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# Old Memories and New Ambitions

*Of late I have been reading over this foolish old journal from the first and seeing the effect all my various experiences have had on me much more clearly than when I lived them.*

*I was fourteen when I began it. Before that time I had kept a little childish diary in various "notebooks" since I was nine. When I grew older I burned them. I shall always regret having done so for they would have been interesting to me now. But I remember my childhood with great vividness.*

*—L. M. Montgomery, May 3, 1908, journal entry<sup>1</sup>*

In later years, Maud would often repeat that her earliest memory was of her mother's coffined body displayed in the parlor of her maternal grandparents, the Macneills. The mental picture was a flashback to September 1876. The toddler in her father's arms was too young to mourn, but she remembered touching Clara Montgomery's white face, and would never forget its chill. The fatal illness, consumption, had ravaged Clara's body but had apparently spared her beauty. Over time, Maud would embellish the memory of her mother resting in her coffin, beautiful with long silken lashes and golden-brown hair. She had inherited both. Many times, Maud would sit in the old rocking chair in the Macneill parlor, replaying this defining moment of her life. It was the moment her family fell apart; the moment her future was determined. And she was too young to realize the portentousness of the scene.

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After Clara's death, Maud's father traveled first across the Island, and then to Boston and across Canada in search of a job, leaving the toddler for her grandmother to raise. Maud's status as an unloved "charity child" was a deep wound on her sensitive psyche, but also became part of a mythology she actively shaped in her journal, as in the unpublished entry of May 3, 1908, just one month before the publication of *Anne of Green Gables*.

I was a dreamy, delicate child, very impulsive, heedless, shrinking from an unkind or sarcastic word as from a blow—and I received many such for Uncle John never lost an opportunity of saying something unkind to me and grandfather was also very hard on me. The latter did not mean to be, I think—but he was extremely irritable and had no consideration for the feelings of anyone.<sup>2</sup>

The hardships of a child forced inward for stimulus and consolation was the story Maud would tell and retell. It was a central theme in the story of her life as a writer—a rationale for self-involvement and self-centeredness. She sketched the compelling portrait of a little companionless girl locked in a strict Presbyterian household and stifled in her emotional life; imprisoned within the mausoleum of reluctant old-age parenting; ultimately pulled in different directions by her rebelling youthful spirit and her desire to fit in with the people who provided her a home. It was the story of adversity and mental exile as she grew up in a large family clan that would implant not only feelings of loyalty and pride, but also loneliness and resentment. For the rest of her life she would be torn between the demands of duty and desire, conformity and rebellion, adult stricture and youthful yearning, without ever being able to resolve them.

### *Childhood Memories*

She was raised in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, by aging grandparents: her literary yet irritable grandfather Alexander Marquis Macneill, and her reserved yet loyal grandmother Lucy Ann Woolner Macneill.

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There were many uncles and aunts and cousins, including the children of her maternal grandparents, such as Uncle John and his family, who were the next-door neighbors farming the fields; Uncle Leander, a minister who came visiting each year during the summer; and Aunt Emily, who took care of Maud when she was a little child. The clan members all felt the need to help raise and correct the perceived foibles of Clara's dreamy little daughter. They were constantly "nagging" her, as the adult Maud described these collective efforts to mold her personality. As she would later assert, "big family connections are by no means a wholly good thing. They produce too much heart-burning and jealousy."<sup>3</sup> In recounting her childhood, the adult Maud would emphasize her isolation from the Cavendish townspeople. Her cranky grandparents quarreled with the community, they passed on as truths what she later recognized as prejudices, and they kept her isolated at home. Nor did Maud recall enjoying her first experiences of school life at age six: "I was an extremely sensitive child and such, I think, have always a hard time in a public school."<sup>4</sup>

"Looking back now," she added, "I see clearly how unwholesome it was and how easily it might have ruined forever the disposition of so sensitive, 'highly strung' a child." So detrimental was the influence, her later journal account implies, that she was marred and scarred by the experience: "I received an impression of which to this day I have never been able quite to rid myself—that everybody disliked me and that I was a very hateful person." She concluded that a "more unfortunate impression could hardly be made on a child's mind."<sup>5</sup> And yet these very circumstances also endowed her with a sense of pride and a sense of her own difference. Just as imaginative Anne is a little odd, and Emily Byrd Starr is "queer," so Maud was a little odd and wrapped up in herself.

