

Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings By Mary Henley Rubio

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Volume 101, numéro 2, fall 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065626ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065626ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Comacchio, C. (2009). Compte rendu de [*Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings* By Mary Henley Rubio]. *Ontario History*, 101(2), 261–262.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065626ar>

*Lucy Maud Montgomery:
The Gift of Wings*

By Mary Henley Rubio

Doubleday Canada, 2008. 684 pages. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-385-65983-3 (www.randomhouse.ca)

Over the past twenty years or so, literary scholar Mary Rubio has achieved international standing as the foremost expert on the life and work of Lucy Maud Montgomery, who is herself, historically, our best-known literary figure. In this thorough, careful and masterful biography, Rubio affirms the merit of both these designations.

In many ways Maud, as she preferred to be known, is the ideal biographical subject. She effectively wrote her own life story, commencing with the beloved Anne tales, with their autobiographical elements of setting and circumstance—the spirited Prince Edward Island orphan’s tales fairly encapsulate the author’s own childhood—through her detailed journals covering the span of her adult life until her death in 1942. To add to this already substantial collection of literary, private and public records, Montgomery very helpfully set about collecting, collating and annotating any number of private documents, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and other such bits of evidence that constitute a personal archive of enormous significance. What Montgomery assiduously left behind is nothing short of a treasure trove of the kind that biographers and historians rarely have the good fortune to uncover on their own.

At the same time, of course, the very existence of this cache, and especially the deliberate manner in which it was selected, collected and sorted for posterity by the subject herself, raises all kinds of challenges for those looking to deepen, in Rubio’s words, Maud’s own compelling account of her life. Yet Rubio succeeds admirably. As much as emotional distance can be expected or even



desired of a biographer, especially one so long and deeply immersed in her subject’s life and work, Rubio presents a sympathetic but not uncritical examination of what it meant to be Maud.

Montgomery’s real life belied her attempts to sort and order its unfolding. Her international celebrity status—*Anne of Green Gables* (1908) was an instant success both in Canada and abroad, an unprecedented feat for Canadian artists—was not instantly matched by critical applause at home. In fact, the adulation of readers, both children and adults, in and outside of Canada, often met with the

sort of derisive response by contemporary literary critics that eventually amounted to the dismissal of her work. The most vocal of these found Montgomery's writing banal, nostalgic, moralistic and anti-modernist; they found it irrelevant in a period of rapid, intensive modernization and subject to the Great War's impact, and suitable only for children. As an unmarried, successful author, Montgomery typified the new woman of her time, able to forge her own path in a patriarchal society that left little space for women to do so. Yet Maud embodied the gendered social expectations of her time. In her late thirties she very much looked forward to marriage with the difficult, depressive Ewan Macdonald, and transplanted herself to small-town Ontario to fill the traditional private and public roles of respectable pastor's wife and mother of two sons. Rubio capably demonstrates the ways in which her subject exercised agency, actively choosing certain literary, business, personal and familial pathways. In short, Maud was acting as the heroine of her own story, all the while confined and restricted by a culture still rigid in its understanding of the proper demeanour and vocation of middle-class women. The portrait that emerges is a fittingly complex one. It suggests how Maud came to be shaped by her times and circumstances and also took an active part in her own shaping as a writer and public figure—loved as L.M. Montgomery, creator of the irrepressible Anne and other novels, short stories and poems.

The structure of *The Gift of Wings* is also very effective. The chapters reflect Montgomery's life-stages as well as the stages of her writing life across the four geographic locations that constituted home: Prince Edward Island (1874-1911), Leaskdale, Ontario (1911-26), Norval, Ontario (1926-35) and, finally, Toronto (1935-42). Rubio dis-

cusses for each locale the essential personal issues as well as the public ones that affected Maud's life and work: in her family, her community, the nation and the world. This method of organization allows for a careful tracing of the ways in which life and work, the real and the imagined, the personal and the historical, intersect in the development of a woman at once both ordinary and yet unquestionably extraordinary. Especially rich in insight is Rubio's treatment of Montgomery's difficult marriage to Macdonald, a depressive man probably misdiagnosed and over-medicated, and anguish concerning her wayward and unstable oldest son, Chester. Then there was Maud's own struggles with 'melancholia,' and the impact of this troubled family life on the 'good' younger son, Stuart, whose memories inform the larger story. All the more impressive, then, was her continued dedication to writing despite these personal troubles, financial exploitation by publishers, and her increasing marginalization on the Canadian literary scene. The personal costs were possibly higher than we can even know. In the time since publication of *The Gift of Wings*, family members have suggested that Montgomery committed suicide.

Over the course of some 600 pages, Rubio's Maud exhibits enormous strength of character and will, but also the flaws and vulnerabilities that make hers a regular life and thus deserving of compassionate admiration. This biography offers a multilayered study of an individual's development as a woman and a writer that is also a fascinating glimpse of the social and cultural trends unfolding in a young nation during the tumultuous life and times of Lucy Maud Montgomery.

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