A Literary Pilgrimage To Prince Edward Island

By Jennifer Bain
July 25, 2022

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A Parks Canada staff member, dressed as Anne Shirley from Anne of Green Gables, walks down Balsam Hollow Trail at Green Gables Heritage Place in fall 2021/Parks Canada

Fact blends with fiction as I meander down Lover's Lane in the literary heart of Prince Edward Island, tracing the steps of author Lucy Maud Montgomery and her globally adored fictional character Anne Shirley, she of the spunky disposition and signature red braids.

The only lovers out strolling today are lovers of the 1908 novel *Anne of Green Gables*. The woodland cowpath that once connected a Victorian-era barnyard to pastures now leads to a protected pocket of Acadian forest and the Balsam Hollow Trail.

"The woods always seem to me to have a delicate, subtle life all their own," Montgomery mused in a 1906 letter to a fellow writer that's quoted on an aging interpretive sign. "In the woods I like to be alone for every tree is a true old friend and every tip-toeing wind a merry comrade … I always feel so utterly and satisfyingly at home."

Lovers Lane
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The start of Lover's Lane in June 2022/Jennifer Bain

Not only did Montgomery fall for this tree-arched lane when she was 12 and consider it a sanctuary, she photographed it often and paid tribute to it in her fiction, non-fiction and poetry. When Prince Edward Island National Park was established in this area in 1937, many of Montgomery's favorite haunts in Cavendish were preserved.

Everyone who comes to the island for *Anne of Green Gables* pilgrimages comes here.

What's officially known as L.M. Montgomery's Cavendish National Historic Site — designated by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 2004 — is actually made up of two properties. The eastern portion, called the Site of L.M. Montgomery's Cavendish Home, is privately owned and operated by the Macneill family and commands its own entrance fee. The western portion (and the one where Lover's Lane is found) is Green Gables Heritage Place and it's run by Parks Canada. The two properties are separated by a secondary highway but connected by the Haunted Wood Trail.

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The wall of International book covers for Anne of Green Gables at Green Gables Heritage Place/Brady McCloskey Photography

Before the pandemic, Green Gables drew more than 210,000 visitors a year. This year it's open daily from May to October and by appointment in November. Most of the interpretation and after-hours programming happens in July and August when a costumed Anne Shirley roams around to everyone's delight.

Pulling into a parking lot big enough to accommodate tour buses, I take note of a row of electric vehicle charging stations before checking out the multi-media visitor center that celebrates Montgomery's life and literary legacy. There's a wall of international book covers and a scrapbook-style presentation of her life.

A recent infusion of cash shows. Between 2015 and 2020, Green Gables received federal infrastructure investments of more than $11 million ($8.5 million USD) to build the center with new washrooms (including gender neutral), a gift shop and exhibit hall. It created the Cordial Café, upgraded Green Gables House to create barrier-free accessibility on the first floor, and did trail and bridge improvements plus parking lot upgrades. The site's 2022-2023 budget is $632,160 ($490,000 USD), and this includes 37 staff (full time, seasonal, term and students).

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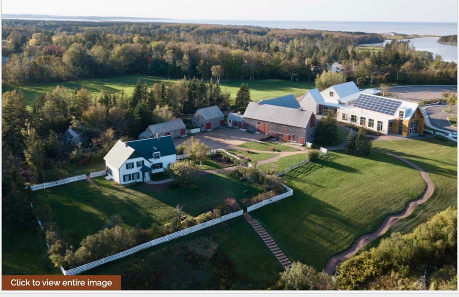
Don't miss the inspirational Anne quote etched into this fence/Jennifer Bain

"It's delightful when your imaginations come true, isn't it?"

The Anne Shirley quote is subtly etched on a white wooden fence between the parking lot and Green Gables House, not far from a plaque that recognizes Montgomery as a person of national historic significance.

The house known as Green Gables was settled in 1831 by David Macneill Sr. and then belonged to David Jr. and Margaret Macneill, cousins of Montgomery's grandfather. The author grew up with her maternal grandparents, Lucy and Alexander Macneill, a short walk away through what she dubbed the Haunted Woods. Montgomery knew the property well and used the homestead as inspiration for her novels, naming it Green Gables and making it the fictional home of orphan Anne's adoptive parents (Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert).