And thus she was perhaps meant to become a writer. For she took refuge from her loneliness in books, retreating into a world of the imagination: she found companions in the trees surrounding the homestead, who became lifelong friends and whose demise would later fill her with more anguish than the deaths of some family members; she created imaginary friends who had names and personalities and who talked back to her in the oval glass of the bookcase in her grandmother's sitting room, a scene she would replay in *Anne of Green Gables*. Her imagined world seemed more lively and real than the world of prosaic farm chores

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involving cows and pigs and chickens, or the even more mundane household chores of washing dishes and cleaning the floor.

When Aunt Emily married, the Macneill parlor became the setting for an emotional scene when little Maud cried bitter tears. The marriage meant the loss of a close contact and the increased loneliness of staying alone with the Macneill grandparents. Presumably Maud would have slept with Aunt Emily, as was the custom during the era. Yet Emily's absence was soon filled by the fortunate arrival of two orphan boys, Wellington (Well) and David (Dave) Nelson of Rustico, who boarded with the Macneills from around 1882 to 1885. They were a godsend to the lonely, friendless Maud, and the seven-year-old was particularly attracted to the handsome Well, who was her own age and whose birthday was just a week after hers in December. Together they would go to the spruce woods and pick blobs of yellow chewing gum from the lichened boughs, an exquisite pleasure; she would always remember its sweet nutty flavor and its change of color from clear sunlight yellow to creamy pink when chewed.<sup>6</sup>

Some winter Well and Maud "took to 'writing stories out of our own heads,'" such as Well's "The Battle of the Partridge-Eggs" in which the characters are cast into dungeons full of snakes and die predictably tragic deaths.<sup>7</sup> The story-writing experience would fuel an entire chapter ("The Story Club Is Formed") in *Anne of Green Gables* two decades later. The Nelson orphans, "although brought up in a nominally Christian family, were veritable little heathens, knowing almost nothing about God or a future state"<sup>8</sup> (just like Anne, who has little conception of religion). Instead they had a firm and rooted belief in ghosts: they named the spruce grove below the orchard "The Haunted Wood" and came to believe that it really was haunted; victims of a self-induced terror, they imagined falling into the clutches of a "white thing." (Here was the original plot for "A Good Imagination Gone Wrong": "Oh, Marilla, I wouldn't go through the Haunted Wood after dark now for anything, I'd be sure that white things would reach out from behind the trees and grab me." "Fiddlesticks!," said Marilla and commanded the terrified Anne to march through the forest.)<sup>9</sup>

"They were the nicest playmates I ever had," Maud later noted in her journal. "Well and Dave were as brothers to me. We used to have glorious fun together."<sup>10</sup> Yet after three years the fun came to an abrupt end. When she was eleven the Nelson boys disappeared suddenly and unexpectedly

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without even saying good-bye. Perhaps Grandmother Macneill had arranged it so, trying to avoid another tearful departure scene with Maud. And thus the closest people in Maud's young life seemed to have a way of disappearing without warning. The permanence of friendship could not be relied on and separation always seemed to leave a sense of unexplained mystery. The many goodbyes of her childhood, though, also prompted her writing and the resurrecting of the nostalgic childhood memory.

In fact, in Maud's childhood, it was the relationship with her absent father Hugh John Montgomery, nicknamed Monty, that created the deepest sense of loss and the most powerful dream of togetherness. The unpublished journal passage of May 3, 1908, in which the adult Maud discusses her childhood love for her father is worth quoting at length:

Father came occasionally to see me and his visits were bright spots for me. I loved him so deeply and felt myself beloved in return. I think now that grandfather and grandmother resented this very love of mine for him. They saw that I did not turn to them with the outgush of affection I gave him. And it was true—I did not. But it was their own fault. I know now that they loved me after a fashion. But they never expressed or showed that love in word or action. I never thought they loved me. I felt that the only person in the world who loved me was father. Nobody else ever kissed me and caressed me and called me pet names. So I gave all my love to him in those years. And my grandparents did not like it. They thought that, as they were giving me a home and food and clothes and care that I ought to have loved them best.<sup>11</sup>

It would become a central conflict for Maud: on the one hand, the imagined ideal of family and love, longed for but seemingly never within her reach as a stable foundation; and on the other, the real, tangible family life with her grandparents and extended clan so profoundly imperfect as to be painful, making her reluctant to attach the word love to it. The impact of her mother's death and her unrequited dream about reconnecting with her father left a cavernous void. With pen in hand she took charge of her destiny, dreaming up a better existence in her head and making it "real" by putting pen to paper and chalk to slate.

