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Poetry in Motion

A centuries-old source of literary inspiration lies along Nova Scotia's Evangeline Trail

BY CHRISTY ANN CONLIN

L"In the Acadian land, on the shores of the Basin of Minas,
Distant, secluded, still, the little village of Grand-Pré
Lay in the fruitful valley. Vast meadows stretched to the eastward ...
Opened, and welcomed the sea to wander at will o'er the meadows.
West and south there were fields of flax, and orchards and corn-fields ..."

Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1847

THE JUNE SUN STREAMS IN THE WINDOW OF OUR waterfront hotel room. My husband, James, sorts out the children's sleeping arrangements in the adjoining room as I sip iced jasmine green tea and read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous 1847 poem, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*, which immortalizes the tragic 1755 deportation of the Acadians. We have

(above) Purple and pink lupines (not to mention brightly painted houses) colour Nova Scotia's Evangeline Trail.

one night in Halifax before beginning our whirlwind literary tour of the Evangeline Trail, the official roadtrip from here to Yarmouth, named after Longfellow's poem. ►

It's not just the trail's name that holds literary associations. Nova Scotia's entire western region, which the 400-kilometre route runs through, has produced such acclaimed writers as the bestselling Ami McKay and Order of Canada recipient Ernest Buckler, among many others. It's a region renowned for its beauty and complex history and is clearly a powerful literary catalyst.

It's also fitting that we chose this hotel, attached to the historic train station, as it was once a part of the distinguished chain of Canadian National Railway properties. With a stellar downtown location, the Nova Scotian, which became a Westin in 1996, is contemporary yet whispers of a grand past. It was Dominion Atlantic Railway that ignited interest in literary travel to Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley in 1894. Using its trains, and the popularity and poignancy of Longfellow's poem, the railway enticed tourists to the area.

But before I can sink too deeply into literary reverie, my thoughts are interrupted by the sounds of an epic battle breaking out among the children (Silas, four, Anna, eight, and Mary, 10) over who gets which big white pouffy bed. My husband diplomatically settles the dispute and we assemble to begin our tour.

The first stop is just a short walk from the hotel at the Five Fisherman Restaurant, a landmark famous for its seafood, particularly the steamed mussels. Dating back to 1816, this building on Argyle Street was once an art college founded by Anna Leonowens, author of *Anna and the King of Siam*, a memoir based on her experiences as governess to the king's children and later adapted into the Academy Award-winning movie-musical, *The King and I*. James goes crazy at the mussel bar and Anna orders Digby scallops with mashed potatoes, while the rest of us try the fragrant clam chowder.

The sun is setting by the time we walk back along Barrington Street, passing the site where L.M. Montgomery lived in the now-demolished Halifax Ladies' College while she studied English literature prior to her 1908 *Anne of Green Gables* fame. Our route also takes us past the charming Waverley Inn, the historic Victorian hotel where playwright and poet Oscar Wilde stayed on an 1882 lecture tour. By the time we return to the Westin, it's too late for a story, so we tuck the children in with a few lines from Longfellow, and the promise that the next morning we'll be off to the Land of Evangeline.

Passenger trains don't run through the Land of Evangeline anymore, but a twinned highway does, and we make good time to the historic town of Windsor, the children transfixed by the purple, white and pink lupines lining the road. It was amid this countryside that Governor General Award-winning writer George Elliott Clarke was born and raised. Clarke now lives in Toronto, but his work focuses on what he calls the "Africadian," the descendents of former African-American slaves who escaped to Canada via another railroad – albeit a symbolic one – and settled in Nova Scotia.

After a 50-minute drive from Halifax, we come upon Haliburton House, home of the first Canadian internationally bestselling author, Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796-1865). His Clockmaker serial appeared in *The Novascotian* newspaper and featured the sardonic Sam Slick, a character whose wise-cracking commentary coined the expressions, "It's raining cats and dogs," and "Facts are stranger than fiction."





We leave Windsor and before us lies the view Longfellow captured in his poem: the meadows and Cape Blomidon stretching into the sky as “sea-fogs pitched their tents, and mists from the mighty Atlantic looked on the happy valley.”

This setting, the lush Annapolis Valley, is one of Canada’s richest agriculture areas, highly regarded for its apples, farmers’ markets and vineyards – and for its rich history,

too. We stop at Grand-Pré National Historic Site, which commemorates the life of the Acadians and where we discover, to the children’s delight, a statue of Longfellow’s heroine.

