

humanity also has the capability to create chaos. He understands this new insight in religious terms and views what is happening to the land as a “desecration.”

Rilla’s brother Walter, who is characterized as an aesthete, does not fear the pain of war as much as he fears its ugly destructiveness, especially when juxtaposed against Ingleside:

War was a hellish, horrible, hideous thing—too horrible and hideous to happen. . . . The mere thought of it was hideous, and made Walter unhappy in its threat to the beauty of life. He would not think of it. . . . How beautiful the old Glen was, in its August ripeness, with its chains of bowery old homesteads, tilled meadows and quiet gardens. (31)

War frightens Walter because he cannot stand the possibility of being disconnected from nature: “To be blind—never to see the beauty of the world again—moonlight on Four Winds—the stars twinkling through the fir trees—mist on the gulf” (61). His final letter home juxtaposes the beauty of Ingleside with the ugliness of war: “Always home has seemed so far away—so hopelessly far away from this hideous welter of filth and blood” (239). Walter’s entire conception of war rests on his appreciation of pastoral beauty.

Even Rilla, protected in her cozy world, senses the discontinuity between Ingleside’s charm and the carnage on the fields of France: “How can spring come and be beautiful in such horror?” asks Rilla in her diary (128). Indeed, nature distances those who stay at home from their loved ones on the front: “When the sun shines and the fluffy yellow catkins are coming out on the willow trees down by the brook, and the garden is beginning to be beautiful I can’t realize that such dreadful things are happening in Flanders” (128). Rilla’s agony at discovering Walter’s enlistment is illustrated by her suddenly altered attitude to nature: “The frogs were singing in the marshes, the dim, ensilvered fields of home lay all around them. The spring night was lovely and appealing. Rilla felt that its beauty was an insult to her pain. She would hate moonlight forever” (150). Until this point, it would be unthinkable for a heroine in the Anne series to declare a hatred for moonlight. Rilla’s statement is revolutionary, akin to having Anne announce her desire to pack her bags and move to a walk-up in downtown Toronto. By juxtaposing the pastoral safety of Ingleside with the chaos of war, Montgomery is able to give readers the sense of dislocation and terror that the war evoked, without alienating them from the story.

While she admits to the brutality of the conflict, Montgomery does not overtly question the reasons for the war. Vance discusses the difficulties for

those who may have wished to analyze the meaning of the conflict: “In the first place, any attempt to question the war or its aftermath raised the hackles of people who saw such questioning, not in the spirit of intellectual enquiry but as an attack on the fallen and their sacrifice” (264). Montgomery had no desire to question the value of the soldiers’ deaths. In a letter to Ephraim Weber in 1916, she chastises her friend for even raising the possibility that the war was not a noble endeavour:

Surely, surely, you cannot so have missed the very meaning of this war—that it is a death-grapple between freedom and tyranny, between modern and mediaeval [*sic*] ideals . . . between the principles of democracy and militarism. I believe that it is the most righteous war that England ever waged and worthy of every drop of Canadian blood. (5)

Montgomery’s passionate defence of what Vance terms the “sanctity of the fallen” (263) precludes any assessment of whether or not the conflict really was the “death-grapple” she describes.

Walter is the emblem of masculine sacrifice in *Rilla*. Montgomery positions him as the saintly soldier visionary as early as *Rainbow Valley*, the novel that preceded *Rilla*. As Edwards and Litster make clear, Walter’s schoolyard scrap in *Rainbow Valley* with the bully Dan Reese prefigures the battles Canadian boys will have to fight in Europe (37-38). Walter is the first one to see the mystical Piper, luring the children away at the end of *Rainbow Valley*. In *Rilla* Walter, unlike Jem, understands precisely what he is getting into when he heads off to war: “I see myself thrusting a bayonet through another man. . . . I see myself lying alone torn and mangled, burning with thirst on a cold, wet field” (106). Yet Walter still chooses to fight. Montgomery idealizes Walter as the ultimate citizen soldier, fully aware of the consequences of his actions, but still prepared to defend the Empire. When he finally meets death, in the form of the Piper piping him to his end, Walter is not afraid because he has faith in the value of his sacrifice:

I’ve helped to make Canada safe for the poets of the future—for the workers of the future, ay and the dreamers too . . . the future, not of Canada only, but of the world—when the red rain of Langemarck and Verdun shall have brought forth a golden harvest—not in a year or two, as some foolishly think, but a generation later, when the seed sown shall have time to germinate and grow. (240-41)

Walter’s words are bitterly ironic to later readers because the seed sown by the First World War came to fruition in the second. Nonetheless, Montgomery believes that sacrifices like Walter’s are valuable, and she places his death at the centre of the story.

