

Emily

of New Moon

Montgomery's Magic Mushrooms

By John Hopkins

Famed writer Lucy Maud Montgomery is best remembered for her *Anne of Green Gables* novels, but these days Montgomery's own favourite set of semi-autobiographical novels, *Emily of New Moon*, *Emily Climbs* and *Emily's Quest*, are all the rage. Similarly inspired, the *Emily of New Moon* CBC-TV series is also driven by the young raven-topped, muffiny cute orphan, Emily Starr. Not having much acting experience, Prince Edward Island's own Martha MacIsaac auditioned and practically died when she clinched the part. Martha survived and the series has now been aired in 26 countries worldwide and scheduled for broadcast in another 100 at last count. Since it began airing on CBC's Sunday night family hour in January 1998, the *Emily of New Moon* series has been a tickly new experience for Islanders glued to their sets. And why shouldn't it be? After all they're paying for a good chunk of it. Through Enterprise P.E.I., its all-purpose investment wing, Prince Edward Island to date has invested a hefty \$2.4 million in *Emily*, or roughly the size of the entire annual budget for the Nova Scotia Film Development Corp. With the series' wide television exposure, the government saw the potential for fresh tourist greenbacks. But in order to fathom why tourism was the primary motivation for the Island investments in *Emily*, you must go back, away back....

Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, circa 1955. Against a salt-air bay accented by brilliantly sculpted golden dunes, wind-weathered evergreens perched on red cliffs, pearly ocean glittering blue and Turner-painted panoramic skies of blazing orange and blue-hued clouds with pink tips, a

Martha MacIsaac and Sheila McCarthy



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pipe-smoking farmer winds his tractor over his century farm. Behind him trails a macramé of magnificent patterns of tilled and fertile rows of red Island soil. From the warmth of this womb incubates those famous Prince Edward Island spuds we so often bake and then drown in butter 'n' sour cream. Yum.

Whip pan and flash forward to the same farmer's bay in 1999, and you too can experience the thrills of an AC/DC rock-music montage maze of fast-paced family flying saucer theme parks, a full-scale Space Shuttle exhibit, King Tut's Tomb, Ripley's Believe It or Not, Santa's Village, wax museums, bumper cars, roller coasters, miniputts and Jello-wrestling contests. Things have changed on the little red rock. Vrrrooom. Wow. Chic-coloured rented Sea-Doos pass furiously in front of the camera, sending the tripod into a spin, scattering seagulls and protected pecking piping plovers. With nearly 15 tourists for every Islander, tourism on the Island has been so good lately that one entrepreneur made history by bringing in the Island's first exotic dancers to his North Shore Cavendish bar before being promptly shut down two weeks later for displaying such bad taste. Now seriously though folks, what's all the fuss about on the sleepy Isle? Why that's easy: turn-of-the-century Lucy Maud Montgomery, of course!

All these cheesy "attractions" have arisen like an expanding ring of magic mushrooms around Montgomery's celebrated headstone in a small, but famous Cavendish graveyard. And to be fair to the Island's gentle rolling pastoral landscape, up until now most of this tourist trap stuff has been quarantined in Cavendish, much to the relief of many. However, further down the coast at the new Greenwich National Park, intended to preserve its famous giant dunes, the Island government is encouraging developer proposals to build around the park boundaries as in Cavendish. Yuk! At one point, a government-commissioned tourism consultant's report recommended, among other things, enlisting Disney to develop the North Shore, virtual Fathers of Confederation and an IMAX theatre at the foot of

the Confederation Bridge, itself a designated "tourist attraction." In the west, where *Emily* is being shot, locals are hoping that the series will do as much for the Cabot Park beach region. Says local cartoonist Wayne Wright, "I see the Cabot region reviving, as opposed to Cavendish, which has been raking in the money." Yes, there's a lot of Cavendish envy and little *Emily* might be just the ticket.

All of this buzz that burps and slurps around L.M.'s resting place seems like a muted distant galaxy away from the Island world of her impassioned turn-of-the-century "Island way of life" stories, many of which have understandably reached into the hearts all over the world. The Japanese have even erected a theme park to replicate rural Prince Edward Island villages and family farms so eloquently described by Montgomery. With all the hoopla, it didn't take long for the movie business to go for a slice. Should it really be to anybody's surprise that the Prince Edward Island government invested in the *Emily* series as a tourism project rather than film industry development? After all Don Harron's and Norman Campbell's enduring "Island way" musical, *Anne of Green Gables*, sucks up tourists dollars faster than an Electrolux. Now preparing for its 35th consecutive season, 1.4 million have gleefully passed through turnstiles to hear Anne sing about ice cream. The Prince Edward Island government

did not want to miss out on *Emily* in the wake of missing the boat when producer Kevin Sullivan landed on shore in the mid-1980s with several *Anne of Green Gables* projects in tow and his finger pointing toward the *Road to Avonlea*. Jack McAndrew, president of Prince Edward Island's Association of Film and Television Professionals, files regular Prince Edward Island reports for CBC's *This Morning*. He recounts that "the government of that time was totally uninterested in doing anything for him [Sullivan]. They gave him a couple of hotel rooms." It was not long before Sullivan hightailed it back to Ontario. Upper Canadian blasphemy! Voice appropriation!! The Island ended up with only a few "scenic pickup" crumbs from the \$136-million *Avonlea* production budget. Nevertheless,



