

## Book Review

Jane Ledwell and Jean Mitchell, eds.

*Anne Around the World: L. M. Montgomery and Her Classic.*

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. 230 pp.

L. M. Montgomery's immensely popular children's classic, *Anne of Green Gables*, originally published in 1908, has acquired considerable scholarly capital over the past twenty years. While many continue to assert that it is mere juvenile literature - good, mind you and wholesomely Canadian! - there are equal numbers who have insisted on its value as a classic and canonical text, one worthy of the full weight of the scholarly apparatus, and have proceeded to bring to it a wide range of critical approaches. At the same time, as many of the same scholars insist, the field of Montgomery Studies has become both international and actively engaged with the popular phenomenon of "Anne." According to the L.M. Montgomery Institute web-site - as quoted by Barbara Carman Garner - "Active engagement has replaced much of the former intolerance, indifference or hostility. The complex story of the coming together of these two audiences (the popular and the academic) is part of the Montgomery legacy to the Twenty-First Century publishing history and to readers around the world" (Ledwell and Mitchell 68).

A number of major works of critical scholarship published over the last two decades, including *Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture* (2002), *Anne's World: A New Century of Anne of Green Gables* (2010) and *Anne Around the World: L.M. Montgomery and Her Classic* (2013), are salient for their claims to mark new directions in the study of this now international literary classic, its author and the iconic red-haired heroine who has assumed a life of her own. Although all include readings of specific works by Montgomery - especially *Anne of Green Gables* - they also explore the popular and global cultural phenomenon of "Anne." And while many of the contributors to these volumes share a recognition of the fact that the global popularity of Anne, or what Benjamin Lefebvre calls "Anne afterlives," has been produced within "a complex multinational industry" (Gammel and Lefebvre), others continue to perpetuate what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "the charismatic representation of art."

A recognition of Anne's emergence within modern mass media is built into the title of *Making Avonlea: L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture*. Published in 2002, it is, as editor Irene Gammel tells us, "the first critical book examining the national and international popular industry that has emerged in Montgomery's name" (8), originating in the 2000 International L.M. Montgomery and Popular Culture Symposium at the L.M. Montgomery Institute at the University of Prince Edward Island. As Gammel writes in the introduction, the title overtly acknowledges that film and television have been crucial to making a Montgomery's books a global "mass culture phenomenon," especially the Sullivan Films/CBC/Disney co-production *Road to Avonlea* (10), which is the subject of four of the seven essays on "Viewing Avonlea: Film, Television, Drama and Musical." Likewise, for the editors of *Anne's World: A New Century of Anne of Green Gables* (2010), Irene Gammel and Benjamin Lefebvre, the mix of scholarly research and popular recognition, including studies of Anne in diverse media and cultural contexts, constitutes the new landscape of Montgomery Studies.

The scholarly negotiation of the popular on a global stage is especially notable - and problematic, I will argue - in *Anne Around the World* (2013), edited by Jane Ledwell (a writer and editor) and Jean Mitchell (a professor of anthropology), both based on Prince Edward Island. The volume is the product of the 8th biennial L. M. Montgomery Conference held in the book's centenary year 2008 at the University of Prince Edward Island on the theme of "L.M. Montgomery, Anne of Green Gables and the Idea of 'Classic'" (ix). The back cover blurb for the volume is suggestive of the editors' fraught navigation of classic status, popular appeal and international reach:

The popular appeal of Montgomery's classic is undeniable, but the reasons for its world-wide resonance are less obvious. From a range of perspectives, the contributors to *Anne Around the World* focus on the numerous themes the novel raises, showcasing why it has charmed readers across the globe - from Iran to Australia, and from Sweden to Japan.

In identifying the text's myterious power to "charm" readers around the world - indeed, we are also informed of the readers' "experience in enchantment" and tempted with "the sources of the wonder that Montgomery's work inspires" - the editors position readers less as agents of interpretation (that would be the experts) than as consumers of an acknowledged (by scholars of course) literary classic, a gesture reminiscent of Bourdieu's observations on popularity and charismatic representation in *The Field of Cultural Production*:

the charismatic representation of art experience never fulfils its function of mystifying so well as when it resorts to a 'democratic' language: to claim that works of art have power to awaken the grace of aesthetic enlightenment in anyone, however culturally uninitiated he or she may be, to presume in all cases to ascribe to the unfathomable

accidents of grace or to the arbitrary bestowal of 'gifts' aptitudes which are always the product of unevenly distributed education, and therefore to treat inherited aptitudes as personal virtues which are both natural and meritorious. (Bourdieu 237)

The scholars for their part deal not only with a range of celebratory themes - indulging the global masses, I suppose - but also with "issues of class, race, and colonial history," which curiously, it is asserted, explain why Anne has become popular around the world. The editors' promotional effort seeks to strike a balance between "criticism and celebration," here placing the presumably cutting-edge critical work alongside the global and the popular. Yet whether such political themes can account for Anne's popularity or indeed whether any intrinsic quality of a given work can explain its popularity is another matter, but one of serious concern. Suffice it to say that if sociologist Duncan J. Watts is to be believed, the popularity of goods, works of art or otherwise, depends less on their intrinsic qualities - the scholar's analytic stock in trade - than on "cumulative advantage," the tendency of popular works to gain in popularity, a social valuation where "individual choices aggregate to collective behavior" (Watts, Loc 1228 / 5093).

