

A Woman's War

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The contemporary names given to what we now call World War I—the Great War, the war to end all wars—reflect a belief that the war that tore Europe apart from 1914 to 1918 was different from previous wars. Instead of naming it for a specific cause or location, contemporary observers defined it as new in scale, perhaps in response to the new technologies in use—airplanes, automobiles, tanks, poison gases. The scale of destruction possible, the number of combatants, the range of countries involved, all demanded a new way to talk about the combat. Much of the literature coming out of the war also reflected these changes. Poets such as Wilfred Owen described the horrors of trench warfare at first hand, leaving readers with few illusions about the “glory” of battle. From the point of view of those at home in Canada, the war could be a distant event of no significance or a personal tragedy as family members or friends enlisted. For L.M. Montgomery, the war was a tragedy of giant proportions, although none of her close associates were combatants. According to her journals, she followed the war news assiduously, was enraged at the reports of German atrocities, could not concentrate on her work when things were going badly, and longed for someone to share her intense reactions. Yet despite her awareness of what was happening in the towns and villages of Europe and her full appreciation of the destruction the war caused, when she writes about the war in *Rilla of Ingleside*, Montgomery romanticizes the period by organizing her novel around the experience of a young woman in Prince Edward Island and making her love story the centre of the plot. Further, by showing that the work performed by women in Canada during the war is merely an extension or intensification of their pre-war activities and by demonstrating how easily they come to regard the activities as “normal,” Montgomery suggests that the war does not change the social life and structures of the village in which her characters reside.

Montgomery wrote *Rilla of Ingleside* (1921) between 11 March 1919 and 24 August 1920. The main character, Rilla Blythe, is the youngest child of Anne Shirley and Gilbert Blythe, whose story Montgomery had already told in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), *Anne of the Island* (1915), *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), and *Rainbow Valley* (1919). While the characters and setting of *Rilla of Ingleside* draw on a fictional world Montgomery had already created, the emphasis and organization of the novel owe a great deal to two war memoirs that she had read and a war movie she had seen. The two memoirs, *My Home in the Field of Honour* by Frances Wilson Huard and *A Hilltop on the Marne* by Mildred Aldrich, are mentioned in her journal entry of 18 March 1917, where she describes *A Hilltop on the Marne* as “a quite delightful little thing, though lacking the charm of ‘My Home on the Field of Honor’ (sic)” (*SJ* II: 212). Montgomery records seeing DW Griffith's war movie *Hearts of the World* on 3 September 1918, going partly because her half-brother Carl had recognized in

one scene the site of a battle in which he had participated, and she describes the movie as “a wonderful thing” (*SJ* II: 267). In describing these works as “delightful” and “wonderful” Montgomery is ascribing to them characteristics not in keeping with expectations about accounts of the war. Although both *Hearts of the World* and *My Home in the Field of Honour* contain graphic depictions of battle, Montgomery is able to focus on the pleasure of seeing or reading them because the overall tendency of the works is to show continuity with a pre-war world that is happy, romantic, and pastoral. Because of her positive response to these works, the version of the home front experience Montgomery produces in *Rilla of Ingleside* draws on this cultural material about the war as much as on her own experience as recorded in her journals. All of these works show that during the war, women, whether near the battlefield or distant from it, perform the roles expected of them by their family and community, and since the expectations are based on class and gender, they rarely change their activities in kind, but only in intensity. Therefore, life in wartime, except when actually at the scene of battle, becomes simply an emotionally intensified version of normal life rather than a different type of life.

