Rereading L.M. Montgomery’s Journals: A Personal Reflection

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This essay explores how time affects the reading of L.M. Montgomery’s journals. Using my own experiences as a Montgomery scholar and an author, I return to the journals after a break of six years during which the world has changed drastically. I also examine my own change from an academic to a fiction writer.

For a video of this article being read aloud by the author, click here.

Today, the day I start writing this essay, it is two months from the death of my brother and almost ten years from the publication of the first volume of *The Complete Journals of L.M. Montgomery*. These two facts have not much significance to anyone but me, yet it is a starting point. We are always somewhere in time, bound by it and affected by it. The present moment rules our actions, our thoughts, and our feelings, so it makes sense to begin this paper on how time affects the reading of Montgomery’s journals from this moment.

13 June 2022, Guelph

I haven’t been in Canada nor read Montgomery’s journals in six years, so it’s no wonder my head feels a bit dizzy. I arrived three days ago, and this morning I walked to the archives at the University of Guelph, as I did so often ten years back. It was a hot morning, and I was wearing new sandals for the first time—always a bad idea—and now have blisters on my soles. The archives weren’t where I remembered,

just a concrete wall where there was once a door. This seems like an apt metaphor for how it feels to read the journals after a long period of time. A concrete wall where there used to be an opening, a new entrance in a different place. Like the country around me, and the city where I spent so much time in my twenties, the journals have somehow changed yet are oddly familiar. It's like having partial amnesia with new vivid images appearing, almost like having new memories. And, of course, I—the person reading Montgomery's journals, the scholar, the writer, the reader—have changed.

Today, when I'm at the archives, I notice in a very tangible way what it means to reconstruct memories. Montgomery does this herself in her journals; in fact, she made a life project of it. But even on a more mundane level, everything we remember is constantly changing. Memories can become stale and then suddenly re-form when something happens in the present moment. My relationship with Montgomery's journals will always be bound with the archives at Guelph because it was here that I first started studying them, where I saw the originals and spent many days with Montgomery's handwriting. So, naturally, I feel a bit dislocated when the archives of my youth are not there anymore. Instead of the warm tones of the room in the basement of the library, there is now the space-age glass cube on the second floor. No more descending into the underworld, but rather ascending to a clear room that glitters with glass. The campus is full of construction, fences everywhere, and people are still wearing masks. It's like I'm in a dream, trying to find my way but not quite succeeding. I realize that it's impossible to access even your own memories, to step into the same river twice. Places where we once were have changed, and we often remember them wrong.

During the six years that have passed, I have transformed from a scholar into an author. I find that this has affected the way my brain functions. I immediately turn my arrival to the campus into a story; I approach Montgomery's journals as a fellow writer, feeling more sympathetic to her tribulations as a professional author and appreciating her skills when a particularly well-written piece of writing catches my eye. I feel I must mention this because it influences the way I write this essay. I feel a bit worried about the change, as if I'm doing something forbidden, writing about myself, about blisters on my feet. But I also feel elated that I can now do this. Write down that a few hours ago, a nice man lifted the first volume of Montgomery's handwritten journals out of the cardboard box and placed it on a fluffy grey pillow. I looked at the ledger's brown leather binding and felt a jolt. After all this time, here I

am again, sitting next to Montgomery's actual diary, looking at her handwriting, written over a hundred years ago.

Preserving Memory in the Journals

Perhaps, if I tried really hard, I might remember the first time I saw the original diaries. But it has been a very long time. I was twenty-five, the diary felt like some kind of sacred object, and I still had all that work ahead of me. Now I’m a bit more world-weary, but, even so, when I look at the book next to me, and gently leaf through it, my mind goes back to the academic mode and starts noticing things that I explored in my Ph.D. dissertation: Here is where Montgomery has replaced a page and written a new version of events; there, she has crossed over a word in the frenzy of copying text from the original, now missing, notebooks. How clear it becomes that she was constructing an autobiography, a memoir, with photos and postcards and captions. Not mere diaries, but a life story, something extremely solid and organized to lean on when she was old enough to realize what time does to every life: turns it into memory, then the past, then nothing.

I’m closer now to the age that Montgomery was (forty-four) when she started copying her diaries into the ledgers that I study today at the archives. She had married Ewan Macdonald, left her beloved island, given birth to three sons (one stillborn), and lived through the years of the First World War. In addition, she had lost her best friend, Frede Campbell, to the flu pandemic after the war. In 1919, her old world had disappeared so completely that it is no wonder she turned to her diaries for comfort. But I also think that she was trying to create something tangible to ward off death.