Montgomery was aware that her stance on the war angered some people. Indeed, she takes a rather tart tone in her journal with a reader who criticized the novel for its war-mongering: "Can't the poor moron realize the difference between offensive and defensive war. I wrote *Rilla* not to 'glorify war' but to glorify the courage and patriotism and self-sacrifice it evoked" (3: 387). While her journal and letters never express doubt about the value of the 60,000 Canadian war deaths, Montgomery's fiction is more ambivalent. Several elements in *Rilla* suggest that Montgomery did indeed question the war and its purposes.

One such element is "The Piper," a poem that Walter writes about the war. Edwards cites it as the most subversive element in the text. Reading it in the context of Robert Browning's "Pied Piper of Hamelin," Edwards interprets Walter's poem as an indictment of the corrupt civilization that thoughtlessly sacrificed a generation of young men. He claims that Walter was "a boy lured to his death by a lying piper" ("Intention" 135). Because we never see Walter's poem, we are left to imagine its content based on a few clues. The theme of "keeping the faith" is deliberately reminiscent of John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields," but the poem's title conjures up Browning's malevolent Piper. Indeed, the references to an enthralling Piper in *Rilla* and in the earlier *Rainbow Valley* strengthen the link between the unseen poem and Browning's work. By withholding Walter's poem, Montgomery allows it to be used in two ways: as a patriotic homage to the Fallen, but also as a subtle critique of the way in which they were robbed of their lives.

Edwards also cites young Bruce Meredith's murder of his kitten, Stripey, as an example of Montgomery's willingness to question the value of the slaughter of so many young men. Bruce kills his cat as a deliberate offering to God: "I thought if I sacrificed Stripey, God would send Jem back. So I drowned him—and oh mother, it was *awful* hard" (323). Edwards claims that through Bruce's action, Montgomery portrays war as "the Carthaginian Moloch, to whom children were sacrificed for military gain" ("Intention" 134). On some level, Montgomery acknowledges the possibility that the sacrifice of a generation of Canadian men may have been futile.

Montgomery's view of the war's purpose presents a similar combination of overt approval and indirect questioning. Montgomery defended wartime values in a 1922 letter to Weber: "I *can not* understand your attitude to the Great War. When Germany outraged Belgium and swooped down on France would you have had England sit still without lifting a finger? Would you have enjoyed the eventual result of a Germany-ridden world?" (39;

emphasis in original). Walter's reservations about joining up do not come from doubt about whether it is a just fight, but from his fear that war will be painful and ugly. Montgomery reinforces the idea that the Germans, led by the war-mongering Kaiser, deliberately left Belgium to starve (108). Her support of the official version of the war is disturbing to the modern reader, but, as Peter Buitenhuis points out, Montgomery's pro-war viewpoint fit squarely into the thinking of her day. Buitenhuis writes of many popular Canadian novelists of the time, including Montgomery:

They maintained that the war, in spite of everything, was necessary and morally justifiable. These novelists were in effect writing a new version of the old story of the new world coming in to redress the balance of the old and bringing a vision of a better future rising from the ashes of a strife-torn Europe. (155)

Mr. Meredith, Glen St. Mary's wise pastor, articulates the idea of the war as a fresh start: "We are witnessing the birth-pangs of a new era—but it will be born a feeble, wailing life like everything else. I am not one of those who expect a new heaven and a new earth as the immediate result of this war" (209). Mr. Meredith's expectations reflect the national spirit of optimism at war's end, although in markedly cautious tones.

