Jane of Lantern Hill and the Montgomery Sugar Maple: An Allegory for Regeneration

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Sugar maple and Lucy Maud Montgomery, linked together through space and time via the Humber River Valley. Tree and author both searching for ways forward through precarious times in their lives. Finding vital links to sources of regeneration through written words and in black forest loam, enabling them to continue into the present and on, into the future. Apparently simple seeds and words, doing their things, wreathed in science and mystery. Leaving signs and certainties by which we may decipher some complexities of the lives of maple and Montgomery.

Introduction

Sugar maples are prodigious seed-producers. A natural maple forest can release more than one million seeds per hectare each year. Any resulting seedlings and saplings are capable of persisting for years in adverse conditions and forge life-giving bonds with other trees and lifeforms, the extents of which are only now being investigated. Due to this strong life-force, quite a few maples in and around the Humber River Valley have attained one-hundred years of age. Some are well into their second century (Strickland 30–31).1

In this article, I trace the life history of an individual tree—the Montgomery Sugar Maple, as I have named it—that has grown to maturity here, on an east slope of the Humber River Valley in the northwest Greater Toronto Area, finding that both it and Canadian author L.M. Montgomery shared a sesquicentennial birthday in 2024 as

well as other connections extending through space and time between tree and author. For instance, both are linked geographically by the Humber River Valley that Montgomery came finally to live beside when she moved to Riverside Drive in the then new neighbourhood of Swansea adjacent to the western outskirts of Toronto and where she wrote her last intact, stand-alone novel, *Jane of Lantern Hill*, published in 1937.

In addition, those abundant maple seeds, often called keys, unlock clues to themes of regeneration that animate this later novel and flow throughout Montgomery's writings, from the earliest *Anne* volumes through the *Emily* and *Pat* series, continuing with *Jane of Lantern Hill* and *The Blythes Are Quoted*—eddying and pooling in still waters, to be sure, before flowing in swift currents through the present and into the future.2 In forestry terms, regeneration refers to the processes of how trees and associated flora naturally return to, or reclaim, sites that have been logged or otherwise denuded by fire, storms, or pestilence. It also defines the ongoing means by which trees produce seeds and the life cycles of resulting offspring. It is not often straightforward. Nothing is guaranteed. More generally, regeneration is a remembering of things lost. It is finding strength and the will to regroup and continue forward with time-tested ways and means of recovering what was lost. Regeneration is a theme in Montgomery's writing that sets it apart from the themes of survival traditionally identified with Canadian literature, as in Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Regeneration implies familiarity and prior knowledge, whereas survival cleaves to a sense of alienation and fear of the unknown.

Into the Forest

To decipher the timeline of this particular tree's life, I have relied upon my familiarity with the structure, ages, and history of the forest in the tree's vicinity, including studies of growth rings on stumps of comparable trees nearby. This tree's unique form, with its outstretched limbs, is what initially drew my attention. Could it be a marker tree, having undergone modifications in pre-settlement times by humans as an aid to route-finding? Gradually, however, closer inspection began revealing other, more convoluted explanations and provided glimpses into the tree's true life-story.

It became difficult to pull away from this study, even if I wanted to, because I realized that to understand the Montgomery Sugar Maple, I had to extend

consideration outward to the larger forest and to the Humber River Watershed itself. Appreciating the tree requires seeing it as more than just an isolated organism. Once my study resolved one riddle of its life, another and then another came to light, leading inexorably to a confluence with the works and life of Montgomery.

Concomitantly during these decades of my getting closer to, and sharing, this tree's environs, the science of forestry itself was undergoing change—a kind of change affecting other natural sciences as well. Supplementing the purely Darwinian view of trees solely as individuals ruthlessly competing for space in the forest, the emerging, still controversial, view is that cooperation and mutual aid are central characteristics of natural forests. Evidence of these newfound connections among the trees is woven together, in this case by the Humber River's fluvial network, and hidden from sight underground or in the air, water, and light.3

Nonetheless, the traceries of years, touches of local seasons, and exposures to storms are plainly, visibly inscribed upon this particular tree's surface. Days of sun and rainfall or sleet, and the branch-breaking ice of winter. Quiet nights, too, on the edge of the forest, while nocturnal animals frequent the tree, even as a nearby roadway disturbs the forest's peace. All of this is known, too, by we few humans who are, or *were*, the tree's neighbours and who dwell alongside it within the Humber River Valley, sharing living connections that nourish a sylvan stillness within the forest where time slows, becoming round and calm. In fact, during these forest observations, it has sometimes seemed—apart from the mathematics of dates, weights, and measurements—as if, as Montgomery writes in *Jane of Lantern Hill*, "There must be magic about it" (5723).