*Putting Together the Fragments: The Birth of the Writer*

Indeed, it seemed that she was always busy putting the fragments of her life together in writing. As she would later assert in her memoir *The Alpine Path*, there never was a time when she did not remember writing. No doubt there was something to Prince Edward Island, the unyielding and addictive grip of the winds, the pungent scent of the firs, the glorious colors of the old orchards, even the blowing hurricanes and spitting snow. There was something about the people, salt-of-the-earth, tell-it-like-it-is, with a quick eye for singling out those “from away.” And, finally, there was something about herself, perhaps her dreamy loneliness, that destined her to become a writer. Like Emily, little Maud wrote biographies of her cats, she wrote letters to her father, and she would write effusive love poetry to her girlfriends. Repressed and conflicted Maud found her most honest and enduring emotional outlet in her creative writing.

At the same time, Maud’s desire to be a writer was never purely idealistic. A kernel of L. M. Montgomery’s often-told legend is the romantic story of clipping a little poem, *The Fringed Gentian*, in her portfolio as inspiration on her journey to become a writer. The poem is about a woman’s dream to “climb the alpine path” and become a famous poet. She named her memoir after it and would cite it in her autobiographical novel *Emily of New Moon*. Drawn from *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, a Philadelphia fashion magazine, to which her grandmother subscribed, the poem appears in Ella Rodman Church and Augusta De Bubna’s “Tam! The Story of a Woman.”

In March 1884, at age nine, Maud would have been turning the crisp pages, whose smell blended with the smell of Grandmother Macneill’s good bread, when her breath caught in her throat, as her fingers ran across the lines: “Do you think I have any right to expect—when I have had more practice I mean—to receive pay for my verses? Actual *money*, as for a marketable merchandise?”<sup>12</sup> The question is asked by Tam Powell, a fictional country girl living in the backwoods of Pennsylvania, who writes poetry in secret. That one could write for *money* was a stunning revelation. This pragmatic attitude toward literature would fuel Maud’s transformation into an ambitious and self-promoting author capable of launching herself from rural Cavendish onto the world stage. As much as

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the pleasure of writing, the idea of fame and self-sufficiency would become the drive that would give her writing distinct motivation and direction. Nothing less than rivaling the Brontës, as she later admitted, was the dream of her girlhood.

In her approach to publishing, Maud was driven by a pragmatism that we will see reflected in the practical Marilla Cuthbert or the hands-on Mrs. Rachel Lynde. She realized early on that dreamy poetry needed shrewd packaging to succeed in the world. To be successful as a professional writer, she required a stimulus from the wider world, which arrived at the Macneill kitchen in Mr. Crewe's mailbag. The mailbag always contained a magazine or two, which Maud read before it was picked up by its owner. As a girl, she read *Wide Awake*, a children's magazine with wonderful stories that inspired her to name her cats after the characters (Topsy, Pussywillow, and Catkin). She even read *Little Lord Fauntleroy* in the *Montreal Witness*.

According to her own journal account, at the tender age of twelve or thirteen, she secretly sent a poem to *The Household* magazine of Boston to which her grandmother had a subscription.<sup>13</sup> When it came back, she was crushed, but not deterred. As a teenager she shared her dream of becoming a writer with Nate Lockhart, her high-school sweetheart, a gifted writer, a kindred spirit, and the first boy, at age fifteen, to declare his love. The two were constantly writing epistles to each other that Maud would read underneath the school maples. But like the writerly heroines in *Godey's Lady's Book*, Maud would forego marriage to claim her independence as a woman and a writer; in lieu of an engagement ring, she secured her first published poem in the Charlottetown *Patriot*. Over the years she suffered dramatic setbacks, but the determination in her gray eyes was as steely as the North Atlantic just before it whirls into a gale. At age eighteen, she was thrilled when *The Ladies World* of New York offered to publish her poem "The Violet's Spell." She would never forget the moment when she received the envelope with the acceptance letter during her college year in Charlottetown. Over the following years, her name flashed in modest print through the pages of *Munsey's*, *The Delineator*, *Ainslee's*, *McClure's*, *Lippincott's*, and *Ladies Journal*, and each time she felt that strange excitement tingling through her nerves. These New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Toronto magazines were the rungs of the ladder she climbed to success.

