

painting the gables 'green'



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Anne of Green Gables isn't exactly hidden history here on the Island, we know. It's a timeless tale loved by many, and millions have visited 'Anne's Island' over the years. But what about the real Green Gables? The story behind one of Canada's most visited National Parks is a surprising one. It involves the unwilling expropriation of land from local residents, Maud Montgomery's mixed feelings about the park, and a two-week eviction notice to the original owners of the Green Gables home.

Features guest interviews: Dr. Alan MacEachern and Carolyn Strom Collins.

Trees whispering, wind whistling, grass moving, crickets and songbirds.

Girl actor: "I had made up my mind that if you didn't come for me tonight, I'd go down the track to that big wild cherry tree at the bend and climb up into it to stay all night. I wouldn't be a bit afraid, and it would be lovely to sleep in a wild cherry tree all white with bloom in the moonshine, don't you think?"

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = narration

When Anne Shirley came to the mythical Green Gables in Lucy Maud Montgomery's novel, she transformed the lives of those around her. Over a hundred years later, she's still changing lives. Anne of Green Gables has been translated into more than 36 languages, sold more than 50 million copies, and inspired countless movies, TV shows and plays. But what about the real Green Gables?

The story behind one of Canada's most visited National Parks is a surprising one. It involves the unwilling expropriation of land from local residents, Maud Montgomery's mixed feelings about the park, and a two-week eviction notice to the original owners of the Green Gables home.

Outside soundscape fades into ocean sounds, rowing in canoe. Theme music introduces.

Welcome to the hidden island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name's Fiona Steele, and I'll be your host for this journey.

Music swells up for a moment.

I know I know; Anne Shirley and Maud Montgomery aren't exactly hidden history here on the Island. But if we look behind the tourism veil, there's little pockets of the past that remain shocking in this story – like a few I mentioned just a moment ago.

Now before I get into the story, here's a disclaimer: I didn't read Anne of Green Gables until I was 22. This is coming from a redheaded Islander who once won \$100 in a local Anne look-alike contest. I love the novel now, but growing up, I didn't really learn much about Anne. I know a lot of Islanders who are like that, too.

That's where this episode idea comes from. Anne and Green Gables are such a big part of this Island's image, but it's a story that visitors come here for. I wanted to learn about the backstory of Green Gables, and why visitors love Anne's Island so much – as I've heard it called.

And if you are an Islander who loves everything to do with Anne, I hope there's still something for you to learn!

Alan: My name is Alan McEachern, I teach history at the University of Western Ontario. And I'm from Prince Edward Island. And I've written a bunch of stuff about the PEI history, including the history of Prince Edward Island National Park. And most recently with Ed MacDonald completed "the summer trade history of tourism on Prince Edward Island."

You might remember Alan McEachern from the 1970s episode. Alan is also the current visiting scholar at the L. M. Montgomery Institute at the University of Prince Edward Island.

Before we talk about the founding of PEI's National Park, let's look at why National Parks were even created in the first place. Alberta's Banff was Canada's first National Park, created in 1885.

Alan: I think the vision was to make use of nature that was otherwise not being very well used, or at least to make the most of them. So, you can't really farm the side of a mountain, it's hard to mine the side of a mountain, it's even hard to cut trees off the side of a mountain. And also, mountains provide opportunity for a certain kind of tourism that was popular in the late 19th and into the 20th century. And even though not all Canadian National Parks starting out were mountains, most of them were. They had sublime landscapes of waterfalls, and size and wilderness of pretending to be untouched by the human hand. Before that, so for example, at Banff, to make that more real, you had to toss out the stony Indian band that was there to ignore the Indigenous past of the place.

This happened at multiple National Parks, and it's important to remember that these lands were stolen, not given to the government. And they only looked untouched because they were so well managed by First Nations who lived there.

Alan: So, by the time of the depression in the 1930s, all the other provinces in the East were itching to have national parks of their own to have the same tourist advantage. The problem was that they didn't have the landscape. So, Parks Canada, or the precursor of Parks Canada, didn't know what to do. They were like, you know, we'd love to give you parks, but your land just doesn't really hold up. So, they had to figure out some other way to make those parks seem reasonable and rational, so Prince Edward Island National Park was one of the first taken of a different landscape aesthetic.