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Sullivan's series was a big boon to tourism mainly through its exposure on the Disney Channel in the United States. Having lost the opportunity to snag *Avonlea*, the Islanders weren't going to let another big one get away. No siree, not with the hook firmly set and *Emily* zipping out line from the rod faster than a North Lake bluefin tuna. All were ready to gaffe *Emily* and hang her triumphantly on the red shores.

After Sullivan and Disney finally milked all the drama it could out of *Road to Avonlea*, the wily *Emily* producers saw a hole in the market and the CBC prime-time schedule. They also gambled that their prying, fate-infatuated, sans saccharin child heroine would find an untapped TV market of *Emily* readers and Montgomery groupies. McAndrew explains the *Emily* deal as follows: "The producers came to the Prince Edward Island government of the day and wanted money. In return for the \$2 million, they entered into an agreement whereby the permanent sets would be used in the future as a theme park." McAndrew adds, "Normally sets don't last for 30 or 40 years." As far as the job of building the sets, "It was my understanding that large portions of the set were built in Halifax and then brought here." Prince Edward Island and Alberta are the only remaining provinces in Canada with no film-tax credits, although McAndrew's association has been "lobbying hard" to get some. Given this, and the tourist theme-park contract, he says there was little incentive for the *Emily* producers to hire the few qualified Islanders for high-paying key technical and creative positions. Enterprise P.E.I. claims that, not counting extras, 88 Islanders worked on the series this season at some point. As far as the transfer of skills was concerned McAndrew says that, "In the initial agreement, there was no training. Any training was incidental, the producers were not required to do any."



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In what is becoming the Garden of the Golf, as opposed to the Garden of the Gulf, the Lucy Maud industry and its expansion has made Island doll peddlers, innkeepers and smart, smooth-pitching producers "from away" natural bed buddies. One wonders where Prince Edward Island and Kevin Sullivan would be right now without Lucy. Rather awkwardly, the net result of all the fingers grabbing for a piece of Maud's apple pie is that there might be some hope for an infant Prince Edward Island film industry. After seeing their rooms and horses rented, hammers sold, and after seeing media stories and a lot of their friends on TV, it seems as though the Island public has embraced filmmaking. Berni Wood, Enterprise P.E.I.'s lone film-investment representative, claims she has

always known about the benefits of developing a film industry in Prince Edward Island. She admits *Emily* was foremost a "tourism product development" project because the province had no "equity investment" guidelines or film development policies. When the *Emily* producers arrived looking for funding, Enterprise P.E.I. felt there was no need to consult with local film producers because the *Emily* series was never seen as related to the little understood area of film development. Some government insiders now realize that the Island may have lost out on many benefits it could have negotiated for with \$2 million in grant chips on the table. It was felt that the tourism spinoff from flimsy *Emily* film sets should not have been considered a negotiating point but rather an ancillary consideration. "The point is," says producer McAndrew, "that if the province wanted to do it correctly, and if there was a producer to be contacted and hired, then legitimate producers should have been given a shot at it. None were." Although only a year ago, the *Guardian* reported that

the Prince Edward Island government was still not prepared to invest in the film industry, the situation appears to be changing. Several Island producers have recently received funding for their projects through Enterprise P.E.I. McAndrew says, however, there will never be a film industry on Prince Edward Island of any note until the Island government offers tax credits to compete with the other provinces. Rumours that the government is planning just that have been circulating since last fall, and some hope 1999 will be the year. With all the new interest in the reissue of the *Emily* books, and the television series impact, Curtis Barlow, CEO and executive director of the Confederation Centre also sees a natural fit for *Emily* to be mounted as the sister musical to *Anne of Green Gables* this summer. Barlow says that Toronto's playwright Richard Ouzounian's adaptation entitled simply *Emily* offers the cultural

experience that people really want when they come to Prince Edward Island.

With the Nielsen ratings generally good, the *Emily* series should swim past Nova Scotia's *Black Harbour* series which was cancelled this January. Islanders are hoping there will be a fourth season of production, and perhaps even seven more, as was the case with *Road to Avonlea*. Whatever happens, says local commentator Wayne Wright, "I was glad, after 90 years of being satiated with *Anne of Green Gables*, to see her dark, twisted sister coming out of the shadows." Merchandisers are hoping that the carrot-topped, freckled-faced dolls can take a rest under the bed for awhile as *Emily* snuggles underneath the covers. ●