Rereading the journals, I notice a funny little detail: After the war, spiritualism was having a heyday in Toronto. On 29 March 1919, Montgomery mentions having read a book called *The Twentieth Plane* by Louis Benjamin—a medium—that purports to reveal what happens after death. Montgomery writes: “[S]ince Frede died I would give anything if I could only be convinced that she still exists and that there might be a faint hope of getting some communication from her, even by the medium of the ouija-board.” But after reading the book she is not convinced. Her analysis of this sensational book proves that, despite having gone through some devastating experiences, she hasn’t lost her sense of humour: “There don’t seem to be any grocers or butchers or carpenters on the Twentieth Plane—though one would think

that a few butchers at least would be needed to convert the synthetic cows into the synthetic beef out of which the synthetic beef tea is made!”[1] Ouija boards were all the rage, and Montgomery herself engages in a ouija session with her friends. This seems normal after so many, like Montgomery, had lost loved ones. However, she couldn’t quite put her faith into the promises of the mediums and hoaxers, so she turned to her diaries instead. As Mary Rubio writes in her biography of Montgomery: “Finding comfort in her journal brought dignity to a life disturbed by personal loss and crushing loneliness.”[2]

Rereading the Journals in a Changed World

Isn’t this something that we can all understand now, perhaps better than before? During these past six years the world has changed so drastically that it’s almost like we have finally reached a time when Montgomery’s journals were always meant to be read. Rereading the journals I notice that not only have I, the reader, changed during the intervening years, but that with the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and even climate change, the world has shifted once again, so that the new world that Montgomery didn’t feel she belonged to after the war has now disappeared, and we’re on the brink of another era.

At times it is almost uncanny reading the entries Montgomery was writing during the war years and the flu pandemic. When she goes to see her dying cousin, Frede, in the hospital ward, I pick up a detail in the text that most certainly escaped my notice ten years ago. Montgomery writes: “The tears were pouring down my face under that stifling mask. Oh, my friend—*my friend!*”[3] That stifling mask indeed. I am wearing one now, writing this, still sitting in the archival room, but soon going home. I was wearing one all those times I went to see my brother in the palliative care unit at the hospital. I wish I didn’t, but I now know exactly how it feels to say goodbye to a loved one wearing a stifling mask. And we all definitely know how stifling they can be even in less emotional situations.

Or what about the entry of 7 December 1914, in which Montgomery writes: “A *Globe* headline to-day was ‘The Germans Capture Lodz.’ This war is at least extending my knowledge of geography. Six months ago I did not know there was such a place in the world as Lodz. … I know all about it now—its size, its standing, its military significance.”[4] Before the war in Ukraine started, I didn’t know much about its geography. I knew the capital was called Kyiv, but that was all. Now, names such as Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Mikolaiv have been carved into my memory forever. Reading

about the horrors taking place in these cities, I again wish I didn’t know, but I do. I have googled instructions on what to do in case our neighbouring country, Russia, decides to attack my country, Finland. I have filled bottles with water in case there are shortages. Another war, another pandemic. Perhaps human beings are constructed in such a way that we cannot know what something is like until we experience it ourselves.

But in reading Montgomery’s journals, it is the years before the war that I read most differently now. Between 1898 and 1911, Montgomery spent almost thirteen years at home taking care of her aging grandmother. Before, these “dark years” seemed to me like her personal Middle Ages. Looking back, it’s easy to think that nothing relevant happened during those years, except painful losses: Montgomery’s father died in 1900, the world of her childhood was slipping away, and she buried the dream of marrying a man she loved. The younger me reading the journals probably skipped over these entries impatiently, or at least read them lazily, thinking that the juicy bits in the diary were somewhere else. I never imagined that I could personally know what it feels like to stay at home with not much happening. Arrogant youth! Even now, I admit feeling a bit impatient sometimes reading the entries in which Montgomery is depressed and the years just pass and her situation doesn’t change. As readers, we want to be entertained, even though life isn’t a novel and most often nothing happens to bring about change.

I start noticing something very familiar in these entries: the monotony; the isolation; the long, hard, winters; the not being able to go out; the fear of sickness; depression. Sound familiar? Again, time passing has given me new insight into something that happened in the past. Because I’ve now lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, I can comprehend a bit better what winters were like on Prince Edward Island in the late-nineteenth century.

Rereading and Reliving the Journals as a Writer

Whether people today can understand what life was like in the past is something I often think about, mainly because I’ve written two historical novels, both set in the nineteenth century. I have come to the conclusion that sometimes too much time can pass, making it impossible to grasp what the day-to-day life was like. It is important to acknowledge that the time we live in always restricts our understanding, like plastic wrap surrounding us.

