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**The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler:  
1955-1982**

By

Marie Thompson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in  
Atlantic Canada Studies  
at  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
March 27, 2003

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The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler: 1955-1982

By Marie Thompson

March 27, 2003

Abstract

In 1971 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television network produced a documentary film which stated that the traditional form of Scottish-style, instrumental fiddle music in Cape Breton was in decline and would die out. Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was the first work in any medium to make such a case. It provoked a response from many people who disagreed with its message. In the years that followed, their opposition to this message led to the founding of a committee which sponsored a new performance style, regular fiddle classes and an increased awareness of the importance of this music amongst the general population. In other words, the film generated an unintentional revival of traditional fiddle music. This thesis examines, for the first time, in detail, the content of the documentary and the conditions for fiddling that existed at the time it was made. It also examines in detail the way in which the responders acted and their motives for doing so. It is based on interviews with the documentary filmmaker and the key people who responded to his film.

The documentary film was partly right. There were fewer young people learning to play in the traditional style than there had been in previous decades. Yet there was still a good number of older fiddlers in the population. There was also a core group of people who were willing to pursue a new, stated goal: to promote the traditional fiddling style within the community and to young people in particular. It was this core group, combined with the efforts of older fiddlers which succeeded in giving the fiddle tradition a higher status than it had in the past. It is unlikely this would have happened without the broadcast of the film.

## Acknowledgements

Five years ago, when I began the Atlantic Canada Studies Program, I had no idea that I would, or could, write my thesis on this topic. After spending twenty years in broadcasting as a generalist, the notion of specializing in any one area was daunting. To imagine pursuing a subject that involved a music form with a long, and in some cases, disputed history would have been unthinkable. But my curiosity got the better of me. The CBC was involved. I knew the CBC. I could ask and answer questions about it. And it seemed there was a way for a non-musician to examine the recent social history of the music in a way that would be relevant and useful to the public.

I owe thanks to many people at the CBC, especially Joan MacKinnon, who started me down this road. My executive producer, Nigel Simms and Ron Crocker, the regional director of television, encouraged me by allowing me to produce new television programming on my subject. They further supported my leave of absence to write my thesis.

This work would not have been possible without the wonderful hospitality and patience shown by Frank and Mary MacInnis of Creignish, who kept a room open for me at all times, and who allowed their dining room table to stay cluttered with hundreds of pages from Frank's files. The MacInnis family gave me a glimpse into the world of step-dancing, music, family support and above all, the powerful connection among neighbours, friends and relatives which characterizes much of Cape Breton society.

During the many twists and turns I followed along the research road, I was helped and encouraged by both family and friends. My brother, Larry Thompson, in Merrickville, Ontario cheerfully negotiated the labyrinth of CBC files at the National Archives of Canada for me. My old and dear friends, Mary and David Coyle in Antigonish provided a warm and open stopping point on my trips between Halifax and Cape Breton. Susan Newhook helped to keep me to my "game plan" from research paper in 1999 to leave of absence in 2002 and thesis in 2003.

Finally, I could never have done this without the love, help and support of my partner Blair Meagher.

This work is dedicated to my parents, Charles and Jean Thompson, of Perth, Ontario.

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## The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler: 1955-1982.

### PREAMBLE.

*"But it seems that we can only stay forever if we stay right here. As we have stayed to the seventh generation. Because in the end that is all there is – just staying. [. . .]*

*"I know, Ma," says my father, "I know that and I appreciate it all, everything. [. . .] We have to see beyond ourselves and our own families. We have to live in the twentieth century.*

From "The Return" in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation is from a conversation between an aging Cape Breton woman and her son, who has left the Island to work and raise a family in Montreal. For the narrator's father, embracing the twentieth century promises a desired improvement in life, even as it imposes great sacrifice: he is moved to tears every time he hears the lively, recorded fiddle music of home. The quotation expresses the tensions that still exist between those for whom the home in Cape Breton embodies an anti-modern world of tradition and those for whom modernity requires both mental and physical separation from family and home.

This conflict is at the heart of much of the evidence in the work which is to follow. I have chosen to rely on references to Alistair MacLeod's work throughout this thesis because it describes the place and time period I study: Cape Breton from the 1950s to the early 80s. Furthermore, a recurring theme in MacLeod's literature is the identification of the 60s and 70s as a time of irrevocable change for Cape Bretoners. He also refers to the subject of my study: the traditional violin music the Scottish immigrants brought with them to the New World. Finally, I hope these references serve to evoke for the reader the depth of feeling that exists for Cape Breton music, both in literature and in life.

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<sup>1</sup> Alistair MacLeod, "The Return," The Lost Salt Gift of Blood 1976 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. 1989) 79.

# I. DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF THE VANISHING CAPE BRETON FIDDLER.

## A. Introduction: Glendale, Inverness County, Cape Breton, 1973.

On Sunday evening, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1973, a stir runs through the crowd of several thousand people gathered on the bleachers and the grass surrounding the tiny stage next to St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Glendale. The stage itself is crowded with people. They spill over its sides and stand on the ground. The sound of violins being tuned blends with nervous coughing. A man with square shoulders and a shock of white hair raises his arms and commands the attention of the musicians. They watch him with a mixture of fear, anticipation and pride. Then with the wave of his hand, 102 fiddlers perform a medley of jigs and the audience roars its approval.<sup>2</sup>

It is the first time such a large group of fiddlers plays together in Cape Breton. It is the first festival devoted solely to Cape Breton Scottish fiddle music. It will come to be known as a turning point in the history of the centuries-old tradition. The white-haired man in the collar, Father John Angus Rankin, announces defiantly that "the fiddlers are not dying -- not vanishing. They're all alive and well."<sup>3</sup> Another cheer goes up from the crowd.

The remarks were aimed at one person in the audience. Eighteen months earlier CBC Television aired a documentary entitled Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.<sup>4</sup> The film took a controversial position, implying there were few young people learning to play the

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<sup>2</sup> "Festival of Scottish Fiddlers – Outstanding Success!!!" Scotia Sun [Port Hawkesbury] 11 July 1973, Section 1: 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ron MacInnis, personal interview, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler in 30 From Halifax, narr./writ. Ron MacInnis, dir. Charles Reynolds, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, recorded 17 Nov. 1971.

violin. Its producer, Ron MacInnis, predicted the island's fiddle tradition would die along with its aging practitioners. It took a year and a half, but a small, determined group of music lovers found 102 fiddlers to play together and prove him wrong. MacInnis was there to witness it. Yet in the gathering of the fiddlers the festival organizers detected a crucial truth in the documentary's warning. Very few of the 102 performers were under the age of thirty and the organizers of the concert at Glendale decided to do something about it. Their efforts are generally credited with reversing a decline that had indeed begun in the 1960s. Not only was the decline reversed, the popularity of the music has increased and a new generation of talented musicians has coincided and converged with an explosion of interest in Celtic music around the world.

#### B. The "Myth" of the "Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler."

In the years following the broadcast of the 1971-72 documentary, there were occasional newspaper quotations citing people who referred to the "myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton fiddler." The word "myth" in that context meant "a mistaken belief." The people being cited were community leaders resolved to discount a damaging message about music loss, which they originally believed to be mistaken, that had been broadcast via the powerful medium of television. The references become more numerous with time, so that now, years later, the term "myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler" has taken on a wider meaning. It is now a reference to a whole mythology: a story which has entered popular awareness in Cape Breton. This story, in particular, is full of meaning and metaphor. It is about culture and empowerment; it is



about a people's response to a perceived threat. The message of warning broadcast in the documentary had a measurable impact. A fiddling association was formed, attempts were made to encourage young people to learn and play, and now the tradition is widely accepted to be on a firm footing. Yet there is still tension over two debates: first, was there really a decline? As we will see, some proponents believe there was not. Secondly, is the music of the "revival" the same, or as authentic, as the music which preceded it? Some purists maintain it is not.

### C. Purpose.

The purpose of this study is to examine the underlying truth in the mythology surrounding Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler and to demystify it. It will attempt to answer a number of questions: did the practice of fiddling on Cape Breton Island enter a period of decline in the 50s and 60s? Was it a numerical decline, or more importantly for continuity, was it the loss of a generation of players? My research, which includes interviews with people who recall the period, as well as surveys of newspaper and magazine articles, supports the latter theory.

This study will examine conflicting cultural influences. The very media that permitted exposure to modern music from "away" also provided a vehicle for the transmission of domestic and traditional music. Furthermore, this study will examine the cultural resistance mounted against the message in the television program. This resistance led to a resurgence of activity and a change in the status of the music within the community. This resistance was formed by a small, elite group of people supported by a relatively passive but willing group of musicians.

We will see that the revival of the fiddle tradition came at a time of re-invigoration of Cape Breton identity and culture as a whole. In 1967, when the steel industry was threatened with closure, Cape Bretoners marched in the streets to protest. They were galvanized to examine their culture as one of many things under attack. They discovered they took much of it for granted. This was so for many of the people who later formed the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association.

At the same time, the medium that broadcast the warning of decline in the fiddle tradition began to promote and disseminate the music of Cape Breton. This study will examine the role of the media in the literal transmission of the tradition. It will focus on two privately owned radio stations and the public radio and television networks operated by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It was the CBC, after all, which broadcast the documentary that started the whole fuss.

My personal interest in this subject derives from my twenty-three-year career as a reporter and producer with CBC radio and television. I have spent fifteen years of this period in Atlantic Canada as a television reporter and producer. Many of the observations I will make about the role of CBC personnel and their practices are based on my own personal experiences with the medium and with the Corporation, where I am still employed.

#### D. A Few Words about Fiddling.

The uninitiated may very well say that all fiddle music sounds the same. Many believe that a violin is a different instrument than a fiddle. They believe the violin is played in symphony orchestras while the fiddle is played in kitchens and at square

dances. They are wrong. A fiddle and a violin are one and the same instruments. Yet as George Proctor wrote in 1984, "the term 'fiddle' is one which often brings a smile of derision when mentioned in educated circles. Its association with unrefined music over the course of history has led to its less than respectable status."<sup>5</sup> Many believe that references to "old time fiddle music" means that it is music played by "old-timers." The expression "old time fiddle music" has become a common one across North America to identify the playing of traditional instrumental dance music. It came into use in the United States in the 1920s, as a way of distinguishing it from jazz. The term has also been used to identify a variety of groups and associations that have sprung up all over the continent. It is often used as a generic phrase to cover many varieties of instrumental traditional violin music. It is sometimes used interchangeably to include the "Scottish" style played in Cape Breton; others speak of Acadian, or Quebec, or Irish styles. Many Maritimers are familiar with the term "down-east music." It is often associated with Don Messer, the highly popular New Brunswick fiddler and bandleader who had his own radio and television show on the CBC for many years. But the fans and musicians who listen to traditional fiddle music in Cape Breton, with its Scottish roots, do not use the terms "down east" or "old time." They distinguish their fiddle tunes from the other styles because they can tell them apart. Even if the tunes of the Carolinas or Saskatchewan started out with the same melody, the style of playing is not the same. Many of the people of eastern Nova Scotia, both of Scottish descent and otherwise, can

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<sup>5</sup> George A. Proctor, "Fiddle Music as a Manifestation of Canadian Regionalism," a paper delivered at a conference on Regionalism and National Identity, Christchurch, New Zealand, 14-10 May 1984. In Explorations in Canadian Folklore, eds., Edith Fowke and Carole H. Carpenter (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985) 227.

detect the change of accent in the playing as easily as Canadian ears can distinguish the accents and dialects of the American South from their own.

#### E. Historiography and Theory.

The study of folk and traditional music is dominated by folklorists and ethnomusicologists. Hundreds of books, theses and papers have been written throughout the twentieth century on folk music and folk revivals of one kind or another in North America alone. One of the themes of debate is what actually constitutes a revival. Being somewhat of a literal person, I always assumed that a revival, by definition, followed a measurable decline. As I have discovered, according to the folklorists, this is not necessarily the case. A revival can be understood as new energy emerging from the younger generation taking over as the dominant performers in a tradition. Another concern is with the impact of the "revival" itself. Some studies show that what may seem a revival is merely one stage in a long ebbing and flowing of continuity.

One of the centers of expertise in eastern Canada is Memorial University's folklore department. Scholars there such as Neil Rosenberg, who edited a book of essays called Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined,<sup>6</sup> have made important contributions to the study of music revivals. He points out "that the thing being revived seems or appears or feels as if it is in decline or being threatened and this prompts the activity we label revival. Often a part of the revival is a social shift from one class to another or from one geographical site to another."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Rosenberg, ed., Transforming Tradition: Folk music Revivals Examined (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Neil Rosenberg, e-mail to the author, 11 Mar. 2002.

Richard Blaustein writes that “at least two major revivals of traditional fiddle music occurred in the United States during this century.”<sup>8</sup> He describes how in the 1920s Henry Ford promoted the revival of old-time fiddling and dancing. He has suggested that Ford’s actions were in some way an attempt to counter the rise of African-American style jazz at the time. Then there was a second revival after World War Two.

Once again the United States had experienced the transition from wartime austerity to a burgeoning domestic consumer economy; the farming population of the country continued to plummet, accelerated by advances in agricultural technology and applied chemistry; and yet another innovative African-American-based style, rock and roll, was capturing the imagination of an increasingly youthful popular entertainment audience.

[. . .] Though the urban folk music revival undoubtedly played a positive role in redefining the value and worth of older forms of country music like old-time fiddling, this second revival of fiddle music was not a direct product of that revival. It appears to be a genuine grass-roots preservationist movement.<sup>9</sup>

Blaustein’s work will provide an opportunity later on to compare and contrast the American revivals with the later Cape Breton fiddle revival. As we will see the experiences were quite different, both in their origins and their outcomes.

And what of the study of Atlantic Canadian instrumental fiddling? Once again, scholars at Memorial University have written a great deal about traditional song and music accompaniment in Newfoundland. In the Maritimes, though, it appears as if the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Blaustein, “Rethinking Folk Revivalism,” Transforming Tradition 259.

<sup>9</sup> Blaustein 259.

instrumental side of music history and tradition has not enjoyed the same attention. The work of Helen Creighton and others concentrated on the folk-song. Almost nothing has been written about the French Acadian instrumental fiddling tradition. Scottish style fiddling has fared better over the last 20 years, inspiring three masters' theses and three doctoral dissertations. In addition, several students at St. Francis Xavier University and the University College of Cape Breton have written under-graduate-level papers on the subject. A handful of music collections and biographical books about Cape Breton fiddlers have been written but they don't really describe a history of change over time. They all make reference to 1971 and the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler as a significant event. None of them, however, really document the period before 1971 or immediately afterward. The only work that looks at an Atlantic Canadian revival in detail is Jim Hornby's 1982 thesis, on Prince Edward Island fiddling.<sup>10</sup> This revival, as he and others report, was heavily influenced by the events which took place in Cape Breton in the early 70s.

In 1989, Ian McKinnon wrote a thesis on the role of commercial recording in the Cape Breton fiddling milieu.<sup>11</sup> He reported that "the program, 'The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler,' suggested that unless more children began to take an interest in the music, it would in time vanish. This chilling prophecy prompted the organization of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Hornby, "The Fiddle on the Island: Fiddling Tradition on Prince Edward Island," M. A. diss., Memorial U of Newfoundland, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Ian McKinnon, "Fiddling to Fortune: The Role of Commercial Recordings made by Cape Breton Fiddlers in the Fiddle Music Tradition of Cape Breton Island," M. A. diss., Memorial U of Newfoundland, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> McKinnon 44.

One work of enormous importance for me is the 1995 doctoral dissertation written by Elizabeth Doherty. She examines the evolution of Cape Breton style fiddling from 1928 to 1995 in her thesis "The Paradox of the Periphery."<sup>13</sup> Doherty challenges and disproves another common assumption: that the music played in Cape Breton today is exactly the same music as was played in Scotland at the time of the major migrations to Canada. And she provides a useful focus on crucial changes and turning points in the fiddle music tradition of Cape Breton. They include the advent of radio and the recording industry, exposure of Cape Breton fiddlers to nineteenth and twentieth century Scottish composers during their World War Two military service, the decline of the Gaelic language, the impact of television, and finally the influence of different styles of "Celtic" instrumental music. As we will see, her work provides some evidence that the instrumental fiddling tradition did indeed go through a period in the 1960s when its transmission to the succeeding generation was uncertain. Most importantly for my study, Doherty identifies one turning point in particular as being noteworthy: the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. "Cape Breton fiddling" she writes "is still riding on the crest of the wave that resulted from that single documentary. Even were it limited to that sole example, it must be recognized that the medium of television has had a profound and lasting effect on the Cape Breton fiddle tradition."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Doherty, "The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition 1928-1995," Ph.D. diss., U of Limerick, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Doherty 154.

## F. Conclusion.

For all the scholars from 1970 onward, who examined Cape Breton fiddling, the broadcast of the documentary Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was a significant event. For a variety of reasons, none of those scholars analyzed it in detail. This thesis is the first one to do so. What really happened after 1971? Was the “revival” in Cape Breton an outburst of activity in response to a perceived threat? Was the threat real? My proposal is that the decline I speak of was not necessarily a decline in numbers. Rather it was a change in the demographic of who was playing the fiddle in the 1960s. Burt Feintuch quotes Dewey Balfa, a “Cajun” musician from Louisiana, as saying that “A culture is preserved one generation at a time.”<sup>15</sup> The journalist Ron MacInnis warned that the 60s generation was no longer playing traditional fiddle music. If they let it drop, he asked, how could it continue? My challenge is to try to measure some of those demographics to show that something MacInnis proposed through non-scientific observation was in fact accurate. As to the revival itself, there is no doubt that beginning in 1972, and as a direct result of the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, concerted efforts were made to create an infrastructure for fiddle instruction, practice and performance for all ages. We will learn much more about it in this study thanks to the memories of some of those who participated and the personal archives of one of the principal architects of the revival, Frank MacInnis of Creignish.

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<sup>15</sup> Burt Feintuch, “A Week on the Ceilidh Trail,” Northeast Folklore: Essays in Honor of Edward D. Ives, eds., Paulina MacDougall and David Taylor (Orono: Northeast Folklore Society, 2002) 72.



## II. A JOURNEY WITH FIDDLES FROM SCOTLAND TO CAPE BRETON.

*"My grandmother gets up and goes for her violin which hangs on a peg inside her bedroom door. It is a very old violin and came from the Scotland of her ancestors, from the crumbled foundations that now dot and haunt Lochabor's shores. She plays two Gaelic airs. [. . .] She is very moved by the ancient music and there are tears within her eyes."*

From "The Road to Rankin's Point" in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.<sup>16</sup>

### A. Introduction.

Much of the information to be provided in this section has been documented by many others. Yet it will be useful to review it in summary in order to set the historical context for my study. This chapter will attempt to describe the origins of the Scottish fiddle tradition and its transfer with the Gaels, to Cape Breton. I will also look into the role of instrumental dance music in some of the other immigrant and ethnic communities in eastern Nova Scotia. This review will show that the instrumental fiddle tradition was pervasive and persistent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The repertoires and styles changed both in Scotland and Cape Breton. At times clergies encouraged it, while at other times it was proscribed. Yet the instrumental dance tradition did not always enjoy a high status with the elite who were abandoning the Gaelic language as well as their rural roots. So while the Cape Breton fiddle tradition was robust enough to absorb contributions and influences from the Irish and Acadian populations, it would soon be threatened by a general decline of the Gaelic culture as a whole.