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The old Cavendish post office was central to her writing and was her connection with the wider world. Grandmother Macneill was the post-mistress and Maud was her assistant. Today you can see the old desk with the pigeon-hole slots, the delicate scales used to gauge the weight of letters and parcels, and the stamp, bearing the round legend “Cavendish, PEI,” displayed at the old homestead bookstore. Many writers, like Jane Austen, with whom Maud is often compared, began by writing for family and friends, testing their literature within an intimate circle before offering it to a publisher. In Jane Austen’s case, her father was not only one of the first readers and critics of her work, but also the person who first approached a publisher. In Maud’s case, her great-aunt Mary Lawson, the sister of her much-maligned maternal grandfather Alexander Marquis Macneill, seems to have provided some support for her writing, and she credits the Macneill family with their literary prowess. Maud loved listening to Aunt Mary tell the tales of the early years of the province colored by the sayings and doings and recollections of youth. Prince Edward Island also has an old and rich tradition of oral storytelling, and stories of the sea, of people and places, as well as ghost stories were popular. In 1901, Maud worked for half a year as a “newspaper woman” for the *Halifax Echo*, writing a column under her pen name Cynthia. Maud’s ambitious drive was evident at an early age when she began testing her fiction and poetry on the world stage. To protect herself from the sneers of disapproving family members such as Grandmother Macneill or Uncle John, proud Maud erected a wall of silence concerning her failures and strategically revealed only her successes.

“New York is the metropolis of Canada as well as of this country,” a book reviewer wrote in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* during the mid-eighteen-nineties. “There has never been a literary separation.”<sup>14</sup> During the last decade of the nineteenth century, New York became a magnet for a number of important Canadian writers who could not find appropriate publishing outlets in Canada. Maud was familiar with the work of “the Canadian Tennyson” Bliss Carman, and “the Longfellow of Canada” Charles G. D. Roberts, both Maritime poets who had moved to Manhattan and become popular icons in the metropolis. New Brunswick writer May Agnes Fleming had similarly gone to Brooklyn and become a sensational bestseller. So had many others.<sup>15</sup> In *Emily Climbs*, the Canadian-born New

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York editor Janet Royal offers Emily, Maud's alter ego, the chance to work in New York: "You must have the stimulus of association with great minds—the training that only a great city can give. Come with me. If you do, I promise you that in ten years' time Emily Byrd Starr will be a name to conjure with among the magazines of America."<sup>16</sup> Emily is tempted, but resists, and Janet Royal's prediction is dire: "...the big editors won't look farther than the address of P.E. Island on your manuscript. Emily, you're committing literary suicide."<sup>17</sup>

*Climbing Literary Heights: The Years Before Anne*

In 1903, twenty-eight-year-old Maud was far removed from New York, the epicenter of literary power. Would she be able to climb literary heights from the obscurity of Cavendish? Or would she remain on the sidelines, never getting to play the game? Around this time, she began to recruit kindred spirits in a kind of virtual writer's space, casting a net of professional pen friends that would include Gerald Carlton, a writer of dime novels in New York, Lucy Lincoln Montgomery, an elderly poet and short story writer in Boston, and two younger novice writers, Ephraim Weber in Alberta and George Boyd MacMillan in Scotland, who would become life-long friends. To the last, the twenty-nine-year-old Maud introduced herself with a fib: "I am 26 years old and like yourself have been scribbling all my life." Writing on December 29, 1903, a month after her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, she elegantly rejuvenated herself.<sup>18</sup> She proudly asserted to be Canadian born and bred with ancestry from Scotland. She was "in literature" to make her living out of it, she confided. A "good workman," with a knack for lucrative juvenile fiction, she had become an expert at formula stories.

