Prologue

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon in August 1909, Myrtle and Ernest Webb hosted a garden party at their Cavendish farm on Prince Edward Island. If needed, the young couple had ample excuse for such midweek festivities. Family friends were visiting from Massachusetts. Myrtle's aunt Maggie was back home on the Island too, having spent years as a schoolteacher in the Klondike. (On her return, she presented her niece with a locket containing gold dust.) Myrtle herself was six months pregnant with their second child. Also, it was simply summer on Prince Edward Island.

What's more, the Webbs had just taken ownership of the property where the party was being held, a 140-acre parcel of rolling farmland on the Island's North Shore. The farm had everything. There was substantial woodland along the back, field upon field of rich red soil, a stream that threaded its way to a sizable pond, and a line of sand dunes announcing the Gulf of St Lawrence. And at the very centre of the property was a large and sturdy old farmhouse with plenty of barns and outbuildings. Myrtle had lived on this farm for most of the past thirteen years, having moved there when she was twelve. She and Ernest had been married there in 1905, they had returned in 1907, and now it was officially theirs. It was a lovely place to be raising a family.

And if reality were not enough, the Webb farm had recently acquired an unexpected touch of romance. Cavendish author Lucy Maud Montgomery had published her first novel, Anne of Green Gables, to great international acclaim just a year earlier, and the farm was becoming associated with it. The novel is about Anne Shirley, a spirited young orphan from Nova Scotia who comes to live with
an elderly brother and sister on their farm, Green Gables, in the fictional PEI community of Avonlea – a farm much like the Webbs’ in a community much like Cavendish. Reporting on the garden party, the Charlottetown Guardian newspaper described the property in reference to locations from the book: “The tables were spread under the shade of the apple trees in ‘Old Orchard’ in full view of the Lake of Shining Waters.” After the charming hostess had served a “bounteous repast,” some of the guests played games while others “enjoyed a walk through the beautiful path known as ‘Lover’s Lane’ now made famous by the author of ‘Anne of Green Gables.’” Although the Guardian did not say so, Montgomery herself may well have been in attendance; she and Myrtle Webb were cousins and confidantes, after all. The newspaper might not have covered this modest party at all but for the fact that in 1909 the Webb homestead was already being identified as the inspiration – even the actual setting – of Montgomery’s 1908 book. It hardly mattered that Anne of Green Gables was a novel and that both “Anne” and “Green Gables” were imaginary.

Myrtle and Ernest Webb made the farm their home for the next thirty-six years. They worked its land. They cut and burned its firewood. They stocked and fished its pond. They renovated and maintained the house. They raised five children there and watched them move away.
They became leading figures in their community. As time passed, they increasingly shared their ordinary home with its increasingly famous reputation. In the 1910s, they grew used to having strangers drop in, intent on seeing sites from the book. In the 1920s, with car ownership and automobile tourism on the rise, they welcomed more and more visitors from all over. In the 1930s, they finally surrendered to calling their farm what everyone else did: Green Gables.

But the Webb family did more than just witness their home in the process of becoming what it is today, the most famous house in Canada. The Webbs also participated actively in making Green Gables the most famous house in Canada. In the 1910s, they put up signs for visitors that identified locations associated with the book. Beginning in the mid-1920s, they welcomed literary pilgrims as boarders each summer. They hosted dignitaries and conventions for teas and meals. They even sold *Anne* books and Green Gables postcards. The Webb family cemented the association between Anne’s world and their own, to the point that for many readers and tourists from around the world, Green Gables was Prince Edward Island.

The Webbs were so successful, in fact, that when Prince Edward Island National Park was being established in 1936, the federal and provincial governments decided that it was natural – indeed, essential – that the Green Gables home and property be made its centrepiece. Facing expropriation, Ernest and Myrtle Webb had no choice but to sell the farm. Yet they were allowed to stay on in Green Gables for almost another decade, living in the middle of the national park as caretakers of what had been their home. Then, in the last days of 1945, they were told on just two weeks’ notice that they had to leave. The literary connection with *Anne of Green Gables* that had long enriched the Webbs’ lives ultimately upended it.