Like her vision of soldier sacrifice, Montgomery's attitude toward the war's purpose is more nuanced than first appearances would suggest. The only pacifist in the novel is the ridiculous Whiskers-on-the-moon. He is also the book's villain and comedic element.¹ Yet when he addresses the prayer-meeting, he sounds reasoned and sane: "He prayed that the unholy war might cease—that the deluded armies being driven to slaughter on the western front might have their eyes opened to their iniquity and repent—that the poor young men present in khaki who had been hounded into a path of murder and militarism could yet be rescued" (218). His speech is given further legitimacy by the fact that it is delivered at the prayer-meeting.

Montgomery also explores some of the troubling undercurrents of the militarist cause. The congregation's reaction to the peace prayer exposes the violence beneath Glen St. Mary's placid surface. Norman Douglas assaults Whiskers-on-the-moon. Douglas is a big man, and the attack reminds at least one observer of "a huge mastiff [shaking] an overgrown puppy" (220). Douglas, with the tacit approval of the congregation, verbally abuses Whiskers, calling him a "pestilential parasite," "Hunnish scum," and "indecent reptile" (219). When the physical and verbal intimidation is over, Douglas boasts, "I reckon you won't be troubled with any more pacifist prayers" (220). Whiskers-on-the-moon also has his windows smashed and

his crop almost ruined for expressing his opinions about the war. Although she endorses the reasons for war, Montgomery, through the persecution of Whiskers, suggests the narrowness of public opinion concerning pacifists.

Rilla's reaction to Walter's enlistment is another indirect critique of the militarist cause. Walter is Rilla's most beloved sibling. By the time he joins up, she has read of the misery of war in the newspapers and the boys' letters home. Rilla knows the conflict will not be over quickly, and that it could easily result in death for any soldier going to the front. Despite this knowledge, she is secretly comforted when her brother joins up: "Amid all of her pain she was conscious of an odd feeling of relief in some hidden part of her soul, where a little dull, unacknowledged soreness had been lurking all winter. No one—no one could ever call Walter a slacker now" (152). Her reaction is an implicit criticism of the way war has perverted values, for Rilla willingly sacrifices her beloved Walter to the Piper's call.

One aspect of *Rilla* shows no ambivalence: its treatment of the female role in war work. Despite her interest in chronicling the conflict, Montgomery's novel is not a story of combat. The heart of the story lies at Ingleside. *Rilla* begins with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and ends with the soldiers' return, encompassing the entire sweep of the war from the female perspective. Montgomery was pleased with a letter she received from a Mr. Douglas on November 24, 1921, and she copied it into her journal, evidently feeling that he understood precisely what she was trying to do:

You have written a very wonderful book—a book that will live, I think, when most of the ephemeral literature of the time will be forgotten. You have visualized the soul of the Canadian people in the war; you have given a true picture of what we went through during five long years of agony . . . the storm and stress of home life during those anxious days have never received audible expression, except in your wonderful book. (3: 27)

Montgomery's determination to express the "soul of the Canadian people" makes *Rilla* a valuable record of the events and attitudes of the day, especially concerning the heroic role of women in wartime. As the sensitive Walter remarks: "It must be a horrible thing to be a mother in this war—the mothers and sisters and wives and sweethearts have the hardest time" (158). Rilla echoes this sentiment when she says to Anne, after Walter's enlistment: "Our sacrifice is greater than his . . . our boys give only of themselves, we give them" (153). Montgomery poignantly demonstrates the courage of motherhood when Shirley asks Anne if he may go to war. She spends a terrible night thinking about the loss of Joyce, Walter's death, her fears for Jem,

and her sadness at her girls' vanished youth. She thinks: "surely she had given enough" (257). Nonetheless, the next morning she tells her youngest son to go. Even Susan, the dowdy, unromantic maid, becomes an emblem of female heroism: "She was one of the women—courageous, unquailing, patient, heroic—who made victory possible" (306).