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<sup>16</sup> Alistair MacLeod, The Lost Salt Gift of Blood 138-139.

## B. Origins of the Fiddle and Its Early History in Scotland.

Francis Collinson, P.R. Cooke and other scholars note the existence of stringed, bowed instruments in Scotland since well before the fifteenth century. They were known variously as “fedyl,” “rebecs,” or “croud.” An instrument called the “fidil” was known in Ireland as early as the sixth century.<sup>17</sup> Experts are unsure whether the instrument originated in the British Isles and moved east or whether it was first found in Scandinavia and moved west.

One of the most interesting accounts of the widespread use and popularity of fiddles is the reporting of an impromptu concert of sorts for Mary Queen of Scots in 1560 at Holyrood: “There came under her window five or six hundred citizens of the town who gave her a concert of the vilest fiddles and little rebecs, which are as bad as they can be in that country. Ah! What a melody it was! What a lullaby for the night!”<sup>18</sup> The writer (of biting tone) was a French historian and soldier, by the name of Brantome. It is extremely fortunate that there is a corroborating account of the event by the famed reformer, John Knox. He describes the musicians as “a company of honest men, who with instruments of music, gave their salutation at her chamber window...the melody, as she alleged, liked her well, and she willed the same to be continued.”<sup>19</sup> Despite her outward flattery, it was said the Queen moved her apartments to “a quieter part of the house” so the musicians could not get as close to her again. That five or six hundred citizens would chose to honour the Queen with their music attests to its popularity at the time. Nonetheless, the

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Collinson, The Traditional and National Music of Scotland (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) 199.

<sup>18</sup> Collinson 200.

<sup>19</sup> Collinson 200.

four-stringed fiddles and rebecs were in the process of being replaced, at least temporarily, by the new six-stringed viol.

The Scots clearly appreciated good instruments but preferred to play on four strings. This became obvious when the Italian-made, new and improved violin finally reached Scotland in the late seventeenth century. Collinson says "the Scottish traditional fiddlers were quick to see its possibilities as an instrument for their native folk music in its flexibility and incisive tone quality."<sup>20</sup>

There is little evidence that the early bowed fiddles were used to accompany singers. This is not to say it did not happen. Scotland has a long history of folk song and bardic poetry, both in the Gaelic language and the Lowland Scots language. An information sheet on pipes, harps and fiddles from the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland states the role of the bards in the classical Gaelic period before the seventeenth century was to "praise famous men, to celebrate heroic exploits and ancestral pedigrees in verse chanted or with musical accompaniment."<sup>21</sup> For the most part the accompaniment was from the harp.

Yet there is a connection between the song and the fiddle. Many songs in the Gaelic language were a mixture of Gaelic and vocables (Gaelic-sounding meaningless words and syllables). Jackie Dunn defines mouth music as "instrumental dance music sung to words."<sup>22</sup> This is "Puirt-a-beul" or "mouth music." She and other scholars such as Dunlay state that it is Highland and Gaelic in origin and did not exist in the Lowland

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<sup>20</sup> Collinson 201.

<sup>21</sup> Pipes Harps and Fiddles (Edinburgh: National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, c.1975) 3.

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Dunn MacIsaac, "THA BLAS NA GAIDHLIG AIR A H-UILE FIDHELEIR: The Sound of Gaelic is in the Fiddler's Music," Senior Essay, St. Francis Xavier U [Antigonish], 1991, 16.

Scots tradition. Dunn reports that “it is common knowledge among the older generations that the first fiddlers in Cape Breton learned their tunes from puirt-a-beul versions”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately it is not clear whether they did so because there was a lack of instruments, or whether it was simply the way a child was introduced to the music. This tantalizing connection between language and music helps to explain the frequent yet frustrating attempts to define the notion of “the Gaelic in the fiddle!” In the mid-nineties, Seumus Taylor and Alexander MacDonald argued about the meaning of this term in several columns published in the periodical Celtic Heritage. This notion and its elusive definition have taken on a much more urgent meaning in the twenty-first century because questions about a decline in the fiddling tradition in Cape Breton frequently stem from concerns regarding the dramatic decline in the use of the Gaelic language.

The eighteenth century is known as the Golden Age of Scottish Fiddling. The composers of that time were William Marshall, Niel Gow and his son Nathaniel. Kate Dunlay writes:

All social classes participated in traditional Scottish music and dance. Over ten thousand tunes were published in a large number of printed collections. Many were newly composed by professional musicians or upper-class amateurs. These tunes form the basis of the Scottish and Cape Breton fiddle repertoire today, although many thousands of tunes have been composed since and incorporated into tradition.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline Dunn MacIsaac 16.

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen E. Dunlay, e-mail to author, 29 Dec. 2002.

Dunlay distinguishes the Highland Gaelic style of dance as being rural and different from the Lowland, city style of fiddling and dancing. The Lowland cities were open to influences from Europe and England. In the lowlands, fiddlers might play in two-part harmony for dances such as Minuets. (Although Minuets were dropped by the nineteenth century.) In the Highland countryside, "there were no fiddle bands; usually one fiddler played at a time, perhaps with cellist. Two fiddlers might alternate at a dance to give each other breaks, occasionally playing together. These fiddlers would have had to have been strong, rhythmic players with stamina and the ability to project."<sup>25</sup>

George Emmerson describes the dances at gatherings of the common people in the countryside of late eighteenth century Scotland. They occur frequently: they are long, and energetic entertainments for weddings, fairs, harvest festivals, ceilidhs and even farmhouse kitchens.<sup>26</sup> In many cases, they evoke the energy, if not the actual steps, of the dances in Cape Breton of the late twentieth century. But by the end of the eighteenth century, dancing in Highland Scotland, at least, had undergone two upheavals.

Following the disastrous defeat at Culloden in 1746, the old clan system of land and family organization was badly damaged. In his article entitled "Identifying the Highland Scots: Nineteenth Century Immigrants in Nova Scotia,"<sup>27</sup> A. M Austin describes the complex changes which affected the Highlanders. The clan chieftain lost his military

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<sup>25</sup> Kathleen E. Dunlay, "The Playing of Traditional Scottish Dance Music: Old and New World Styles and Practices," Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples: Proceedings of the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies eds., Cyril J. Byrne, Margaret Harry, and Padrig O Siadhail (Halifax: D'arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, Saint Mary's U, 1992) 175.

<sup>26</sup> George Emmerson, A Social History of Scottish Dance (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's U P, 1972) 131-143.

<sup>27</sup> A. M. Austin, "Identifying the Highland Scots: Nineteenth Century Immigrants in Nova Scotia" <[http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/highland\\_scotsns.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/highland_scotsns.htm)>

power, “became a landlord and was forced to gain an economic return from the soil.”<sup>28</sup>

The way the chieftains did this over the succeeding seventy-five years hurt the remnants of their clans in different ways. Many chieftains ordered the villages to be cleared to facilitate a switch to livestock farming. Some of the evictees moved to crofting tenancies and relied on the kelp gathering industries to help them pay high rents. Before 1815 many left of their own accord to go to the New World. After 1815 the kelp industries collapsed and more lands were cleared of people in order to make way for sheep. Thus began a huge migration of Highlanders westward across the Atlantic to the New World. Furthermore, both political and religious persecution of Highland customs led to a discontinuance of many styles of music and dance in Scotland. The Highlanders who left the old Scotland to seek freedom of expression and opportunity in a New Scotland brought their bagpipes, fiddles and their dance steps with them.

In closing, this review serves to remind us of two things. The “traditional” fiddle music of Scotland went through enormous change. The musicians, both rural and urban, eagerly adopted new instrument designs and taught each other new repertoire. Despite the mass migrations of the nineteenth century, the fiddle in Scotland went through a revival thanks to the efforts and artistry of composer J. Scott Skinner and the formation of the Strathspey and Reel societies. But, for Cape Breton Gaels, the notion of loss is all too real. When Ron MacInnis raised the spectre of a vanishing Cape Breton fiddler, his audience only had to look back to Scotland to know that it was possible. The traditional Highland music may have declined for very different and less subtle reasons than MacInnis was proposing, but Cape Bretoners knew that it could happen here because it had happened before elsewhere. They had also witnessed the steady decline of the Gaelic

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<sup>28</sup> Austin 2.

language. Father Eugene Morris was one of the community leaders who responded to the message in the program by helping to organize the first Glendale festival and the subsequent fiddlers association. He is a Cape Bretoner and avid step dancer. He says the television show sent a chill through him. "I think a very big part of our lives were [sic] at stake, it's almost as ...it's something very deep in our soul, our music...and with our fiddle especially, I think it can express every feeling of the human heart."<sup>29</sup>

### C. History of Fiddling in Cape Breton.

*"They waited there, Calum Ruadh holding his violin and perhaps resting his foot on the wooden sea chest with its neatly divided compartments."*

From Alistair MacLeod's No Great Mischief.<sup>30</sup>

The Scots were by no means the first to play the violin on Cape Breton Island. The French at Louisbourg, both common and highborn, enjoyed its music.<sup>31</sup> So, too did the English and Irish who settled in smaller numbers. But it was the wave of Scottish immigration of the late eighteenth and first quarter of the nineteenth century that overwhelmed western Cape Breton with an abiding musical tradition.

Scottish immigrants first arrived in mainland Nova Scotia at Pictou in 1773 aboard the ship Hector. Those that followed moved east to find land in Antigonish County or crossed the Strait of Canso to settle on the shores of Inverness County. Later on, many would land at Sydney, or further north, making their ways south to Iona and Margaree.

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<sup>29</sup> Father Eugene Morris, CBC interview conducted by Marie Thompson, 24 Oct. 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Alistair MacLeod, No Great Mischief (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999) 22.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Donovan, "'After Midnight We Dance Until Daylight': Music, Song and Dance in Louisbourg, 1713-1758," Acadiensis 32, 1 (Autumn 2002): 4.

Campbell and MacLean report that immigration to Cape Breton increased in the first half of the century: between 1814 and 1838, the population grew from four thousand to thirty-eight thousand people. More than half had come from Scotland.<sup>32</sup> While the majority of the early Scots immigrants were Protestant, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic population had surpassed the Protestants in number.<sup>33</sup>

When the Scottish Gaels arrived they had fiddles, bagpipes, song and dance, and very little else. Life was not easy in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Villages were isolated, and the climate was harsh. Frank Rhodes captured the flavour of the musical recreation which served to soften the harshness, in a timely survey of dancing on Cape Breton, published in 1964. His survey spanned two centuries because he was able to find informants who could recall the nineteenth century, as well as the stories of their parents and grandparents.

In Cape Breton Island, as in the Scottish Highlands and the Western Isles, a good deal of dancing took place in the people's houses. The early Scottish settlers built for themselves quite large frame houses with three or four good-sized rooms on the ground floor, and thus had much more space in their homes for dancing than in their old croft houses in Scotland. The only alternative places for indoor dancing in the early days were barns and schoolrooms, for public halls were not built until the early years of this century. Among the younger people outdoor dancing was also common, the wooden bridges being particularly popular as

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<sup>32</sup> D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, Beyond the Atlantic Roar (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974) 67-68.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell and MacLean 233.



dancing-places; also in the summer, whole districts would organize 'picnics', when large open-air dance floors would be built out in the forests for a day or two of merrymaking.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately Rhodes does not say which instrument provided the music. Charles Dunn speaks more frequently of the bagpipe than he does of the fiddle when he portrays the world of the Scottish Immigrant in his book Highland Settler.<sup>35</sup> Even today one community near Sydney is renowned for its pipers and their history of playing for dances. (This is the area known as the French Shore between Sydney and Louisbourg.) But Ian McKinnon points out that the fiddle became more common than the bagpipe because the bagpipe was harder to maintain.<sup>36</sup> Some have suggested they don't fare as well in the harsh winter climate. Fiddles were cheaper to buy or construct and easier to transport than bagpipes.

By the beginning of World War Two, fiddles were the predominant instrument for dances. And while the style of playing and dancing was always referred to as "Scottish," evidence shows that the fiddle players were developing a character of music unique to Cape Breton and eastern Nova Scotia. McKinnon and Dunlay both point to the "distinctive Cape Breton bowing technique" as one difference. Another is the ornamentation which emulates the bagpipe.<sup>37</sup> In 1975 Alan Bruford and Aillie Munro produced a pamphlet called The Fiddle in the Highlands in which they examine the

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<sup>34</sup> Frank Rhodes, "Dancing in Cape Breton Island Nova Scotia," appendix in Traditional Dancing in Scotland by J.F. and T. M. Flett (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) 269-270.

<sup>35</sup> Charles W. Dunn, Highland Settler (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1953, 1968) 54-7.

<sup>36</sup> McKinnon 20.

<sup>37</sup> McKinnon 29.

various styles of fiddling in Highland Scotland as well as Cape Breton Island. Here is what they say:

The features we have noticed in the few Cape Breton fiddlers we have heard, include a relatively fast Strathspey and slow reel tempo, with the Strathspey accelerating imperceptibly into the reel without a break, and regular sounding of the open strings, beside the melody, especially in strathspeys. These fiddlers seem very fond of figures involving repeated notes, and practically every crotchet tends to be broken up either with the “doodle” (a figure involving two rapid changes of bowing direction on a single note), a mordent, or other ornament.<sup>38</sup>

Over the years the fiddler became a familiar member of Cape Breton communities, in spite of the fact that he (for the fiddlers were most often male) was not always privileged or appreciated. The musicians and public dances were often associated with public drunkenness. In the late nineteenth century, Father Kenneth MacDonald of Mabou in Inverness County, ordered the fiddlers to give up their instruments and burned them. During the depression years of the 1930s musicians became itinerants and often lodged with relatives or friends, hoping to provide music in exchange for room and board. Margaret Gillis, of North Sydney is a step-dance teacher and long-time member of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. She vividly recalls the resentment felt towards some of these musicians:

The families didn't encourage their family to play because they had bad experiences with relatives walking the road with the fiddle and living off other

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<sup>38</sup> Alan Bruford and Aillie Munro, The Fiddle in the Highlands (Inverness: An Comunn Gaidhealach, 1973) 9-10.

people and not working. ...the feeling was there that if they grew up and be like Uncle so-and-so, they'd be no good....You'd have them for three months and then they'd move on to another relative.<sup>39</sup>

Margaret and her husband Donald are in their seventies. Donald learned to play the fiddle at the age of 42. He tells this story from his childhood which would place it sometime in the 1940s:

I was about 10 or 11. And the roads were crooked, bad and sunken culverts and big stones and dust, so I was in the back seat and my father was driving the car, Neil MacKinnon was with him. We picked him up at Ross ferry, and we went up. And from Glencoe, up and back, is a big trip then, you know, so we were going over Dunvegan Mountain and sometimes we'd hit a culvert, a bad piece of road and the dust would be flying, oh it was wicked. So we were going over Dunvegan Mountain and there was a barn there flat on the ground and the house was ready to go, too, it was old, and had an awful lean to it, but there was people living in it, there was clothes on the line. And Neil said to my father, "there must be a good fiddler live there, Dan" he said. Everything was falling down.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, such sentiments would have been most acute when times were hard. Many families did include fiddlers. If they were good enough to play at house parties and dances they certainly made themselves available. Otherwise they provided entertainment for friends, family or just themselves. It should be noted that in certain communities

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Gillis, personal interview, 18 June 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Donald Gillis, personal interview, 18 June 2002.

fiddlers were very highly regarded. The well-known Celtic music singer and guitarist, John Allan Cameron comes from a long line of musicians in Inverness County, the most famous being his uncle, Dan Rory MacDonald.<sup>41</sup> Cameron maintains that “when I was a kid growing up, the most important people in the community were the fiddler and the priest.”<sup>42</sup>

Most of the fiddlers in Cape Breton prior to World War Two were “ear” learners. They learned by trial and error. If they were lucky, a parent or a neighbour would teach them. One of the most vivid stories I’ve found describes the way Archie Neil Chisholm and his brother Angus persisted in learning to play. Archie Neil became a legendary Cape Breton “personality.” Archie recited stories in Gaelic and English on radio and television. He could sing and he could play. But as Mary Ann Ducharme writes, learning to play wasn’t easy:

Willie D. brought home some sheet music but none in the family knew a note from a rabbit track ... Archie Neil held that instrument in an iron grip. Show it who is master. The music was in his head. He could hum it, he could sing it. Why couldn’t he play it? He had tried being gentle with the fiddle; this time it was going to play music or else! But what came out of the elegant little fiddle was something like the death scream of a poorly slaughtered sow.<sup>43</sup>

The story goes on to describe how Archie Neil and his brother persuaded a neighbour, Johnny Steven to teach them to play. For four hours Johnny laboured in vain, showing

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<sup>41</sup> Many Cape Bretoners use their first and middle names to identify themselves. In Dan Rory MacDonald’s case, his name was often abbreviated to “Dan R.”

<sup>42</sup> John Allan Cameron, personal interview, 6 August 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Ann Ducharme, Archie Neil (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 1992) 55-6.

them the finger positions and how to play a simple song. The teacher was drenched in sweat and claimed to be worried about his heart:

Then it happened: Angus played the five notes, a little raspy, but recognizable. Then Archie Neil did the same. A gleam of hope rekindled in Johnny's eyes. By late that night they learned enough notes to play the skeleton of their first tune. Angus got his first clear note.<sup>44</sup>

In later years, Archie Neil Chisholm never claimed to be a master fiddler. But his brother Angus was revered for his fiddling ability.

During World War Two, many Cape Bretoners served overseas in England and Scotland. The best known fiddler who did this was the aforementioned Dan Rory MacDonald of Mabou. Dan R. is a legend in the fiddling community. He worked in the car plants of Windsor and Detroit and then joined a forestry division to labour as a woodcutter in Scotland for his military service in World War Two. There he was exposed to the repertoire of J. Scott Skinner, one of Scotland's most prolific fiddle tune composers. In the late nineteenth century Skinner transformed the somewhat rustic nature of Scottish fiddling into a hugely popular, smooth, semi-classical type of chamber music. Dan R. returned home to Cape Breton with collections of violin dance music he'd found in Scotland including Skinner's large repertoire.<sup>45</sup>

Reading music gave the fiddlers access to a much wider selection. It was a powerful skill. Another well-known fiddler and teacher, John MacDougall, describes how he taught himself how to read notes after he'd been playing by ear for many years: "I

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<sup>44</sup> Ducharme 57.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Maguire, "Composition, Definition and Living Tradition: A Case for Dan Rory Macdonald," unpublished paper, Saint Mary's U, Halifax, 1997, 27.

wanted to know what it was to read. I wanted to be independent, that I could write my own music. Then I could read going out to play at the concert, I could pick out the tune and I knew I was right.”<sup>46</sup> MacDougall was one of the few fiddlers who supported himself with music. But it wasn’t by playing. After years of working in a sawmill, he became a piano tuner. In the 1970s he began to teach fiddling. But that part of his story comes later on.

