MacMillan.



Within this dream, these friends and relatives lived out an idyllic summer. Their activities included everything the Macdonald family had already enjoyed during their vacation, but Montgomery also added treats that they couldn't enjoy, like dancing and sleeping in the open. In this fantasy, Ewan was not a minister, a liberating change. Also, the cottage guests were free to sleep out under the night stars without the nuisance of mosquitoes. As all residents of North Country know, this is pure fantasy. But the centerpiece of this dream was talk – the frequent “soul-satisfying talk of congenial souls.” This was a restorative and crucial element to any daydream for Maud Montgomery, for it was the thing she craved the most.

To conclude this daydream, Montgomery conjured up a storm and a dramatic and joyous homecoming. One evening, the men and boys, Bertie, and Frede went to the mainland leaving Maud, Stella, and Aunt Annie at the cottage. A wild storm blows in. Maud hangs a lantern light on a pine tree by the boathouse to guide the boaters home. Frede is the first to see it and when they return safely, they are pulled into a timbered room lit by a blazing fire. While the storm continues, they sit down to a hot meal. Montgomery carefully creates every dish and detail on the table. They laugh and talk and are happy and then the summer is over. When the dream ended, Montgomery could still hear the echoes of the voices of her own kindred spirits.

Note: She wrote the first record of this daydream on July 31. She must have re-worked it in the next two months because by the time she sent it to G.B. MacMillan, Stella has been omitted and the ending has changed. This time when the dramatic storm arrives, all the women wait at the cottage – only the men are in the boat. The heroic Frede is the one, in this version, to struggle down to the boathouse and hold out a lantern to guide the boaters home. George and Ewan spot her guiding light.

The People

Besides Maud and Ewan Macdonald, who were the characters in this Group of Seven?

Aunt Annie Campbell was the older sister of Montgomery's mother – a superb hostess and the embodiment of a happy hearth. Annie's second and third daughters were Maud's good friends from her girlhood. Stella was five years younger than Maud while Frede (“Fred”) was nine years younger. Stella, more than Frede, shared the happy childhood times as one of the “three merry Campbell cousins” (George, Clara, Stella) at their Park Corner farm. But it was the young Frede who became her dearest adult friend and confidante until her death three years before this daydream. Montgomery dedicated two books to Frede, *The Story Girl* in 1910 and *Rilla of Ingleside* in 1920. These dedications commemorate “old days, old dreams, old laughter” and a person who was “a true friend, a rare personality, a loyal and courageous soul.” Stella also had a Montgomery book dedicated to her: “To Stella of the tribe of Joseph,” in *Emily's Quest* in 1926.

Beatrice Alberta McIntyre, called Bertie, was the daughter of Montgomery's beloved Aunt Mary (Montgomery), who mothered Maud while she was a student at Prince of Wales College. Montgomery dedicated one of her earliest books, *Kilmeny of the Orchard* (1910) to Bertie. Bertie was one of “the few women in the world who really mattered” to Montgomery. Besides Frede, she was one of the few in whom Maud found both emotional and intellectual companionship. Unfortunately, Bertie lived a continent away in Vancouver, B.C. At the time of the Muskoka daydream, they had not seen each other for six years.

Bertie was an unmarried teacher, full of fun with dark Montgomery eyes. Maud wrote that when Bertie laughs “youth pops out through her eyes and flashes over her face. Bertie has a wonderful smile.” Two years after the Muskoka dream, Bertie accompanied the Macdonalds on an eventful vacation to the Mammoth Caves. She and Maud shared a spellbinding experience in the caves and later at Niagara Falls in a storm. It was during this period that Montgomery was writing *The Blue Castle*, set in Muskoka, and developing the character of the “old maid,” Valancy Stirling. While she could draw on her own past experiences as an unmarried twenty-nine year old, she could also tap into Bertie’s life.

A few days before traveling to Bala for her vacation, Montgomery sent off the manuscript for *Emily of New Moon* to her publisher. This book is dedicated to George Boyd MacMillan, her pen pal in Scotland since 1903, “in recognition of a long and stimulating friendship.”

Mr. MacMillan was a devoted and valued friend until the end of her life. He loved the outdoors, was an avid gardener and sent Montgomery pressed flowers, bulbs, cuttings, and seeds, as well as souvenirs from the shore. He had great taste in gifts and always sent her books she enjoyed. He was creative, humorous, wrote parodies and enjoyed astronomy. He was always upbeat. They both shared the ability to escape into worlds of imagination, to create their own ideal world, a “peculiar kingdom” as Maud called it. They met one time, on the Macdonald’s honeymoon in Scotland. George and Maud took long moonlit walks along the shore while her new husband and George’s fiancé followed silently behind them. He was a good talker and shared all the local legends and traditions.

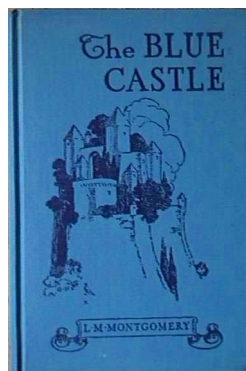
Is it any wonder that she brought George into her Muskoka daydream? Or Bertie?

The Book

Montgomery declared that in her next dreaming she would marry George to Bertie and they would live happily ever after! And she did just that in *The Blue Castle*, published four years later. The echoes of the poetic, irreverent outdoorsman, George Boyd MacMillan, can be found in Bernard Snaith Redfern. The independence, sensibilities, and compassion of Bertie McIntyre are reflected in the actions of Valancy Stirling.

From her appealing Muskoka Dream, Montgomery spun out a novel with a strong dose of independence – not only for her adult heroine, but this time for her adult hero as well. A beautiful setting, characters with strength, dignity and a sense of humor, and, as always, love for the unloved – it is what we expect and embrace from L.M. Montgomery.

We are still commemorating these events that happened and did not happen 73 years later. And today we can still enjoy three accounts of LMM’s trip to Bala – first, the Macdonald family vacation, then Mrs. Macdonald’s daydream, and finally, L.M. Montgomery’s novel, *The Blue Castle*. The combination of a sore ankle, a veranda, and a vivid imagination can lead to long-lasting dreams!



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