Back to the Future

One-hundred-and-fifty years ago, in the spring of 1874, on an upper east slope of the Humber River Valley, fifteen miles upriver from the shore of Lake Ontario, a seed of a sugar maple germinated in dark forest soil. A bright green stem and white fibrous rootlets burst from the seed's dry "helicopter" husk. A tiny green embryonic leaf curled out from the tip of the stem and lay close upon the duff of old leaves, seeking light, of which there wasn't much. Forest shadows hid the new seedling from direct sunlight. Nonetheless, the seedling's rootlets found moisture and sustenance below, in forest loam, sufficient to sustain it while its own initial reserves of energy ebbed. A time of patience arrived for the maple seedling as it waited for a place in the sun. In this it was well schooled, having access to knowledge within itself,

bequeathed tree to tree through millions of years of survival.

Successive winter snows would freeze the seedling. Many springs, summers, falls would arrive, teasing the seedling with intimations of warmth and light. By chance, it escaped browsing by white-tailed deer. Once, a coyote stepped lightly upon the seedling but did no lasting damage. Squirrels and chipmunks busily foraged nearby. Ruffed grouse drummed; rabbits came and went. Owls haunted the nighttime forest. As it was, only dead leaves fell upon the maple seedling, and it persisted, working its way up through accumulating layers of new organic soil, hoisting bits of green, hopefully, above the dark loam. So it went for sixty years, waiting for change in the forest.

At about this time, in 1935, Montgomery moved with her family to her new house in Swansea, located on the east side of the lower Humber River Valley, approximately ten miles downstream from where the maple seedling patiently waited. She called the house “Journey’s End.” Although world famous as an author, she was haunted by a sense of isolation—more profound than any she might have experienced alone on the busy streets of a big city.4 Shadows had gathered in her life, troubles that could not easily be banished or brought out from darkness into curative sunlight. Clues as to causes of this enveloping malaise are recorded in Montgomery‘s journals; especially troubling were her wartime experiences and worsening difficulties arising within her own immediate family. Threaded among these debilitating factors, although difficult to disentangle from myriads of other discrete causes—like teasing apart a helix of DNA to reveal a central strand—was that Montgomery’s lifelong, life-saving attachment to nature had stretched very thin in later years. By this time in her life, daily contact with the outdoor natural world was infrequent for Montgomery, who wrote in the poem “Night” in the voice of Anne, “I am a sister to the loveliness / Of cool, far hill and long-remembered shore, / Finding in it a sweet forgetfulness / Of all that hurt before” (*BAQ* 235). Nature, for her, was becoming “[a] dream that we dreamed and lost” (“Among the Pines,” *The Watchman* 57). It was a loss that she further expressed in poems such as Anne’s “Remembered”:

> Through the shriek of the city comes to me
> A whisper of some old ecstasy,
> … People rush by me mad and fleet
> But I am not on this haggard street,
> I am out where the shadows and silences meet

Round an old grey house that is dear to me
Between the hills and the calling sea …" (BAQ 428–29)

Additionally, no kindred spirits with whom she might share this nature relationship were close at hand, partly because Montgomery's kind of "existential" connection to the natural world, tested in tough times, is a rare trait (Gothie 27). Individuals who, similar to Montgomery, have this affinity for nature might find themselves set apart from the "madding crowd" and have a tendency toward shyness. In a poem included in *The Blythes Are Quoted*, Montgomery, again in Anne's voice, reaches out "To a Desired Friend":

I know we love the same things...
Little wandering stars, all the timeless rapture
Of a windy night when our thoughts are safe from capture,
All the pale witcheries or old enchanted woods." (361; ellipsis in original)