#### D. Geographic spread of Scottish fiddling in Cape Breton and Eastern Nova Scotia: Rural versus Urban.

There is a recognition that the Cape Breton Scottish style of fiddling has its roots in the rural communities of the Island and the eastern mainland of Nova Scotia in Antigonish County. But as the demand for workers grew in the industrial complex around Sydney, people who moved from the country to the city brought their fiddles with them. The popularity of square dances and house parties was strong, but the people had more choices. Immigrants from other parts of the world settled in Sydney, introducing their own forms of music. For the most part, jazz and swing music stayed in the urban areas. It did not travel back to the country. Still, throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century, people of the Sydneys loved to dance to Scottish style music. There were as many well-known dance fiddlers from Sydney as there were in Inverness or Iona. As for Antigonish, while the university crowd from away did not appreciate the local music, a large part of both the student body and clerical faculty came from rural Cape Breton. Anyone who loved Scottish fiddle music knew where to find Bernie MacIsaac’s Celtic Music store on the main street. They could find out if there

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<sup>46</sup> John MacDougall, personal interview, 6 June 2002.

were dances in the area, or house parties, or purchase one of the many records he had for sale there. Antigonish even has a variety of Scottish style polka which fiddlers perform. The Highland Games were appreciated for their concerts, and Antigonish radio station CJFX kept playing the jigs and reels throughout each broadcast day. Still, it was felt the audience for this music was not so much in the town of Antigonish itself, but outside, in the rural areas and across the strait in rural Inverness County.

#### E. Language and Religion.

The precise numbers are not clear but it's safe to say the majority of Scottish immigrants to Cape Breton were Gaelic speakers. They were from the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland where Gaelic was the dominant language, although most of those people could not read or write it. Campbell and MacLean report in Beyond the Atlantic Roar that the most intense period of migration was between 1815 and 1838: "Of the 39,243 immigrants to Nova Scotia during the period 1815-1838, available evidence suggests that 21,833 were of Scottish origin. And it is highly likely that a majority of these settled in Cape Breton..."<sup>47</sup> At first, the majority of the migrants were Scots Presbyterians but they were soon outstripped by Roman Catholic Highlanders. This did not change even when the migrations ended.

According to John Gibson, in his book, Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745-1945, "both religious communities shared a common music and dance culture in Nova Scotia."<sup>48</sup> The Presbyterians frowned on the use of instrumental music in church and on Sundays.

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<sup>47</sup> Campbell and MacLean 22.

<sup>48</sup> John G. Gibson, Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping 1745-1945 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's U P, 1998) 201.

Both sets of clergy frowned on the drunkenness associated with dancing. As previously noted, one priest in particular, Father Kenneth J. MacDonald, stands out in the memories of Inverness County Gaels.

Gibson discusses the efforts of Catholic clergy to discourage alcoholism by confiscating and destroying violins: "He was not inconsistent but it is remarkable that, on the one hand Fr. MacDonald attacked fiddle playing and the ceilidh because they were associated with stills but presided over a mass that used local violins in church."<sup>49</sup> Although as Gibson notes, Pope Pius X ordered an end to dance music and opera music in the mass in 1903, the fiddle is still commonly used for funerals in Cape Breton. Ian McKinnon writes that "in the twentieth century, the traditional folk arts in Cape Breton have gained the Church's stamp of approval, with some of the best fiddlers, Gaelic singers and step dancers being themselves Catholic priests."<sup>50</sup> (Of course, most of the performance by priests and others, takes place outside church.) McKinnon points out that the only music permitted by the Presbyterians on Sunday was the Gaelic psalm singing in church. However in the Catholic tradition, Sunday afternoons were popular occasions for fiddle and pipe sessions.

Catholics and Protestants also shared the Gaelic language. As we have already heard, the Gaelic language added to the distinctiveness of the violin music. If the tunes originally had Gaelic words, the Gaelic musicians would know them, even if they were not singing them out loud. Many of the musicians would have learned the tunes using mouth music, which tended to emulate the vocalizations of the Gaelic language. When

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<sup>49</sup> John G. Gibson 203.

<sup>50</sup> McKinnon 25.



they later picked up the fiddle to learn the notes, they hoped to carry that “emulation” from the voice to the strings. Archie Neil Chisholm told Ron Caplan that listening to Gaelic songs was how he developed an ear for fiddling:

My mother would sing Gaelic by the hour. I could quote you dozens of Gaelic songs that are played now as music, that she’d know verses to them. Fiddle tunes...and we would learn from listening to her; it unconsciously became part of us, this music. She sang when she’d be churning. The old fashioned churn. She’d be singing a song, and the foot would be going and the churn would be going.<sup>51</sup>

The Gaelic language increasingly lost its status as a source of pride for Cape Bretoners throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of the Gaelic speakers were non-literate.<sup>52</sup> In a pragmatic gesture, they encouraged succeeding generations to learn to speak and read English, which was the language of education and economic opportunity. Gaelic was unjustly stigmatized as a marker of poverty and backwardness. Many of the Cape Breton Gaels accepted this stigma, contributing inadvertently to the decline in the language. Still, it was a powerful aspect of the connection they held to their heritage. We will see how that unfolded in a specific case involving the CBC later on.

Elizabeth Beaton writes that “although Gaelic was the mother tongue of many of the people of Eastern Nova Scotia until 50 years ago, there was a time when Gaelic was

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<sup>51</sup> Archie Neil Chisholm, “With Archie Neil Chisholm of Margaree Forks,” Cape Breton’s Magazine 42 (1986): 72.

<sup>52</sup> Jim and Pat Lotz, Cape Breton Island (Vancouver: Douglas David and Charles, 1974) 154.

openly discouraged by priest, parent and teacher.”<sup>53</sup> She points out that Father John Hugh MacEachen broke with this trend in 1941 by initiating concerts in his South-West Margaree parish: “After ten years of organizing activities which focused on Gaelic folk plays, stepdancing, fiddle music and Gaelic singing, he was invited to organize the first concert at Broad Cove, Inverness.”<sup>54</sup> This took place on August 27, 1956.

So for a time, the Gaelic language amplified the effects of geographic isolation and poverty for unilingual and bilingual speakers in some of the rural communities of Cape Breton. And the music stayed with them. Many of the musicians developed local styles. The Iona style of fiddling was slightly different from that of Mabou Coal Mines. The Judique style differed from Ingonish. There was less stigma attached to the playing of Scottish style music than there was to speaking the Gaelic language. So it was in this way that much of the original repertoire was preserved well into the twentieth century, when the new technology of radio and recording would carry on the preservation, while admitting change.

#### F. Acadian Fiddling.

As previously noted, the original French settlers were the first to bring violin music to the earliest European settlements in Northern North America. Ken Donovan documents the role of music in Louisbourg, in all classes of society. Here he describes the taverns:

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Beaton. “The Role of the Parish Priest in Maintaining Ethnic tradition in Eastern Nova Scotia,” presented to the meeting of the Canadian Folklore Studies Association, Learned Societies, Fredericton, 1 June 1977, published in Highland Heritage, ed., John G. Gibson and Joey Beaton (Port Hastings: 1977) 8.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Beaton 9.

Tavern keepers such as Claude Morin, Marguerite Desroches and Madame Decoudray Feuillet, who was married to the violinist and dancing master Decoudray Feuillet, owned violins and presumably entertained patrons in their establishments. Marguerite, who was a fishing proprietor, had brought her violin with her from Saint Malo, Brittany.<sup>55</sup>

Yet little is known about the role of instrumental music in the Acadian communities of Nova Scotia, which were somewhat culturally distinct from the New France colonies, such as Louisbourg. One of the only places where there is some discussion of Acadian music is in a volume of essays entitled Acadia of the Maritimes.<sup>56</sup> In a section entitled Instrumental Music, under the chapter heading of Acadian Folklore, the authors state that “no historical documents tell us what instruments were played at the time of the Deportation.” However, they add that a few violins must have returned with the Acadians because violinmakers were present in the re-established settlements. In a mere three pages covering instrumental music and dance, Chiasson, Cormier, Deschenes and Labelle report that “traditional fiddlers cannot read music, but use phrases or expressions with the same rhythmic pulsations which helped them to trace the rhyme and the beginning of the melody.”<sup>57</sup> On the next page, they point out that “more than anywhere else in French Canada, and in order to make up for a lack of musical instruments after the Deportation a tradition of mouth music developed in Acadia.” As has already been

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<sup>55</sup> Donovan “After Midnight” 18.

<sup>56</sup> Daigle, Jean, ed., Acadia of the Maritimes: Thematic Studies from the Beginning to the Present (Moncton: Universite de Moncton, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> Fr. A. Chiasson, C. Cormier, D. Deschenes and R. Labelle, “Acadian Folklore” in Acadia of the Maritimes 673-674.

stated, mouth music, or jigging as it is sometimes known in Cape Breton circles, is a long-standing tradition that accompanies fiddle music in Scottish Gaelic communities.

The authors state categorically that “since instrumental music has no linguistic barriers, movement and borrowing between neighbouring cultures, mainly Irish and Scottish, have profoundly transformed the repertoire and techniques of Acadian musicians.”<sup>58</sup> Despite my own assumption that many Acadian “returnees” would have brought violins back with them, I came across a contradictory view written by Sam Cormier, who lives in Cheticamp, a robust Acadian community on the western shore of Cape Breton Island. Sam’s brother, Joe, is one of Cape Breton’s best traditional fiddlers of the Scottish style. (He has lived for many years in Boston.) He has been recorded by Rounder Records, one of the world’s best repositories of North American folk music. Sam wrote the liner notes for Joe’s album, The Dances Down Home. He provides a fascinating insight into the history of music in an Acadian community cut off from the larger Acadian population of New Brunswick:

There is no evidence that the original settlers of 1782 could play any instruments. We were brought up in the same house as my grandmother who had the nickname of “Patouche.” She was born around 1855 and was a terrific “jigger.” [Jigging refers to mouth music.] Some of the tunes she would jig had a French background but some were also of Irish and Scottish origin. The first regular fiddler of whom she talked would be Paddy a Paul who would have come into prominence in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. One would conclude that for about the first hundred years of settlement, music was largely produced vocally.

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<sup>58</sup> Chiasson, Cormier, Deschenes and Labelle 673.

It must be noted that this was a period when all forms of social entertainment were forbidden by the priests who were very powerful. In my grandmother's day, there were private house parties but only the men danced since men were not supposed to touch women in public, not even their own wives.<sup>59</sup>

The Acadians of Cheticamp and Arichat on Cape Breton Island shared many conditions of life with their Gaelic/English neighbours. They were both, for the most part poor and Catholic, and both experienced discrimination on the part of the English speaking, Protestant majority of British descent in Nova Scotia. The Acadians in Cape Breton were a small minority ethnic group on the west coast and southeast coast of the Island. Unlike their compatriots in the larger communities of Acadians in eastern New Brunswick, they were more vulnerable to cultural influences from their more numerous neighbours. (This also seems to have been true for the Acadian fiddlers of Prince Edward Island and the English-speaking players of Scottish descent who played the Scottish style.) It is not surprising, then, to learn from a Cheticamp genealogist and historian, Charlie Dan Roach, that the Acadian fiddlers of the area have blended into the Cape Breton fiddling style. Mr. Roach says his research in the community has found evidence of at least one family of musicians from the turn of the century who made their own violins.<sup>60</sup> He says the Acadian fiddlers of the first half of the century still had a style distinctive from the so-called Scottish tradition. He also recalls the 1960s as a period when fiddling languished because the young people lost interest. He credits the work of the highly regarded Acadian scholar and Catholic pastor, Pere Anselme Chiasson, with

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<sup>59</sup> Sam Cormier, "Scottish Violin Music From Cape Breton," liner notes, Dances Down Home Performed by Joe Cormier LP 7001, Rounder Records, 1974, reissued 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Charlie Dan Roach, telephone interview, 3 Jan. 2002.

saving much of the folklore and old songs which would have required fiddle accompaniment. Roach also believes there was a revival of interest in Acadian fiddle music in the 70s, but it was not as a result of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler broadcast. Rather it was due to the popularity of modern Franco- North American performers in a number of musical genres, such as Zachary Richard, Garolou, Edith Butler and Angele Arsenault. Yet most Cape Breton fiddlers are very aware of the Acadian background of some of the best Scottish style players. One of those is Joe Cormier, who was in great demand at dances in Cape Breton until he immigrated to Boston in 1962. Ninety-nine percent of his recorded repertoire is in the Scottish style.

The 1970s was a time of cultural and political ferment for the Acadian people in general. John Reid documents the battles in the 70s for greater bilingualism, access to education in French and student protests on campuses.<sup>61</sup> The stakes rose with the election of the Parti Quebecois government in 1976 in Quebec because it became vital for federalist proponents to prove that francophone culture could survive outside Quebec. So, if instrumental music in Acadian communities remained non-political at dances, weddings, or the kitchen parties, it also became a point of pride for Acadians. Anecdotal accounts suggest that a desire to find an "Acadian sound" to go with an Acadian identity helped to spur a revival in interest in traditional fiddle music in New Brunswick. At the same time it was assimilated in Cape Breton. This area requires more much more study.

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<sup>61</sup> John Reid, "Sharpening the Skeptical Edge," The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation, eds., E. R. Forbes and D. A. Muise (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993) 478-482.

### G. Irish Fiddling.

Fortunately two people have addressed the history of the Irish in Cape Breton, including a specific look at Irish music in Cape Breton. A.A. MacKenzie writing in The Irish in Cape Breton establishes that the Irish lived alongside the French at Louisbourg, predating the Scots.<sup>62</sup> The Irish brought their musical instruments with them. Although in subsequent decades, the Scottish immigrants vastly outnumbered the Irish, there remained enough of them to have an influence on Cape Breton “Scottish” culture and music.

In the same book, Paul MacDonald outlines the history and distinctiveness of Irish music in Cape Breton.<sup>63</sup> He points out that while the Cape Breton tune repertory is made up of a large number of Irish melodies, the two styles of playing the fiddle (Scottish and Irish) have remained recognizably different. He gives a clear and concise description of those differences:

Cape Breton fiddlers retained the important elements of the Gaelic fiddle style, filling the Irish tunes with rich Gaelic accent and complex Scottish bowing techniques that they call cuts and double cuts. Players applying the Irish style to these same tunes would use rolls and triplets and other fingered ornaments in combination with long slurred bowing.<sup>64</sup>

MacDonald goes on to state that the two styles of fiddlers on Cape Breton differ in their interpretation of the tunes. The Scottish-style fiddler adheres closely to “correct”

<sup>62</sup> A.A. MacKenzie, The Irish in Cape Breton 1979 (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Paul MacDonald, “Irish Music in Cape Breton,” appendix in The Irish in Cape Breton, 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Paul MacDonald 121.

playing and attempts to play the same tune exactly the same way each time. An Irish style fiddler, according to MacDonald, will do almost the opposite, throwing in variations within the same tune and at each playing. Scottish fiddlers will play Irish tunes more slowly for the Scottish style of dancing. The Irish style of dancing, Macdonald says, is faster.

Some of the most highly respected fiddlers of Cape Breton fiddle music have been of Irish ancestry. But it was important for at least one of them, Winston Fitzgerald, to telegraph the fact that he played the music in the Scottish tradition. Fitzgerald adopted the nickname "Scotty" and as Allister MacGillivray states, he became "a gigantic figure in Cape Breton's musical history" and is "considered among the most popular and influential fiddlers in the Scottish tradition."<sup>65</sup> None of the accounts I've read or heard about Fitzgerald account for the adoption of the "Scotty" nickname or explain whether it was his idea or someone else's. One thing I do know, is that although Fitzgerald died in 1987 many of the fiddlers still refer to him as Winston. They don't add the "Scotty" anymore. For those I have met in the course of my own research, there will ever only be one Winston!

#### H. Mi'kmaw Fiddlers.

One of the most interesting legacies of the relationship between Scottish pioneers and North American aboriginals is the shared joy of playing fiddle music. From Cape Breton, to James Bay, to Manitoba, native fiddlers have displayed a huge interest in learning and playing a music which was completely alien to their culture prior to European settlement.

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<sup>65</sup> Allister MacGillivray, The Cape Breton Fiddler 1981 (Marion Bridge, N.S.: Sea-Cape Music Limited, 1997) 103.



Two of the best fiddlers in Cape Breton are Mi'kmaq. Lee Cremo, who died in 1999, commanded huge respect from his fellow Cape Breton musicians. Many of them recall the time they played for Queen Elizabeth II on the occasion of her visit to Nova Scotia in 1976. Lee Cremo played a solo, and according to Carl MacKenzie, introduced it by saying "this is for you Queenie!" MacKenzie adds, "he first said we used to have the bow and arrow. We put the arrow away and we picked up the fiddle. That was his introduction. He composed a piece for her."<sup>66</sup>

The other Mi'kmaw fiddler is Wilfred Prosper who is now handing on his interest and knowledge to his son Wilfred, Jr. Wilfred Prosper and Lee Cremo practiced a lot together, according to Cremo's own account. Prosper did not have the recording experience or the "showmanship" experience that Lee Cremo enjoyed. They both learned from their fathers who were influenced by the Catholic priests on their reserves of Barra Head (now Chapel Island) and Eskasoni.

In 1979 Cremo explained the Mi'kmaw fiddling connection to Cape Breton publisher Ron Caplan:

And there's a music you could call Micmac music. They don't use any kind of instrument. They just take a little piece of stick and they tap on the bottom of their sole. There's a good rhythm to it. That's why I think today when I play a reel, a Scottish reel, I make it a little faster. I think it's the Micmac rhythm. Indian music you can step dance to real good. You have to use both of your feet

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<sup>66</sup> Carl MacKenzie, personal interview, 18 June 2002.

in the same way. If one foot is delaying the other you are losing your timing on the music. Same goes for step dancing.<sup>67</sup>

Cremo was adept at playing a wide variety of fiddle music including “old time,” “down-east” and “Cape Breton Scottish” styles. Yet it was the Cape Breton style he learned first from his father, as he told Gordon E. Smith in 1990.<sup>68</sup>

Smith points out that Lee Cremo was highly respected in the non-native fiddling community of Cape Breton and his identity as a Mi’kmaq was secondary (in their view) to his ability to play. Conversely, the people of the Mi’kmaw community were more interested in his identity as an aboriginal and his “knowledge of Micmac culture and his willingness to share this knowledge with young people in his community.”<sup>69</sup>

It is interesting to note in this article that Cremo participated in many fiddling competitions. This sets him apart from the majority of Cape Breton fiddlers who stay away from competition. As well, Cremo was often invited to perform as a soloist because of his native identity. He usually obliged, thus leading to his performance for the Queen and his performance that same year at the Cultural Olympics. Yet as Smith points out and as I have found during the course of my own interviews, Cape Breton fiddlers respected his ability and appreciated the attention he received for their “shared” musical style.