Think of it this way: the entire province of PEI is half the size of Jasper National Park. That meant they couldn't go with usual model of awe-inspiring nature so vast you feel lost in it.

Alan: So, what they did was they basically got their head around the fact that they didn't have to find mountains in PEI. But what they had to find was kind of the landscape equivalent of mountains, they had to find the best and the most representative, and if possible, the most sublime views of Prince Edward Island.

Fiona: Okay, that makes sense. So, whenever we look at PEI, they chose the location of the North Shore, kind of Dalvay-by-the-Sea, Cavendish area. Now, did they choose that because it was a great location, or do you think LM Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables played any role in the location decision?

Alan: I think it was the right location, like I think they wanted the North Shore. I think there were the inspectors who came to PEI were very polite when being taken all over the island at every single little spot where local politicians thought, oh, this be a great place for national parks. But I think that they pretty quickly decide that North Shore was the place to be. I'm not sure, there's no evidence that the inspectors really connected PEI to Green Gables or to Anne of Green Gables or to LM Montgomery until they arrived here. And they saw some signs in Cavendish for examples, saying home of Green Gables. I think that really got them thinking along that line is that that would kind of serve as an anchor for the National Park. And, of course, they really ran with that once they start thinking in that direction.

But tourists had been coming to Green Gables long before a National Park was established. I talked to Carolyn Strom Collins, who's been studying LM Montgomery for about 30 years. She's also the founder of the LM Montgomery literacy society.

Carolyn: I was reading Anne of Green Gables with my daughter when she was in junior high school. And we sort of read it in tandem. And I just got so interested not just in the story, which is wonderful. But in the background, and in the language that L M Montgomery used to describe Prince Edward Island and the landscape and the sunsets and sunrises and so much more, that I just wanted to expand on that and learn more about it.

Carolyn is from the states, and Anne of Green Gables inspired her first trip to the Island. She's been coming to the Island most summers since the 1990s, and she used to be a summer resident. So, in a way, that pilgrimage or journey to see Anne's Island is still alive. I asked Carolyn more about that language Montgomery uses to describe PEI.

Carolyn: Well, she just described her sense of nature, her view of nature so beautifully and so sensitively. And I think, well, many people call her a word painter, because you can just visualize what she's saying and see it in a deeper way than you would if you were just walking through a wooded path. If you're familiar with her language, you would think you would see more detail and you would appreciate more coloration of beliefs, for instance, the textures. And I think her way of doing things, her way of writing things about nature just puts you in a different plane, I think, if you're interested in that kind of thing.

Carolyn: She wanted to be a poet, actually, rather than a novelist or story writer. And I think her interest in poetry and she read so many different poets growing up and all of her life, but I think that contributed to her way of writing about nature. She could just go a little deeper than a lot of novelists do.

I find it interesting that Maud Montgomery originally wanted to be a poet. I have a book of her poetry at home, and that same language is all throughout it. But anyways, back to Green Gables.

In case you don't know much about the history of Green Gables, I'll let you in on a secret: it doesn't exist. Originally, Green Gables was just known as the Webb family farm.

Earnest and Myrtle Webb were third cousins of Maud Montgomery. Myrtle and Maud Montgomery were neighbors, and they became friends over the years.

Alan: I'm writing a book about that about the Webb's right now and I mean, I think it's just such a remarkably strange and wonderful-slash-terrible story. The Webb's had been living at what we now call Green Gables from before Anne of Green Gables was written. And almost from the moment that Anne of Green Gables was published in 1908, their property was being interpreted as one of the likely inspirations for Anne of Green Gables. So, it was definitely the home of Lovers Lane, for example. By 1920, the other real competitor for the inspiration of Green Gables, Montgomery's own birthplace or childhood home, I should say, was burnt, burned down. So, the Webb home became by default, the only existing inspiration for Green Gables so it became the really the Mecca, where tourists took their pilgrimage, they started coming to this house.