While she is very much in favour of the war and Canada's participation in it, Montgomery's journal records an intense emotional response to the war and engagement with war news and events that she tries to reproduce in her novel and which is reflected in her choice of incidents to use. For instance, Gertrude Oliver, the village school teacher, has prophetic dreams, as Montgomery did herself according to her journals. As well, the whole fictional household at Ingleside suffers as Montgomery did at news of particular setbacks and battles and in response to the reported atrocities in Belgium (*RI* 74; cf *SJ* II: 155) and the sinking of the *Lusitania* (*RI* 105-06; cf *SJ* II: 165-66). Montgomery's own excitement on receiving by telephone the news of Germany and Austria suing for peace and the response of her aunt as recorded in her journal are re-used in *Rilla of Ingleside*, except that it is Rilla who is so excited and a visitor who admonishes her in exactly the same words: “‘Sit down, child,’ said Mrs. Clow, who never got excited over anything and so had missed a tremendous amount of trouble and delight in her journey through life” (*RI* 266; cf *SJ* II: 269). In the novel Gertrude Oliver expresses Montgomery's idea that the world has changed when she comments on a Wordsworth poem that “Its classic calm and repose and the beauty of the lines seem to belong to another planet, and to have as little to do with the present world-welter as the evening star” (*RI* 153-54), echoing almost word for word a passage in Montgomery's journal (*SJ* II: 197). Montgomery also uses Gertrude Oliver to express her own hope for permanent change as a result of the war: “‘I wonder,’ said Gertrude dreamily, ‘if some great blessing, great enough for the price, will be the meed of all our pain? Is the agony in which the world is shuddering the birth-pang of some wondrous new era? Or is it merely a futile *struggle of ants/ In the gleam of a million million of suns?*’” (*RI* 165; cf *SJ* II:160). By assigning her own emotional responses to the war to various characters in her fictional account “of Canada at war” (*SJ* II: 404), Montgomery suggests that an emotional reaction and hope for change are common responses.

The plot and thematic development of *Rilla of Ingleside* and *Hearts of the World* suggest that there is little reason to expect change. Although *Hearts of the World* is set in France, the type of story it tells may well have influenced Montgomery's plotting of *Rilla of Ingleside* as simultaneously a romance and a story of a country at war. The film, subtitled “The Story of a Village: An old fashioned story with a new fashioned theme,” tells the story of the war through the experiences of two young Americans, Marie Stephenson and Douglas Hamilton, whose

families live next door to each other in a quiet French village. Similarly, *Rilla of Ingleside* opens with news of a village, as Susan Baker is reading the "Jottings from Glen St. Mary" (the village in which the characters reside), in the provincial newspaper. Before the war, both girls have been sheltered from responsibility. In *Hearts of the World* there is some emphasis on the domestic femininity of Marie's life: we see her caring for goslings and making clothing, and it is specifically stated that she is interested in fashions. Although Rilla's interests up to the start of the war have not been domestic, neither is she ambitious for a career. In fact, she states that she is "devoid of ambition" and that the only thing she really wants to be is "Kenneth Ford's wife" (231). In the movie, when the general mobilization is announced, Douglas joins the army despite having just become engaged to Marie, just as in *Rilla of Ingleside* Kenneth Ford asks Rilla to wait for him just before he goes off to war. Thus the central romantic story of the young woman wondering if her lover will return is established in both works to make personal emotion the focus of the war story.