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<sup>67</sup> “Lee Cremo and Scottish Fiddling,” Down North: The Book of Cape Breton’s Magazine, ed., Ron Caplan (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1980) 39.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon E. Smith, “Lee Cremo: Narratives about a Micmac Fiddler,” Canadian Music: Issues of Hegemony and Identity, eds., Beverly Diamond and Robert Witmer (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 1994) 544.

<sup>69</sup> Smith 551.

## I. Conclusion.

One of the champions of Cape Breton fiddling, Fr. John Angus Rankin believed that it was the cultural diversity of the players, as much as the Scottish history of the tradition which defined the playing style. He told Ron MacInnis on camera, "As long as we have Scotchmen, Irishmen, Frenchmen and Mic Mac Indians who love Scotch music, we're going to have this Gaelic Cape Breton fiddler with us."<sup>70</sup> Except for the Mi'kmaq, the peoples he named all have a Celtic heritage. And while they all identified their music as "Scottish" or "Scotch," later comparisons would show it was very different from the fiddle music being played in Scotland. As Doherty points out, it was named for the first time on the CBC. Ron MacInnis may have thought it was vanishing, but he knew what to call it: Cape Breton fiddling.

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<sup>70</sup> Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

### III. CAPE BRETON IN THE 1960s – MODERN INTRUSIONS.

The road out of town “*leads through cluttered back streets where the scent of the greasy hamburgers reeks out of the doors of the little lunch-counters with their overloud juke-boxes, simultaneously pushing Elvis Presley and the rancid odours of the badly cooked food through the half open doors.*”

From the “Vastness of the Dark” in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.<sup>71</sup>

#### A. Introduction.

The conditions for fiddling in Cape Breton were relatively stable in the first half of the twentieth century. The music and dance had survived the proscriptions of the clergy in the nineteenth century. The place of the music in the local society was reinforced with the advent of radio and the record player, which broadcast the music and gave it a higher status. Isolation and poverty were both a help and a hindrance to the music. A violin was an inexpensive instrument to own, and easy to transport on the dusty dirt roads of the island. Choice was limited and free time (what little there was in a rural household) a luxury. But isolation and poverty were twin motors for out-migration. Thousands of Cape Bretoners left their over-crowded land to look for a better life.

The quotation from “The Vastness of the Dark” paints an unflattering picture of New Glasgow, on mainland Nova Scotia, an industrial, semi-urban community on the edge of the Cape Breton identity. The date is June 28, 1960. It is this time frame as much as the location, which helps to set the tone for this chapter. Some may wonder if the quotation is out of context for this thesis. It is not. The New Glasgow-Stellarton area was a coal mining community like many in Cape Breton as was Springhill, further west. The quote is a verbal snapshot of a scene from a young man’s migration away from his Cape Breton

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<sup>71</sup> Alistair MacLeod, The Lost Salt Gift of Blood 41.

home. It is modern; it is the 60s. It introduces the notion of instant gratification, with the reference to fast food restaurants. MacLeod's depiction of change in Cape Breton focuses on Elvis Presley as a new and urgent agent of musical expression.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the conditions for fiddling in Cape Breton in the ten-year period prior to the broadcast of The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler in 1971. Some references will include the 1950s as well. It will attempt to review the evidence that may have contributed to Ron MacInnis' observations that Cape Breton fiddling was in decline. It will attempt to place in context the burst of organized activity that followed the broadcast. Folklorist Alan Jabbour writes that a revival or revitalization in the world of arts happens "when the creative work in question already exists and has been displayed or disseminated but has also encountered a period of dormancy or suffered from inattention."<sup>72</sup> We will see if this indeed was the case for Cape Breton fiddling in the 1960s. If it was it may be useful to consider the words of Wendell Berry to help us understand why this may have happened. He writes that a local culture relies implicitly on the ability of the local community to create for itself what he calls a centripetal force, allowing it to hold itself to a central core. He compares it to the gradual building of soil in the forest and says the community "must build soil, and build that memory of itself – in lore and story and song – that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related."<sup>73</sup> He goes on to say that "as local community decays along with local economy, a vast amnesia settles

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<sup>72</sup> Alan Jabbour, introduction, Transforming Tradition, ed. Rosenberg.

<sup>73</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Work of Local Culture," What are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990) 154.

over the countryside.”<sup>74</sup> Could it be that Cape Bretoners had begun to forget the meaning of the fiddle music and its connection to their past as the new music of rock and roll flooded into their communities?

A final piece of the framework for the examination of the Cape Breton of the 60s can be found in another work by Alan Jabbour.<sup>75</sup> In a lecture to a conference on aging, he explained how he studied and contributed to the folk music revival of “old time fiddling” in the United States in the 1960s. After reviewing the life stories of dozens of elderly fiddlers he saw an important pattern. It was characterized by four periods in the lives of the fiddlers. In the first thirty years of life the musician learns to play and then perfect the art. In the “middle period” from thirty to fifty-five, he (for they were mostly men) stops playing. In this stage, the fiddlers “allow their artistry to go fallow. Some players continue through the middle years of life without their musical participation abating, but they are often those whose musicianship has earned them a special designation within the community.”<sup>76</sup> Jabbour explains this fallow period as being a stage in life where music takes a back seat to other priorities such as career and family. But during old age, after fifty-five, the fiddler resumes playing and in the presence of grandchildren, takes on the role of teacher. This is the fourth and final stage of the musician’s life.

Jabbour observed this pattern in the communities of traditional fiddlers in the upper southern United States. Could it have been true for the communities of Cape Breton?

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<sup>74</sup> Berry 157.

<sup>75</sup> Alan Jabbour, “Some Thoughts From A Folk Cultural Perspective,” Perspectives on Aging: Exploding the Myths, ed., Priscilla W. Johnston (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing, 1981).

<sup>76</sup> Jabbour, “Some Thoughts” 145.

Was it this fallow period that Ron MacInnis observed and mistakenly identified as a general decline in the music? Or did the fallow period of fiddlers in Cape Breton coincide with a loss of interest in the young?

By relying on a blend of statistical reports, economic studies, and journalistic and literary accounts, I hope to paint a portrait of what was happening in Cape Breton in the 1960s that led Ron MacInnis to produce Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. The evidence will show that traditional fiddling was in decline, both in appreciation and in the numbers of youth who were playing. Many of the people who could support the fiddling tradition had retreated; they had become less vocal and perhaps less active. This was due in part to the perception that traditional music had lost its status in the face of the new Rock and Roll. It was also due to the fact that the economy of Cape Breton was changing and populations were shifting. Yet the evidence will also show that the supporters and performers of traditional fiddling had not vanished. They had resources and institutions at their disposal which Ron MacInnis did not take into account.

#### B. Social Change.

The 1960s were a period of conflicting options for Cape Bretoners. For decades employment was found in the industrial coal and steel complex around Sydney. But Della Stanley reports that by the 1960s “coal mining was rapidly declining as oil and gas replaced coal in homes and industry.”<sup>77</sup> The new federal crown corporation, the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO), took over Dosco’s coal mining operations

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<sup>77</sup> Della Stanley, “The 1960s: The Illusions and Realities of Progress,” The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation, eds., E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, 454-455.

in 1967 with the intention of slowly winding down the industry while at the same time finding alternatives to replace it. The private sector abandoned the steel industry and this time it was the provincial government which took it over. None of this provided much confidence to young workers throughout Cape Breton. Rather than stay at home and join the growing ranks of the unemployed, they would leave in search of employment in Ontario and the West, or join the Diaspora of Cape Bretoners in New England and Detroit. The Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) pointed to the declining birth rate in the region in July of 1967 that contributed to an over-all decline in population growth. But APEC noted the decline was compounded by increased out-migration:

“Between 1961 and 1966 out-migration from the Atlantic Provinces numbered more than 100,000 people or roughly 20,000 per year...It has reached alarming proportions.”<sup>78</sup>

Another report published by the Institute of Public Affairs at Dalhousie University in 1966 focused on problems in the communities of Industrial Cape Breton. It pointed out that in Cape Breton County the population of children and youth was high, while all the older groups had declined in number. Out-migration of adult workers was the cause.<sup>79</sup>

The survey painted a grim picture of the towns of Dominion and New Waterford:

“Blight is widespread in the towns and evaluation of building conditions revealed that small percentages of the housing structures [...] were in sound repair.” The authors blame mine owners and developers for the poor conditions: “The existing structural quality of buildings in both towns suggests that the towns were built as ‘boom towns’ and

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<sup>78</sup> Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, Atlantic Report 2 (July 1967).

<sup>79</sup> K. Scott Wood and Harold Verge, A Study of the Problems of Certain Cape Breton Communities (Halifax: Institute of Public Affairs, Dalhousie U, 1966) 14.



that the coal company and other developers did not expect the communities to serve indefinitely.”<sup>80</sup>

No wonder that insecurity and displacement was rampant in the industrial complex of Cape Breton. But it was even greater in the rural areas. Jim and Pat Lotz state that between 1961 and 1971, the number of farms on Cape Breton dropped from 1,975 to 640.<sup>81</sup> The reduction of the violin culture’s farm base by two thirds in a single decade was bound to have a considerable impact on the social and cultural psychology of rural Cape Bretoners.

The post-war belief in modern education led many parents to encourage their children to get a university degree. St. Francis Xavier University established Xavier Junior College in Sydney in 1951. Stanley points out that between 1960 and 1970, enrollment in Atlantic universities rose from 5,811 to 15,820.<sup>82</sup> Yet, by the same token, the Atlantic Provinces had to find ways to encourage their youth to stay in the region. For example, in 1960, New Brunswick premier Louis Robichaud appointed a ministry of Youth and Welfare. In 1969 New Brunswick provided a monthly allowance to students if they would remain in high school.

Even before students were faced with post-secondary choices, the environment for primary and secondary schools was evolving, undercutting some of the fibre of community life. The Lotzes state that from the end of World War Two and onward, attempts were made to provide better education to rural students. This was done by “a

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<sup>80</sup> Wood and Verge 17.

<sup>81</sup> Jim and Pat Lotz, 94.

<sup>82</sup> Stanley 438.

move towards greater efficiency through the use of amalgamated school boards covering bigger areas and providing a wider range of opportunities in larger schools at centrally located points.”<sup>83</sup> Yet, the loss of small section schools hurt. They were often used on weekends for community square dances. When they were closed the fiddlers and dancers had to find new venues.

Whole communities disappeared and with them a way of life. It is hard to believe now, but the interior of Cape Breton Island was once crowded. One of the best illustrations of this is in Silver Donald Cameron’s book, Wind, Whales and Whisky. He describes an area in southwestern Cape Breton’s Inverness County. Now, the population lives along its coast on the Northumberland Strait, but the county was once filled with people on the plateau overlooking the coastal lowlands as well:

There were whole communities back there: Creignish Rear, Rhodena, Essex, Lexington, Lake Horton, McIntyre’s Mountain, Rear Long Point, Macdougall’s Mountain. Farms filled the countryside from Port Hawkesbury to Mabou, and thence across Cape Breton to Whycocomagh and West Bay.

But those farms are gone, replaced by a strange, eerie forest, all spruce and balsam fir – a forest seamed by roads and pathways, and peopled with ghosts.<sup>84</sup>

Where did their inhabitants go? The Lotzes provide a depressing picture: “Between 1921 and 1961, Cape Breton lost 57,369 people. Between 1951 and 1966, one person out

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<sup>83</sup> Jim and Pat Lotz, 132.

<sup>84</sup> Silver Donald Cameron, Wind, Whales and Whisky: A Cape Breton Voyage (Toronto: Macmillan, 1991) 38.

of every four between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four left the island and most of those who left were between the ages of fifteen and forty.<sup>85</sup>

Although there may be a tendency to romanticize the life they left behind, the settlements that once existed there were highly supportive of music. Cameron does not gloss over the harshness of life on these farms, or their isolation, especially in winter. People died of diphtheria, childbirth, cold and hunger. But they provided for themselves too and “for amusement, they visited, played cards, made music, danced and told the long Gaelic stories called *sgeulachd*.”<sup>86</sup> Individuals were known and appreciated for their idiosyncrasies and the fiddlers were part of it. They may not have been recording artists, or in demand at big square dances, but they played in the safety of their small circles of family and neighbours. Wendell Berry describes the members of this kind of society as the holders of a culture: “They were poor, as country people have often been, but they had each other, they had their local economy in which they helped each other, they had each other’s comfort when they needed it and they had their stories, their history together in that place.”<sup>87</sup> Yet Cameron goes on to describe the very thing Berry decried earlier as leading to a collective cultural amnesia: “Electricity, the telephone, paved highways and the railroad spread along the shore, but not into the back lands. The farms produced more children than they could support, and the ones who moved away came

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<sup>85</sup> Jim and Pat Lotz, 104.

<sup>86</sup> Cameron 42.

<sup>87</sup> Berry 159.

home with cash in the pockets of the store clothes. More than one Gaelic poem damns the Eaton's catalogue for destroying a way of life."<sup>88</sup>

Yet, other authors write in an unflattering way about the "subsistence" lifestyle of the rural Scots of Cape Breton in the 1960s. Pierre Yves Pepin conducted a study, Life and Poverty in the Maritimes published in 1968. It was funded by ARDA, the Agricultural and Rural Development Agency, which had as its mandate to improve "the lot of rural people" and to help them to "rise above the conditions that cramp their lives and stifle their hopes for their children."<sup>89</sup>

Pepin made no attempt to sugarcoat his assessment of the differences between the Scottish residents of Margaree in Inverness County and their Acadians neighbours at Cheticamp. "Unlike the Scots" he says, "the Acadians had a community spirit, were resourceful and outgoing."<sup>90</sup> The Acadians relied on the fishery while the Scots, "land-based country people, turned their backs on the sea and fishing. Marked by isolation and their conservative natures, they followed the valleys into the interior where they settled down again to a subsistence economy."<sup>91</sup> It might be said these very tendencies made the Cape Breton Gaels invisible to most outsiders, except those, such as Pepin, who were forced to look for them.

While stereotypes such as those offered by Pepin seem to offer little real insight (except into the prejudices of the author), it is important to note that Inverness County

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<sup>88</sup> Cameron 44.

<sup>89</sup> Maurice Sauve, foreword, Life and Poverty in the Maritimes, by Pierre-Yves Pepin (Ottawa: Minister of Forestry and Rural Development, 1968) ii.

<sup>90</sup> Pepin 80.

<sup>91</sup> Pepin 78-79.

was selected along with a handful of others in the Maritimes, because it was seen to be badly in need of economic stimulation. Pepin's description of a tour of a part of Inverness County does offer a sense of depression and powerlessness:

We took a long trip through the region of the Northeast Margaree, the Southeast Margaree and around Lake Ainslie. The general impression is one of somnolence. The first sector in particular is practically abandoned. Buildings are falling in ruins. There is not a living soul to be seen. The lumbering on the plateau causes some activity, of course and creates a few jobs, some trucking and a little business. This is quite limited....Long ago man had retreated before the forest and the forest has taken over the countryside once more. The same phenomenon is evident north of Margaree Forks, even though the valley there is relatively broad and flat.<sup>92</sup>

Yet Pepin's report either ignored or predated a major shift in Inverness County, which made it a special case in the 1960s. Perhaps he made a deliberate attempt to focus on the rural areas and pay less attention to the urbanization that was taking place in the south of the county. (Although one was directly linked to the other.) People were leaving its backcountry areas in droves, but not necessarily to leave the Island. This is significant in light of subsequent events. The area on both sides of the Canso Causeway supported the new industrial complex at Port Hawkesbury and Point Tupper. Three mega-projects had come to the area: a heavy-water plant, a Gulf Canada refinery and the Stora Forest Products pulp mill. Although the population of the county had been steadily declining

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<sup>92</sup> Pepin 107.

since 1951, the trend was reversed in 1966. By 1971 the population of the county had grown from 18,152 to 20,375.<sup>93</sup> Another trend developed too. Incomes almost doubled in Inverness and Richmond Counties, thanks to the new industries.<sup>94</sup> As we shall see, many of the county's fiddling aficionados had not left. They were no longer in their old rural homesteads, but they were close by and ready to respond to the warning in Ron MacInnis's TV show.

### C. Evidence of the Fall of the Cape Breton Fiddler.

As we'll see in greater detail, in the next chapter, the strength of Ron MacInnis' argument comes from comments in the film from older fiddlers.

Voice of Dan R. Macdonald:

*"Oh, I don't know in the world. But, sometimes I think that Scotch music is dying in Cape Breton. Sometimes I think.*

Voice of Sandy MacLean:

*"Now you take it here in Sydney years ago, there were violins for sale in the music store. You can't see one there now, because there's no demand for violins."*

Unknown Voice:

*"In the old days, you could go on Saturday nights, there'd be one long*

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<sup>93</sup> Department of Development, Province of Nova Scotia, "Table 1, Population Growth, Inverness County and Nova Scotia" Inverness County Statistical Profile (Halifax: Nova Scotia Department of Development, 1978) 7.

<sup>94</sup> Department of Development, Province of Nova Scotia, Perspective Nova Scotia (Halifax: Nova Scotia Department of Development, n.d. [c.1974]) 114.

*dance and 4 or 5 square dances. What we called square dances ...with Scottish fiddles. Today there's very few except out in the country."*

Voice of Sandy MacLean:

*"Well we're very, very fortunate to have a good abundance of good Scottish players in Cape Breton. But I'm sorry to know this, but young fellas are not taking the interest in the violin music." <sup>95</sup>*

Yet many of the people who reacted to the broadcast of the film, disputed its premise. Even the subsequent festival of Scottish fiddling at Glendale in 1973 was intended to discount the film's assessment that few young people were playing. After all, 102 fiddlers on one stage would seem to discredit the conclusions of the film. This is a difficult issue to quantify, since the fiddling tradition of Cape Breton was essentially an informal one. Parents taught their children in the homes and there were no registries of musicians.