Montgomery's portrayal of home-front sacrifice empowers her female characters, for she makes it clear that women have a definite role to play in victory. Initially, Rilla has a very poor view of what she can accomplish: "[Kenneth's] thoughts were full of this Great Game which was to be played out on blood-stained fields with empires for stakes—a Game in which womankind would have no part. Women, thought Rilla miserably, just had to sit at home and cry" (48). There seems to be no space for women to fight in this war. When Walter confesses that he does not want to go, he feels useless and exclaims: "I—I should have been a girl" (61). The tomboyish Faith expresses bitter regret that she is not a boy, so that she could take part in the conflict (54). Slowly, however, it becomes apparent that women do have a role to play. Not only is their support of the menfolk valued, but the prosaic fact of women's work is recognized. Donna Coates notes that several home-front novels by women used this setting to make certain feminist points: "It could be argued that Canadian writers are war profiteers, seizing the chaos occasioned by war to vanquish women's subordinate status" (68). The women in *Rilla* certainly profit from these new freedoms. Rilla takes on the responsibility of raising an orphaned war baby. Walter acknowledges the heroism in her actions: "It took more courage for you to tackle five pounds of new infant, Rilla-my-Rilla, than it would take for Jem to face a mile of Germans" (89). Eventually, even Faith, the girl devastated that she could not fight, finds a way to participate when she sails across the Atlantic to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment (261). Despite Rilla's doubts, women can contribute more than tears to the war effort. As Elizabeth Epperly notes, "by the end of the novel we find that the apparently passive, apparently secondary role the women take is essential for the war effort and, equally importantly, to the continuation of a life of values and vision after the war" (114). Female work is the central fact of the novel.

Rilla is in part a female *Bildungsroman*. Early in the book Anne says of her youngest daughter: "She has no serious ideas at all—her sole aspiration seems to be to have a good time" (16). Rilla desperately wants to be thought grown-up, but it is obvious that she is not. She responds to her teacher Gertrude's dream of impending war in a shallow manner: "I hope it doesn't

mean there's a storm coming up from the east to spoil the party" (30). Initially, like Faith, Rilla wishes she were a boy so she could participate in the conflict (57). According to Kornfeld and Jackson, this "dissatisfaction with a society that offers so few options for women" is a characteristic of the female *Bildungsroman* (145). Gradually, Rilla sheds her selfish vanity and manages to contribute to the war effort. By the end of the novel she has skilfully managed the Junior Red Cross, raised a war baby, risen above Irene's pettiness, organized a wedding, and worked at a tedious job in a store. In her finest hour, even after she learns that Walter has enlisted, Rilla continues on with the Red Cross concert and does her part: "She places public duty before private feelings and fulfills her responsibilities" (Wiggins 74). Rilla matures into a responsible and confident woman who can take her place as a useful member of her community. Rilla learns that she does not have to be a boy to effect change.

Montgomery's portrayal of the maid Susan complements the story of Rilla's maturation. According to Kornfeld and Jackson, an unmarried woman has a specific function in a female *Bildungsroman*: "Not bitter, disillusioned or unfulfilled, spinsters play an important role in the lives of the heroines and their communities. The vital and interesting role of the spinster in these novels indicates to the reader that a single woman can have a fulfilling life" (145). Susan achieves this fulfillment directly through her role in home-front activities. At the beginning of the book Susan sees herself as a drudge. She hates any mention of her age, "Not from vanity, but from a haunting dread that people might come to think her too old to work" (14). She initially reads the *Daily Enterprise* solely for the "Glen Notes." Montgomery makes a point of her ignorance when Susan demands: "Who is this Archduke man who has been murdered?" (19). When Rilla reads that the war would last three years, Susan says, "I'm not acquainted with Lord Kitchener, but I daresay he makes mistakes as often as other people. Your father says it will be over in a few months and I have as much faith in his opinion as I have in Lord Anybody's" (57). Yet by the end of the novel, Susan regularly defies patriarchy by challenging Gilbert, the head of the Blythe household, on war matters. She becomes discerning in her judgments and disparages the experts: "As for the military critics they do not know one blessed thing about it. . . . They have been mistaken times out of number" (297). Susan has surprised herself with her public speaking abilities, learned to care about suffrage, worked in the fields to bring in a crop, and even rejected a marriage proposal. Her new confidence is evident in her response to Cousin

Sophia's prediction that the Germans will soon overrun Canada: "The Huns shall never set foot in P.E.I. as long as I can handle a pitchfork" (297). The gratification that Susan earlier took in her place in the community and in her domestic capabilities has been transformed into pride in her country and the war effort. Mentally, she leaves the insular world of Glen St. Mary for the wider one of international affairs. Early on in the text Susan had asked herself "what an honest, hard-working Presbyterian old maid of Glen St. Mary has to do with a war thousands of miles away" (64). By novel's end she has the answer: her duty is to fight on the home front and work for victory. As the boys return home, she announces that she is going on a "honeymoon." She has accepted her life as a spinster and realizes that there is no shame in her unmarried state. Now, thanks to her war work, Susan is no longer a household drudge, but a dignified woman with a right to a rest.