Even so, despite those losses and difficulties, Montgomery kept on writing and engaging with literary communities as she found them, for, throughout her life as an author, she had written various iterations along the lines expressed in her poem "The Choice":

Life, come to me in no pale guise and ashen,
I care not for thee in such placid fashion!
I would share widely, Life,
In all thy joy and strife,
Would sound thy deeps and reach thy highest passion,
With thy delight and with thy suffering rife." (*The Watchman* 90)

In this sense, Montgomery had long ago aligned herself with the spirit of wild Nature—with the means and will to live that infuses Earth's natural environments and with which she had grown familiar from a young age. Although those ups and downs, losses and gains, and hours spent searching for ways forward could make meaningful existence elusive in a personal sense, Montgomery had observed in the natural environment of Prince Edward Island, and within her own life, an innate ability to continue forward, as far as possible, with few guarantees. She had come to know the purposefulness of things. Yes, flowers would disappear. Leaves would wither, and, as she writes in *Jane of Lantern Hill*, "[a] rat got drowned in [Mr. Julius

Evan's] cask of new maple syrup and he made a terrific fuss over such a waste" (5881). But things could also come back. New meanings could be discovered or created. Light could balance darkness. Regeneration was on the wind and in the earth. Seeds were everywhere, ready and waiting for the future. As Captain Jim says in *Anne's House of Dreams*, "When I ponder on them seeds I don't find it nowise hard to believe that we've got souls that'll live in other worlds. You couldn't hardly believe there was life in them tiny things, some no bigger than a grain of dust, let alone color and scent, if you hadn't seen the miracle, could you?" (1286).

Meanwhile, the maple seedling on the slope of the upper Humber River Valley was finally touched with new light. A pre-existing rural trackway, which ran along the forest's north edge there, was in the process of being upgraded. It was still to be only a single dirt lane, largely for horse-drawn farm equipment, with a wooden bridge spanning the Humber River down in the valley to the west. Even so, because a few trees were laboriously felled, sunlight was able to reach the waiting maple seedling. Slowly, it began to respond, pushing aside the accumulated inertia of decades of waiting. It had to be careful not to expend too much energy all at once, in case conditions turned against it again.

At first, it seemed like the real thing. Through the summer of 1935, sunlight persisted day by day. Rains came as usual. And the long-suppressed seedling unfolded new leaves. Its stem, until now only a feeble white thread, acquired wiry toughness. However, all the years of persisting in the deep shade and hugging the forest floor had left the seedling weakened. The sun was certainly beneficial, but when autumn arrived and winter's cold was at hand, the seedling was short of resources. Not enough sugars had been distilled photosynthetically from the summer sunlight. Another spell of dormancy, or worse, seemed in store for the seedling.

Jane's Journey Begins

Back at Journey's End just downstream from the young/old maple seedling, Montgomery began work on *Jane of Lantern Hill*. In this novel, we initially encounter eleven-year-old Jane Stuart, the protagonist, biding her time in a "castellated" fortress on 60 Gay Street in downtown Toronto, with her domineering grandmother, her elderly aunt, and her still youthful, though resigned and seemingly timid mother. Of her father she knows little; in fact, she has given him up for dead, and she thinks she hates him for that absence.

Young Jane is oppressed by her garrison-like surroundings, which are opulent in many ways. A staid deadness hangs over her environs. This human-built abode that largely constitutes Jane's daily environment appears, to her at least, to have hoarded everything unto itself and sucked the oxygen from an atmosphere that might otherwise nurture her young life. It seems to her that, other than her mother, there are no takers for the love she wants to give. Life's potential has all been spoken for and ossified into an oppressive rigidity: "At 60 Gay everything had to be done in a certain way on a certain day" (5653). Grandmother's cold-blue, judgmental eyes and icy-grey hair are all the future holds, and if she dares step away, she may find herself on her own, an outcast. Jane sums up her feelings of isolation when she says, "I don't belong here" (5684). Jane finds a pal nearby. She befriends Jody, an impoverished orphan girl working as a domestic at the adjoining house, 58 Gay. Together, although they come from opposite ends of the economic and social spectrum, they share mutual feelings of isolation and draw strength from their friendship, sufficient to allow them to engage with their respective daily grinds. In a familiar Montgomery fashion, they regularly frequent, together, the lower branches of a backyard tree, there contemplating the moon or the rising of a morning star from this leafy perch. For these friends, these shared arboreal excursions affirm an intuitive hopefulness in the elusive expansiveness of life. Together, they can touch other worlds, outside the fortified walls of their everyday prescribed lives.

