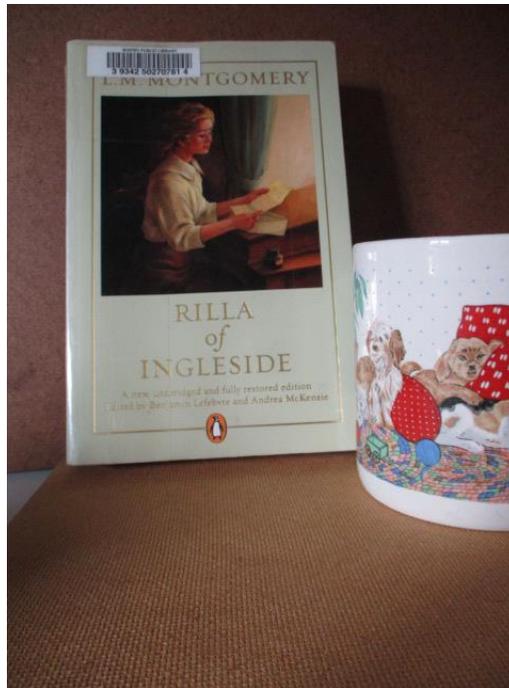


Rilla of Ingleside

By Rod Fraser



THIS STORY OF the Great War is different than others I have written. It tells of Rilla Blythe, a young girl of 15, who sees her brothers and a boy she danced with—and kissed once—enlist and go off to fight in France. And Rilla is not just any girl. She is the daughter of Anne Shirley, immortalized in *Anne of Green Gables*.

Rilla of Ingleside is the eighth of the Anne novels, written by L. M. Montgomery and published in 1921. It is her only book that speaks of the impact of the First World War on the home front—in particular, Prince Edward Island and the Blythe family. I expect it will be a welcome diversion from my earlier reviews that told the stories of the soldiers at the front.

I read *Anne of Green Gables* twice over the years and recall that Mark Twain once said, “Anne was the dearest and most lovable child in fiction...” I tend to agree, but on the whole, I found *Rilla of Ingleside* a much better, more moving book, perhaps because it was written in the context of the Great War.

I should explain to those who haven't read *Anne of Green Gables*, or have forgotten some of the details, that Anne Shirley became a teacher in adult life, and subsequently married Gilbert Blythe, a boy from her childhood who had studied to become a doctor. They had seven children, one of whom died shortly after birth. Those that lived were Jem, Anne, Diana, Walter, Shirley and Rilla. Joyce was the baby who died so young. Anne and Diana were twins.

This novel is a coming of age story, against a backdrop of the Great War. Rilla or ‘Bertha Marilla Blythe’, at age 15, is the youngest child of Anne Shirley and Gilbert Blythe. She is aimless and dreamy, seemingly unprepared for the challenges of life. Fortunately for us, she also writes regularly in her

journal, so we learn much of her thinking, the news from the war and family life.

Rilla is closest to her brother, Walter, a “kindred spirit”, who hopes to avoid the war if he can. Rather than enlisting like his older brother, Jem, he chooses to take up studies at Redmond College to earn his degree. Rilla often mentions her two brothers in her diary, “I couldn’t bear to have Walter go. I love Jem ever so much, but Walter means more to me than anyone in the world....”

JEM IS EAGER to join the army. Shortly after war is declared, he approached his father and said, “They are calling for volunteers in town, father. Scores have joined up already. I’m going in tonight to enlist.”

While Jem is taking his training and preparing for the war, Walter is in Nova Scotia, concentrating on his school work. He is coming under increasing pressure to enlist. After receiving an anonymous letter at school suggesting his cowardice, he puzzles over his options. He resolves to complete his school year and decide on his future in the summer.

He explains it to Rilla, when he returns home for his Christmas break. “It isn’t easy at school, Rilla. They all look at me and think, he’s a perfectly fit fellow, of military age. Why doesn’t he join up? I’m looked at as

a shirker and treated accordingly.”

With his school year successfully completed, and home for the summer, Walter catches the train to town one early morning and enlists in the army. A week or so later, he is sent on basic training. He is then home for a week’s leave, before shipping out for France.

Once at the front, Walter proves to be a brave soldier. He receives the *Distinguished Conduct Medal* for carrying a wounded soldier to safety while under enemy fire, writes a poem called *The Piper* that receives wide acclaim and shortly after, Walter dies at the Battle of Courcelette in September of 1916.

Just prior to Walter’s death, he writes Rilla a letter, telling her he is no longer afraid. He says in his letter, it “might be better for me to die, than to go on living with my memories of the war, forever spoiling life’s beauty.”

Of course, one must keep in mind this is a work of fiction. There was no Walter Blythe and there was no poem called *The Piper*. Some suggest this is a reference to John McCrae, who wrote *In Flanders Fields* during the Great War. John McCrae was an officer, physician and war poet who died in 1918 of pneumonia while serving with the Canadian Army. *In Flanders Fields* was written in 1915 after the death of McCrae’s friend, Lt. Alexis Heimer. It was published in *Punch* that year.