Parks Canada has restored and decorated the house and grounds to match details from the novels. Visitor center and barn exhibits explore Montgomery's life and celebrate the global impact of her career. Montgomery may have married a minister and moved to Ontario, but all but one of her 20 novels have her beloved P.E.I. as the main setting.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A drone image of Green Gables House (left), farm buildings and the visitor center (back) at Green Gables Heritage Place/Parks Canada

"Green Gables House and the surrounding garden, yard, farm buildings and forest trails bring visitors back to a simpler time, to the authentic place of L.M. Montgomery's inspiration," Parks Canada notes in a draft management plan for the site. "The site presents the coming together of L.M. Montgomery, the beauty of nature and the character Anne."

Just down the hill from Green Gables House is another loop through the forest, this one called the Haunted Wood Trail. The fictional Anne and her best friend Diana were scared to take a shortcut through the Haunted Wood. In real life, Montgomery and her friends made up spooky stories about the spruce grove.

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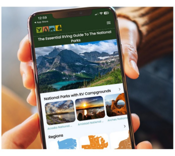
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Anne of Green Gables author L.M. Montgomery is depicted in a bronze statue in Montgomery Park/Jennifer Bain

The short, easy trail leads to Route 13, and across it to Montgomery Park, home to a bronze statue of Montgomery designed by Grace Curtis and sculpted by Nathan Scott. *A Glimpse of Beauty* shows Montgomery — on a bench, cats at her feet — “taking on a posture of awe in a moment of pure inspiration.” It's the recommended starting point of an island-wide tourism trail called the Inspiring World of L.M. Montgomery Literary Tour.

Montgomery married in her 30s (late for that era) but had three sons, one of whom was a stillbirth. After she struggled with depression and died in Toronto in 1942 at the age of 68 — some say by suicide, others disagree — her body was finally returned home and buried in the Cavendish Community Cemetery near the end of the Haunted Wood Trail.

An entry arch bears the message “Resting Place of L.M. Montgomery,” and the well-tended grave sports flowers and greenery. Montgomery is buried under the name Macdonald with her husband Rev. Ewen Macdonald and so an extra marker lets people know that this is indeed the author's grave.

MACDONALD
Grave of / Tombeau de
L.M. Montgomery
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The final resting place of author L.M. Montgomery is in the Cavendish Community Cemetery/Jennifer Bain

Back at Green Gables Heritage Site, it's interesting to note that the federal site is finally poised to get its first stand-alone management plan after being included in two previous ones for P.E.I. National Park.

Three key strategies will guide the next decade, according to a draft of the plan that was released before public consultations in the spring. In the spirit of “Anne with an E” these strategies have been evocatively titled “the scope of visitation,” “the pleasant ache of nature” and “working with kindred spirits.”

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In Green Gables House, Parks Canada has recreated Anne Shirley's room based on the Anne of Green Gables book series/Jennifer Bain

On the visitor front, it's hoped that the recent infrastructure improvements will help the federal agency boost the range of quality of experiences here. I can certainly vouch for the “Ropes Down” tour of Green Gables House that I took with interpretation officer Kate Arbing, who shared stories about everything from the brown puffed sleeve dress in Anne's room to the raspberry cordial on the shelf that the fictional Anne famously confused with red currant wine.

“it's kind of like we're walking into Anne's world,” Arbing said during the hour-long, after-hours tour that was piloted last year and is doing well despite its $33.50 ($25 USD) price tag on top of the usual entry fees.

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The brook wasn't quite babbling in June on the Balsam Hollow Trail/Jennifer Bain

On the nature front, the forest I've just walked through and the brook I've admired are being monitored and protected with an eye on the impacts of climate change and a promise to catalogue which species-at-risk live here — everything from nesting Bobolinks and other birds to bats.

As for “working with kindred spirits,” Parks Canada will keep connecting with those who share interests in literary, cultural and nature-based tourism as it refines the identity of Green Gables and its relationship with its Anne-themed neighbors.

Anne with an e!!
everything.
Celebrating
80th
my
friend!
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Some of the handwritten notes written by fans of Anne of Green Gables in the visitor center/Jennifer Bain

Before leaving, I find an interactive spot in the visitor center where people are encouraged to leave personal notes. Most are in English. Some are in French. Soon, a few will be in foreign languages as international tourism ramps up.

All are in pencil.

"Remembering traditional Canadian values," reads one message.

"Anne reminds us that there is beauty and wonder everywhere," declares another. "We just have to see it."

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