

THE WOOLNER JUG: CENTREPIECE OF "A TANGLED WEB"

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Our L.M. Montgomery Literary Society meeting in May 2004 featured a discussion of L. M. Montgomery's *A Tangled Web*. The main "character" in the book is an heirloom jug that members of the Dark and Penhallow clans are desperate to inherit from old Aunt Becky Penhallow Dark.

History of the Woolner jug:

As students of L. M. Montgomery's work know, she frequently used items from her own experience in her books and stories (i.e., "Gog and Magog," the rosebud tea-set, the blue chest, etc.). In "A Tangled Web," she uses her own heirloom jug as the model for Aunt Becky's jug. (Even though Montgomery uses the English term "jug" to describe it, many people today would call it a "pitcher.")

In reality, the jug was actually known in Montgomery's family as the "Woolner jug." It was made in 1826 for Harriet Kemp, Montgomery's great-grandmother's sister, as a gift from her fiancé. The fiancé died and Harriet, unable to bear the memories the jug evoked, gave the jug to her sister Sarah. Sarah brought it to Prince Edward Island from England in 1832. Lucy Woolner Macneill later inherited it from her mother, Sarah Kemp Woolner, and passed it on to her granddaughter Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1911. Maud took it with her to Ontario when she and Ewan Macdonald married and moved to Leaskdale. Although it is now in pieces, the jug is part of the Montgomery archive at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

This is not the first time the Woolner jug has been in pieces, however. In her journal entry of Oct. 24, 1911, Maud says: "Once it met with an accident and was badly fractured. Great-grandmother Woolner mended it with white lead and, though the mending is not very artistically done, being all too evident, it was at least done thoroughly and holds good to this day." Maud would never have the jug professionally repaired because the white leading showed a fingerprint of her great-grandmother.

Maud was photographed with the Woolner jug for an interview after the book was published [see *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*, Vol. IV, Sept. 18, 1932].

Maud remarked in her journal that Sarah Kemp filled the jug with black currant jam before leaving England and then used it in her home on PEI for cream. Maud's grandmother Macneill placed it on the top shelf of the china cupboard at the Macneill home in Cavendish. Maud displayed the jug in her parlour at Leaskdale, near the china dogs Gog and Magog. She commented in her journals that the jug was her most prized possession.

Description of the Woolner jug:

While at the archive in 2003, I asked to see the Woolner jug. The archival box containing pieces of the jug was brought out and I proceeded to investigate the contents. After unwrapping 29 individual pieces of the pottery jug and arranging them in an approximate re-creation of the original, I was surprised to note that many pieces of the jug are missing. However, enough of the pieces remain that show the dimensions and shape of the jug and the two "mottoes" and the personalization can still be read.

The jug (or pitcher) would be about eight inches high; the base is four inches in diameter. There is a pouring spout and a sturdy handle. The "mottoes" are on either side of the handle and the personalization, "Harriet Kemp. Albro. 1826," is on the front of the jug, under the spout. [The white-lead mending runs horizontally through the middle of the jug and the personalization panel.] The mottoes are the same as those Montgomery quoted in "A Tangled Web," chapter I, part ix. The personalization, however, was changed to "Harriet Dark."

The motto to the left of the personalization reads:

"The man is doom'd to sail
With the blast of the gale
Through billows attalantic [sic] to steer
As he bends oe'r the wave
Which may soon be his grave
He remember's his home with a tear."

This motto is a slightly paraphrased verse from Lord Byron's poem "The Tear."

The motto to the right of the personalization reads:

"Thus smiling at perils at sea or on shore
We'll box the old compass right cheerly:
Pass the grog, boys about & a song or two more
Then we'll drink to the girls we love dearly."

This motto is illustrated by a comical sketch of two drinking sailors and two flags: the British "Union Jack" and the British Ensign.

The jug is mostly creamy white with decorations of dark brown leaves, pink and green borders and swags, and a few red and blue flowers. Violet stripes around the top rim and the base complete the design. There is a lustrous quality to the finish of the jug, especially in the violet striping.

Even if the existing pieces were to be re-glued, there would still be gaps in the jug. However, it might be worth having the jug repaired to ensure that the remaining pieces are not lost or stolen.

According to a brief article on lusterware jugs by Ralph and Terry Kovel [*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 28, 2004], this sort of jug was made in England "to sell to seaside visitors as souvenirs" in the early 19th century. I ran across a picture of an almost identical jug on an antique pottery website recently; the caption suggests that the jug is "possibly" Welsh. Circa 1820." The luster glaze so popular in this period would reflect the light of the candles and firelight that were the only sources of light in homes at the time.

Brief History of “A Tangled Web”

A Tangled Web was published in 1931 by MacClelland Stewart. There was a bit of difficulty over naming the book but Maud’s title was finally chosen [see *SJLMM*, Vol IV, June 1, 1931]. However, in England, the book was published under the title *Aunt Becky Began It* to differentiate it from another book already on the market entitled “The Tangled Web” [see *SJLMM*, Vol. IV, July 11, 1931].

There was also some disagreement over the book jacket. Maud objected to the original Stokes design of a “figure in poke-bonnet and crinoline” because it would “suggest a sentimental novel of the Victorian Era, which is the last thing I want people to think it” [*SJLMM*, Vol. IV, Aug. 21, 1931]. On Sept. 10, she writes: “Stokes have got a new jacket for the book after all. They have gone to the other extreme and the design looks like a head-on collision between two comets. However, it is much more “striking” than the other and better suited to the book.” The Hodder-Stoughton dust-jacket shows a girl holding a jug.

Maud remarks in her journal entry of Oct. 10, 1931, on a reviewer’s opinion that she must have got material for the stories in the book from “old folks in P.E. Island:”

“There are just two anecdotes ... that I got from anybody. The rest is purely my own invention—incidents, dialogue and plots. G-r-r-r!”

She does not elaborate on which two anecdotes she meant.

As a matter of curiosity, I decided to count the number of characters mentioned and came up with 197. A tangled web, indeed!