One study, published in 1985, provides evidence that the numbers of fiddlers playing in Cape Breton did decline in the 60s. Virginia Hope Garrison spent several years in the late 70s and early 80s, preparing a doctoral thesis on teaching and learning practices in the Cape Breton fiddling milieu.<sup>96</sup> She examined the new style of fiddle teaching that was taking place. It was seen to be replacing the in-home, familiar style of violin learning that had thrived for so long in Cape Breton. She surveyed seventy-eight fiddlers

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<sup>95</sup> Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

<sup>96</sup> Virginia Garrison, "Traditional and Non-Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices in Folk Music: An Ethnographic Field Study of Cape Breton Fiddling," Ph.D. diss., U of Wisconsin, 1985.

ranging in age from eleven to seventy-nine years of age in May and June of 1979.<sup>97</sup> Her work is displayed in tables that separate the ages by decades. While the survey questions were designed to elicit information about where the fiddlers came from in Cape Breton, what kind of help they received in learning and who gave that help, it is possible to glean another significant fact from her sample. In 1979 all the other age groups outnumbered the fiddlers who would have been children and teenagers in 1960. The most telling information is in Table 3, reproduced here. For the purposes of this paper I have added my own deductions in parentheses and bold italics.

<u>Survey distribution of 78 Cape Breton Fiddlers by Age and Home County</u>								
Age	Cape Breton	Inverness	Victoria	Richmond	Antigonish	Other	(Total)	(Age- 1960)
11-19.9	2	5	2	0	0	1	<b>10</b>	<b>NA</b>
20-29.9	1	2	0	0	0	0	<b>3</b>	<b>1-10</b>
30-39.9	3	4	0	0	0	1	<b>8</b>	<b>11-20</b>
40-49.9	2	4	4	3	3	2	<b>20</b>	<b>21-30</b>
50-59.9	8	3	7	1	1	1	<b>21</b>	<b>31-40</b>
60-69.9	7	3	1	0	1	1	<b>13</b>	<b>41-50</b>
70-79.9	1	1	3	0	0	0	<b>4</b>	<b>51-60</b>

What this table clearly shows is a change that occurred after 1960. There is a much smaller group of fiddlers who learned to play between 1960 and 1970. By 1970, however the numbers begin to rise again. Half of the seventy-eight surveyed are fifty years of age or older. Only twenty-one are under the age of forty.

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<sup>97</sup> Garrison 198.



This is good sample of a fairly large number of fiddlers who gathered for a rehearsal in Baddeck for the 1979 Glendale fiddling festival. There was no direct question aimed at measuring a “decline” in fiddling in the 1960s, but information about a shift in attitudes and practices is supported by the rest of her data. Garrison herself makes general references to the decline in her summary. She says “Cape Breton Island...began experiencing modern society’s threat to its traditional lifestyles, values and artistic expressions later in this century than most North American areas.”<sup>98</sup> She refers to Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler as the vehicle which “most dramatically made the general public of the island aware of the slow but persistent encroachment of modern society and its effects on traditional ways, specifically, the ways of the Cape Breton Fiddler and the music.”<sup>99</sup> Only one of her informants had taught a son or daughter at home. The reasons she listed include lack of time or interest, competition with radio and/or television and the fiddler’s desire not to force it on the child compounded by the older fiddler’s lack of confidence in teaching ability.<sup>100</sup>

A similar attempt to count fiddlers was conducted ten years later for another doctoral study. In the early 1990s Elizabeth Doherty spent three years conducting fieldwork in Cape Breton for her study of the Cape Breton Fiddling Tradition from 1928 to 1995. She arranged sixty-one fiddlers by age and gender. In 1995, ten of them were under the age of nineteen, twenty-two were between twenty and thirty-nine, eleven were between the ages of forty and fifty-nine and eighteen were older than sixty. “That those in the forty-

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<sup>98</sup> Garrison 274.

<sup>99</sup> Garrison 274.

<sup>100</sup> Garrison 197-8.

fifty-nine category constitute the smallest numbers reflects the reality that certainly, in those decades of the 40s, 50s and 60s, numbers of young people taking up the fiddler were at their lowest.”<sup>101</sup> Ian McKinnon’s study of the vibrant history of the electronic recording of Cape Breton fiddlers in the twentieth century, “Fiddling to Fortune,” indicates that much of this activity stopped in the 1960s and was itself revived in the 1970s. He reports that George Taylor, the owner of the best known recording label, Rodeo Records, stopped his work in 1962 when he moved to Montreal. Two American folk music labels, Rounder and Shanachie made new efforts, starting in 1974.<sup>102</sup> This coincides with other reflections of the decline and revival in the fiddle tradition in the 1960s and 1970s. Other accounts attest to the fact that fiddlers were giving up. Willie Kennedy told Mark Wilson of Rounder Records that he would play for dances with his friend, Morgan MacQuarrie, in the Kenloch-Lake Ainslie area of Cape Breton, from the age of fifteen. That would have been around 1940, and he earned 10 dollars a night, which was good pay: “But I pretty much stopped playing the fiddle in the late ‘fifties. [...] When Morgan left Cape Breton, the bottom dropped out of everything in Kenloch and there was really nothing for me to play for anymore.”<sup>103</sup> John MacDougall who lived very close by recalls that he was one of the last fiddlers playing in the community: “I knew the old players around, I knew there was a lot of other players too, but they weren’t out playing anyway. But the ones that was playing, I knew they was coming to the end of

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<sup>101</sup> Doherty 70.

<sup>102</sup> McKinnon 59-67.

<sup>103</sup> Willie Kennedy, “Cape Breton Fiddler,” liner notes, Willie Kennedy, Cape Breton Violin, Rounder CD 7043, 2002.

their rope. So that's when I started. Then they all dropped out and I took over the whole community. They just quit playing."<sup>104</sup>

Marie MacLellan witnessed the decline in another way. She is a well-known piano accompanist for her sister Theresa and her brother Donald, who both fiddle. Their father, the late "Big" Ronald MacLellan, is an icon of the Cape Breton Fiddling tradition.<sup>105</sup> Marie says she saw a decline in appreciation for fiddling in Sydney as early as the late 1940s:

When I came to Sydney first, I can truthfully say that Scottish music had gone out. It had gone out, cause there was Scottish music, of course, but it was played in a different style, you know what I mean? It was played like rock-and-roll. It was played in a faster tempo. And it was swing, all swing. It was like our tunes were taken and they were made swing music.<sup>106</sup>

She went on to say that she used to play with two fiddlers at the Ashby legion in Sydney for Sunday afternoon Ceilidhs:

And we were lucky if we got 6 people. I used to go to dances around here, you know, square dances. And I didn't play rock and roll and I didn't play any modern songs, really. So they'd come over to me and they'd say "Is that all you

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<sup>104</sup> John MacDougall, 6 June 2002.

<sup>105</sup> Marie and Theresa were two of the very few women who achieved stature in the Cape Breton Fiddling community of the third quarter of the twentieth century. Winnie Chafe became better known through broadcasting, but the MacLellan Sisters, Tena Campbell and Mary MacDonald established names for themselves in an environment where the women, who might have been musical, usually stayed very busy controlling their households and staving off the effects of poverty in their families.

<sup>106</sup> Marie MacLellan, "A Talk with Marie MacLellan, Pianist," Cape Breton's Magazine 42 (1986): 38.

can play? Can't you play any modern music?" You know they'd almost slap you on the face!<sup>107</sup>

She believed that this was most pronounced in Sydney; the people of Inverness County still liked the old style of music. She did however express relief that by the mid-1980s things had improved after a long uphill period. "But we took an awful beating for it!"

Unfortunately there are no economic studies or reports of the numbers of fiddlers or dance venues available in the 1960s. There are no registries from the 60s or surveys of the ages of the fiddlers taken at that time. (There is a registry from the 1970s, as we will see later on.) That is why we rely now on surveys done after the fact, which require us to work backwards and extrapolate the information. But there is a great deal of disagreement today about the healthiness of the fiddling community of the 60s. Despite the opinions of people such as John MacDougall and Marie MacLellan, others recall the 60s as being a time when fiddling was as popular as ever.

Carl MacKenzie is one of them. He is a highly regarded fiddler from the Sydney area. He recalls the late 60s and early 70s when he worked in Port Hawkesbury: "I know myself around that time, I worked as an engineer at the pulp mill and I used to play five regular dances a week myself and one session I went eleven nights in a row, playing for dances. If that was 'Vanishing' I don't know."<sup>108</sup> John Donald Cameron of Port Hawkesbury supports MacKenzie's contention that fiddling was popular at the time. He recalls the dances as well, and even though he recognized there weren't a lot of fiddlers around, he felt it was just a question of time: "I came from a time [the 1940s], there

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<sup>107</sup> Marie MacLellan 38.

<sup>108</sup> Carl MacKenzie, 18 June 2002.

weren't very many then either. Yet the music is still thriving, thirty and forty years later. It goes in cycles."<sup>109</sup>

Frank MacInnis, who later became one of the key organizers of the revival, did not notice a decline in the traditional music environment either. He is from Port Hawkesbury, too, although his family's roots include the abandoned communities of Creignish Rear referred to by Donald Cameron. He was a young teacher in the late 60s and early 70s. He was not a fiddler, but loved to dance the traditional Scottish dances: "As a young guy, growing up in Port Hawkesbury, there was always music around, music in my family, both mother and father...I guess I got interested in going to square dances and went through the 50s, 60s and 70s...We went to contemporary dances as well...but the traditional country square dances always played a significant part."<sup>110</sup>

MacInnis names a number of well-known fiddlers who would visit his home: people like Dan R. MacDonald, Angus Chisholm, Dan Hughie MacEachern and Buddy MacMaster. In many ways, these were the people who mattered for public performances. They were the stars. But for decades, the fiddle had been a ubiquitous instrument, played informally in kitchens and living rooms by people with varying degrees of ability. Donald Gillis of North Sydney suggests that it was this informal group that was vanishing: "There was a lot of fiddlers. But a lot of them weren't playing for years, eh. They just got away from it and this other gorilla music was coming in and they were kind of taking over and the young people didn't want fiddles or fiddlers or anything."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> John Donald Cameron, personal interview, 5 June 2002.

<sup>110</sup> Frank MacInnis, CBC interview conducted by Marie Thompson, 23 Oct. 2000.

<sup>111</sup> Donald Gillis, personal interview, 18 June 2002.

The “gorilla music” he refers to is Rock and Roll. It’s an apt description for a music that heralded the breaking of bonds between youth and their elders. And as we’ll see, there were a lot fewer kids yearning to play the traditional music than there had been in the past.

#### D. New Music.

*Rock and Roll made a big mess of everything for a few years. But I knew it was only like a big storm, so next time, I said ‘take it easy, give them a few years and that will disappear like a storm’.*<sup>112</sup>

John MacDougall sits in his tiny kitchen in the trailer where he’s lived alone for many years not far from Lake Ainslie in Inverness County. He recalls the 1950s and 60s when the music of Elvis Presley and the Beatles swept the continent like a hurricane, reaching into the farthest corners of Cape Breton. It drew young people away from the boredom and isolation of their lives and the traditional culture they had come to take for granted. He says, back then, the older people lost faith in their music: “There was nothing going on to give them a boost or anything. Everything was dead. There was nothing. Nobody gave them courage to go out to play. It was hard for them.”<sup>113</sup> Despite his insistence in his belief that Rock and Roll would blow itself out like a big storm, many others did not share his conviction.

Richard Blaustein, in his examination of the “Old Time Fiddlers Association Movement” in North America, says in the 1950s “country music entered a period in

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<sup>112</sup> John MacDougall, personal interview, 6 June 2002.

<sup>113</sup> John MacDougall, 6 June 2002.

which the fiddle, the oldest American folk instrument, was banished from the commercial mainstream.”<sup>114</sup> Ken Perlman in his book, The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition,<sup>115</sup> describes PEI of the early twentieth century as an isolated place cut off from the modern effects of electricity, paved roads and automobile travel. Then in the 40s and 50s, “the Maritimes experienced a bunch of whammies: modern transportation, consolidation of schools, mass media and the development of an adolescent subculture.”<sup>116</sup> Perlman suggests these changes would have undermined the culture that supported traditional Scottish-style fiddling both on PEI and in eastern Nova Scotia.

The storm of Rock and Roll came ripping in on the radio and television airwaves bringing with it the sense that “old-time” music was conservative, hide-bound and moribund. The new driving beat of rock enlivened and energized young people, promising new freedoms and new sensations. These included drug experimentation and freer sexual activity after the introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s.

This was certainly the spirit that drew well-known Cape Breton blues-man, Matt Minglewood away from his fiddling roots. In an interview with Ron Caplan in Cape Breton’s Magazine, Minglewood (whose real name is Roy Batherson) says he learned to play the fiddle when he was six or seven years old. He’d even performed two Gaelic songs at the age of four, although he says he never really knew what the words meant.

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<sup>114</sup> Richard Blaustein, “Traditional Music and Social Change: The Old Time Fiddlers Association Movement in the United States,” Ph.D. diss., Indiana U, 1975, 60.

<sup>115</sup> Ken Perlman, The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 1996).

<sup>116</sup> Ken Perlman, e-mail to author, 29 Nov. 2001.

“So anyway, I quit playing fiddle and started playing hockey, because of peer pressure. Saturday, everyone’s going skating, going to play hockey – I’m going to take my fiddle lessons, you know. So I got teased a lot about it.”<sup>117</sup> Not long after, he got hooked when he saw Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan Show: “My father and mother were just shocked. But I remember that feeling that I got from seeing him doing that. It was like – I suppose it was wild abandon. And I loved the energy that he was giving off, the energy that was coming from the man and the music.”<sup>118</sup>

Ed Sullivan took another Cape Breton son away from fiddling, temporarily. Dave MacIsaac grew up in Halifax, but his father was from St. Rose, Inverness County, Cape Breton. He recalls he learned to play the fiddle when he was just a small boy. He and his father used to drive up to the top of Citadel Hill in Halifax in the evenings because it was the only place where they could capture the signal from CJFX in Antigonish broadcasting Scottish style fiddling. But the night he saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964 everything changed:

The fiddle went in the closet and I had to have a guitar. My older brothers and sisters were bringing home a lot of rock-n-roll and country and I was hearing guitar players, Chuck Berry and people like that, so I was getting into that stuff too. About the mid 60s.<sup>119</sup>

Matt Minglewood became one of the most successful Canadian rock musicians.

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<sup>117</sup> Matt Minglewood, “From Talks with Matt Minglewood,” Cape Breton’s Magazine 49 (1988): back page.

<sup>118</sup> Matt Minglewood 98.

<sup>119</sup> Dave MacIsaac, personal interview, 6 Aug. 2002.



Dave MacIsaac, although not as well known outside the Maritimes, is one of Canada's most talented guitarists and fiddlers. Indeed, despite his early seduction by Rock and Roll, he returned to the fiddle at the age of 15, after hearing Angus Chisholm play a dance in Halifax: "Something kind of exploded in my head and I had to get back to fiddling. And I met Angus [Chisholm] and he said I had to get my music reading together and get at the old books, Neil Gow, William Marshal, Capt. Fraser, [...] so then I got my reading chops together."<sup>120</sup>

Not only did he get his "reading chops" together, Dave became a master of the Cape Breton style in guitar and fiddle, and has performed on literally hundreds of recordings, while being in demand by anyone seeking professional back-up for live performance. Yet his anecdote about the appeal of Rock and Roll on television carries resonance. The explosion in demand for guitars at the music stores had an influence on the status of the fiddle in the culture at the time. Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler concludes with a clip from one of the interviewees providing what seems to be another piece of evidence for the fall in status of the fiddler. He says, "Now you take it here in Sydney years ago, there were violins for sale in the music store. You can't see one there now, because there's no demand for violins."<sup>121</sup> Mac Skinner owned and operated McKnight's, the main music store in Sydney for many years. He says McKnight's was a virtual department store for music, selling instruments, sheet music, stereos, audio equipment and records. He says he always had fiddles on display in the store, even in the 60s and 70s.<sup>122</sup> He says

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<sup>120</sup> Dave MacIsaac, 6 Aug. 2002.

<sup>121</sup> Unidentified voice in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

<sup>122</sup> Mac Skinner, telephone conversation, 4 Sept. 2002.

Professor James MacDonald always maintained violin lessons in the Sydney area, with three or four classes learning to play traditional violin. But Skinner adds at the same time there were ten to twelve classes of students eagerly learning to play the guitar. And he says the wave of Rock and Roll in the 60s and 70s swamped the sale of violins and with it, the general interest in traditional music. Where there may have been a dozen violins on display, there would have been several dozen guitars. This, he suggests, may have prompted the man in the documentary to say that fiddles had disappeared altogether from the music store in Sydney.

#### E. Electronic Media: Radio and Television.

The electronic media played conflicting roles in the evolution of traditional instrumental music in the Maritimes. At first they introduced competing choices for listeners. Then they introduced changing styles that had an impact on traditional musicians. But finally they broadcast and helped to preserve and promote the tradition.

Both McKinnon and Hornby document how radio stations CFCY in Charlottetown, CJFX in Antigonish and CJCB in Sydney, devoted a great deal of air time to local fiddlers from the 1930s onward. But Rock and Roll sounds from Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley and the British invasion of the Beatles became more attractive to young musicians. Rock and Roll was everywhere, and while there was still some room for "old time music," young people as we've seen, came to associate it with the older generation. Remember, this was a time when anyone older than thirty was held in contempt and suspicion! But there were still effective champions of the tradition in eastern Nova Scotia.

Since its inception in 1928, radio station CJCB in Sydney had the most powerful signal for radio listeners over the largest territory in Cape Breton. And as early as the 1930s it recorded and broadcast Scottish style fiddling, usually for 15 minutes in the evenings and on Saturday night. One show from the 1930s was the Scottish music show known as The Cottar's Saturday Night. It was broadcast on the national "Trans Canada Network" provided by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In the 40s, 50s and 60s, the programming included Scottish and country music on the Cape Breton Roundup. Then Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald achieved wide acclaim with his fiddling virtuosity on the Macdonald Tobacco-sponsored Saturday night program.

Ray MacDonald spent his whole career in private radio, starting first at CJCB at the age of nineteen. His starting salary in 1953 was \$35 a week. He grew up in Sydney Mines but says he didn't know much about "Scottish" style music until he began to learn the ropes from his mentor at CJCB, Lloyd Taylor. He believes he was hired at such a young age for the radio station because at that time, experienced CJCB announcers were getting ready to begin work at the brand new CJCB television station. He didn't know much about the music, he says, but he liked it. He's given a lot of thought to it over the years. He told me the music "was formerly familiar." When I asked him what he meant by that, this is what he said:

It's as if I knew it before. And I'd say this. What the tunes do to me is this. I'm probably about the only Cape Bretoner in captivity who can't fight, but when I hear the Scottish music I could stand on the table in the Port Hood tavern and challenge the whole place [. . .] It's just something that moves me and it reaches

... me and speaks to me, but I think the music [. . .] is the land and sky and the water.