Therefore, it is a strange pleasure to notice that while the pandemic was a hard time in my life, something good came out of it. I have a slightly better understanding of what extreme isolation does to the mind, body, and professional writer's life. When Montgomery repeatedly mentions how difficult it was to go out in the winter, I recall this past winter in my hometown, when it was nearly impossible to walk outside for two or three months because the sidewalks were continuously iced over. For instance, on 3 March 1905, Montgomery complains: "I cannot even get out for a walk and the lack of all exercise and companionship makes me feel positively wretched, mentally and physically."[5]

Reading this, I think: at least we have snow plows and cars and regular mail and supermarkets and bookstores. But because the pandemic had closed down most of the stores and swimming pools and yoga classes, my life was constricted in a way that is unprecedented in the twenty-first-century Western world. We were able to communicate through emails and Zoom calls, but physically we were as stuck as Montgomery was during the PEI winters. Montgomery's caption in the previous entry, written 8 February 1905, seems symptomatic of what we now call "COVID brain fog": "Wednesday," she writes, "(Is it Wednesday? Yes, it is.)"[6] I can almost feel the lockdown anxiety in my body again when I revisit these entries that repeat sentences such as: "Another storm! No mail! Abominably dismal!" or "Why do I get this journal out tonight? I've nothing to write."[7]

Now that the pandemic years have also turned into history and exist only as memories no one really wants to revisit, I have become more aware of the value of a slower and more circumscribed life. My own life has changed drastically during these years, but with inward changes rather than outward. Similarly, looked at more closely, many things happened in Montgomery's life during those thirteen years. No wonder, then, that Rubio labels this time as "The Golden Decade."[8] No, we don't get the steamy romance with Herman Leard, or giddy college years. Montgomery does do a stint in Halifax in 1901–1902, working in a newspaper office, but visits to Boston and Charlottetown to meet her publisher and Earl Grey don't happen until toward the end of these years—when, peculiarly, everything suddenly happens at once. Even so, I now recognize that these slower years made Montgomery who she was.

Most significantly, Montgomery became a writer. *Anne of Green Gables* was published in 1908, but already before that, she was a professional writer. Having realized how much time and space writing fiction requires, I understand that Montgomery probably wouldn't have become the writer she was if it hadn't been for

these quiet years. Although she did have domestic chores and took care of her grandmother, she could devote the rest of her time to writing. Not many women during her time were able to do that. Rubio notes this in her biography: “Maud’s grandfather’s death [in 1898] was in other ways a blessing. Maud could now return to a home she loved and devote herself full time to writing. She was not like the many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women writers … who had to toil with their pens all night to earn money for their families’ upkeep.”9

Getting engaged to Ewan in 1906 and coping with fame after *Anne* became a bestseller are also events that took place during these years. As several others have noted, Montgomery’s decision to marry Ewan was influenced by the years she spent at home, with financial and other troubles piling up.10 This choice shaped how the rest of her life turned out, but I realize more clearly now that the decision to start the autobiographical project took place already before the marriage in 1911. It was Montgomery’s way to deal with the rupture between her home life and her public image. Once the public and media became interested in her as a person, as the creator of Anne, Montgomery took a new kind of look at her life and understood that, if she wanted to keep control in her own hands, it was she who had to do the shaping of her life story. This is when the reframing of memories, secrecy, reshaping, and renarrating really begin. Montgomery writes on 26 December 1909:

> This evening, as I paced the floor in the twilight, listening to poor grandmother groaning with rheumatism, I smiled rather grimly as I contrasted my lot with what the world doubtless supposes it to be. I am a famous woman; I have written two very successful books. I have made a good bit of money. Yet … I can do *nothing* with my money to make life easier …11

If it hadn’t been for the split between the reality of her solitary life and the publicity that her first novel brought about, Montgomery’s journals might be very different today. In the same way, if it hadn’t been for the pandemic years, publishing my first novel during the first lockdown, the losses, the loneliness, the war, I wouldn’t be in the archives today, looking at the diaries with this new perspective. Reading and living, always connected. Rereading and reliving, too. The present moment is impossible to capture because it always turns into the past. But we try, we try. Montgomery tried capturing it in her journals, building a buffer against oblivion, and to some extent succeeded.

The “today” when I started writing this essay has turned into yesterday, and imperceptibly the campus has become familiar again. I’m getting used to the new archival room, being surrounded by Montgomery’s papers and my own past selves. The blisters are healing, and I’m wearing different shoes today.

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Banner Image: Courtesy of Archival & Special Collections, University of Guelph. L.M. Montgomery Collection, XZ5 MS A001.

- 1 Montgomery, *SJ* 2 (29 Mar. 1919): 312.
- 2 Rubio, *Lucy Maud Montgomery* 272.
- 3 Montgomery, *SJ* 2 (7 Feb. 1919): 294; emphasis in original.
- 4 Montgomery, *SJ* 2 (7 Dec. 1914): 157.
- 5 Montgomery *CJ* 2 (3 Mar. 1905): 123.
- 6 Montgomery *CJ* 2 (8 Feb. 1905): 122.
- 7 Montgomery *CJ* 2 (7 Feb. 1905): 122 and (14 Apr. 1905): 127.
- 8 Rubio 104.
- 9 Rubio 106.
- 10 Rubio 146–47; Gammel, *Looking* 198–99.
- 11 Montgomery *CJ* 2 (26 Dec. 1909): 246; emphasis in the original.

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