The poet’s epic work is based on the fictional story of Evangeline and Gabriel, betrothed but separated during the Deportation. It’s a sad tale, but happier memories await as we move on to Houston Beach

(clockwise from top left) Anna, Silas and Mary on the Halifax harbour front; Apple orchards in bloom in the Annapolis Valley; First Nations Day at the Port-Royal National Historic Site; diners at Domaine de Grand-Pré winery near Wolfville; the Historic Gardens and farmers’ market in Annapolis Royal.



for clam digging. The children run like sandpipers along the shore and I leave them with their father to make the short drive to Canning, a former shipbuilding village, for lemonade with historical fiction writer Ami McKay.

McKay is the ideal person to describe the attraction the area holds for literary types. Originally from Chicago, she set her first novel, *The Birth House*, on the other side of Cape Blomidon, where she now lives. It tells the tale of a midwife living in Scots Bay, which is incidentally where the author fell in love with her future husband. "We hiked to Scots Bay on a stormy day and I felt like I was

home for the first time in my life," she says. "By the end of the week, we were engaged."

McKay's next novel, *The Virgin Cure*, will be set in 1870 New York, but it's here in rural Nova Scotia that she'll craft her settings and characters. "When I need to go deeper, to think about the bigger questions the story wants me to answer, this is where I need to be, in the stillness," she says. "I can sit on the rocks by the water and close my eyes and feel closer to New York than when I'm sitting in downtown Manhattan. This place helps me channel that energy I need when I am creating."

These words stay with me on the drive

(top) The Lookoff, north of Wolfville, overlooks the Minas Basin; Silas searches for clams along Houston Beach.

into Wolfville, long after I've retrieved my family from their sojourn on Houston Beach. But by the time we reach our home for the night, the Blomidon Inn (built in 1881 as a sea captain's stately manor), my thoughts are back in the moment and it's me, not the children, who ends up jumping on the antique four-poster bed. There is a charming gift shop on the property and a hectare and a half of Victorian gardens to explore. Wolfville, population 3,658, is also home to Acadia University, which adds to the town's quiet, erudite charm.

That evening, while a friend watches the children, James and I dine at Tempest World Cuisine, a chic restaurant that could have been airlifted in from New York. Michael Howell, owner and chef, is the president of Slow Food Nova Scotia and committed to using local ingredients. Our meal starts with Thai curry mussels followed by smoked haddock chowder and a salad of golden beets with smoked duck and a roasted red-pepper coulis. The main course is a memorable lobster risotto and beef tenderloin.

Each serving is paired with a wine from the multitude of local vineyards. The





Becki McLean,
AMA Travel Specialist

EVANGELINE TRAIL, Nova Scotia

You needn't fret about bumping into other tourists when exploring Nova Scotia's rural Evangeline Trail. Prepare instead to be struck by its natural beauty, historic villages and charming local traditions. • One of my favourite places to stay is **Mersey River Chalets and Resort**. It's located in the **Southwest Nova Biosphere Reserve**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where you can hike, kayak, canoe, swim and fish in the surrounding lakes and rivers. • The Evangeline Trail is best enjoyed over several days so I recommend breaking up the drive with a few hours at any of the numerous **U-Pick Farms** in the Annapolis Valley. This area is especially known for its apple orchards, but strawberry, blueberry and apricot farms also abound. Once you've worked up a thirst in the fields, head to **Just Us! Coffee Roasters Co-op** in Wolfville. This local fair-trade coffee co-op not only has a remarkable roastery, its refreshing cider is the best in the area. • A must for any culinary connoisseur is **Acton's** in Wolfville, where the menu is loaded with sumptuous entrees, such as my favourite: gnocchi in onion-gouda sauce with a side of buttered fiddleheads (I'm salivating just thinking about it). Acton's is yet another Evangeline Trail gem, where you'll find the crowds refreshingly absent and the experience exceptionally memorable. □

i Need help planning and booking a trip to Nova Scotia? Call 1-888-989-8422 to speak to Becki McLean or visit your local AMA centre.

region's cool-climate grapes produce a broad range of enigmatic yet well-balanced wines, such as the evening's reserve Chardonnay from Blomidon Estate Wineries (with its characteristics of pear and apple) and the 2008 L'Acadie Vintner's Reserve from Domaine de Grand-Pré, made from L'Acadie grapes, a cultivar exclusive to the area and named in honour of the Acadians.