It's bold to say that Green Gables had that much of a draw for visitors. But it did, and it still does – Carolyn is one example of that. In the 1920s, Myrtle and Earnest Webb began taking in borders because so many visitors were coming to their home.

By the mid-1930s, they had added a new section to their home to accommodate more visitors. There were also signs leading the way to Green Gables. These signs are likely what Parks Canada saw when they surveyed the Island for a new National Park.

Anyways, it's now 1936 and a location for the National Park is chosen. It'll exist in Cavendish area, along the north shore.

There's only one problem: people already live on this land. Of course, the entire island is unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq, but settlers have long been living in the Cavendish area. These people have to leave, or at least give up some of their farming land inside the new park parameters. In total, over 100 properties had to be expropriated.

Alan: So, you can imagine on PEI long, thin farms with water, and especially along the shores there, the long thin properties would run right down to the to the water. In the 1930s in Canada, expropriation basically, if the government came along and said, "We want your land," everyone kind of shrugged and, and they took it. There was not much consideration for landowners in that period in terms of expropriation law, and probably expropriation culture in this period in Canada. So as soon as the Parks Canada said, we want it, they got it, that was pretty much it. It was the province who had to do the expropriation then hand it over to the feds, but it was basically the same thing.

Not everyone gave up their land willingly, or quietly.

Alan: There are people who were paid from Prince Edward Island for expropriation for their land, and they never picked up the check. They just refused to accept that their land had been taken. So, they were never going to accept the money because that would accept that, that would suggest that they accepted it. I mean, there were folks who kept plowing. So, if they had a field down to the shore, they would keep plowing all the way to the shore. And Park wardens had to come and say, you know, this land is no longer yours. And then they would say, Okay, well. They would accept it for next year, but then they would come back and plow it again. You know what I mean? Like they kept plowing on the golf course, for example. I mean, there were, there were things like that that were going on in the late 30s and into the 40s. And that dissipated as you would expect, because, over time, perhaps Canada's ownership of that land area became more legitimate, and kind of accepted as more legitimate.

Along with expropriating land from Islanders, the government bought one property in its entirety: the Webb family home. You know it as Green Gables.

Alan: When Parks Canada came to them in 1936, and said we want this property, they did not end up being expropriated because they ended up selling. So, they sold their entire property, unlike most of the landowners who got to keep some of their lands, Parks Canada wanted the entire thing.

After Parks Canada bought the property, it had to be renovated. The Webb family home was Maud Montgomery's inspiration for Anne of Green Gables, sure. But it didn't look exactly like the novel talked about yet. Even though Green Gables was an old farmhouse in the novel, Parks Canada spent more to renovate it than it would've cost to just build a new farmhouse. And when a Park surveyor R. W. Cautley wrote to his superior, he said

Male Narrator: 'While the exterior does not actually need painting, the present color scheme is not altogether suitable, and it would accordingly be desirable to repaint the building at an early date in order to emphasize the gables, which should, of course, be green.'

In other words, Green Gables wasn't green to begin with. Once the house was refurbished, Myrtle and Earnest Webb became part of the PEI National Park. They were still allowed to live in their family home, and Earnest now worked for Parks Canada.

Alan: And kind of as what would you call them this as kind of, like relics of their, you know, as almost like museum objects or something like that, of what a farm on PEI was like, they ran the tea room and they basically just lived in Green Gables from 1936 to 1945 as they had before. And then they were evicted on two weeks' notice at the end of 1945.

Fiona: Wow.

Alan: Yeah, it's a, it's a very wild story. Ernest Webb had been hired in 1937 after as basically as part of the agreement to sell. He was hired as a caretaker for the west end of the park. In 1945, he was, but oh, but very little of this was put on paper. So, his actual kind of the kind of agreement about whether this is a lifetime residency or what was never put on paper. So, in 1945, in November 1945, he turned 65. And the superintendent of the park came to the house and said, okay he's 65, you folks have to go. And it's clear, it seems clear the superintendent was not doing this on his own say so, that this was the Ottawa-level, this was a decision that kind of wanting to start a fresh at the end of the Second World War with a new postwar vision of Green Gables. And that meant getting rid of, frankly, this older couple who were no longer capable probably of, of working for the park and were no longer actually, Ernest was no longer an employee at the park. So, the decision was made to evict them. Evict might be too strong actually because it it's not like they were dragged out. But they were one way or another, they were told that they couldn't be living there anymore because they were not, because he was not an employee.