I SHOULD CAUTION those who are prone to tears that I found this book to be quite moving. But in fairness to those who are made of sterner stuff, it is probably overly sentimental. I think this a fair criticism, but it ignores the fact the sentimentality is so artfully done. Perhaps the anecdote about Dog Monday set out below will give my readers a chance to decide for themselves.

Dog Monday is a small black and yellow dog owned by Jem Blythe. It appears this little dog has strongly bonded with his master. After Jem's enlistment and training, he is home for a short leave, before taking the train to start his long journey to the front.

Rilla tells the story so, "Mom was holding Jem's hand—Dog Monday was licking it—everybody was saying goodbye—the train was in."

After all the goodbyes were said and the train was pulling out with Jem on board, "Monday was howling dismally and was forcibly restrained by the Methodist minister from tearing after the train."

It seems that Dog Monday never left the station for the duration of the war. Gilbert Blythe (Jem's father) dropped by regularly to ensure he had food and water. And at some point, he built Dog Monday a shelter. Rilla confides to her diary, "Dog Monday waits and watches... with as much hope and confidence as ever.... We never try to coax him home now: we know

it is of no use.”

“When Jem comes back, Monday will come home with him; and if Jem—never comes back—Monday will wait there for him, as long as his dear dog heart goes on beating.”

In the final chapter of the book, Jem does come home from the war—on a slow day in town, with no one to meet him. Rilla tells it like this, “Nobody was there to meet [the train], except the new station agent and a small black-and-yellow dog who for four and a half years had met every train....”

“One passenger stepped off the train—a tall fellow in a faded lieutenant’s uniform, who walked with a barely perceptible limp. He had a bronzed face and there were some grey hairs in the ruddy curls....”

“A black and yellow streak shot past the station agent. Dog Monday stiff? Dog Monday old? Never believe it. Dog Monday was a young pup, gone clean mad with rejuvenating joy. He flung himself against the tall soldier, with a bark that choked in his throat.... Dog Monday’s long vigil had ended. Jem Blythe had come home.”

RILLA BLYTHE IS just a young girl at the start of the war. But like Anne Shirley in *Anne of Green Gables*, she has plenty of events during the war years to

form her character and contribute to her understanding of life.

By war's end, Rilla who is now 19, has endured much and learned more. Her mother, Anne Blythe has this to say of her, "She has changed into a capable, womanly girl and she is such a comfort to me.... I don't see how I could have got through these terrible years without her."

ONE OF THE interesting subplots to the book is the story of James Kitchener Anderson ("Jims"), a baby taken in by Rilla, when the mother dies and Jims' father is off fighting in France.

Rilla called at the Anderson home in the early part of the war to collect Red Cross supplies as part of her volunteer work. Mr. Anderson had enlisted in the British army some time earlier, and upon arrival at their home, she found Mrs. Anderson dead with a two-week old baby in a crib.

After some thought and a conversation with a disinterested relative, Rilla determined it was best to take Jims with her. She bundled up the baby in a blanket, placed him in a blue soup tureen and off she went to Ingleside.

Her father cautioned Rilla that the baby was her

responsibility and she alone would be responsible for his care. So starts the story of Rilla's mothering of baby Jims for the war years and how his care contributes to her maturation as a young woman. Over the years, she grows fond of young Jims, but always wonders, where his future will lie.

In October of 1918, Rilla receives a letter from Jims' father, explaining that he is now married again to an English girl, has been discharged from the army and is coming home with his English bride. Soon enough they arrive, and the new Mrs. Anderson puts Rilla's fears to rest. Jims will have a proper family with good care.

Mrs. Anderson says, "I'm fond of children, Miss. I'm used to them—I've left six little brothers behind me. Jims is a dear child and I must say you've done wonders in bringing him up so healthy and handsome. I'll be as good to him as if he was my own, Miss."

"So Jims went away with the soup tureen, though not in it."

I WOULD LIKE to finish this review by noting that Rilla has her own hopes and dreams for her future. In the early part of the novel, she falls in love with handsome Kenneth Ford, a young man who lives

nearby and is six years her senior. He asks her for a dance at the Four Winds lighthouse, gives her her first kiss and then later asks her to wait for him, when he leaves for France.

They keep in touch by letter during the war years, and when Ken returns from France, she finds him much changed—older, with lines around his eyes, “and a narrow white scar running across his brown cheek.”

Despite the changes the war has wrought, their passion has not cooled, their feelings are not diminished. The novel ends with a promise of hope for all in the Blythe family and an enduring and loving relationship for Rilla.

Who could ask for more? I recommend this book for all who might be interested in reading an interesting novel centred on the impact of the war on the home front.

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