Striking a Fine Balance: A Conversation with Arnold Smith

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Laura Robinson’s blog featuring Arnold Smith, who was to facilitate a workshop on “Fashion, Fabric, and Handiwork from the Times and Writings of Montgomery: What Was in Her Wardrobe and Work Basket,” was scheduled to be posted on the LMMI website the week that the decision was made to cancel the conference. Laura provides us with a glimpse of some of the items from Arnold’s treasure trove we would have seen and discussed.



Arnold Smith. Photo provided by Arnold Smith.

Proud Prince Edward Islander, Arnold Smith is a well-known creator, collector, and restorer of vintage clothing, specializing in reproductions of L.M. Montgomery pieces, such as a replica of Anne's beloved dress with puffed sleeves. In 2008, the centenary of the publication of *Anne of Green Gables*, Arnold and his sister Anita were commissioned to create over 150 pieces of period costumes for the celebrations, and, in 2011, the siblings marked the anniversary of Montgomery's wedding by reproducing five outfits from her wedding trousseau. In 2014, Arnold and his mother, Dorothy, created "Susan Baker's Dress" from *Rilla of Ingleside* for an exhibit I curated, "The Canadian Home Front: L.M. Montgomery's Reflections on the First World War." I recently had the wonderful opportunity to reconnect with Arnold to ask some questions about his work.



Left: Anne's dress with puffed sleeve. Photo provided by Arnold Smith.
Right: Susan Baker's dress. Photo provided by Arnold Smith.

Laura: Which came first for you: L.M. Montgomery or vintage clothing?

Arnold: L.M. Montgomery came first. As a child, visiting the Green Gables house with vacationing relatives and later reading her books. Then, answering the questions of tourists at our motel, The Bay Vista in Cavendish (1974–2015); and working as a step-on tour guide.

Collecting vintage clothing did not start until after I was part of the re-enactment of the Fathers of Confederation in 1989 when I portrayed A.A. MacDonald, the youngest Father of Confederation.

Laura: How big is your vintage/period clothing collection? Where do you store it?

Arnold: My collection of vintage/period /reproduction clothing and accessories along with the fabrics and accessories is huge. It fills many rooms in my 1865 restored family home, the largest room being 12’x26’; next a fabric room 6’x8’ with floor-to-ceiling shelving on all walls; another room 9’x12’ filled to ceiling with accessories, hats, ladies and men’s jewellery, and fabric notions; plus several closets and cupboards, and a six-foot-wide tall bookcase full of reference books and vintage magazines.

Laura: Aside from the ones you’ve created yourself, where do you find the pieces in your collection?

Arnold: Public auctions, vintage clothing shop, thrift shops, gifts from people who know I will appreciate and care for vintage pieces that they have found in old family homes and who want them to be cared for in a way that they will be remembered and not lost. Over the years I have been given many boxes and bags of items—some containing pristine treasures and vintage items of value; and other items less cared for, yet valuable as a reference source.



Arnold as Andrew A. MacDonald, the youngest Father of Confederation. 1989. Photo provided by Arnold Smith.

Laura: Do you have a favourite article of clothing or period piece?

Arnold: They all have a story and special memories attached. As a collection, the L.M. Montgomery pieces required the most detailed research and workmanship. The 1864 period clothing formed the first part of the collection, now going back thirty years, when I portrayed the youngest Father of Confederation at many events, balls, and celebrations.

My collection ranges from Acadian reproductions from the late 1700s, through to the 1970s, representing two hundred years of fashion ranging from the ordinary to the elaborate.

Laura: Are you still making reproductions, or do you primarily supply clothing for events and exhibits?

Arnold: Not as many this past few years; however, during the past several years I have been designing and creating costumes for the River Clyde Pageant, an outdoor production on the banks of the River Clyde in New Glasgow, PEI—the community referred to as "New Bridge" in Montgomery's writing.

Laura: Did making the clothing give you a different perspective on Montgomery and/or her works?

Arnold: Yes, when you realize the importance of public image and how she liked to be well dressed. As a minister's wife, she should not appear overly dressed. Though, as a famous author being fashionably up to date was essential. It was a fine balance as she did not want to cause any problems for her minister husband, yet not appear dowdy when appearing as the author, L.M. Montgomery.

You can find out more about Arnold and his work here.



Laura Robinson. Photo provided by Laura Robinson.

About the Author: Laura Robinson is the Dean of Arts at Acadia University where she is also a professor of English and Theatre and Women's and Gender Studies. Former Visiting Scholar at the L.M. Montgomery Institute at the University of Prince

Edward Island (2015–17) and ongoing member of the L.M. Montgomery Institute Committee, she co-chaired two International L.M. Montgomery conferences (2016 and 2018) and is a consulting editor for the *Journal of L.M. Montgomery Studies*. Her articles on Montgomery's work have appeared in many collections and journals, such as *L.M. Montgomery and the Matter of Nature(s)* (2018), *L.M. Montgomery and War* (2017), *War Memories: Commemoration, Re-enactment, Writings of War in the English-Speaking World* (2016), *L.M. Montgomery's Rainbow Valleys* (2015), and *Children's Literature* (2012). She curated a travelling (2014–18) and virtual exhibit entitled "The Canadian Home Front: L.M. Montgomery's Reflections on the First World War." She also acted as a consultant on Historica Canada's L.M. Montgomery Heritage Minute and on "The Inspiring World of L.M. Montgomery Literary Tour." She is currently editing a collection of essays on Montgomery and gender with E. Holly Pike.

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