And that's the story. But finding an exact truth is hard. Were Myrtle and Earnest told they could always live at Green Gables? Was it assumed? What did Maud Montgomery think of all this?

Alan: I mean, one of the problems that we have in this era of me kind of trying to pull this apart exactly what was going on is that there's different players. So, you have the provincial government in some ways, I mean, the provincial government. The premier was involved in this, the left-tenant governor, so he was having conversations with the Webb's. He was having conversations, the premiers having conversations with Maud Montgomery, and they were the ones, the province was the one expropriating. But then they immediately hand it over to Parks Canada and parks Canada's are the ones that are having conversations then with the Webb's. And very little is ever put to paper. So, for example, a promise might be made from the province to the Webb's, and the Webb's might have told Maud that. But that promise has never communicated to the Parks Canada and never put to paper.

Alan: And certainly, I mean, obviously, Myrtle and Ernest are long deceased, but certainly their family has this tradition that they were promised that they would have lifetime residency at Green Gables and that that promise was not fulfilled. But even whether that promise was actually made by Parks Canada, or by the province, is really unclear. And so, Montgomery is kind of tied into this too, it's not clear what she was told or what she believed.

What we do know is how Maud Montgomery felt about the new National Park.

Carolyn: I think she had mixed reactions. She I don't I don't know if resentment is the right word that's a little strong, but I think she was surprised that there were so many people who would come to try to find Green Gables. I think I think she was worried that, that so many visitors would alter the natural landscape.

Carolyn: And of course, that did happen. There's much more commercial activity in Cavendish now than ever before, of course. And I think she was concerned that her special sacred places like Lovers Lane and some of the other places around Cavendish, that she enjoyed walking and being inspired by think she was worried that they would be trampled, that that they wouldn't be the same for her personally. And she mourned when trees were cut down to make way for something and that kind of thing. So, I think she, but I think she would have been very satisfied to know that that her books especially *Anne of Green Gables*, drew the attention and the love and the inspiration for so many people that they wanted to come to this landscape that she wrote about and experience it. So, I think her feelings might have been mixed, to tell you the truth.

Alan said the same thing. He called Montgomery's reactions a 'double-edged sword.'

Alan: I always think Montgomery had kind of a conflicted view of it. I mean, she was always kind of flattered. But she was also disturbed by what it was potentially doing to Cavendish. She was disturbed by the number of cars she was disturbed by, I mean, there were a times in the early 1930s, there were 100 cars parked on a summer day on Cavendish Beach, like right on the beach. She was disturbed by the amount of people kind of wandering in and out of Green Gables to farm.

Alan: And when the park came in, I think she felt very much the same thing. She felt that her kind of idyllic, simple vision of Green Gables and of Cavendish was ruined. That that life was over. And she felt bad about that she felt especially when she bad when she heard that the Webb's were going to lose their farm and that others in Cavendish would lose. But she also felt kind of flattered by it. And she felt once she heard more about what the park was going to do and what it was going to look like. And even once she saw the kind of landscape development that went on there, she thought that it was that it had its own kind of beauty, like having the golf course around the house. She was even okay with that. To me, it seems kind of strange, like it seems so un-PEI, un-kind of rural Prince Edward Island, to have this golf course right around the house. But it was a different kind of beauty. And it was it was attractive to her in a different way.

So, it's not like Montgomery hated the park. But she did have mixed feelings. For example, Maud Montgomery wrote in a letter in February 1928 that

Female narrator: "Alas, yes... Cavendish is being over-run and exploited and spoiled by mobs of tourists."