In the years when the Webbs were experiencing many of their greatest changes, Myrtle Webb was keeping a diary. When she first picked up the pencil in 1924, she was a forty-year-old homemaker running a household of eight, and the farm was of interest only to a relatively small number of travellers. By the time she set the pencil down in 1954, she was a seventy-year-old widow who lived alone, no longer occupying the house that was now a major Canadian tourist destination.

In contrast to her cousin L.M. Montgomery – a writer who kept a journal to capture, and later amend, her innermost thoughts in
entries that often ran on for pages – Myrtle was content to jot down a short, prosaic review of the day’s events. She noted the weather, what work and other activities members of the family were up to, their visitors or people they had visited, news about community births, marriages, or deaths – and often that was it. Few days rated
Figure 2 | Map of Prince Edward Island with place names of major towns and communities mentioned throughout the text (bottom left), an inset map of the Cavendish area (top left), and an aerial photomosaic of the Webb farm and surroundings in 1935 (above). Visible in the photomosaic, from top to bottom, are the Gulf of St Lawrence, sand dunes, Macneill's Pond (“Lake of Shining Waters”), Cavendish Road, the Webbs’ house and barns, and the backwoods through which Lover’s Lane runs.
more than forty words. In the diary’s back pages, she recorded transactions ranging from the amounts charged long-stay boarders to a list of which cows had been bred by which neighbours’ bulls. Today, we may think of diaries as inherently private, but historically, they have tended to be closer to semi-private, with many left out to be read or even co-written. Myrtle’s diary was sufficiently public that it was accessible to the whole family. When she was sick or away from home, Ernest or one of the children recounted the day’s happenings in her stead. All in all, about 5 per cent of the diary was written by others. To that extent, it was not just Myrtle Webb’s diary but the Webbs’ diary – the Green Gables diary.

The brevity of the diary’s daily entries ensures that in its entirety it is relatively compact. It is written across seven simple, slim volumes, beginning with a 48-page scribbler and ending with a hardbound 200-page notebook; its thirty years comprise just over 200,000 words on 1,000 handwritten pages. Myrtle’s descendants preserved the diary in the decades after her death but never made it public or made it available to researchers. But Myrtle Webb’s diary can now be read in full at greengablesdiary.ca. With the Webb family’s blessing and assistance, I developed a web exhibit that includes scans and transcripts of the entire diary, as well as family photos, Green Gables memorabilia,
maps, and an introductory text. We launched greengablesdiary.ca on 24 April 2024 – the centennial of Myrtle’s first post. I encourage readers to visit the site.

Yet the succinct nature of Myrtle’s writing also means that individual entries often benefit from explanation or context. *Becoming Green Gables* explores a selection of the entries as a means of revealing the world of Myrtle Webb and her family, along with the history of Green Gables. It focuses on the years 1924 to 1945, when Myrtle kept the diary faithfully, with a conclusion that covers the decade that followed, when she wrote only sporadically. The entries – about ten for each year – have been chosen because they are both representative and evocative, capturing the rhythm and routine of the passing seasons at Green Gables while marking life’s gradual and sudden changes. We learn how the Webbs farmed and worked and socialized and travelled and communicated and played and worshipped and much more. As a means of retaining Myrtle’s voice, each of the entries is reproduced in full with its original spelling and punctuation.9

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activities, even as the text proceeds chronologically, discussion spirals out in countless directions, from potatoes to Prohibition, from “Aunt Maud” to modernity. Although the foundation of this book is the Webbs’ own story, it is also a history of their famous home, the community, the province, the nation, and the world in which they lived in the second quarter of the twentieth century. A belief underpinning the book, and echoed in its structure, is that reducing historical actors or episodes to a single meaning is to miss, and thus to miss out on, their complexity.