For both Rilla and Susan, the war brings about positive growth and change. As Mary Rubio explains: "[They] represent the new order which includes women. . . . Patriarchy and its ramifications in class structure are defeated by the young and older women's discovering their own power of speech and action" (11). Montgomery views women's war work as empowering, and she believes the conflict has created a positive shift in gender relations.

Not only did *Rilla* allow Montgomery to explore her feminist leanings; it also allowed her to expound her conception of Canadian literature and nationhood. Irene Gammel and Elizabeth Epperly have argued that Montgomery played an important role in forming Canadian identity, at home and abroad:

What has not been adequately recognized, however, is Montgomery's impact on the shaping of a distinctly Canadian culture. This lack of acknowledgement may be all the more surprising given the volubility of Montgomery's most popular characters and their uncanny ability to change their worlds through the power of the word. (3)

Rilla is Montgomery's most conscious exploration of Canadian culture. Edwards marvels at her chronicle and asks: "Did she realize how far she was recording Canada's self-discovery as a nation?" ("Intention" 131). I think Montgomery was very aware of what she was creating. In the novel she deliberately records the upheavals of Canada's birthing process into nationhood. In August 1919 Montgomery notes her discovery of a newspaper clipping from 1910 in which an editor had asked her to comment on the state of Canadian literature:

I do not think our literature is an expression of our national life as a whole. I think this is because we have only very recently . . . had any real national life. Canada

is only just finding herself. She has not yet fused her varying elements in a harmonious whole. Perhaps she will not do so until they are welded together by some great crisis of storm and stress. This is when a real national literature will be born. (2: 339)

It is noteworthy that Montgomery found the old clipping in the midst of writing *Rilla* because she incorporated its ideas into the novel. Significantly, the nation in which *Rilla* is set is first mentioned in the context of Walter's writing. Miss Oliver says: "I believe Walter will be a great poet, too . . . perhaps the first really great poet Canada has ever had" (24). Even more importantly, once the war begins, Walter finds himself incapable of writing until he enlists (151). He cannot create a real poem until he too has undergone the baptism by fire that forges Canada and Canadian literature. Walter arrives at his status as national poet because of the poem he composes at the front which, like McCrae's "In Flanders Fields," earns its author international acclaim.

Montgomery also records Canada's emergence as a nation. In the beginning of *Rilla*, she presents a view that accords with Sarah Corse's description of prewar Canadian nationalism: "To the extent that Canadian nationalism existed and was even prominent in the nineteenth century it was a nationalism defined as much by its imperial context and connection as by its Canadian-ness" (50). Montgomery illustrates English Canada's loyalty to the Empire in a prewar conversation between Walter and Jem: "Suppose England does fight?" asks Walter. "Why we'll have to turn in and help her. We couldn't let the old grey mother of the northern sea fight it out alone, could we? We're the cubs—we've got to pitch in tooth and claw if it comes to a family row" (30). But for Canadians such as the Blythe family, the turmoil and loss of the war years diminish the old imperial connection, replacing it with a new sense of national pride. In *Rilla*, Montgomery mentions four important battles where Canadians acquitted themselves with distinction: Ypres, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, and the Somme. She writes of Ypres: "Our Canadian boys have done splendidly" (128). Writing in 1919 in *The Pictorial History of the Great War*, S.J. Duncan-Clark claimed that Canada had contributed something unique to the war effort: "Canadian snipers, silent men from the bush or the prairies with many a notch on the butts of their rifles, taught the Hun the value of cover" (17). Duncan-Clark's description suggests that Canadians did not simply participate in the war, but rather contributed specifically colonial values of individuality and ruggedness that aided in the allied victory. Montgomery also acknowledges the increasing international importance and recognition that Canada achieves

through its war effort. When Miss Oliver believes that Canadians have voted for a Liberal, anti-conscription government, she says, "Canada is disgraced in the eyes of the world" (283). Suddenly, Canada's actions matter on an international level. By the end of the novel, the war is no longer about saving the "old grey mother"; it has become a mission to honour those who have died and to prevent another conflict from occurring. Rilla says, "Walter died for Canada—I must live for her. This is what he asked me to do" (286).