Meanwhile, with faltering vitality, the hopeful maple seedling emerges from winter into a new spring. It had run low on energy before the sun's strengthening rays could fully revive it. Then, unexpectedly, a green glow of new life comes to the seedling, just in time. The source of this new life is hidden in the earth, in black forest loam below, where, in subterranean darkness, pale fibrous fungal strands are contacting the seedling's struggling rootlets. With electrical rapidity, these fungal fibres begin conveying sustenance to the seedling. In this, the fungal network plays primarily the role of a conveyor. The actual producers of life-giving sustenance––sugars, nutrients, minerals––are other, stronger trees and plants in the surrounding forest, for although space certainly is at a premium in the forest, survival long ago created a need for sharing among the forest's diverse lifeforms.

Juiced by this fungal lifeline, the maple seedling responds quickly through the warmer seasons of 1936. It transitions from seedling to sapling with branch nodes bearing fully formed maple leaves, lifting into sunlight. Even so, space and light are

limited. Once more, early life senescence is at hand for the maple sapling.

Back at 60 Gay, Jane's world turns upside down. The fragile thread of friendship she has with Jody seems about to be severed when Jane discovers, through a gossipy classmate, that her father is actually alive and living in Prince Edward Island, where she herself was born but whisked away from at age three, leaving her with few conscious memories of those early years. Before she has time to accept this truth, a letter arrives from him—this estranged, unknown father—requesting that she come and stay with him for the entire summer on the Island. This is terrifying news. The last thing Jane wants to do is venture against her will into that distant unknown. Legally, however, she has no choice. In a traumatized state, she soon finds herself on a train with bags packed, en route to Prince Edward Island, accompanied by fear and a deepened sense of isolation: "Jane felt herself alone in the universe" (5705).

The struggling maple sapling is also hit by potential calamity. The quiet rural road nearby to the north is again in the process of being upgraded. This time, significant widening is in the offing, from one to two lanes. And the sapling is near the edge.

Thus, as 1936 unfolds, many trees are felled day by day, and the chugging, exhaust-bellowing, ground-shaking tread of heavy equipment draws closer, until one morning in early summer, the steel blade of a D8 bulldozer, glinting in sunshine, plows along the slope where the maple sapling grows and catches it on the edge, uprooting and carrying it along before unceremoniously heaving it up onto a spread of black soil. By chance, throughout this upheaval, the sapling remains upright, sailing above the earth-shaking tumult by virtue of its weighted roots. Just in time, the dozer stops and clanks into reverse, back dragging its way down the slope, never to return, its job finished. The young maple is left high and exposed on the raw edge of the forest above the new roadway.

Jane's own upheaval is playing out as she finally arrives at Prince Edward Island, amid rain and darkness. The cold, unfriendly surroundings are unimpressive: "So this was Prince Edward Island ... this rain-drenched land where the trees cringed before the wind and the heavy clouds seemed to almost touch the fields" (5703). Before that first night is through, however, things begin to brighten. She awakens early to see the familiar moon floating in pre-dawn darkness: "It was like seeing an old friend. That moon was looking down on Toronto as well as Prince Edward Island. Perhaps it was shining on Jody ... or on mother" (5709). Things brighten further next day for Jane, when she is at last able to meet her father. His first words upon seeing

her—“A russet-haired jade”—are “only four words ... but they changed life for Jane” (5711). “All at once everything was all right,” although “60 Gay was a thousand miles away” (*JLH* 5712, 5717).

Sometimes things happen unexpectedly, by chance or design or unseen intervention. Insurmountable barriers fall away. Instead of loss, there is gain. Instead of a ransacked future, a motherlode waits to be mined. What seemed strange and alien turns out to be welcoming and familiar. Regeneration is at hand.