In plotting their stories, both Griffith and Montgomery rely on the traditional literary device of the foil, establishing class differences in paired romances, one serious and one comic. In *Hearts of the World*, the young female street singer called "The Little Disturber" first tries to attract Douglas Hamilton, who does his best to repulse her. At the same time, a young working man, Monsieur Cuckoo, tries to attract the singer and is rejected until Douglas is engaged to Marie, at which point the singer settles for Monsieur Cuckoo. Their relationship is never depicted in the same manner as that of the hero and heroine, for their encounters occur on the street, and "The Little Disturber" is clearly treating Monsieur Cuckoo as a poor substitute for the man she really wants, her disdain being shown in physical abuse of him, while the encounters of the young Americans take place in a garden and involve tender embraces and whispers. The farewell scene of Monsieur Cuckoo and "The Little Disturber" is comic, involving obvious cupidity on her part, while the farewell scene between the young Americans is touching and patriotic, as the photo Marie gives Douglas at parting is in a frame showing an American flag. Similarly, the romance between Miranda Pryor and Joe Milgrave in *Rilla of Ingleside* is presented as slightly ludicrous, while Rilla's own romance with Ken Ford is presented very seriously. Rilla assumes that Miranda's ability to love is limited (according to Rilla, Miranda is "as much in love with Joe as a china-blue girl can be with anyone" (151)) and she treats Miranda's difficulties in getting married over her father's objections comically. At Miranda's wedding the dog has a fit, the groom cries all the way through the ceremony, the groom's mother sits on a pie, and Miranda is "such a flat-faced, commonplace, uninteresting little bride" (159-60) that Rilla finds the experience unromantic. At the end, all Rilla can think of is writing "a perfectly killing account of it all to the boys" (161). While Rilla's farewell evening with Ken is disrupted, first by a crying baby and then by Susan Baker's recounting of "all the family spankings" (136), Rilla appears to Ken as a Madonna figure holding the baby in the lamplight (134) and the setting is a beautiful summer night romantically described with the scent of mint around them "like a soundless, invisible benediction" (138), establishing an almost religious atmosphere around their courtship. The presentation of the central romances in garden settings emphasizing the altruism of the characters—Douglas volunteering to fight for a country not his own, Rilla caring for someone else's child—draws attention to continuity with an innocent, idealistic prewar world, as a specifically romantic and pastoral tradition is drawn upon, just as the subtitle of the film emphasizes that the story is "old-fashioned."

While the fictional plots link the war to a traditional set of values and conventions, Montgomery's journals imply the continuity of the world at war with prewar life by linking the war news with routine events, as if it is as ordinary as the neighbour's harvest. Montgomery, for instance, links news of her son Stuart's birth to the war by suggesting that Constantine of Greece may have caused her to go into labour early (*SJ* II: 172); and in discussing her convalescence from delivery as a "dreary time", she gives equal weight to the "depressing despatches" and the fact that she does not care for her nurse (173). Similarly, the following winter her worries encompass family and war equally: "[husband] Ewan's voice was no better—the Germans were advancing—the baby had been failing for three weeks—I was wretchedly ill" (178), and a year later she still balances "[elder son] Chester's illness, the strain of the winter and the agony of Verdun" (188) in a single sentence. Commenting on being in Indiana to visit her husband's brother she writes, "It seems so strange to be in a country that is not at war! I did not realize until I came here how deeply Canada *is* at war—how *normal* a condition war has come to be with us" (191). Her concerns about the war are linked to even more mundane areas of life than her family's well-being: a beautiful day spent clearing the garden is spoiled by war news (227); an interview with fans occurs in a daze because of the news of the Halifax explosion (232); and her aunt's pleasure in her visit and Bulgaria suing for peace are given equal weight (268).

One reason for this "normalization" of the war news was undoubtedly the duration of the war – it lasted long enough to become a routine part of the news and to affect living conditions -- and Montgomery's characters share with her the perception that living in a country at war is normal. In *Rilla of Ingleside*, which is narrated partly through Rilla's diary entries, she reflects on how readily they have adapted to being at war in passages very similar to those Montgomery uses in her journal: "It seems strange that we can go on with ordinary life just as if nothing were happening overseas that concerned us Susan is putting in the garden, and mother and she are housecleaning, and we Junior Reds are getting up a concert in aid of the Belgians" (100-01). Later she says, "to me, the strangest of all the strange things since 1914 is how we have all learned to accept things we never thought we could—to go on with life as a matter of course" (146). Rilla includes putting on a concert in aid of the Belgians among items of "ordinary life". Although local concerts were a regular feature of village life in North America a hundred years ago, the usual aim would be to raise money for some local project. The continuity of this type of activity, if not the aim of the activity, with everyday life is also demonstrated in Montgomery's journal, which shows that Montgomery's war work is simply an extension of her normal activities. When a Red Cross Branch is formed in her village of Leaskdale, Ontario in November 1915, she naturally, as the clergyman's wife, becomes president, in addition to her "missionary societies, Guilds, . . . endless visits" (*SJ* II: 174). The activities of the Red Cross are similar to those of her other clubs, such as lectures and socials (189, 221), with the addition of preparing boxes for the soldiers (269). Just as Montgomery's social position determines her participation, the social position of Anne and Rilla Blythe as doctor's wife and daughter determine their roles in the village, including running the Red Cross and Junior Red Cross and Rilla becoming a foster mother. While caring for a baby is not something Rilla would normally do, it is the type of activity expected of women, and as one of the wealthier families in the village, the Blythes would be regarded as natural guardians of an orphaned child with no relatives.