There's something in the music.<sup>123</sup>

In the beginning, though, the veteran musicians like Fitzgerald and Beatty Wallace and Estwood Davidson, simply accepted the young and untutored announcer, treating him with affection and patience. He became committed to playing the music as much as he could as long as he remained convinced that his audience wanted to hear it. He continued to do so at his next post, CKBC in Bathurst, New Brunswick, where French Acadians and displaced Cape Breton miners requested the Scottish fiddle music frequently. One listener even purchased the records for him, as long as MacDonald promised to play it.

Ray MacDonald says gradually, many of the radio stations changed their mandates. Some, like CJCB, switched their format to Top 40 Rock and Roll in the 1960s: "Radio was different up and down the dial" he says, "mainly because of the conglomerates[. . .] ownership by multi-stations and given a format and that changed the face of the land."<sup>124</sup> It should be noted, however, that CJCB radio continued to broadcast a Cape Breton music show hosted by Donnie Campbell right up until the present day.

If one thing wasn't in decline, it was the effort of the Antigonish radio station, CJFX to play lots of Scottish style fiddle music. If other stations changed their formats to rock and roll, it was because the advertisers believed that's what would sell the most advertising. In the case of CJFX, that didn't happen. The Antigonish radio station went on the air on March 23, 1943. One of the pioneer radio stations in Canada, it was

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<sup>123</sup> Ray MacDonald, personal interview, 7 June, 2002.

<sup>124</sup> Ray MacDonald, 7 June 2002.

different from all of the others right from the beginning. Its founders were Catholic priests, teachers and graduates of St. Francis Xavier University, anxious to provide a broadcast medium for a Roman Catholic message. But because of the social consciousness promoted by two of the university's most famous alumni, the founders also wanted to advance education, self-help and cooperativism. While Fr. Moses Coady and Fr. Jimmy Tompkins were not directly involved in the application for the radio station, their experience and beliefs in teaching the less educated how to find power had a huge influence on those who were more educated and more privileged. Most of my information for this section comes from two sources. Bruce Nunn wrote an unpublished biography of his father, the late J. Clyde Nunn, for his senior paper at St. FX. My other source is the aforementioned Ray MacDonald, also known in Antigonish as Ray "Mac." He worked as an announcer and programmer at CJFX from 1967 to his retirement in 1999. He wasn't one of the founders but he believed that the playing of "Scotch" music went hand in hand with the mandate:

The money for CJFX was raised from small contributions, farmers, fishermen, steelworkers, miners. It's still run by a board of directors, it's still privately owned. It was based on co-op principles of being for and of the people. They had a social justice idea or at least they had a feel for that and they had a definite mandate to promote the music of the area and the language and so on. Well, the language was perhaps more difficult to promote. But the fiddle wasn't a tough job. But even in the format of CJFX. I mean Clyde used to break records on the air, he used to say, well that's WACKO! If it didn't conform to kind of what they wanted. So we weren't really into rock n roll too heavily. We had stuff at night

we'd play for the young people, after 7 o'clock at night, they'd have their say, but throughout the day, they were very careful and they played a lot of Irish type tunes and Scottish Celtic tunes.<sup>125</sup>

CJFX could be heard all over eastern mainland Nova Scotia, western Cape Breton, eastern Prince Edward Island and even as far as Newfoundland. It relied on commercial revenue and throughout the 50s and 60s was able to raise enough money to pay its staff and provide programming. It was a mix of "university of the air" provided by university faculty, live sports and music broadcasts, and programs picked up from the CBC Dominion network. One of the most popular shows was J. Clyde Nunn's Fun at Five. Nunn assumed an identity known as "the Old Timer" and along with a sidekick Percy Baker, he "punned and poked his way through any topic that he deemed himself wise enough to comment on. . . . Of course this commentary was carried on between the playing of various 'Scotch' tunes as the Old Timer called them. In reality, Clyde never much cared for them himself."<sup>126</sup> But Bruce Nunn goes on to say that the commercial advertisements were prominent in the show. It was very popular and "as a result sold very well."<sup>127</sup> "Remember too," Ray MacDonald adds, "Clyde Nunn was a politician, he was a [provincial] member for Inverness County. The reason he was elected was, he knew his people, he knew the people who elected him. He knew what they liked and disliked and if he didn't know

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<sup>125</sup> Ray MacDonald, 7 June 2002.

<sup>126</sup> Bruce Nunn 34.

<sup>127</sup> Bruce Nunn, "Life was His Podium – a Biography of J. Clyde Nunn," senior essay, St. Francis Xavier University[Antigonish], 1984.

their faces, he knew their politics. Having said that he knew the music was part [of them].”<sup>128</sup>

But Ray MacDonald made his own contribution along with his colleague, Gus MacKinnon. Fiddle music had its place at all times of the day on CJFX: “If [fiddle music] was declining, we were oblivious to it. Maybe we were stupid, or born stupid and losing ground, but as I say it was a combination of not caring what the other stations were doing, it was more of paying attention to what we were doing and what we wanted to do.”<sup>129</sup>

Ray MacDonald and Gus MacKinnon went out to the concerts and taped performers on location, but they also invited them back to the station in Antigonish to record. MacDonald adds the recording environment was enhanced by the efforts of Bernie MacIsaac in Antigonish and his Celtic Music label. Ian McKinnon has documented the history of this small recording company in his thesis, Fiddling to Fortune. Ray Macdonald says the recording industry had a big impact on the fiddlers: “It gave them an identity. Back in the 1930s there were no tape recorders. And having the records of their own music, gave them confidence in their abilities. And CJFX played the records.”<sup>130</sup>

There were two other stations targeting Cape Breton. One was CHER and the other was CBC radio’s CBI. CHER had a very weak signal and could be heard only in the Sydney area. CBI’s reach was larger, but still didn’t go all the way across the Island. Unfortunately for people in western Cape Breton, they could only hear the CBC’s

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<sup>128</sup> Ray MacDonald, 7 June 2002.

<sup>129</sup> Ray MacDonald, 7 June 2002.

<sup>130</sup> Ray MacDonald, 7 June 2002.

Halifax-based programming. Still, both CHER and CBI made an effort to carry traditional music on the airwaves. In fact CHER is where Ron MacInnis worked as a freelancer and where he first found a market for his stories about Cape Breton culture. Later on, in the 1970s, both stations put increasing emphasis on Cape Breton music and language. But CHER had to go through a change of ownership first and the CBC was about to go through some upheavals of its own in Cape Breton.

The British and American music invasions spurred Canada to try to develop its own music industry. The Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission introduced Canadian content regulations in 1970. Henceforth, thirty percent of all radio music programming in Canada would be Canadian. Ironically, this should have favoured the fiddling community. In 1989 Ian McKinnon provided a massive discography of recordings of Cape Breton fiddling dating back to the late 1920s: "Since that time over three hundred recordings have been produced featuring some sixty-three different Cape Breton fiddlers."<sup>131</sup> Fiddlers were veterans in the music industry by the time of the rock phenomenon. But rather than be included in the general category of popular music, fiddle music became ghettoized. Commercial radio programmers, however desperate they were for Canadian content to fill their play-lists, would rarely turn to fiddle music. That being said, it managed to hold a place in at least one area of Canadian broadcasting. The medium with the biggest impact in the second half of the twentieth century was television.

For much of that time, in Eastern Canada, the CBC was the dominant player. More than one person has said that the coming of television drove the electrification programs

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<sup>131</sup> McKinnon 49.



of the power companies. The most popular shows on CBC were The Ed Sullivan Show, produced in New York, and Don Messer's Jubilee, produced in Halifax. CBC had a big television operation in Halifax, active from the beginning in seeking out Maritime talent for broadcast. Don Messer's Jubilee made a certain style of fiddling immensely popular across the country. A few of the Cape Breton fiddlers would perform on the Messer show. Still, Messer's style of fiddle music was not the Scottish Cape Breton style. Cape Bretoners admired his talent and watched the show. But there wasn't much room for Cape Breton style fiddling on it. In a move that still resonates in rural Canada more than thirty years later, the CBC canceled the Messer show in 1969. It is possibly the most unpopular thing the CBC has ever done! But soon the Corporation was looking for a replacement and this would all play into subsequent events of significance for the Cape Breton fiddle revival.

In conclusion, the early to mid-1960s was a time when radio, the senior service, was going through an identity crisis due to the pressure of the new music. Money was being invested in television, while radio languished. Television programmers were anxious to find Canadian talent and broadcast it back to viewers across the country. At the same time viewers were seeing often idealized images of the American urban life that did not reflect their own rural realities. The decade closed with a sense that the old ways of life were to be abandoned with the new values projected on television, taking their place.

#### F. Music, Modernity, Change and Loss in Alistair MacLeod's Writing.

It is not easy to paint a picture of Cape Breton of the 1960s and its attachment to traditional music. Economic and social studies, individual accounts and anecdotes give us close-up views of specific problems or individuals, but it is difficult to step back and see the whole landscape. One way of doing this, is by reading the works of Alistair MacLeod. While they are works of fiction, his powerful stories include characters who, like so many real Cape Bretoners, struggle to maintain their connection to the Island and their Scottish heritage in the face of hardship, poverty and separation. One of the ways they do that, and indeed one of the manifestations of that culture is the playing of the violin and the singing of Gaelic songs.

MacLeod was born in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, but was raised in Cape Breton. He spent his adult career away from Nova Scotia, settling in Windsor, Ontario where he taught at the university there. His publishing output is small in quantity, by some measures, but his first two books of fourteen short stories were quickly recognized as classic literature. His first novel, which took him about twelve years to write was an instant success. No Great Mischief (1999) tells the story of one family's history in Cape Breton and the tragedies that afflict them both in their island homes and later in their labours far away. The dust jacket for the novel says "the music of Cape Breton rings throughout this book, by turns joyful and sad but always haunting." This is true of almost all his work.

I met Alistair MacLeod on a hot and humid August, Saturday morning at his summer home in Inverness County. We spoke about the music in his work and in Cape Breton. There are many musicians in his extended family and he knows many more. All of his

children play musical instruments. Music, he says, is very important to him. "It is a means of communicating feeling and a certain emotional depth."<sup>132</sup> He believes that the reason why it is so strongly felt in Cape Breton is "because a lot of these people have been here for a long, long time. And I think that when people have been in a certain place, for a certain length of time, whatever they are or whatever they brought with them becomes intensified."<sup>133</sup> MacLeod's explanation for the Cape Breton Gaels' connection to their music corresponds with Wendell Berry's description of a healthy, long-lived community: "A human community, then, if it is to last long, must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place."<sup>134</sup> For MacLeod, a well-connected, inside observer of Cape Breton culture, the intensification process over time, and in one place, heightened the Gaels' awareness of their identity and their music. Yet, as we have seen, Cape Breton did not fit all the criteria for Berry's healthy human community because poverty and out-migration undermined that centripetal force. And in MacLeod's fictional work he dramatizes those counteracting centrifugal forces to develop themes of advancing modernity and the loss that goes with it. The narrator in No Great Mischief declares "I am a twentieth century man, I think, as I step out onto the street. And then another phrase of my grandmother's comes to mind, '*whether I like it or not.*'"<sup>135</sup> The narrator is Alexander MacDonald who is looking in on his alcoholic, ex-convict brother. He has heard him singing in Gaelic, and has picked up the words to

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<sup>132</sup> Alistair MacLeod, personal interview, 17 Aug. 2002.

<sup>133</sup> Alistair MacLeod, 17 Aug. 2002.

<sup>134</sup> Berry 155.

<sup>135</sup> Alistair MacLeod, No Great Mischief (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999) 17.

continue singing them along to himself. The words come from a distance, through a closed door, over time and geography, yet they are still familiar:

There's a longing in my heart now  
To be where I was  
Though I know that it's quite sure  
I never shall return.

[...] Sounds planted and dormant and flowering at the most unexpected times.<sup>136</sup>

The juxtaposition of these two thoughts (the longing for home and the recurrence of the dormant Gaelic words) helps to explain the meaning of the use of music in Alistair MacLeod's work. In the stanza of translation from the old Gaelic song we meet again the notion of departure. It is a departure without end. It evokes sorrow and a "longing" to be not only at home geographically but at home spiritually and in the past. It is a past that will never return. The song's expression comes in the same scene in which the narrator reminds himself he is a twentieth century man. It is voiced in the last decade of the twentieth century. It echoes the passage we read at the very beginning of this paper, where a middle-aged man, earlier in the century, admonishes his mother in Cape Breton to stop holding on to the past even if the past represents stasis and safety of a family living around her. "It is just that, well, somehow we just can't live in a clan system anymore. We have to see beyond ourselves and our own families. We have to live in the twentieth century."<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately, in the view of this created character, living in the twentieth century requires the abandonment of the clan

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<sup>136</sup> MacLeod, No Great Mischief 17.

<sup>137</sup> MacLeod, The Lost Salt Gift of Blood 79.

system yet again. But it's hard to let go completely. Hence his deliberate choice to listen to the old recordings of fiddle music, seeking the wave of emotion they carry with them.

In 2002, Alistair MacLeod speaks of the legions of Cape Bretoners and Newfoundlanders who travel to the west for wages and compares them to economic refugees all over the world:

There are all these stowaways in boats and clinging to the undercarriage of airplanes. These are people who hope their economic lives will be better. But your economic life is very often at odds with your cultural life. [. . .] They hate their jobs! But they can't leave their jobs because of economic necessity. [. . .] There are all kinds of people in Fort MacMurray, Alberta; all kinds of men living in camps; all kinds of people from Cape Breton, from Newfoundland. And they're there because they get whatever, \$22 or \$32 an hour. You can't make that kind of money in Inverness County. You probably never could. These people go and leave their families and then they come back.<sup>138</sup>

Cape Breton's economic refugees are different from others around the world, though, because they find ways to go home and like the miners waiting for the end of their Cape Breton respite in "The Closing Down of Summer," they take that culture away with them. MacLeod points to the way many think of Ireland, where every family has someone in recent memory who left for the New World. He refers to a conversation he had with the head of Ireland's arts council.

She says no one in Ireland thinks of the Irish nation being surrounded by the sea, just being Ireland. The Irish nation is everywhere. This does not necessarily

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<sup>138</sup> Alistair MacLeod, 17 Aug. 2002.

diminish their Irishness. [. . .] And that's the same here. There's not one house in Inverness County that does not have people in Toronto or Boston or even Halifax – which is kind of foreign to a lot of people.<sup>139</sup>

So if modern life in the twentieth century means separation from Cape Breton and an abandonment of the family, there is one thing in MacLeod's world it does not mean. The emotional connection to home through the music of this world is not lost. It may be dormant, but it sends out flowers at the most unexpected times. His use of music throughout his work allows the reader to see that his stories are not simple nostalgic indulgences, but rather a celebration of a still vibrant and virile culture.

In many ways, Alistair MacLeod's writing argues against the thesis of this paper by stating, over and over again, that of all the expressions of Celtic culture, music is the most enduring. He addresses the uncomfortable coexistence of "progress" with the "echoes of an earlier time" in a 1977 non-fiction piece entitled "Inverness County: From Highland to Highland and Island to Island."<sup>140</sup> Here MacLeod blames television, radio and Hi Fi records for replacing ghost stories as entertainment. Modern communication has chased away the references to fore-runners and the interpretation of "signs." But music, he says "is the one aspect of Highland Scots culture that has unquestionably flourished."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> MacLeod, 17 Aug. 2002.

<sup>140</sup> Alistair MacLeod, "Inverness County: From Highland to Highland and Island to Island," Mabou Pioneer II (Mabou: Mabou Pioneer Committee, 1977), viii to xvi.

<sup>141</sup> MacLeod, "Inverness County," xii.

It is tempting for the purposes of my own study, to suggest that MacLeod is reporting on the situation as it existed in 1977, when, as we will see, a great deal of effort was going into ensuring the continuity of the violin tradition. It is tempting to suggest that he failed to see the decline of fiddling in the 1960s. In fact he mentions that "there was a square dance, especially in summer, every night of the week somewhere in the area. Such a situation existed and persisted until a relatively short ten or twelve years ago."<sup>142</sup> That seems to imply that it somehow stopped persisting in the mid to late sixties. He also says that Inverness County's "strongest artistic thrust has gone into its violinists and like any kind of musical artistry it is largely invisible and difficult to locate by the uninitiated."<sup>143</sup> Could this explain why Ron MacInnis had trouble finding young fiddlers when he went looking for them in 1971?

Other than the oblique reference to a decline in summer square dances in the 60s, the thrust of MacLeod's message in this article is to state that violin music is in fine shape in Cape Breton. He concludes though, by emphasizing the thought that will recur throughout his fiction. It is the notion that the music and its evocations are buried until they surface "unbidden and remained for only a few seconds and its coming like its content and its associations and the response that it drew forth remains unsettled and unsolved."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> MacLeod, xiii.

<sup>143</sup> MacLeod, xiv.

<sup>144</sup> MacLeod, xvi.

If there was any doubt from the reading, it is dispelled in his interview. He says he believes a lot of young people were playing the fiddle at the time of the broadcast of

Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler:

I think what happened there, is under the, I suppose, guidance of Father John Angus Rankin who was somebody who had a kind of public presence, but was also trusted by the local people [. . .] when he put that together, the fiddlers association, it gave a lot of people who played just by themselves in their kitchens, a kind of society. Not a labour union. But a place where they could all come together. You see, sometimes the violin is seen as a solitary occupation. But one of the things they did is say “well, you’re not alone doing this by your kitchen chair,” so they kind of came out, and then it came out kind of fashionable, because I think for some of the young people there was the temptation of Rock and Roll.<sup>145</sup>

Still, the short stories and the novel feature other references to the kinds of things that Ron MacInnis might have observed in the late 60s and early 70s and which led him to declare a decline in fiddling. In “the Road to Rankin’s Point,” the narrator describes the musical evolution of his Grandmother’s offspring:

On the night of this day and on this afternoon as well, two of her grandchildren and one great-grandchild will gyrate and play the music of their time; the music of the early 1970s. They are at other destinations on that other road that leads in the larger world. One is in Las Vegas and two on Toronto’s Yonge Street strip. [. . .] Here in the quietness of Rankin’s Point, at another road’s end, the body out of

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<sup>145</sup> MacLeod, 17 Aug. 2002.



which they came and to which they owe their lives has trouble controlling the last quavering notes of *Never More Shall I Return*.<sup>146</sup>

What is important to the narrator of the story is, not so much the genre of the music, but the inheritance of a certain spirit of music; blessed with that spirit the descendants (whether of the grandmother or of Alistair MacLeod himself) will express and carry on the gift whatever kind of music they are playing or feeling. “‘The MacCrimmons were said to be given two gifts.’ she says, ‘the gift of music and the gift of foreseeing their own deaths. [. . .] They are not gifts of the ordinary world.’”<sup>147</sup> MacLeod’s own family could be a model for the MacCrimmon’s. He told me: “All of my children are musicians of one kind or another. They can all read music or play music, some of them play Celtic music on the piano or violin and some of them play rock and roll songs. I just think that music is very important to the world.”