But she also says later,

Carolyn: "I think Cavendish, the Cavendish shore is the most beautiful in the world. I could never love any place as I have loved Cavendish."

And Cavendish is where Maud Montgomery is buried today. Montgomery died in 1942, which means she never lived to see Green Gables after Earnest and Myrtle Webb left. The National Park has changed a lot over the years, but no one has lived in the home since the Webb's left.

Alan: I mean, you could say that the long history of Green Gables is kind of returning it to, to what it was like in the early, correcting some of the mistakes that were made shortly after the park was created. Like one of the things that they did, of course, was that they tore down the barn. They tore down kind of the outbuildings, kind of any existence of this being a PEI farm. So, they focused very much on the house, because they had this golf course, right beside it, like right around it to the point where you're too young to remember this Fiona, but there was at one of the greens, it was right in front of the house. So, people you walk into Green Gables and you, you would hear golf balls hitting the side of the house. I mean, it was a little strange now in retrospect, but slowly over time, over decades, Parks Canada returned it to being more of a farm property.

Today, when you visit Green Gables, you won't see any golf greens nearby. They're hidden behind some trees. But there's a reason why this National Park is one of Canada's most visited. I went for the first time recently and even though it was raining, it was lovely.

Carolyn: Well, as I understand it, tourism is the third largest contributor to the economy on Prince Edward Island. And I don't know the percentage but I'm sure it's quite high that that has to do with Anne of Green Gables and LM Montgomery. Because as I said before, People want to see what she wrote about, they want to experience it.

Carolyn: But the tourism portion of the economy, I think, is quite important to Prince Edward Island. And I think you're right. Many islanders have sort of ignored the Anne thing, shall we call it? And I think maybe some just really resent her having so much influence because maybe they haven't even read the book yet. They just sort of know a bit about Anne and maybe wish she had moved on to another place. But I think it would be wonderful if more people in Prince Edward Island would read the book and know so much more about their own place and appreciate it that much more than maybe they can if they don't read it.

Carolyn: Carolyn: Even if you haven't read Montgomery, if you if you love nature and the sea and the wonderful skylines, shall we say, you will be entranced in Prince Edward Island to see things in such a beautiful clear way. The air on Prince Edward Island is so clear and unpolluted. You just get a sense of brightness and clarity that you don't often get in other places, I think.

Carolyn: And the National Park I think has done very well in keeping the nature portion of the park, maybe not intact because it's changed over the years, but I think they're really trying to make it a very natural landscape. And then of course going to Green Gables, which is part of the national park, you get a wonderful feeling of being in the novel. Once you've gone into the house and looked at it and you can see it what LM Montgomery must have been talking about. Even though it's been redone since she wrote the novel, and it's not exactly as it was, of course, I think the National Park has done a wonderful job in translating Anne of Green Gables house into what it must have looked like in the novel, in LM Montgomery's imagination. So you do get a real sense of being in that place.

The way Carolyn describes Green Gables, it almost sounds magical.

Theme music begins underneath narration.

Carolyn: Well, for many people, it is magical. And when I first started going to Prince Edward Island, there were so many people from Japan, who came over in droves to just to see Green Gables. And I remember hearing about a man who just sat on the front lawn of Green Gables, for hours, meditating, enjoying the, the atmosphere and being in a place that I think he must have considered almost sacred. And I think that's the case with many people, is it is a sacred spot in many ways.

Theme music continues for a few seconds.

As a born and raised Islander, I can't say I know what he would've experienced. But I can begin to understand after hearing Carolyn explain it to me.

I hope you enjoyed this episode – if you did, feel free to find us on social media or at peimuseum.ca. On our website you can donate or purchase a membership, where you can check out all seven of our museum sites across the Island.

Thanks to Innovation PEI and Skills PEI for your support, along with our sponsors: Beyond the Brim Consulting, Upstreet Brewery, Confederation Centre of the Arts.

As well, we had some fantastic voice actors in this episode: Matthew McRae and Kristie Rogers, thank you for bringing some historical figures to life.

Finally, shout out to Adam Gallant for our theme music.

Talk to you next time on the hidden island!