

# Searching for Home: The Lives of Lucy Maud Montgomery

A Brief Biography of Lucy Maud Montgomery by Prof. Mary Rubio

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A novelist, diarist, short story writer, and poet, Lucy Maud Montgomery was born in New London, Prince Edward Island on November 30th, 1874, one year after PEI had joined the Canadian Confederation. Lucy Maud was the daughter of Clara Woolner (Macneill) and Hugh John Montgomery. Montgomery's mother died when she was 21 months old. She was raised by her Macneill grandparents in Cavendish, PEI, an inbred, tightly knit, flourishing rural Scottish community built up by three generations of her ancestors. Her Montgomery and Macneill ancestors had come from Scotland in the early 1770's, over a hundred years before her birth. Among the first wave of English-speaking Scottish immigrants, they were of a wealthier and more educated class than the Highlanders of later migrations, and they were deeply involved in the development of Prince Edward Island.

Montgomery's great-grandfather, William Simpson Macneill, served from 1814 to 1834 in the provincial legislature, becoming Speaker of the House of Assembly. Her grandfather Donald Montgomery served in the provincial legislature from 1832 to 1874; he was a senator in the federal government from 1873 to 1893. Because her family had been so prominent, she grew up feeling deeply rooted in the land and society.

Montgomery's "Island" was a 19th-century society dominated by settlers from Britain, predominantly Scots with a strong work ethic. In rural settlements like her Cavendish, the rhythms of nature controlled the rhythms of human life; rigorous religious practice — Scottish Presbyterianism in Montgomery's case — provided the community ethos; the church and the school were the hubs of social activity; a lending library provided cultural enrichment; the Island's newspapers were a provincial forum for lively political and intellectual discourse; there was a community hall for outside lecturers and local events. Notions of old-world class permeated social thought, but class was determined by how long one's ancestors had been on the Island and by how important they were. Montgomery felt herself to be of the elite on both counts.

The Scottish traditions of oral storytelling and reverence for book learning were powerful influences on Montgomery. As a child, she grew up hearing her grandfather Macneill reciting poems by Robert Burns, as well as turning local events into his own stories and poems. The Bible provided another rich literary field. She had access to more books in her home than was usual in this era, including assorted history and informational books as well as the Royal Readers of her aunts and uncles, Sir Walter Scott's novels and poems, Robert Burns's poetry, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, L.M. Alcott's *Little Women*, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*.

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The local lending library furnished many other books, as did her uncle, the Rev. Leander Macneill, who visited every summer. Her grandmother subscribed to Godey's Ladies' Book, a compendium of fashion plates and patterns, fiction and articles of interest to women. Maud Montgomery, an imaginative child, had an exceptionally retentive memory and a love for "scribbling" and storytelling from an early age.

After taking a two-year teacher's degree in just one year at Charlottetown's Prince of Wales College, she taught in a rural school to finance a year at Dalhousie University. She taught for two more years in rural Island schools and churned out scores of stories and poems for a thriving North American periodical market. She was soon making enough money as a writer to quit teaching, and after her irascible grandfather died in 1898, she returned home to write full-time; she lived with her aging grandmother, Lucy Ann Woolner Macneill, throughout the next decade (except for a winter-long stint of newspaper work in Halifax). These years (1898-1911) with her grandmother were ones of astonishing literary productivity.

In 1908 she published her first novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, which she had begun when Reverend Ewan Macdonald, the new Presbyterian minister in Cavendish, started courting her. *Anne* and its sequels moved her into international best-sellerdom. By the end of the Great War in 1919, Montgomery's name was a household word all over the English-speaking world.

After her grandmother's death in 1911, she married Ewan Macdonald, who by then was preaching in Ontario. They honeymooned in Scotland, a country romantically enhanced in her imagination by her reading of Scottish historical and "kailyard" novels. Her marriage, which brought her two beloved sons, was a disaster: her husband was frequently incapacitated for long periods by a severe mental disorder, which prevented his professional advancement. For 15 years they lived in the rural community of Leaskdale (near Uxbridge) and then moved to another similar charge called Norval (near Georgetown), where he preached until forced to resign in 1935. They retired in Toronto on the proceeds of Montgomery's income. Montgomery died in Toronto on April 24th, 1942.

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