

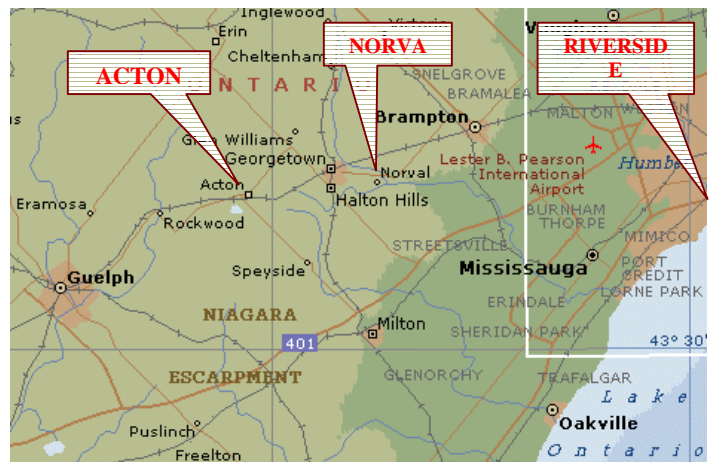
Who Is Isabel Anderson?

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L.M. Montgomery was accustomed to receiving fan letters which were full of enthusiastic hero-worship like the one addressed to "Dear Wonder Person." Montgomery was proud of her accomplishments but she was uncomfortable with the adulation of strangers. "It is well that my young worshippers don't know what a very clay-footed creature their divinity is," she wrote in 1928. At worst she characterized some of her fans as "freaks" (*Green Gables Letters*, 76) but more often as sweet eager admirers who made her feel useful and important.

She may not have felt that she was unworthy of others' attention, but she did feel at times that some people were unworthy of hers. L.M. Montgomery was an intensely guarded person in public, keenly attuned to social status, propriety and codes of behaviors well before she became famous. Her intimate circle of friends was established early in her life. Few new people were admitted into it as she grew older. Then, in 1926, a "fan" tried to enter this private circle, seeking from Montgomery an exclusive friendship that she was not prepared to share.

Isabel Anderson was young woman who, having found love and acceptance for the creative spirit in the fiction of *Anne*, sought love and acceptance in the person of Anne's creator. She was an elementary school teacher in Acton, Ontario, just a few miles from Norval where Montgomery, her husband, Ewan Macdonald, and their two sons, ages 14 and 11, moved in the winter of 1926. Isabel, 30 years old, had loved L.M. Montgomery's books since she was young and was thrilled when the 52 year old author moved so close to her. Ironically, Montgomery first mentioned Isabel as a self-appointed protector of her privacy. In an effusive letter from the summer of 1926, Isabel vowed she would guard Mrs. Macdonald like a "saint in a shrine" from all "annoyances." In the years to follow, Montgomery came to view Isabel as a complex annoyance from which she had no protection.



At first, Montgomery enjoyed Isabel's letters and considered them brilliant, witty and delightful. Isabel kept writing, encouraged by Montgomery's responses. An unusual correspondence began between the famous author and the smitten fan. Whether as a casual "girl" friend, or a daughter-like protégé, Isabel gained an emotional access to her hero, which was otherwise unavailable to all but a few of Montgomery's family and friends. In addition to the frequent letters and some gifts, Isabel offered repeated invitations for visits, which Montgomery found hard to turn down.

Their first meetings were conventional and unremarkable. When Isabel was recovering from surgery, Montgomery went to her home to have dinner with Isabel and her sister, Mary Ellen (Nellie), and mother. When Isabel's mother, Matilda Anderson, died in April 1929, Montgomery went to the funeral. She felt sorry for Isabel who had to move from her mother's home into two rooms in another house.

In the summer of 1929, Montgomery spent a day with Isabel and her sister at a regional park. Isabel did not talk much in the company of her sister, or any other person with whom she had to share her own Mrs. Macdonald. But she began to write impassioned letters to "my darling" or "my beloved" after each visit and the intensely personal tone in these private written conversations began to unsettle Montgomery.