So life begins to turn for Jane: “She was going to spend a whole summer with dad and they were here together, driving over a road which had a life of its own that seemed to be running through her veins like quicksilver” (5717). And just a little further along that red Prince Edward Island road, “[s]he knew the fields and the windy golden shore were part of her” (5717).

As for the young maple, after the dust settles and construction moves onward, it begins trying to re-establish itself on its new site. It seems better poised for the future. Sunlight is abundant. It is still rooted in good forest soil, and although now on the forest’s outer fringe, connections to the other trees by subterranean means and through air and light might be restorable.

At that critical point, something else comes into play as the sapling struggles to regain its footing. Somewhere not too far, in the depths of the forest above the Humber River, the sapling’s own old parent tree begins preferentially, with strange discernment, directing nutrients to its long-lost offspring by way of the forest’s underground network of root hairs and fungal filaments, reaching out to its offspring in this time of need. This is a crucial boost. Sustained in this way, the young maple now has a good chance to overcome the shock of relocation.

For Jane and those close to her, many more challenges lie ahead. Chief among those challenges is discovering what has caused the long-ago split between her parents. With the way forward coming clearly into view, however, there can be no turning back, come what may.

The young maple, too, stands its ground. Over the decades, it has grown large and tall (now thirty inches diameter and about sixty feet original height). Because of its location on the edge of the forest, it has been able to continue to develop its distinctive lateral limbs to better reach sunlight.

This exposed position makes the maple vulnerable in some ways. For instance, a little more than eighty years ago, around 1942—coincidentally the year that Montgomery passed away—the top of the tree was struck by lightning at least once. Luckily, this strike did not kill the tree; instead, a spiral crack was blasted around the trunk down to the ground. The maple was able to recover from this severe injury by encapsulating the damaged tissues, and although the topmost twenty feet or so of the maple's stem was permanently damaged, those existing large lateral limbs were able to take up the slack, further accentuating the tree's multi-stem appearance.

In 2019, the nearby roadway was once again widened, this time to six lanes. The now mature Montgomery Sugar Maple barely escaped this latest episode, in part because it stands on the south side of a wildlife fence, installed as part of the project, while on the north side of this fence, every remaining tree was felled; the stumps were then pulled and chipped, and the land's contours bulldozed to suit.

Present Moment

In 2025 the big maple is doing well, as can be seen in this video clip shot onsite:

The Montgomery Sugar Maple
Tue, 06/10/2025 - 21:40
lmmiassistant

The tree has recorded its century and a half of life thus far in rings of growth and scarred, gnarled bark. It is producing offspring, future generations of maples. In fact, a half-dozen healthy maple saplings are ranged 'round the big tree, well poised for the future. One of these saplings has attained pole size and is leaning against the parent tree, mutually supportive. Air pollution, noise, and artificial light from the nearby, now arterial roadway, present ongoing challenges to these trees. However, the maples' life-history inspires confidence in their future, as Montgomery suggests in her poem "The Hill Maples": "But here on these free hills we grow and are strong and flourish, / Comrades shoulder to shoulder our watch of the years to keep" (*The Watchman* 61).

Likewise, after one-hundred-and-fifty years, the writings and life of Montgomery continue to inspire new generations of readers of all ages, worldwide. Her theme of regeneration grounded in her close connections to the natural world gives readers a sense of coming home when they venture outdoors.

As is true for an old-time tabula scalata or modern lenticular print, slight shifts in viewpoint illuminate different dimensions within Montgomery's writings. Perhaps in *Jane of Lantern Hill*, she viewed the protagonist as a spiritual emissary sent in a time of need from the edge of the Humber River Valley to Prince Edward Island in search of personal regeneration in accordance with the life of the forest. As she wrote in her poem "Midnight in Camp," "Oh, it is well to waken with the woods / And feel, as those who wait with God alone, / The forest's heart in these rare solitudes / Beating against our own" (*The Watchman* 60).