We can glean from their correspondence that by this time Maud had seventy periodicals on her list of potential publishers. These she shared with MacMillan, noting the kind of stories the editors would be interested in. Like a New York stockbroker, she studied the market and recorded the rise of her income. That year she had made \$500 from her writing, as she noted in her journal in December, the equivalent of a male stenographer's yearly income in New York. She was being listed by several

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magazines as one of “the well known and popular’ contributors for the coming year.” The Presbyterian Board of Publications in Philadelphia was asking her for an autographed photo. And she had finally triumphed over those family and community members who had disparaged her writing. “The *dollars* have silenced them. But I have not forgotten their sneers. My own perseverance has won the fight for me in the face of all discouragements,” she concluded with a trace of vindictiveness in her journal.<sup>19</sup> And yet a note of self-doubt rings clear as a bell in her December 29, 1903, letter to MacMillan: “I know that I can never be a really great writer.”<sup>20</sup>

Still, strong-willed Maud had more on her mind than little Sunday School stories. Frustrated and restless, she was hard at work honing her literary skills, secretly pushing forward with her ambition—her dream of a novel. Around the turn of the century, Maud had made her first attempt at writing a full-length book. She called it *A Golden Carol*. Set in Halifax Ladies’ College, a residential school in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which Maud had attended from 1895 to 1896, its conventional heroine was modeled after the popular Christian stories for children, the Pansy books of her childhood. Punned from the character’s name Carol Golden, its ill-starred title seemed to betray that the writing was caught in the golden cage of formula fiction. The novel was uninspired. It preached. Its ending was predictable. The book failed to find a publisher, not because it wasn’t a good story, as Maud later realized, but because the heroine, a goody-goody type, lacked life and spunk. Maud shuddered to think that even the Sunday school publishers had passed on the manuscript. But she never regretted burning the flawed book. As she would much later realize, “It was the re-action drove me to ‘Anne’ and probably kept me from making a dummy of her.”<sup>21</sup>

Maud was ready to write about a different kind of heroine: not the goody-goody formula fiction girl of *A Golden Carol*, but one with depth and humanity—one more like Maud herself, and the heroine needed a face, as Maud revealed in a stunning disclosure almost three decades after writing *Anne*, on the day before her sixtieth birthday, a day when Lucy Maud Montgomery enjoyed the new Hollywood movie adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables* in Toronto’s Uptown Theatre on bustling Yonge Street. Maud thought that the actress Dawn O’Day looked like she imagined Anne.<sup>22</sup> Her journal reminiscences that same night included a truly fascinating revelation and clue as to how *Anne of Green Gables* came about.

### *The “Original” Anne*

On the evening of November 29, 1934, writing in her home in Norval, Ontario, Maud put the clipping of a young girl in her journal. The dreamy beauty, Maud said in a remarkably belated revelation, was the model for Anne’s face when she was writing the novel decades earlier. “I wonder,” she mused, “if she ever read of *Anne*, never dreaming that, physically, she was the original!”<sup>23</sup>

The memorable photograph shows a richly textured face in which the play of light and shadow tells a story. The girl’s big, dark eyes are rapt with just a tinge of melancholy. Light floods her face. A satiny band accentuates her forehead. The girl wears two large chrysanthemums in her hair. When I examined the original clipping in L. M. Montgomery’s personal papers at the University of Guelph Archives in Ontario, I could see the care with which she had put the clipping in her journal, using old-fashioned photographic corners to frame the picture. I also traveled to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. where, after even more intense security checks than in Guelph, I was able to examine the still-unprocessed papers of photographer Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr. Along with the original photograph, I found a gorgeous color poster of the early-twentieth-century model and beauty icon.

Who was the mystery girl? “I have no idea who she was or where she lived,” Maud claimed, but insisted that she was a “real girl somewhere in the U.S.”<sup>24</sup> And since Maud had a way of forgetting and confusing names and dates, often cutting and pasting little snippets from magazines and sticking them pell-mell into her portfolio and notebooks, it is difficult to determine if she knew her identity or not.

In fact, the face belonged to Evelyn Nesbit, at the time a teenage model in New York who was one of the era’s leading beauty icons and was also one of the famous Gibson Girls. While Evelyn’s name was first identified by co-editor Wendy E. Barry in *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables* in 1997, we know very little about this picture’s role in the creation of Maud’s novel. Maud tells us that the American beauty arrived at the Macneill homestead between the covers of a magazine, but she does not say which magazine. Neither does she tell us when she first saw her. These mysteries pose the question of when Anne first entered Maud’s

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mind. Knowing the date of the arrival of that picture allows us an important entry point into the enigma of Anne's birth. To explore the history of the photograph that inspired Anne's face, one must look back at the early years of the century in New York City, a world very different from the world of Green Gables.