<http://news.halinet.on.ca/>

In her first dramatic confession in the summer of 1929, Isabel wrote that she felt she was losing her mind and could only find relief if Montgomery would allow her to come to Norval and stay overnight with her. Montgomery was repelled by the idea, although she had shared sleeping quarters with many relatives and some strangers over the years, but she could not bring herself to tell Isabel her misgivings. Instead, she gave Isabel hope by telling her that she was unavailable because a friend was coming to visit and then she was leaving for the Island in September. When Montgomery returned in October, she made more excuses. In November and December, Montgomery begged off again, explaining that she was healing from problems with her teeth and Ewan was healing from an accident on the train with a snowplow. Isabel waited for a convenient time.

In January 1930, Montgomery was too ill to see Isabel. At the end of the month, she grieved for the eleventh year, as she did every year, on the anniversary of the death of her friend and "soulmate," Frederica Campbell. It felt like "she died yesterday." A month earlier, in a moment of sad intimacy on Christmas Day, Montgomery placed a favorite picture on the wall above her bed. It was a large photograph, newly restored, of Frede standing in a birch grove near her home on PEI. "... Frede is watching just above me and ... if I just knew the exact magic to make, I could step up into the picture and clasp hands with her."



LMM Montgomery Collection, Guelph Archives

There was no magic that either Isabel or Montgomery could make to bridge their worlds and that of their loved ones. Montgomery could not step into the picture and an era of romantic friendships and walk away with Frede, nor could Isabel step into Montgomery's life with her expressions of passionate friendship and clasp hands.

By February 1930, in spite of months of excuses, Isabel still hoped to be allowed to see Montgomery in person. She countered Montgomery's delays with claims of her own illness and loneliness. Montgomery relented and spent an evening, a night and a day with Isabel. Now that she had the author all to herself, Isabel was still quiet and shy, except to say that she was "perfectly and entirely" happy and intended to lie awake all night beside Montgomery to "revel" in her happiness. When Montgomery left by train the next day, Isabel cried. Isabel's enraptured response to her overnight visit prompted Montgomery to begin recording this saga in her journal three years after it started.

Isabel's letters in the spring and summer of 1930 were forthright declarations of love. She was unable to be circumspect in any way about her affection for Montgomery and hoped for a return of her feelings, no matter how small. Although Montgomery had told her young friend that she did love her, and had given her gifts, she began to feel persecuted by Isabel's candid letters and awkward phone calls in the winter of 1931. However, the correspondence continued. In the summer of 1931, Isabel pleaded to see her again. Eight months later, in February 1932, Isabel came to Norval again and the relationship reached a turning point. Montgomery decided that she must copy Isabel's most recent outpouring into her journal so that readers could understand her dilemma. But a reader could also see that Isabel was aware of Montgomery's feelings and felt her "scorn." She claimed that her own feelings were not "unnatural" and mourned the imbalance in the friendship. Isabel wrote a direct impassioned letter, speaking more forthrightly about Montgomery than anyone else had probably dared to do. Montgomery copied this letter into her journal. In May 1932, she also noted that she had learned that Isabel had a history of "falling in love" and was known to have pursued her married minister until his wife made her stop.

In the summer of 1932, their conversations were very frank. Isabel was insulted that Montgomery referred to her love as "Lesbianism." The cycle of persuasion continued. Montgomery wrote tempered and direct rebuffs, then called the obsession unacceptable and decreed that communication must end. She repeatedly acquiesced to a limited friendship but, when Isabel reverted to the language of love, Montgomery admonished her and began the cycle over again, unable to fulfill Isabel's desire for a closer relationship yet incapable of severing their ties all together.

She echoed the words of Phillipa Gordon to Anne Shirley in *Anne of the Island*, accusing Isabel of creating a person out of her imagination to love--"a person so utterly unlike the practical elderly woman I am." (SJ 4:184) She accepted, with doubts, Isabel's promise to be friends. Montgomery's condition for their friendship was that Isabel could not express her love.