In any event, Montgomery's literary journey did not end with her move to Journey's End, as she continued to write and to publish three other novels besides *Jane of Lantern Hill—Mistress Pat, Anne of Windy Poplars*, and *Anne of Ingleside*—while also attending demanding events relating to her literary output and finding time to answer voluminous fan mail with handwritten letters, altogether a lifetime's work for many authors. And owls—particularly barred, saw-whet, and screech owls––still haunt the Humber Valley in the vicinity of the Montgomery Sugar Maple, as Jane and her father found to be true also of the maple wood on Prince Edward Island around Lantern Hill, "a likely place for owls," which, Jane says, is a place "simply jammed with magic" (5729).

Bio: James E. Garratt graduated in 1975 from the forestry program at Sir Sandford Fleming College. He subsequently worked across Ontario doing forest inventories for Ontario Hydro. He presently works at the Kortright Centre for Conservation in operations and previously at Scanlon Creek Outdoor Education Centre as an instructor. He has held executive positions in several environmental NGOs, including Save the Rouge Valley System and Ontario Nature. Garratt has published three books, *The Rouge River Valley an Urban Wilderness, Nature Reserve on the City's Edge*, and *Journeys into Algonquin Park*. He has three forthcoming books: *Northern Silence* (novel), *Explorations of Scarborough Bluffs and Lake Ontario*, and *Field Notes from the Rouge River Valley*.

Banner Image: Sugar maple seedling. Photo by James E. Garratt.

- 1 Studies of sugar maple forests in Algonquin Park reveal production of millions of maple seeds per hectare in average years. Also, the importance of old-growth trees (100 to 1,000+ years old) in natural forests is increasingly recognized by foresters. In the past, a forest's oldest trees were largely viewed as past their prime, taking space away from new growth. Forestry was all about maximizing yields of merchantable timber from a forest over time. One of the best books on this subject, relevant to all Canadian forests, is Michael Henry and Peter Quinby's *Ontario's Old-Growth Forests* (Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2010).
- 2 *The Blythes Are Quoted*, Montgomery's last novel, was apparently completed in 1942 although not published in its present form until 2009. For insight into this work, see the foreword by Elizabeth Rollins Epperly and afterword by Benjamin Lefebvre.
- 3 It is becoming clear that cooperation among trees in natural forests is prevalent. Trees send messages through the air, warning other trees of threats such as insect pests. A forest's trees are also linked underground by networks of fungi and roots involved in trading and sharing life's essentials. It is emerging that a natural forest's oldest trees help to maintain these hidden networks. Canadian scientists Diana Beresford-Kroeger, *To Speak for the Trees* (Random House Canada, 2019), and Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (Penguin/Random House Canada, 2021), are among researchers who, along with Indigenous colleagues, are helping to elucidate these forest networks. Their work, and the interpretations of their findings, has met resistance from mainstream forest ecologists—which is to be expected, since this is a major paradigm shift with profound implications for applied forestry. In a 26 October 2022 interview in *Emergence Magazine* (available online at https://emergencemagazine.org/conversation/finding-the-mother-tree/), Simard defends her interpretations and her research, which has been corroborated worldwide. (See, for example, the online portal, *The Mother Tree Project*, at https://mothertreeproject.org/, which collates relevant technical papers.) Montgomery would find these developments in forestry congenial. In several ways—through experience, observation, and intuition—she anticipated these recent findings, as in the following two examples of many found throughout her writings: "the trees talked all about her in some lost sweet language of elder days" (*JLH* 5782); and in her poem "The Tree Lovers," about a spruce and maple tree growing closely together, "All through the days of summer they

talked and / whispered low" (*Ultimate Collection* 8075). Catherine Reid's *The Landscapes of Anne of Green Gables* (Timber Press, 2018) delves into the specific woodlands that Montgomery grew up with in Prince Edward Island and where she first began to hear a whispered language of the trees.

- 4 For commentary pertaining to this time in her life, see *L.M. Montgomery's Rainbow Valleys: The Ontario Years, 1911–1942*, edited by Rita Bode and Lesley D. Clement (McGill-Queen's UP, 2015). Particularly relevant to Montgomery's connections to Toronto before and after moving there is Clement's chapter "Toronto's Cultural Scene; Tonic or Toxin for a Sagged Soul?" (238–60).

Back to top

Article Info

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