Montgomery mirrors Canada's budding maturity in her heroine's growth (Edwards, "Intention" 131). Rilla goes through agony when Walter enlists: "Rilla did not sleep that night. . . . The body grows slowly and steadily but the soul grows by leaps and bounds. It may come to its full stature in an hour. From that night Rilla Blythe's soul was the soul of a woman in its capacity for suffering, for strength, for endurance" (152). Despite the losses of the war, Rilla emerges with self-knowledge and a sense of purpose: "I expected these past four years would be the most delightful years of my life and they have been years of war—years of fear and grief and worry—but I humbly hope, of a little growth in strength and character as well" (319). At an earlier point in the novel, Rilla talks with Walter about the end of the war. She says that they will not be as happy as they used to be, and Walter replies, "No, not in the same way. . . . But it will be a better happiness, a happiness we've earned" (158). Like Canada, which cannot become a nation until it has suffered "storm and stress," Rilla cannot become a woman until she has earned her maturity through the ordeal of war.

The romantic coupling at the end of the story symbolizes the new possibilities for the nation. Kenneth Ford, the returning soldier, has suffered greatly. When he arrives at Rilla's doorstep, she does not recognize him: "He looked so much older . . . that scar—the lines about his eyes and lips" (340). But Rilla too has changed. Kenneth thinks, "[I] left a school girl, and . . . [have] found a woman" (340). Their physical alteration reflects the emotional and mental toll of the war. The sacrifices that the Blythe family, and by extension all of Canada, have made are too great to ensure a traditional romantic ending. Rilla's innocence ended with the death of Walter. Kenneth is no longer a fresh-faced boy, but a scarred and battle-hardened soldier. The couple represents the new breed of war-tempered individuals for whom an earned happiness is possible.

The novel's final word—"Yeth"—has engendered some debate among critics. Mary Rubio has argued that the return of Rilla's lisp in the last line of the novel is regressive and a prophetic sign of women's loss of rights after

the war (11). Edwards views it as an “affirmation of love, creativity and harvest” (“Intention” 135). Rilla’s lisp is indeed a regression, but this is not negative. Instead, it is a nostalgic hearkening back to the babyhood that Rilla—and Canada—have left behind. The “yeth” reminds readers just how far the heroine and the nation have come in their journeys to maturity.

Rilla of Ingleside is much more than a propagandist tract or an example of hegemonic discourse. Through her juxtaposition of the pastoral with the nightmare of no man’s land, Montgomery shows, in the only way she can, the filth and terror of the conflict. It is true that she valorizes soldier sacrifice throughout the book, but, as Edwards has argued, there is an implicit awareness of the futility of those deaths. Montgomery endorses the propaganda of her time, but her narrative offers some spaces for resistance to the militarist message. Montgomery’s real agenda is to value the work on the home front. Through Rilla and Susan, Montgomery clearly indicates the possibilities the war has brought for women. Montgomery does not yearn for those “green untroubled pastures before the war” because she can see the positive outcome of the war, at least in cultural terms, with the emergence of a new sense of Canadian identity and literature from its ashes. In conclusion, Montgomery’s depiction of the First World War is a complex assessment of the impact of this “total war” on the Canadian population. Montgomery’s only overt war novel is a brave examination of Canadian home-front attitudes to sacrifice, propaganda, gender equality, Canadian literature and nationhood. More than mere tract, *Rilla of Ingleside* offers rich insights into Canadian society at a pivotal point in its history.

NOTES

- 1 These include his dehumanizing nickname (which refers to his round red face), his ignominious escape when he believes Susan will drench him in boiling dye, and his male-chauvinist attitudes. See Edwards, “Intention” 133.

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