Montgomery finally shared her problem with one of her oldest friends, Nora Lefurgey Campbell, who had moved to Toronto in 1928. Nora's urgent counsel was to end the potentially scandalous association. Perhaps Montgomery had not fully considered the consequences of her "friendship" with Isabel, who, after all, had a collection of letters and gifts from Montgomery. Together, Montgomery and Nora contrived to make Isabel uncomfortable in the summer of 1932, by using their own familiar banter, when she was invited to visit. Nora and Montgomery were quite skilled at "insulting" each other and Montgomery guessed that if Isabel ever heard them do it, she would think them both insane. She wrote: "And we think her insane! 'All the world is queer etc.'" Montgomery was referring to a quote attributed to Robert Owen in 1828, "All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer."

When Isabel heard them tease each other, she retreated into her usual protective and self-conscious silence in the presence of Nora, who was a strong and confident person. Isabel lacked the essential characteristics of all of Montgomery's closest friends—the ability to be at ease, generate laughter, and most of all, to talk. Nora wrote in her diary: "The pervert Isabelle Anderson visited Maud a whole day while I was there. Her ability for complete abeyance of all speech is phenominal [sic]... How can Maud stand her? Is not even pretty." Montgomery expected a dramatic letter from Isabel after such treatment, but instead received a gracious thank you letter.

In November 1932, after reading books on psychiatry, Montgomery told Isabel that their visits must end because they only fed Isabel's obsession. To which Isabel replied, "Please show me what is meant by friendship and love and I'll sincerely try to learn."

By January 1933, Montgomery was forced to re-examine what friendship--casual friendship--meant to her. She was simply not open to new friends of the deeper sort. She expected girlfriends to be content with two to three letters a year and a few visits. She didn't have time for the kind of commitment that Isabel needed. Finally, in February 1933, she told Isabel that she couldn't see her anymore. Her personal life was too upsetting at the time and she wanted to be left alone. Isabel asked to begin anew and astonishingly, Montgomery relented, again.

By the end of 1933, her despair over the burden of Isabel's love felt like hatred, although she admitted that sometimes she felt she hated everyone and could only dispel her bitterness by escaping into a dream world. Montgomery believed that the walks she took with Isabel and the flowers she received from her would have been pleasant memories if only they were with someone else. Montgomery demeaned her, lamenting that beloved and worthy friends died while Isabel yet lived. Isabel's overtures of friendship were always doomed because they were rooted in Montgomery's fame and success and not in the "olden days" which bound her closest friends to her.

Montgomery continued to visit Isabel at least once a year in 1934 and 1935 -- her sons took turns driving her there. When Isabel came to Montgomery's home, Chester drove her back to Acton. In the last years of Montgomery's life in Toronto, Montgomery's reaction to Isabel began to dull. She still recoiled at her letters "full of crazy ideas of 'going to P.E. Island with me,'" and yet she hosted Isabel in her new home -- they went to a movie, had tea, and walked by the ravine. She also continued to stay with Isabel in Acton until 1938. Montgomery included some of Isabel's gifts in her will and gave them to Chester, probably because he had become well-acquainted with Isabel by shuttling his mother and Isabel during visits over the years. On June 24, 1941, Montgomery added these things to her will to be given to her first son: a "tall black vase given me by Isabel Anderson" and a "painting of owl, given me by Isabel Anderson of Acton in 1931. It was painted by an aunt of hers."

Why did Montgomery endure this attachment for so long when she did not want it? At first, Montgomery may have been tethered to Isabel by conventions of politeness and patience. Doubtless the attention of a bright woman was flattering and she may have been intrigued by this intense

personality, but she did not seem bewildered by it. Isabel might have managed (briefly) to touch the same deep connection she had always felt with her closest female friends. She might have feared a scandal in the event that Isabel should choose to share Montgomery's letters as Montgomery had shared hers. But, in March 1928, the stage was already set for Isabel's rejection. Montgomery made a point in her journals of stating her aversion to physical contact with her friends, no matter how much she loved them – when Frede Campbell was dying, Montgomery held her hands for the first and only time.

