

Canada's Jane Austen

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[Next article of this series: The Great Lakes Poets—Lampman, Campbell and D. C. Scott.]

NO history of English literature is considered complete unless it gives due place to the work done by Jane Austen in her portrayal of rural English domestic life; and no history of Canadian literature, when such comes to be written, should fail to recognize that L. M. Montgomery has done for Canada what Jane Austen did for England.

L. M. Montgomery (now Mrs. (Rev.) Evan Macdonald) was born at Clifton, Prince Edward Island, and spent her childhood in Cavendish—a seashore farming settlement which figures as “Avonlea” in her stories. Like many another young Canadian she has to the credit of her experiences a few years as teacher in the schools of her province. That her life so far has been spent chiefly within the limits of the little island province and the bounds of an Ontario country parish does not narrow her outlook although it necessarily confines her to themes bounded by rural experiences, for her forte is the portrayal of what she has seen and knows. She has the imaginative and creative gifts, but she uses these in enabling us to see the beauty, the humour, and the pathos that lies about our daily paths.

“Anne of Green Gables”, which was Miss Montgomery’s first novel, has an interesting literary history. She tells us that upon being asked for a short serial story for a Sunday School weekly, she cast about for a plot idea. A faded note book entry suggested: “Elderly couple apply to orphan asylum for a boy; a girl is sent to them”. The writing of a serial was started, but time did not allow the author to complete it for the purpose intended. As she brooded over the theme it began to expand and the result was a book which may already be confidently labelled a “Canadian Classic”.

In Anne we have an entirely new character in fiction, a high-spirited, sensitive girl, with a wonderfully vivid imagination; wise beyond her years, outspoken and daring; not always good but always lovable. The basis of the story is already explained; its working out is somewhat different from the original suggestion. Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert, an elderly bachelor and his sister, living alone on the farm of Green Gables, send a message to an orphan asylum asking that a boy be sent