Just as Montgomery and the Blythes must take on leadership roles due to their position, in *My Home in the Field of Honour* Frances Wilson Huard, the American wife of a French

landowner, must take charge of the estate when her husband is called to military service along with the men of the district, "especially as all those in my employ . . . were under twenty, and looked to me for moral support" (Huard 55). Because she is the *chatelaine*, not only her own household but also the people of the village look to her for guidance (157). When in September 1914 Huard and her household are traveling the countryside to escape battles in and around their village, it is she who decides where and when they will stop, what direction they will go in, even what they will eat: "The line outside the baker's shop warned me that I had a dozen hungry mouths dependent upon me and yesterday's supply of bread was well-nigh exhausted, let alone being stale" (177). Furthermore, when her party is lodged in a deserted bakery in the town of Rebais she takes it upon herself to cut up the stale bread there and distribute it to the soldiers before going to help care for the wounded at the local convent (183). That Huard's role as protector is part of the social structure of the village is illustrated when her notary comes to tell her that she must abandon her work of helping the wounded at Rebais and get her party on the road again: he says, "But think of all the young people who look to you for protection! You cannot desert them; you must go!" (191). This notion is further reinforced when she later refers to those traveling with her as "my people" (234).

In *A Hilltop on the Marne*, American journalist Mildred Aldrich, retired from Paris to a village where she can enjoy a pastoral life at low cost (Aldrich 15-17), is freer to choose her course of action than Huard is; however, in response to the presence of British and French forces in her village in the early days of the war she does take on the responsibility of providing food and facilities for washing to the British soldiers encamped near her home (91-92, 99), for entertaining the officers of the force (104-05), and for billeting a French officer (142-43). In these instances, her social position enters into the determination of what her role should be. When the French arrive seeking billets, Aldrich's servant interferes to ensure that "madame" is not inconvenienced by having to house several soldiers and gets only the "chef-major" as a billet (143). When Aldrich provides water and towels to allow the British soldiers to wash, one of the soldiers comments to her on the difference between her behaviour and that of British "ladies": he says, "there ain't no English woman of your class could have, or would have, done for us what you have done this morning" (106). Whether or not this is the case, the nature of Aldrich's voluntary support and the requests made of her by the armed forces are determined by perceptions of her place in the village hierarchy and her gender.

While the women in all of these works share a class and gender based obligation to provide support within the assumed normal range of their activities, there are significant differences between their experiences that raise questions about Montgomery's use of the words "charm," "delightful," and "wonderful" to describe the memoirs and film. For instance, while moving from place to place, Huard hears from those who have had direct contact with the fighting and is told that the women would be better off dead than having faced the German army (283). Similarly, the danger for families residing in Europe is graphically depicted in *Hearts of the World* when the village is virtually destroyed by shelling as the inhabitants are evacuating and Douglas' father and Marie's parents are killed, leaving Marie to wander the countryside in a disoriented condition while Douglas's mother and his three little brothers find refuge in a cellar. While Rilla is devastated when she loses a brother in the war, unlike Marie she never loses the security of her home. Rilla faces some of the same emotional situations as Marie, but not the physical danger: Marie is threatened with rape by a German officer and later must defend her

fiancé with a carving knife when he is struggling with a German soldier. Newspaper reports as well as Montgomery's knowledge from Huard's memoir and the film account for Walter's oblique reference to the danger of rape when he tells Rilla, "there were girls as sweet and pure as you in Belgium and Flanders. You—even you—know what their fate was," and says that one of his reasons for going to fight is "to make it impossible for such things to happen again" (*RI* 119).