Isabel's overt desire to be physically close clearly crossed Montgomery's personal boundaries. She believed she had given all she could to this friend, short of physical expression. She was deeply insulted by Isabel's judgment that she could not love. In answer to this charge, she found solace in her love for Frede (but not Herman Leard). While ensnared in the continuing drama of Isabel, Montgomery grounded herself in several ways. She embraced a renewed friendship with the return of the trustworthy Nora Lefurgey in 1928. In 1930, she reread all of her own books. In the fall of 1930, she visited two intimates from her youth, Alexina MacGregor and Laura Pritchard, reminding herself of the feelings of first love between female friends. And, after reading Isabel's letter in the winter of 1932, she read old letters from her first sweetheart, Nate Lockhart.

Montgomery's own personality, so feisty in her journals, was more passive when it came to being confrontational. At times in her life, conflicts (or aversions) dragged on, such as those with her unwanted suitors, her maids, her estranged fiancé and even with her sister-like cousin Stella, while she fumed in private (until the relationships wilted).

Montgomery recast Isabel from an enthusiastic bright young woman to an obsessed, insane and child-like creature. Unable to dismiss Isabel in person, she diminished her on the journal pages as an unsophisticated, pitiful "girl" who had an empty life aside from her connection to L.M. Montgomery. She wrote herself as the heroine who steadfastly refused to let the girl self-destruct, taking her theatrical "I can't live without you" literally. It became her altruistic motivation for continuing appeasement.

Montgomery conscientiously used her journals to craft a memoir and an image of herself, not so much as a writer, but as a lover, as a mother, as a wife, as a friend and as a "wonder person." Decades earlier, she had recorded her unexpected involvement with Herman Leard, revealing that she could love passionately, even irrationally. In the last decade of her life, she wrote dozens of pages about Isabel, showing she could be loved passionately, although not willingly, in a way that not many people could claim.

Montgomery tempered her frustrations with Isabel in 1935 by creating the fickle Hazel Marr in *Anne of Windy Poplars/Willows*. She wrote the character (who had a "notorious crush" on Anne Shirley) sympathetically, even affectionately. Like Montgomery's friend Nora, Anne's friend could not understand how she put up with Hazel. But Anne saw in Hazel someone who was a reflection of herself, who recalled her own youth with all its "raptures and ideals and romantic visions," and Anne confessed that she liked being worshipped. Isabel might have written as Hazel did, "I'm so different, ...Nobody understands me, ...But when I saw you, some inner voice whispered to me, 'She will understand ... with her you can be your real self.' "

It is difficult to know the real self of either Montgomery or Isabel. But there are some facts of Isabel's life that help readers to see more than the caricature that the Montgomery journals record.

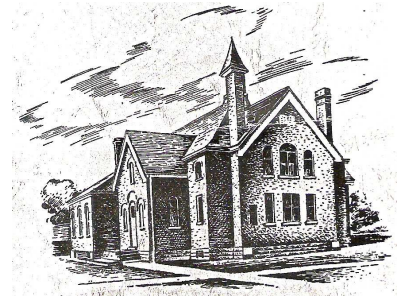
Isabel stayed in her hometown all her life. She continued to teach for decades and was known as a writer and clever speaker. She was born in 1896, and named Isabella, in Crewson's Corners, which was settled by Gaelic-speaking Scots. Her father, William, was 58 years old when Isabel was born to his second wife, Matilda Cripps (after the death of his first wife). He was a blacksmith and worked on the construction of the Grand Trunk Railway around 1856; he was a musician and played in the first band in the area in about 1864. He became the town's first postmaster three years before Isabel was born. Like Montgomery's relatives, William was also a farmer, until 1906, when he moved his family to nearby Acton. He died in 1924, two years before L. M. Montgomery moved to Norval. He left three daughters from his second marriage, eight children from his first, twenty-six grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.