But given the diary’s content – and my own background and interests – the book is also situated in and speaks to specific literatures.
For one, the book demonstrates the important role of women in tourism development. There exists a substantial international literature on the tourism industry’s capacity to empower women, but it overwhelmingly deals with the Global South, and little of it is historical. Conversely, although there is a considerable historical literature related to women and travel in the Global North, its focus tends to be on women as tourists, not as operators. Becoming Green Gables shows that the winter planning and day-to-day summer labour of women such as Myrtle Webb, the four Webb daughters, neighbour Katherine Wyand, and members of the local Women’s Institute were essential to making Green Gables, Cavendish, and Prince Edward Island major tourism destinations. (And, at least through the mid-1930s, the clear majority of tourists to Green Gables were also women, drawn to this place by the writing of a female author about a female character.) The summer trade provided rural women such as Myrtle Webb a rare chance to build and run a business out of their own home.

The Webb diary also sharpens the picture of Green Gables itself. Considering how closely identified with Anne the physical site has become – not to mention how important to Prince Edward Island and Canadian tourism and culture – remarkably little has been written of its history, and this account has been produced mostly by Parks Canada staff for internal use. Becoming Green Gables shares new findings about the house and property, such as the degree to which the Webbs maintained and modified their home to accommodate tourists in the 1920s and ’30s. It also shows the degree to which the growing celebrity of Green Gables in this era did not just happen but was facilitated by the Webbs and, to some degree, by L.M. Montgomery herself; they were not simply relying on awareness of an existing Anne brand but were also helping to build this brand. In this regard, the book makes a novel connection between the literary and the literal Green Gables.

In its later years, the diary also offers a rare account of the history of national parks in North America, providing a compelling behind-the-scenes look at a park’s establishment and development. Whereas most histories of parks lean heavily on internal correspondence and reports, Becoming Green Gables traces the day-to-day progress of a park’s creation from the perspective of previous owners – describing in detail the dramatic physical changes that were wrought to the Green Gables house, grounds, and farm. That the Webbs continued living in their old home, in the middle of Prince Edward Island National Park, makes them especially unusual and valuable witnesses to the park’s
first years. What’s more, Myrtle’s diary captures how Green Gables experienced the Second World War, offering arguably the most captivating view of any North American national park in wartime.

The Webb diary also chronicles the unfolding of modernity across rural Canada in the early to mid-twentieth century. In the mid-1920s, the Webbs were still growing and gathering much of their own food, they relied on horses for transportation and wood for fuel, and they were involved in the rural co-operative movement in numerous ways. By the mid-1940s, none of these things were true. To be sure, the family’s modernizing arc was not absolute: they engaged with the cash economy at the beginning of this narrative, and they still grew a large vegetable garden and maintained a close-knit relationship with their rural community at the end. Nor was the family’s arc at all typical: that they lived in, profited from, and ultimately were forced to sell a home that was becoming increasingly famous greatly accelerated the transformation of their way of life. But the very speed with which Green Gables changed from a largely subsistence farm to a golf course, the centrepiece of a national park, and a major tourist attraction allows readers to easily observe the onrush of modernity in the Webbs’ lives.

Although the diary’s entries and their stories continually guide us outward – connecting the Cavendish community to the wider world – they always bring us back again to Green Gables, to the Webb family, to Myrtle. My primary motivation in writing this book is to introduce readers to Myrtle Webb’s world. Coincidentally, just a few months after Myrtle began her diary in 1924, L.M. Montgomery read and transcribed into her journal a somewhat similar account of everyday life on Prince Edward Island, the 1890s diary of Cavendish farmer Charles Macneill. “I don’t think I ever read anything quite so delicious in my life,” Montgomery wrote. “[I]t gave me the keen, sad delight of a vanished world.” Myrtle’s diary does much the same. It opens a window into the life of a family over the course of three decades.

I admit to loving that Myrtle Webb shared the name of the everywoman wife and mother of Thornton Wilder’s 1938 play Our Town. Yet these Webbs were not characters but real people. They lived a real existence in a real place that they loved. Their existence changed when their home became accepted as the setting of a famous novel. Although their lives grew increasingly governed by this fictional connection, they remained as real as ever, so they grieved the eventual loss of the place. In fact, generations after losing it, the descendants of the Webbs still identify with the farm. They are still the Webbs of Green Gables.