In *No Great Mischief* we hear the narrator, young Alex MacDonald, describe his early teen years, which would have been in the late 1950s or 1960. “For by that time, I was beginning to play ‘organized hockey’ and was interested in my stamp collection and the ‘modern’ music on the radio and the chess board and the microscope which my other grandfather had given me for Christmas.”<sup>148</sup> It is clear from the narrative that he is still exposed to his family’s fiddle music playing. But what is new is the exposure to “modern” music. It marks him as someone of the twentieth century.

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<sup>146</sup> Alistair MacLeod, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* 138-139.

<sup>147</sup> MacLeod, *Lost Salt* 39.

<sup>148</sup> MacLeod, *No Great Mischief* 86.

Despite MacLeod's optimism about the violin music's persistence, he paints a much less positive picture of the Gaelic language, which he links closely to the music. One of his saddest stories is "The Closing Down of Summer" in which a group of men, (brothers, cousins, friends) describe their alienation from their home in Cape Breton because of the migratory nature of their work. They are united in their craft and their Gaelic language. This bond of brothers, as much as the physical distance, creates a separation from the women they marry and the children they make. They attempt to celebrate their culture during their brief summers at home by singing Gaelic songs together at local concerts. In fact they describe what may very well be part of the revival we will look at later on in this paper:

There is a 'Celtic Revival' in the area now, fostered largely by government grants, and the younger children are taught individual Gaelic words in the classroom for a few brief periods during each month. It is a revival that is very different from our own and it seems like so much else to have little relevance for us and to have largely passed us by.<sup>149</sup>

Their "own" revival is a private one shared only with the members of the clan who travel and work together and place their lives in each other's hands. The narrator explains they sing or hum the Gaelic songs of their youth instead of paying attention to the modern music on the radio. He explains it is because "they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar."<sup>150</sup> It is a more authentic revival,

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<sup>149</sup> MacLeod, "The Closing Down of Summer," As Birds Bring Forth the Sun (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) 19-20.

<sup>150</sup> MacLeod, As Birds 19.

albeit ephemeral, than the public one subsidized by government grants. Furthermore, their experience as they sing to an audience of outsiders armed with tape recorders, seems futile. Few understand the words and are therefore uninvolved.

In the "Tuning of Perfection," MacLeod addresses the collision between Gaelic music and television. The protagonist is an elderly widower renowned throughout the community for his ability to sing Gaelic songs. He is asked to prepare a group of singers to audition for a performance in a national televised concert. In this story, the television producer is given the role as one who wishes to distort the reality of the music in order to present "a good impression of the area and the province."<sup>151</sup> It's hard to say when this story was completed, but it seems MacLeod could be describing any one of a number CBC television producers who may have worked on concerts celebrating the Gathering of the Clans in 1979 and again in 1981. The producer is faced with a choice between the widower's group, who sing the songs in their lengthy original versions, and a less accomplished group who sing with power and (presumably) brevity. He attempts a compromise, asking the widower, Archibald, to abandon his own group, but lead the other one. He tries to convince Archibald that they need him for his looks and the other group for its energy. "'You see,' said the producer, 'we've got to have someone we can zoom in on for close-ups, someone who looks the part. [. . .] That's why you're so good.'"<sup>152</sup> Archibald declines.

The search for "looks" and "energy," in many ways defines the modern understanding of entertainment. As we will hear from a real life television producer later

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<sup>151</sup> MacLeod, As Birds 110.

<sup>152</sup> MacLeod, As Birds 109.

on, the recruiter's main purpose is to entertain as well as to expose his audience to some notion of "culture." But despite the quality and sincerity of the performers (or even of the producer), it would seem that MacLeod believes it is a futile effort. The singing of Gaelic songs is becoming more and more a private exercise, because there are fewer and fewer people who can sing them. Yet this is not the case for fiddle music which is heard as a universal language. MacLeod illustrates its power in No Great Mischief as he describes the way a Cree fiddler from James Bay unites feuding groups of Cape Breton and Quebec miners. They all play traditional violin music together, temporarily setting aside their suspicions and rivalries. They recognize the shared roots of their jigs and reels, while at the same time they explore the different accents in the music.

Unfortunately the interlude of camaraderie only delays the explosion of rage and violence with its tragic consequences. A few weeks later, Alexander MacDonald's older brother Calum kills one of the Quebeckers and his life of freedom and dignity is over. In the book, however, the musical display provides a powerful counterpoint to the violence. It heightens the suspense for the inevitable breakdown of peace which is to come. As time passes, that musical afternoon becomes a metaphor for the promise of brotherhood no matter how fleeting. It is the top of the arc in the life of Calum MacDonald. In MacLeod's first two short story collections and his novel, there are sixty-five references to traditional Cape Breton music, either sung in Gaelic or played on the violin or bagpipe. His portrayal of Cape Breton in the third quarter of the twentieth century is one of migration, displacement and depression, but it is also a world full of music. Elements of Cape Breton culture, such as folklore, story telling and the Gaelic language are in decline, but in MacLeod's fiction, the music is not.

### G. Conclusion.

Is Alistair MacLeod, the fiction writer, a keener observer of Cape Breton life than are the journalists and television producers of the late 60s or early 70s? Perhaps from a distance, yet with his strong personal “insider” connections to Cape Breton culture, his observations and reflections are more accurate than are those of the others. MacLeod portrays a culture that is powerfully alive in his imagination. How do we reconcile his vision with the perceptions of those (sometimes perceived as “outsiders”) who believed that fiddling would die because it had lost its meaning for young people? As I have documented in this chapter, there is ample evidence for consideration: population shifts and decline; loss of status for the Gaelic language (although it was even more stigmatized than was fiddling); loss of status for traditional fiddling in the onslaught of modern music; two different statistical efforts by Garrison and Doherty. These all show that fewer young people learned to play the fiddle in the 1960s than in earlier decades. Perhaps there is no reconciliation between MacLeod’s vision of an eternal music and the brush of the twentieth century broom that disrupts all with its sweeping. MacLeod, himself, however, does acknowledge something happened in the seventies which changed the fiddle tradition in Cape Breton: “But I think that with Father John Angus Rankin, he was able to bring the music forward and gave it a kind of a stamp of approval that was put on it. So a lot of small children at that time, like -- maybe they weren’t even born -- like Natalie [MacMaster] or Ashley [MacIsaac] and so on, flourished under that.”<sup>153</sup>

I will conclude this chapter with a glance at an important piece of scholarship, published in 1974. Beyond the Atlantic Roar was written by D. Campbell and R.A.

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<sup>153</sup> MacLeod, 17 Aug. 2002.

MacLean over several years in the early 1970s. The authors declare that square dancing “has declined markedly and the demand for fiddlers has fallen correspondingly”<sup>154</sup> in the fifteen years since the 50s. They say that bagpiping has become more popular and “the pipers may therefore witness the demise of the fiddlers.”<sup>155</sup> Yet there is a curious footnote at this point. The authors have added, at some time between the writing of the chapter and the publication of the book, a new and unexplored fact: “During the past two years there has been a strong resurgence of interest in Scottish violin music and it now appears that it will survive for a long period.”<sup>156</sup> These authors, with strong links to Scottish Nova Scotia, recognized that something had happened between 1972 and 1974 when the book was published. But they didn’t have the time to explore the roots of the resurgence before the book went to press. Alistair MacLeod notwithstanding, the resurgence is deserving of more than a footnote. It is this gap which I hope my thesis will fill.

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<sup>154</sup> Campbell and MacLean, Beyond the Atlantic Roar 190.

<sup>155</sup> Campbell and MacLean 190.

<sup>156</sup> Campbell and Maclean 190.

#### IV. THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE – THE VANISHING CAPE BRETON FIDDLER.

*“He did not mind living alone up on the mountain, saying that he got great television reception, which of course was true – although it was a relatively new justification. There was no television when he built the house in the two years prior to 1927 and when he was filled with the fever of his approaching marriage.”*

From “The Tuning of Perfection,” in As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.<sup>157</sup>

##### A. Introduction.

The purpose of this chapter is to learn about the freelance writer, Ron MacInnis, and to examine the words and images in his documentary in some detail. He was originally criticized for making what some viewed as incendiary and uninformed comments, but as we will see the language in his script was specific and local and well-informed. The message was aimed at a highly-interested local Cape Breton audience. The programmers who commissioned it for national broadcast would have simply felt they were presenting some unusual and eccentric aspects of a disappearing side of life in rural Canada to a wider audience who would not have understood the specific nuances.

To understand the impact of the show, it’s necessary to try to put into context the advent of television in Cape Breton. People there began picking up television signals from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in October of 1954. That’s when Nate Nathanson added television to his broadcasting business in Sydney. Less than a year later, he built rebroadcast towers in Inverness County and Antigonish Counties.<sup>158</sup> In addition to the base CBC network programming, CJCB Television provided numerous hours a week of local live entertainment.

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<sup>157</sup> Alistair MacLeod, As Birds 87-88.

<sup>158</sup> William Harper, e-mail to author, 26 Aug. 2002.

The notion of “if you build it they will come”<sup>159</sup> may apply to faith in baseball. But building the towers and broadcasting the signals, wasn’t enough for television. People still needed to have television receivers. In many cases, in rural areas of Canada, electrification was still in process. One elderly woman from Northeast Margaree in Cape Breton vividly recalls the arrival of the power lines on October 10, 1958. People wanted the convenience of electric power and they were mightily intrigued by the images that filtered over the airwaves. Yet it would have been difficult for many of these people to afford a TV set. A twenty-one-inch Admiral with phonograph cost \$689; a twenty-one-inch Sylvania cost \$399. This was at a time when people with salaries were earning in a range of \$3000 to \$5000 thousand dollars a year. It would have been a lot harder for people in the rural areas to find that kind of money. But by the late 60s, television had become a big part of life. One of the most important events for CBC Television was the live broadcast of the Springhill Mine explosion and subsequent rescue effort in 1958. It galvanized people from around the world and brought attention to Nova Scotia. The live broadcast with a television announcer speaking directly to the audience as they all waited for news together made the new medium very personal. This type of broadcast was unusual in the 50s and 60s (although it has become commonplace in the twenty-first century). Fortunately tragedy of such scope was not often repeated locally. But people quickly accepted the routine of the television schedule, which was printed in daily and weekly newspapers. They depended on the local and national newscasts. They also loved the entertainment shows, from Don Messer’s Jubilee, to Juliette, Hockey Night in Canada and The Ed Sullivan Show.

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<sup>159</sup> Bill Kinsella, Shoeless Joe 1982 (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).



The CBC's new production center in Halifax began broadcasting on December 20, 1954. In the years that followed, it spent a great deal of time, effort and money producing documentaries and live broadcasts reflecting the cultural and social lives of Maritimers. In the 1950s and 60s, producers based in Halifax prepared segments commissioned by National Network shows such as Telescope, 20-20 and Take Thirty. They interviewed elderly people in Meat Cove, they broadcast from the bottom of Salt Mines in Pugwash and they recreated aboriginal villages.

Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was a single production commissioned by a Halifax producer at the urging of a freelancer (an independent writer/researcher/producer who is employed and paid by a company one project at a time). It was partly financed by Glenn Sarty, the executive producer of Take thirty, a national afternoon television show. Sarty originally estimated it would cost \$2000 to produce, although if they chose to shoot it in colour, "we will consider revising upwards."<sup>160</sup> Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was not journalistic in nature but it was informative. It used music, not just to document a style, but to entertain its audience. It had a strong point of view defended by evidence produced for the audience by the narrator/writer. The thesis of the television documentary had been explored initially in radio format for CBC's Maritime Magazine. Unfortunately, the CBC has no record of this radio show, either in audio or script format. Yet it was the television broadcast which galvanized individuals to respond with a message of action of their own. It was broadcast nationally although, in many ways that was almost immaterial to its Cape Breton audience, as we will see.

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<sup>160</sup> Glenn Sarty, telex to Sandy Lumsden, 7 May 1971, Records of the CBC, Vol. 839, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

B. Ron MacInnis.

Ron MacInnis is a widely-read, thoughtful man, committed to writing and talking about his fellow-Nova Scotians' place in society. He was among the first generation who grew up with television and learned how to communicate in the broadcast media, becoming aware first-hand of the power of television. He didn't make a lifelong career of broadcasting. He has spent the 80s and 90s working for a professional association, and later owning and operating a resort outside Halifax. Through it all, from time to time, he has participated in and produced a number of stage shows and television pieces about Cape Breton culture. In many ways, he was perceived as an outsider: he left Cape Breton as a teenager; he grew up in the new world of television thanks to his father, and when he returned it was as a journalist, adopting a more distant curiosity as the motivation for his questioning. He did not grow up with Cape Breton style fiddling at home.

Ron MacInnis was born in 1944 and spent the first fourteen years of his life in Sydney where his father Lloyd worked for CJCB radio and television. In 1958, the family moved to Halifax where Lloyd became a host for CBC's supper hour television show Gazette. Because of his father's connection to broadcasting, Ron was immersed in that world from the beginning. Around 1967 he went back to Cape Breton and began freelancing stories to CHER radio station and the CBC's CBI radio. He continued freelancing in the early seventies as he completed two degrees at Dalhousie University, a bachelor of Science and then a bachelor of Education.

MacInnis was influenced by the general manager of CHER AM radio, David Neima. MacInnis says Neima did a great deal to promote Cape Breton culture and would introduce the young freelancer to "old people and [. . .] comment that it wasn't going to

be around long.”<sup>161</sup> MacInnis says he developed a passion for the music, language, humour and story-telling traditions which set the Cape Bretoners of Scottish Gaelic background apart from the rest of Nova Scotia. In 1967 and 68 he met a number of the fiddlers he would include in his documentary. One of them was Dan R MacDonald, who had a terrific influence on Ron’s appreciation for the music and culture. Gradually he became drawn to the music and the Gaels who produced it:

“I just got interested in it, and the unique sense of humour and that became a part of the whole equation. Neima was important. We used to laugh ourselves silly because there were all sorts of cultural things that were really funny, so the crossover of the Gaelic accent and character was interesting.”<sup>162</sup>

By the late 60s, MacInnis was providing freelance stories to the CBC radio show Maritime Magazine. He presented programs on milling frolics and the Gaelic language (although he was never able to learn how to speak it). MacInnis says that he developed such a good relationship with CBC radio that he was virtually assured of being paid for his pieces, and he would often produce them without being commissioned. In the 1960s he would travel with a reel-to-reel tape recorder and then do his own editing in Sydney. Of course music was the subject most frequently explored. Given his mentor’s concern about a disappearing culture, MacInnis began to consider the conditions for the fiddling tradition in the 60s.

He says that while CHER was making an effort to provide an environment for Cape Breton culture, CJCB went in the opposite direction. This happened after 1958 when

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<sup>161</sup> Ron MacInnis, personal interview, 8 May 2002.

<sup>162</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 May 2002.

Ron's father Lloyd went to Halifax. Lloyd was the popular host of The Dishpan Parade on CJCB, a program from seven to nine in the morning where listeners would phone in with new lyrics to be set to old music. But then Ron says CJCB switched to a rock format. At the same time the music store in Sydney began holding the top ten countdowns of popular Rock and Roll hits. MacInnis noticed that there were fewer violins on display for sale there: "They'd probably have a couple of fiddles but mainly they'd have booths where you could listen to '45s."<sup>163</sup> (The owner of the store, Mac Skinner, disputes this observation, as we have seen already.)

MacInnis, who says he was not exposed to fiddle music in his home, began to develop a liking for it, especially once he met some of the older fiddlers. He gradually started to inquire to see if there were any young people playing the fiddle: "I would explore in the back country of Cape Breton, different people's homes and I would ask the same question. To me, it was in fact all over. I could only find indisputably, two fiddlers on the island who were young fiddlers and that was that."<sup>164</sup>

Donald and Margaret Gillis' home in North Sydney was on Ron MacInnis' research path. Donald was a fish buyer and a fiddling enthusiast. Margaret was a step dancer and encouraged their ten children to learn a variety of music from violin to guitar to Scottish Highland dancing. Their son Sandy also worked at CHER radio at the time. Donald and Margaret met Ron in 1971 one evening because he wanted to see if they knew of any young fiddlers. Donald recalls:

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<sup>163</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 May 2002.

<sup>164</sup> Ron MacInnis, personal interview, 8 Mar. 2000.

Sandy brought him over one evening. And he started talking about there was no fiddlers. I told him I could take him places where there were lots of fiddlers and drop him there and he'd never find his way home. [. . .] I just thought he was trying to pull the chips off me. But this is what he did. He went around to Father John Angus Rankin and a few more and did the same thing, and some places they were going to have him for supper, I think, the way he was going on.<sup>165</sup>

Ron remained convinced that there were only two young fiddlers playing with any proficiency in Cape Breton. They were John Morris Rankin and Kinnon Beaton, both of Inverness County. He was unswayed by the protests that there were lots of fiddlers out in the countryside. Ron's preoccupation was with the transmission of the tradition based on his conviction that young people were turning away from traditional music and were instead moving towards what he later described as "synthetic" music. This adjective could be taken to mean artificial, or blended, or even electronic, synthesized music. Whatever the exact meaning for MacInnis, he used it in a pejorative sense. He proposed a documentary concept to CBC Radio's Maritime Magazine in which he would introduce his audience to what he called Cape Breton style fiddling and the notion that it was dying away. He says the program caused a stir in Cape Breton and this made an impression on CBC Television producer, Charlie Reynolds. MacInnis says because of the reaction to the radio show, the TV people "knew it would be popular and they basically just wanted to add some visuals to the thesis of what was said on radio and it sounded to them like it

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<sup>165</sup> Donald Gillis, 18 June 2002.

would be good television and it was.”<sup>166</sup> So, in the summer of 1971, Ron MacInnis was hired to work on his first television documentary, Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

### C. The Shoot.

There are no production records that I could find about the dates of the shooting, or the total budget. We know that the crew was on location in Cape Breton at the time of the Broad Cove Scottish concert, which usually took place in August. Ron MacInnis’ memory of the shoot is vague, given the passage of time. He does not recall any discussion about why the TV people would be interested other than the fact that it was controversial and bound to attract an audience, at least in Cape Breton.

But I don’t remember any discussions. It was just something that one just did. It sounded like an interesting time and back in those days when CBC was a little wilder perhaps it was a good excuse for a party, to go to Cape Breton, file in some trucks and have a toot. That’s what happened, as well, it always went with the territory.<sup>167</sup>

There were five people in the crew: a producer/director (Charlie Reynolds), a writer-commentator (Ron MacInnis), a film cameraman (Dave Carr), sound technician (Jim Snow) and lighting technician (Clarey Phillips).

There is no doubt that such a trip would have been an opportunity to get away from the CBC plant and have a good time. While mixing alcohol with work was against CBC policy, employees frequently drank after hours when they were on the road. The man in

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<sup>166</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>167</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

charge of the “shoot,” Charlie Reynolds, was notorious among the CBC staff for his outrageous personality. He had a bad temper and would often scold or yell at guests, not to mention his fellow staff. He was not above taking a swing at someone or throwing things.