Isabel was extremely close to her two sisters. Emma was three years older and married. One of her daughters, Wilma, was invited to have lunch with Aunt Isabel and L.M. Montgomery. Isabel's younger sister, Mary Ellen (Nellie), was a schoolteacher. When her mother died in 1929, Nellie started training to become a missionary. She finished in June 1930 and left home to become a missionary in Japan. Isabel missed her sisters and her mother and was left to live alone in the summer of 1930.

But Isabel's life was not as "empty" as Montgomery saw it. After she earned a degree at the Ontario College of Education in Toronto, she taught school for forty years and filled her time with summer travel, writing, and church work. In her obituary, her colleagues and students characterized her as a respected teacher: "Her interest in her pupils, her dedication to having each achieve his/her personal best and her keen sense of humour (shared with the children at appropriate times) made her room a superior place of learning. Discipline was firm but fair, and respect for good morals was taught by example as well as words."

Her family printed some of her poems in a booklet and included this one about her students:

Good morning, good morning when
Day will be done
We hope we can say that our work
Has been fun
So let us begin with a ready good will,
Our pencils at work, but our tongues
Lying still!



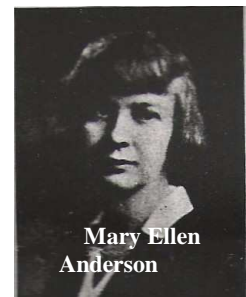
Isabel became a member of Knox Presbyterian Church in 1913 and sang in the choir for 72 years. She wrote a history of her "Kirk" for its 100th anniversary (which was reprinted for its 150th anniversary) and was active in the Young People's Society and taught Sunday School.

Her poetry is often humorous but most of it reflects the creative life of a poet, the importance of her family, her church and faith. When her sister left for "yet another term on the mission field," she wrote "To My Sister:" In this poem she acknowledges a "troubled heart," and an "impetuous will."

....
Thy nearness breathed a welcome peace
That brought my troubled heart release,
Erased the fret of petty strife,
Restored the elixir of life.

Thy calmness, undiminished still,
Curbed my impetuous will;
Thy radiance made a light to shine
Within this clouded sphere of mine.

....



Mary Ellen
Anderson

From *Our Kirk: 1845-1995*

Nellie died in June 1959. Isabel wrote a poem about her little sister called "Reverse:"

Through the gloomy silence and the falling snow
Comes a plaintive echo from the long ago;
"Wait for me," it's calling in a childish tone
And I slack my footsteps till they match her own.

Life brings many changes with the passing years
Sunny days and shadows, joys and bitter tears,
And my cry goes winging forth to Heaven's gate,
"Wait for me, dear Sister, just a little, wait."

A poem called "Insight" may also refer to the comfort the three sisters gave to each other:

Three times aloud I called your name –
I'm sure I was not dreaming –
And instantly in love you came
To calm the dark's dread seeming.

What satisfaction just to know
That you were there beside me.
Let lurking shadows come and go,
No danger would betide me.

I reached to take your hand in mine –
I know I was not sleeping –
But ere our fingers could entwine
My joy was changed to weeping.

For suddenly – a stab of pain,
The chill of grim December,
Empty the place where she had lain –
Dear God – I did remember.



Isabel Anderson died on July 6, 1994, "in her 99th year," after "a long and exemplary life." Isabel never became one of L.M. Montgomery's best friends or even a friend, as Montgomery defined it. But she did emerge as one of the most interesting personalities in the pages of Montgomery's journals. The creative young woman, excessive, unrestrained, and impetuous in her letters but muted in the presence of L.M. Montgomery, lived a long life as a beloved member of her family and a distinguished contributor to her community.

(This essay was first completed in July 2000 for part of a chapter on the dedication in Montgomery's book, *Anne of Windy Poplars*. It is part of a larger book proposal, *To the Friends of Anne: L. M. Montgomery's Kindred Spirits*. Some of the information appears in *The Intimate Life of L.M. Montgomery*, University of Toronto Press. Poetry and later photo were provided by the Hansen family.)