The next morning we head west into the Annapolis Valley on a back road called Route 221. We pass through Woodville where Margaret Atwood's mother grew up, heading up North Mountain to Harbourville on the mighty Bay of Fundy where Atwood's aunt, Joyce Barkhouse (the writer of *Pit Pony*, later made into the popular CBC television

series) has a cottage. We make our way across the heart of the valley through Ernest Buckler country. The warm air smells of wild roses as we pass by quaint farms along the Annapolis River on this classic summer day, heading through Centrelea where Buckler, an internationally acclaimed writer whose work is infused with this landscape, lived on his farm. I think of a line from his famous 1952 novel, *The Mountain and the Valley*: "The sky was so purely blue from morning till night, it had a kind of ringing."

In Annapolis Royal, we stroll around the seven-hectare aromatic Historic Gardens before piling back into the car. Ten minutes later, we are picnicking on the grounds of Port-Royal National Historic Site by the Annapolis Basin, the reconstruction of a settlement built in 1605 by French navigator, explorer and cartographer Samuel de Champlain. For entertainment (and sanity) over the long winters, Champlain established The Order of Good Cheer, a social club in which guests dined on a feast of wild meats and were entertained by "Le Théâtre de Neptune," quite possibly the first theatrical company in North America.

From Port Royal, the Evangeline Trail



AMA MEMBERS SAVE MORE Nova Scotia may be one of Canada's smallest provinces, but there's no end to what's there to discover. Spend a day at the **Ross Farm Museum**, located in New Ross. The museum is also a working farm, where both land and animals are tended the exact same way they were in the late 1800s. AMA members save \$1 on admission. • The province's scenic capital, Halifax, has so much to offer it begs to be explored by both land and sea. AMA members save 10% on all one-day or part-day **Ambassadors Gray Line** sightseeing tours, and 15% on **Tall Ship Silva** tours of the city's harbour. Back on dry land, spend an afternoon exploring the **Art Gallery of Nova Scotia**, where AMA members save 20% on admission. Then, turn in for the night at the **Westin Nova Scotian** and receive 10% off the best available rates. • A six-hour drive from Halifax, Cape Breton consistently ranks as one of the world's most beautiful islands. Experience its vistas and unique wildlife on a boating excursion to the nesting grounds of the Atlantic puffin. AMA members who book with **Donelda's Puffin Boat Tours** save 16% on regular adult rates.

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now takes us to Yarmouth via the Acadian Shore where French-speaking villages dot the coast of Baie Sainte-Marie. We motor along, the children enthralled with Saint Mary's Church, the tallest wooden church in North America, its steeple reaching more than 56 metres. We lunch at Chez Christophe Grosse Coque near Church Pointe, tucking into crispy fish cakes and the traditional Acadian dish of *rapùre* or rappie pie, a savoury blend of grated potato and meat.

Finally we arrive in Yarmouth where the Evangeline Trail comes to an end. Our friend Sandra Phinney, the current writer-in-residence at the Yarmouth Regional Library, tells us her town has been home to many authors, among them Frank Parker Day, who penned *Rockbound*, winner of the CBC's 2005 Canada Reads competition. *Rockbound* was also adapted as a musical and premiered back in Ami McKay territory at the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts.

We spend the late afternoon in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's Yarmouth satellite location before Sandra takes us to the solar-powered house that she and her husband built on the banks of the Tusket River. There, we boil lobster and, later, Sandra

leads us to what she calls "the summer shack," a charming cottage in the woods. The warm evening air smells of pine trees, and James and I hold hands under the stars – that is until a chorus of young voices calls out through window: "You forgot to read us a story!"

Sandra offers to fill in as reader, which leaves me free to continue sitting in the gentle, fragrant night pondering how this Land of Evangeline has become such a beautiful weave of geography, culture, tradition and innovation. I now believe I understand

why this land gives birth to writers: it provides the variety needed for inspiration and the solitude needed for creation. ■

i *Designed with the pace of children in mind, a six-day guided cycling trip along the Evangeline Trail includes whale watching and inner tubing, among other activities. The family-friendly adventure begins and ends in Halifax. From \$1,795 US per person, not including airfare. Receive a 20% discount when booking two adults with children. 1-866-667-4777*