

L. M. Montgomery

and the 100th Anniversary of Anne of Green Gables

by Deborah Quaille

Pinkerton and Priceville could have had a famous author move to their midst in 1919 when Rev. Ewan Macdonald preached for a call at the joint congregations. His wife, Maud, was intrigued with the opportunity: These villages in Grey County were deeply rooted with Scottish pioneer stock, and both her family and her husband's held the same values and convictions.

It's not known whether the communities knew much about the minister's personal life — his children, his interests, or even his wife's claim to fame. Because Maud Macdonald, as she was known in their current Presbyterian parishes in Leaskdale and Zephyr, was actually world-famous author L. M. Montgomery.

The Prince Edward Island born writer had a short career as a schoolteacher and penned poems, short stories and articles for various Canadian and American publications. In 1904 Maud had been searching for material to write up a Sunday School serial when she came upon an idea in her notebook that suggested an elderly couple could apply to an orphanage for a boy and by mistake they are sent a girl instead. The concept suddenly became so engaging that the character and storyline were too broad to confine to a serial, and Maud decided it was time that she tried writing a novel.

Anne of Green Gables was born, but not fully christened. The manuscript was sent out time after time to publishers and consistently rejected. Maud disappointedly pitched it in storage where it languished for a couple of years until she rediscovered it while spring cleaning. Surely, she thought, if it captured her imagination, it should do so with readers. Out it went again, this time to the L.C. Page Company in Boston. To Maud's delight, the firm decided to publish the story and she received her first printed book in the mail on June 20, 1908.

The novel was a stunning success. It quickly sold out several reprints, and instead of living only as a children's story, it was read by countless adults as well. Earl Grey, Canada's Governor General, requested to meet Montgomery and purchased numerous copies to give to friends. American author Mark Twain declared Anne the sweetest child in fiction since the immortal Alice. And Maud's reading public clamoured for more "Anne" books and related stories.

"People ask me how I came to create Anne. I didn't create her. She simply sprang into being in my mind, all ready created - Anne, spelled with an e, red-haired, dreamy-eyed

and elfin-faced. Yet she seemed so real to me that when I tell people that she is 'entirely fictitious' I have the uncomfortable feeling that I am not telling the truth," Maud said in an article with *The Chatelaine* in January 1935.

Unfortunately for Grey County, Rev. Macdonald and his famous wife never moved to the area.

Priceville did not call him, Maud wrote in her journal in April 1921. Pinkerton wanted to, but after being there he did not like it and declined. After a little more searching, the family was enthusiastically accepted by the joint charge of Norval and Union Presbyterian Churches, Halton, between the years of 1926-1935.

However, Maud was occasionally drawn to Grey and Bruce for artistic engagements. On November 6, 1935 she visited Owen Sound.

"...I stayed until Thursday to speak at a banquet ... These little outings I enjoy. The ten dollars and expenses I get do not pay for the loss of time but one must have a bit of a change once in a while."

On November 5, 1936, she went to Goderich to speak to a banquet of CGITs, and when Lucknow's library sponsored a book fair on March 15, 1939 — a new concept created by Canadian Bookman two years earlier — Maud was invited to participate in the program.

In retirement Rev. Macdonald ventured into the area when he was asked to supply preach at Markdale on June 23, 1935, but by then the family had moved to a house on the Humber River, Toronto.

L.M. Montgomery died in April 1942 and was taken to her native Prince Edward Island to be buried, but her memory is still very much alive in Ontario, the province in which she spent about half of her life.

Throughout 2008 there are many L.M. Montgomery and "Anne" related events and releases. Penguin has released a 100th anniversary edition of *Anne of Green Gables* as well as a prequel authorized by the heirs of L.M. Montgomery, written by Nova Scotia children's author Budge Wilson. Al-



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though *Before Green Gables* is not written in the same style as Montgomery, it has been attracting good reviews.

Canada Post has released two new stamps, one with Anne and one of Green Gables. The Canadian Mint has released a colour image of Anne on a collector's edition quarter.

On September 7, the Eden Mills Writers' Festival in Wellington County will feature Mary Rubio, official biographer of L.M. Montgomery (the official biography is due out in October), and Elizabeth Waterston, co-editor of the author's journals. As well, the University of Guelph will hold a conference on the famous writer in October.

Anne of Green Gables is a significant milestone in Canadian literary history. The book is as popular today as when it was first published, with over 50 million copies sold worldwide in over 40 languages. L.M. Montgomery remains Canada's best-selling author of all time.

After 100 years, it seems that the public still can't get enough of all things "Anne."

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