When we turn inside the volume to the editors' introduction, we are confronted with the usual editorial enthusiasm: celebratory themes and tone, and a measure of hyperbole, in addition to a few solid examples of Bourdieu's charismatic representation. Montgomery's success is narrativized as a unlikely rise from obscurity, an unforeseen popularity that, unaccountably, has reached sales of 50 million copies and translation into more than 30 languages. "This book," the editor's claim, "has powerfully influenced generations of readers and helped shape the identities not of Montgomery's readers around the world but also of her beloved Prince Edward Island and the fictional worlds of childhood" (3). Ironically, it is readers' avoidance of the categories of the institutionally consecrated literariness that has helped to facilitate Anne's global popularity: "[R]eaders of different ages and eras and diverse cultures," the editors tell us, "have read beyond literary conventions and the conventionalities of literary genre, style, and culture" (3), engaging directly with Anne and identifying with her experiences such that she has become "an icon of childhood cross time and across cultures" (4). So much, it would seem, for the scholarly consecration of literary works. Of course, it is the convening of academic conferences and the work of scholars, their consecration of works as worthy of serious attention that make possible the persistence of books on publishers' lists; and it is institutes like the L. M. Montgomery Institute, founded in 1993 as a forum for academics and fans, on the model of Wordsworth and Tennyson societies in England, that has enabled what founder Elizabeth Epperley calls "new forms of scholarship" (7). Precisely, what that is - aside from the invocation of "varied points of view" - is not spelled out by the editors. Nor are the fans anywhere in evidence among the mostly PhD-holding, university-based contributors.

Thankfully, the expert contributors to the volume do not all follow the editors' tendency to mystify the social and institutional production of Montgomery as author, of the text as classic or popular, or of Anne herself as international pop icon. The collection is divided into five sections: Situating Montgomery and Her Classic; The Terrain of the Classic: Allusions and Intertexts; Provoking the Classic: Class, Colonialism, and Christianity; The Local and the Global Circulation of the Classic Text; and Paratexts and Aftertexts: Further Words on Anne.

Constraints of space here permit me to focus only on contributions in the section on Class, Colonialism, and Christianity, those that, as the editors contend, present as "provocative and contentious" readings of the classic text. Caroline E. Jones's reading of class in Anne of Green Gables and other works informs us that while Montgomery's classic broke ground with its outspoken female protagonist, the author remained ambivalent about upsetting class arrangements, investing her authorial capital in a "'naturally' established order" based on "blood and breeding" (134). The novel's classic status, she tells us, rests to a large degree on its generic affiliations with the Cinderella story: "the idea of a virtuous woman restored to her rightful place is compelling," with Anne's confident transgressions of the local order of things enabled by her middle-class parents (144). Brooke Collins-Gearing's "Narrating the 'Classic' on Stolen Ground: Anne of Green Gables" takes Anne's invocation of "Abegweit," the Mik'maq word for today's Prince Edward Island, as a opportunity to meditate on the ghostly presence of indigenous peoples in the novel. An Australian-born scholar with Aboriginal heritage, Collins-Gearing treads carefully around Montgomery's cultural capital in her effort to unearth "how the idea of a children's classic has been built on possessing stolen land to construct an identity of national belonging" (165), confessing her worry about broaching the topic to "a massive room full of Montgomery fans, friends and followers" (166). Collins-Gearing argues that "Anne's scope for for imagination is privileged and cements her power within the colonial and imperial center," calling for a re-examination of "its power over the national imaginary" (176). Likewise, Jean Mitchell's contribution on missionary activity in 19th century Prince Edward Island provides a fascinating context for orphan Anne's education by Marilla and the discourses of religion circulating in the fictional Avonlea. The essay reveals not only how Anne's little island is connected to the broader world, including the civilizing mission of empire, but also how Anne herself is a figure both of "the imperial colonizing child" and a disturbing "other." In regard to the latter, Anne, lacking religion, is "next door to a perfect heathen," as Marilla says of her. Exploring the Montgomery family's connections to Presbyterian evangelicalism as well as the missionary activity of John and Charlotte Geddie, Mitchell asserts that as a "civilizing text," Anne of Green Gables was shaped by the stories of conversion and transformation circulated by local missionaries (159). At the same, it reveals Montgomery's ambivalence about religion

- her support for Presbyterianism tempered by her distrust of authoritarianism and narrow spirituality (151). The essays in this section of the volume complement each other and, taken together, not only add to our understanding of Montgomery and her times, but also suggest further issues to be explored in the broader field of children's literature. How does the early twentieth-century invention of adolescence by researchers such as Luther Gulick and G. S. Hall overlap with works like Montgomery's and with her contemporaries? Given the influential recapitulation theory of human evolutionary development then circulating - one could recall here Hall's famous contention that inside every boy was "a little Indian" - what are we to make of Anne as heathen, as primitive being or as imaginative child? Is children's literature itself, as recently argued, the offspring of Victorian debates about evolution? (See Straley) Likewise, could the global end-of-century growth in Anne's popularity be correlated with the growing market for children's literature and young adult fiction? And if so, is such a trend reflective of the so-called end of adolescence announced by researchers such as Paula S. Fass?

Ledwell and Mitchell's *Anne Around the World* attests to the considerable cultural capital accumulating around L. M. Montgomery and provide a wealth of insights for Montgomery scholars. In addition to the above-mentioned themes, Montgomery's novel is charted on its route to classic status; we learn of the events surrounding Montgomery's possible suicide by drug overdose; we glimpse Montgomery's standing as a conservative feminist revealed in her handling of an allusion to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*; and we hear testimonies on the reading and teaching of Anne in Sweden, Turkey, Uruguay, Iran and Japan. Yet the editorial effort to navigate the popular and global phenomenon of the books and of "Anne" is fraught with contradictions, namely, the desire, on the one hand, to consecrate a "timeless classic" and, on the other, the need to understand the text as product of its time, as a rich work capable of sustaining a variety of approaches. The "provocative and contentious" readings of Anne on class, colonialism and Christianity, however, offer little in the way of threat to Montgomery's rich store of cultural capital.

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