While Montgomery merely depicts women doing additional work and facing changes to the way they must keep house during the war, Huard's memoir shows the direct impact of war on a village. Huard's wandering household group does not face much immediate danger, though she and a companion are shot at by German soldiers once (227); but they are unable to find shelter and must sleep outside with inadequate food, and when they are able to return to the chateau after moving around for some days, it is to find that the place has been pillaged and wantonly damaged once it is no longer needed as shelter by the German army. Everything worth stealing has been stolen, "then what remained was thrown into corners and wilfully soiled and smeared in the most disgusting and nauseating manner" (291). The Blythe family's regret at ploughing up the Ingleside lawn and peony bed to plant potatoes (*RI* 243) echoes the far greater distress felt by Huard on discovering that "All the wilful damage that human beings could do had been wrought on the contents of my home" (Huard 290). But the temporary loss of a lawn for the sake of producing food cannot compare to Huard's loss. Similarly, the Red Cross work done by the women of Glen St. Mary is a safe and mild version of the work done by Huard. While Huard provides hospital space in her chateau and actually assists a doctor performing emergency surgery on wounded soldiers (Huard 238-39), the women in PEI prepare sheets, bandages, and comforts for the soldiers in the knowledge that they will not have to put them into use themselves. The "charm" in these descriptions must lie in the depiction of women acting when required to and perhaps in the personality expressed in the narration, since the events themselves are disturbing.

With only old men left at home, the responsibility for the routine activities of the village as well as their normal activities falls on the women and children. This necessity is illustrated in the references in all the works to the process of getting the crops in. In the opening days of the war Huard must prepare three baskets of plums for preserving in the middle of her other preparations (48); as she travels to Soissons to meet the officials who can help her start a hospital she "observed that the harvesting was being done chiefly by women" (67); and trying to get back to her home she sees in the destruction of crops "signs of the invaders' passage" (272). Likewise Aldrich records the French government "calling on [the women] to go into the fields and get in crops and prepare the ground for the sowing of the winter wheat" and the women and children "climbing the hill at six in the morning" to "pick the black-currants, all of which go to England to make the jams and jellies" (60). Getting the crops in is one of the few instances in these works of women stepping outside their normal occupations in order to meet the demands of the war, though farm women have always worked in the fields to some extent, so again it may just be a matter of the women extending a normal activity rather than adding an activity. Rilla's safety from the harsher realities is demonstrated in *Rilla of Ingleside* when she does not go to work in the fields, although her friend Mary Vance and the Blythe's maid, Susan Baker, both do (*RI* 216). In *Hearts of the World* both Marie's unfitness for manual labour due to her class and the extraordinary conditions she faces are shown when, while working in the fields, she is flogged by a German officer for her inability to lift a basket of potatoes into a cart, though an

older peasant woman is able to perform the same task easily. Montgomery's awareness of the need to continue to produce crops and her experience of shortages and high wartime prices are recorded in her journal in the spring of 1917, when she writes that in planting her garden "not an inch of space has been left unutilized" (*SJ* II: 216). Montgomery, like the Blythes, is able to restrict her share of crop production to the needs of her own household, simply extending a routine part of the household work, while women in France must become part of large-scale production, performing functions that are not necessarily part of their normal lives.

While the absence of the men from the village may require the women to take on new roles and always causes them to perform extra work, the scenes in both the fictional and non-fictional works depicting the departure of the men from their home villages emphasize the expectation that the women will behave as if nothing extraordinary is happening. In *A Hilltop on the Marne*, describing the departure of the men to join their regiments, Aldrich writes, "There was no laughter, . . . but neither were there any tears" (52), a sight that moved her "as nothing I have ever met in life before has done" (52). In *My Home in the Field of Honour*, Huard describes "a most touching sight" as a man bids farewell to his family: "The couple bore up bravely until the whistle blew—then clasping each other in an almost brutal embrace, they parted . . ." (33-34). Perhaps recalling these descriptions of actual scenes as well as her own experience of seeing soldiers leave Leaskdale, in *Rilla of Ingleside* Montgomery depicts her women characters making a point of being composed and as cheerful as possible when seeing the soldiers off at the station, fulfilling the expectation that the women be as brave as the men and mask their emotional responses. In *Hearts of the World* the same point is made when Marie and Douglas part, and the title card informs the viewer that Marie's "sad heart" was "masked with smiles—as were millions of others in troubled France." By not showing their fear and sorrow, by minimizing their sense of the danger and risk, the women are meeting the expectation that they do what they can to instill courage in the men. The refusal to show excessive emotion creates the impression that the partings are routine and that the ordinary life of the village will continue uninterrupted in the absence of the men, and this is interpreted as a show of courage by the women. Marie in *Hearts of the World* must show physical courage and does so in protecting herself and her fiancé, as does Huard in protecting her household, but women in North America need only continue in their accustomed paths to rate praise. Walter Blythe tells Rilla that "It took more courage for you to tackle that five pounds of new infant . . . than it would for Jem to face a mile of Germans" (68) and Susan Baker is described by the narrator of *Rilla of Ingleside* as "one of the women—courageous, unquailing, patient, heroic—who had made victory possible" (247) because she has continued to do her job and care for the family throughout the war.

Both *Hearts of the World* and *Rilla of Ingleside* implicitly equate the village with civilization as a concept by conflating them in defining what the war is about and whom it will affect. In the film the point is made explicitly that the trenches are just outside the home village of the main characters, and although the army is described in a title card as fighting for "France and Civilization," in other cards it is stated that the soldiers are also concerned with the village itself, and know that with their retreat, it is doomed. In *Rilla of Ingleside* the characters are also aware that the war has both global and local implications. Mr. Meredith says that the war is essentially about preserving civilization and uses the standard opposition of black and white to emphasize that this is a battle between good and evil: "France is certainly very wonderful. It seems to me that in her I see the white form of civilization making a determined stand against the

black powers of barbarism” (165). While Rilla’s friend Mary Vance initially says of the war that “it doesn’t concern us,” Walter Blythe states that “Before this war is over . . . every man and woman and child in Canada will feel it . . . millions of hearts will break” (33), claiming that the effects of war reach into individual homes and that those effects are primarily emotional. The depiction of the war as concerning both the abstract civilization and the concrete emotional lives of individuals implies that the war, even when not fought at home, is fought for home, in Montgomery’s case a village in Prince Edward Island. As Douglas’s thoughts of the village while in the trenches and Walter’s comment about rape show, the soldiers fighting on the side of France are also defending the safety of women, particularly women of the upper classes, who are not expected to have significant responsibilities outside their own households. Thus in both the novel and the film while the goals of the war are stated in abstract terms, the response to war is depicted on a local, personal, and emotional level.

Montgomery’s own essentially emotional responses to the events of the war needed to be placed in a framework that channeled the emotions into recognizable paths to make a readable novel. The romance framework that guarantees a happy personal ending in both *Hearts of the World* and *Rilla of Ingleside* also justifies intense emotional response to the events of the war, since the future happiness of the young women is at stake. At the end of both the novel and the film the couples are reunited and the villages are returned to ordinary pre-war life, and at the end of the memoirs the writers apparently continue their lives in the now ravaged countryside. The restoration of individual happiness at the end of *Rilla of Ingleside* and *Hearts of the World* suggests that the world will go back to its old ways, with the end of the war being a restoration of what was rather than the new world Montgomery hoped for. Thus Montgomery’s description of war memoirs that recount only the hopeful opening weeks of the war and a romantic war film as “delightful” and “wonderful” are justified because those works assert the continuity of the world she is familiar with despite the temporary insanity of war. Therefore, despite knowing what actual dangers women may face in a war zone, Montgomery is able to take from the first-hand accounts only those aspects that suit her own need to show continuity and stability. In making her war novel a village love story Montgomery creates a version of the war that allows her female characters to appear heroic simply by meeting the expectations of their communities, thus ensuring a post-war world that is essentially unchanged.

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