But the native of Ireland relished his job as a television producer at the CBC. One former colleague and friend, Peter MacNeil, says “If we come up with an idea and we’d be talking about doing some type of show, well if Charlie thought that might be good, he’d jump on it full tilt. He would go with it.”<sup>168</sup> It is also clear from the information available that Charlie Reynolds and Ron MacInnis were aware that the premise of their piece would be provocative to the people they went to interview.

Because of the radio program and the need to explain their purpose to the various participants, many of the prospective interviewees knew in advance what the premise of the show was and disagreed with it. Father John Angus Rankin told Ron Caplan about his exposure to the TV crew when they arrived around the time of the Broad Cove Concert in August of 1971.

So they got me so mad, eh – I’ll get like Coady at times – I’ll hold on, see, but then, if I blow, I’m going to blow. So I told the CBC I didn’t give a darn whether every Scotch fiddler would die, or every Irish fiddler, I said, “The French have picked it up, the Micmacs have picked it up.” I said, “it’s going to go on.”<sup>169</sup>

To make matters worse, Father Rankin had another argument with one of the producers that disposed him poorly towards the CBC. He described the comments made

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<sup>168</sup> Peter MacNeil, personal interview, 27 June 2002.

<sup>169</sup> Father John Angus Rankin, “With Father John Angus Rankin, Glendale,” Cape Breton’s Magazine 45 (1987): 69.

to him by “the CBC fellow” at the Broad Cove Concert the next day. Father Rankin had been asked at the last minute to direct ten or twelve fiddlers together on stage. He put a line-up of tunes together, checked with them to see if they were acceptable to the musicians and proceeded to lead them through a set, while the CBC camera rolled. “This fellow from the CBC came along. He said, ‘how long were you practicing that?’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘How many weeks did you have the group together to get them . . .?’ I said, ‘I had no weeks.’ He said, ‘Who are you trying to kid?’ I said, ‘You can believe it or not.’”

The idea of anyone challenging the fierce Catholic priest in such a way is mind-boggling. Ron MacInnis says he was not present at the altercation but adds it would not have been out of character for Charlie Reynolds. Fortunately, for the most part, people in Cape Breton accepted the crew with open arms, happy to argue or agree with Ron MacInnis’ proposals.

One such person was Eddie Rodgers. He was present during another film set-up with the crew at a kitchen ceilidh. It featured well-known Cape Breton fiddlers Winnie Chafe and Dan Hughie MacEachern. Eddie, too, is a fiddler, but did not perform at dances. He was more of a “kitchen” fiddler. In his later years he has begun to teach fiddling to a group of teenagers. But in 1971 he was excited to be invited to the filming of the session. It didn’t take them long to figure out why Ron MacInnis was there:

At first it was just a group of violin players not unlike a normal ceilidh that we were pretty used to. But during the course of the evening, we realized that this was perhaps for real and that people across the country would see it and it was in fact touching on the possibilities of the fiddle being no longer, the fiddle actually



vanishing. [. . .] At that time I wasn't surprised because at that time, remember this was the early 70s and at that time, there weren't very many violin players of note playing. There were square dances, but you know I could have counted the number of fiddlers that were playing for these dances on my hands, so I wasn't surprised.<sup>170</sup>

Yet Eddie also recalls feelings of ambivalence. He was annoyed to have someone from outside the musical community suggest something he didn't want to envision:

For somebody to come along and me a violin player and tell me the art was disappearing, you know when I played myself and probably I knew more, other players at least, maybe more players than somebody who didn't play the violin knew, and Ron MacInnis I don't think had played the violin as well, it did get my dander up as well a little bit, but I didn't get overly excited about it.<sup>171</sup>

Several years earlier Ron MacInnis had made the acquaintance of a man he would admire for the rest of his life. And it was the presence of this man in his documentary that gave the piece its power. The late Dan Rory MacDonald, as already mentioned, is one of the most highly respected of the Cape Breton fiddlers. He lived simply, was generous with his music, was known to drink a fair amount of whisky, and was a born performer. The crew spent considerable time and effort in Dan R's home interviewing him about his music. Dan R speculated quite openly that the future of fiddling was shaky. At the time of the filming, one of his nephews, John Donald Cameron, was present. He recalls being surprised to

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<sup>170</sup> Eddie Rodgers, CBC interview conducted by author, 21 Apr. 2001.

<sup>171</sup> Rodgers, 21 Apr. 2001.

hear his uncle voice such an opinion. John Donald told Ron MacInnis he disagreed with the premise, but was not asked to speak his mind on camera. Some might suggest that Ron had already made his mind up and was not interested in contrary opinions. In fact Ron admits that he remained convinced of the truth of his observations. But even for the sake of balance in reporting, it would not have been useful to roll expensive film for the opinions of a young man. They already had Fr. John Angus expressing the same beliefs.

So, in spite of everything, the shoot ended and the crew rolled home with cans of films and some good yarns. As was the practice at the time, Charlie Reynolds, the producer/director sat with the film editor to put the show together. Ron MacInnis would come in through the process to write the script. They recorded an introduction with host Jim Bennett in Studio 1 on Bell Road in Halifax on November 17, 1971. The piece was shipped to Toronto and went to air. There is no CBC published material about it: no advance promotional information; no program or TV Guides. It is likely that it ran on CJCB – Channel 4, the CBC affiliate in Sydney, between Christmas of that year or very early in the new year of 1972. It was then re-broadcast in the Take Thirty slot, nationally later in that same year. The only reference I found to it in any of the Cape Breton newspapers was in the Cape Breton Highlander television column, “Let’s Talk TV with Helen” on January 19, 1972: “One of the best things Channel 4 has done for along time was to present the CBC production titled ‘The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.’ About the only critical comment I heard about it was that it wasn’t long enough.”<sup>172</sup> There were no editorials, letters-to-the editors or other published comments taking issue with “Helen’s” compliments. There is nothing to hint at the movement that was taking shape

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<sup>172</sup> Helen Campbell, “Let’s Talk TV with Helen,” Cape Breton Highlander [Sydney] 19 Jan. 1972: 14.

in the rural areas of eastern Nova Scotia. After the many twists and turns in its two hundred year history, Cape Breton style fiddling was about to enter yet another era.

#### D. Glossary of Television terminology.

A few definitions as used and understood by Marie Thompson at the CBC:

**ON CAMERA STANDUP:** host/reporter appears on camera and speaks directly to the audience – usually scripted.

**NARRATION:** voice-over recorded by host/reporter

**SEQUENCE:** A series of shots edited together to display a scene or action.

**CUT:** an edit in which the shot changes abruptly to the next one.

**DISSOLVE:** an edit in which the end of the out-going shot is blended with the start of the next one.

**TRAVELING SHOT:** The camera is moving.

**CUT AWAY:** An extra shot related to, but not part of, the activity being shot, used in editing to advance the action.

**CUT IN:** An extra shot, directly related to and part of the activity being shot, used in editing to advance the action.

**FADE:** Picture or sound fades slowly in or out.

**PAN:** shot moves by moving the camera (sitting on a tripod) horizontally.

**TILT:** shot moves by moving the camera (on tripod) vertically.

**WIDE SHOT:** A shot that would be able to show scenery or several people.

**MEDIUM SHOT:** A shot that would only show one person

**CLOSE-UP:** A shot in which a person's face would fill the frame.

**FRAME:** The area framed by the dimensions of the television monitor, originally derived for filmstrip which was comprised of numerous frames/still pictures.

**EXTREME CLOSE-UP(ecu):** a shot which would focus on a small detail.

**PULLBACK (pb):** Shot changes size as camera lens is rotated to move from a close-up to a wider shot.

**ZOOM (or push):** Shot changes size from wide to close-up.

**CLIP:** video/audio extract from an interview with an individual: Television version of a quotation in a magazine or newspaper article.

**CLIP VOICEOVER:** The speaker is heard but not seen.

E. "Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler." Script and Images.

A transcript of the documentary film follows. Included is the entire script with descriptions of visual images and music.

CBC Butterfly unfolds

<b>Introduction to show runs:</b> <b>1:06</b> <u>(2 men sit in TV studio)</u>	Inter: Hello, I'm Jim Bennett and this is "30 from Halifax." With me is Ron MacInnis who both wrote and narrated the film you're going to see this afternoon
<u>(Bennett turns to MacInnis)</u>	and Ron as a native Cape Bretoner, it must have been as much pleasure as it was work for you to travel back to your native heath, Cape Breton, to make this film.
Ron:	I don't think you could say it was work at all Jim. I had moved away from Cape Breton when I was 14 and because of my affiliation with the radio station, CBC radio, it was a big chance to get down and do a little documentary work in an area that I really loved. So I went down and visited lots of the territory that I had never seen before in my life and met all sorts of new people. I just had a great time.
Jim:	Well we're going to be meeting a lot of those people ourselves and I think that probably above the scenery, above the industry and everything else in Cape Breton, the people are possibly its greatest asset.
Ron:	Sure, they're a unique breed and they sure do know how to have a good time.
Jim:  <b>end introduction</b>	Well, as we said, you'll be meeting more of them as we visit Cape Breton on "30 from Halifax."

<b>Start documentary.</b> <b>Introduction to documentary</b> <b>runs for 1:33</b>	<b>Fiddle Music: "Glengary's Dirk" – strathspey</b> <b>played by Angus Chisholm.</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traveling shot, passing Ron in car on highway</li> <li>• Shot of road going up highland hill</li> <li>• Shot of road behind in rear view mirror, mirror on diagonal across frame</li> <li>• dissolve to shot of coasts and hill</li> <li>• shot of road</li> <li>• dissolve to shot of thistles, switch focus to see farmhouse on field beyond</li> <li>• cut to interior of cabin, wood panels, snowshoes,</li> <li>• music fades out over</li> <li>• silent shot of old fiddle</li> <li>• dissolve and tilt down old fiddle with no strings</li> </ul>	<p>Fiddle music: "Glengary's Dirk."</p> <p>Music fades out – silent</p>
Clip: (Fr. J.A. Rankin) 01:09	"The vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. What is that?"
Clip: Unknown speaker	"There's no young ones comin up now, like there used to be at one time."
Clip: (Dan R. MacDonald)	"There's not many around here that I know of."
Clip: Unknown speaker	"Well, I'll tell you there's a lot of them that pulled out and left Cape Breton when they're young and watching too much television, I'd say."
Clip: (Fr. J.A. Rankin) clip ends at 01:33	"As long as we have anyone on Cape Breton Island who loves Scotch music, we'll have the Cape Breton Fiddler."
<b>Commercial break</b>	

<p><b>Resume program for 22:13</b>  shot of sky through old barn  roof...only rafters left</p> <p>Dissolve to</p>	<p>"Poppy Leaf Hornpipe" played by Winston  Fitzgerald</p>
<p>(00:08)  <b>TITLE: <u>VANISHING CAPE</u></b>  <b><u>BRETON FIDDLER</u></b>  wider shot of decaying barn</p>	
<p>(00:20)  RON ON CAMERA (WALKS  IN FRONT OF A BARN)</p>	<p><b>PERHAPS THE CHANGING TIMES HAVE  BEEN MOST HARSHLY FELT IN THE RURAL  AREAS OF CAPE BRETON. WITH THE  PASSING OF YEARS AND THE LURE OF CITY  LIGHTS, THERE HAVE BEEN MANY  CHANGES IN THE COUNTRY WAY OF LIFE.  PERHAPS THIS BARN IS SYMBOLIC OF A  WAY OF LIFE THAT'S DISAPPEARING. AND  SO IS THIS FIDDLE.</b></p>
<p>CUT TO FIDDLE IN RON'S  HAND, TILT DOWN...SAME  ONE AS IN CABIN...NO  STRINGS</p>	<p>A TIME WORN OLD VETERAN, PERHAPS A 100  YEARS OLD THAT GAVE A GOOD MANY HOURS  OF GAIETY AND LAUGHTER ON LONG COLD  WINTER NIGHTS. IN FACT IF YOU LOOK  CLOSELY YOU CAN SEE WHERE SOME OF THE  VARNISH AND A BIT OF THE WOOD HAVE BEEN  WORN AWAY BY A BEWHISKERED OLD CHIN.</p>
<p>BACK TO RON ON  CAMERA  (43 SECOND STANDUP)</p>	<p><b>AND IT ALL STARTED MANY YEARS AGO IN  SCOTLAND AS FR. JOHN ANGUS RANKIN  DESCRIBES.</b></p>

<p>(00 01 04) clip: Father John Angus Rankin –head and shoulders shot against wood panelled wall</p> <p>56 SECS</p>	<p>“Well, the pioneers came over from Scotland after ‘the 45’<sup>173</sup> and they brought with them the music and the songs that they were accustomed to in Scotland. When they come over here they kept alive the violin, the singing, the dancing and the piping and that has been handed down from one generation to another. They brought some music books with them and the young people coming up availed themselves of these books and they also availed themselves of the services of the old violin players by getting them to teach them how to play the violin and they learned the tunes on them. Later on when communications developed between the old country and the new country, the books that were printed in Scotland by the later composers were brought over here and the fiddlers learned those tunes and they were handed down from one generation to another.”</p>
<p>(00:01:59)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scene at house party of a group of 5 people (4 men, 1 woman) playing fiddles, a piano player.</li> <li>• Dan Hughie MacEachern, pull back to show Eddie Rodgers, pan over to show Winnie Chafe playing, pull back to show whole group as two women start dancing.</li> </ul>	<p>Music for 36 seconds “Homeward Bound” reel</p>
<p><u>RON VOICEOVER</u> (00:02:34)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People listening: Fr. Rankin, Mike Chafe, with child</li> <li>• Cut to closeup of feet stepdancing</li> </ul> <p>Hold shot and music,</p>	<p>THIS IS A CEILIDH. A GOOD OLD FASHIONED SCOTTISH PARTY. YEARS AGO CEILIDHS WERE A COMMON THING WHEN PIONEERS TOILED FROM SUNUP TO SUNSET FOR THERE WAS NO OUTSIDE ENTERTAINMENT IN THESE LITTLE CAPE BRETON COMMUNITIES AND THE THOUGHTS OF A HEARTY HOME-COOKED SUPPER AND A CEILIDH WITH ALL THE NEIGHBOURS HELPED TO PASS SOME OF THE LONGEST DAYS.</p>

<sup>173</sup> “The 45” is a reference to the 1745 Jacobite rebellion in Scotland.

(00:03:07)	IF YOU'RE LUCKY ENOUGH TO GO TO A CEILIDH IN CAPE BRETON, YOU'LL FIND THE LAUGHTER AND THE MERRIMENT GO ON INTO THE NIGHT AND USUALLY END ONLY BECAUSE EVERYONE HAS BECOME EXHAUSTED.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shot tilts up, pulls back as dancers keep dancing.</li> </ul>	AND YOU'LL LEARN QUITE A BIT ABOUT SCOTTISH MUSIC. YOU'LL SEE HOW FIDDLERS PASS TUNES ALONG TO EACH OTHER. JUST AS THEY HAVE FOR YEARS AND YEARS AND HOW NEWLY COMPOSED TUNES ARE TRIED OUT IN PUBLIC FOR THE FIRST TIME.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change shots to closeup of feet again</li> </ul>	NEVER A DULL MOMENT WITH LOTS OF GOOD FOOD, GOOD DRINK GOOD MUSIC AND GOOD PEOPLE.
<p>(00:03:37</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wide shot kitchen ceilidh</li> <li>• Mike Chafe</li> <li>• Eddie Rodgers</li> <li>• Fiddler sitting down</li> <li>• Wider shot, Fr. Rankin</li> <li>• Closeup dancers' feet, tilt up to young woman in short pink dress dancing</li> <li>• Wide shot, 2 women leave floor,</li> <li>• Musicians end tune at Mike Chafe as new tune Fades.</li> </ul>	Continue playing and dancing to "Homeward Bound"
<p>(00:04:33) cut to  <u>New scene: old man step dancing with fiddlers</u>  Tight shot of old man, pull back as he stops dancing, to reveal group of fiddlers including Dan R on stage, Fr. Rankin directing.</p>	<p>"Jenny Dang the Weaver" reel  BROAD COVE, 1971, AND IT'S ANOTHER GRAND OUTDOOR SCOTTISH CONCERT, TYPICAL OF THE DOZEN OR SO CONCERTS THAT OCCUR IN CAPE BRETON EACH SUMMER. FIDDLING TALENT COMES FROM ALL OVER THE ISLAND</p>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Woman in shorts</li> <li>• Man holding cigarette, (extreme close-up)</li> <li>• Pb to wider</li> <li>• Cut to 3 men stepdancing</li> </ul>	AND YOU MAY EVEN SEE A STEP DANCE OR TWO, A FACTOR UNIQUE TO SCOTTISH MUSIC AS IT'S PLAYED IN CAPE BRETON FOR IN SCOTLAND, STEPDANCING AND INDEED FOOT TAPPING ARE FROWNED UPON.
<p>Pause for music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shot pulls back to reveal two women also dancing, fiddlers behind,</li> </ul>	"CIAD MILE FAILTE" INCIDENTALLY IS GAELIC AND IT BIDS YOU ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND WELCOMES.
<p>(00:05:22)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• audience shot</li> </ul>	AND WHAT COULD BE MORE GAELIC THAN THE SKIRL OF THE PIPES, AN INTEGRAL PART OF ANY SCOTTISH CONCERT.
<p>Pipers on stage, sequence as they play, wide shot tight shots (00:05:46)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• audience shot</li> <li>• pipers again</li> </ul>	<p>Music: Royal Scottish Pipers Society March</p> <p>AN EVENT THAT'S ANTICIPATED ALL YEAR, THE SCOTTISH CONCERT PROVIDES A WELCOME OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO MEET AND CHAT WITH THEIR MORE DISTANT NEIGHBOURS ABOUT THE EVENTS OF THE PAST YEAR,</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shot of very large audience at night time</li> </ul>	FOR IT'S CHARACTERISTIC OF THE OLDER RESIDENTS OF SMALL VILLAGES IN CAPE BRETON, THAT THEY SELDOM STRAY MORE THAN FIVE OR SIX MILES FROM THEIR HOMES, EXCEPT OF COURSE IN THE EVENT OF A SCOTTISH CONCERT, FOR HERE THEY GET A CHANCE ONCE AGAIN TO SPEAK THEIR BELOVED GAELIC, TELL A FEW TALES AND EXCHANGE A FEW JOKES AND MAYBE EVEN HAVE A LITTLE NIP OF SOMETHING OR OTHER.
<p>(06:20) sound up for pipe band (06:thirty) resume narration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• piping visuals continue over narration</li> </ul>	A TYPICAL CONCERT LIKE THIS WILL INCLUDE OTHER DISPLAYS OF THE OLD SCOTTISH PIONEERING CULTURE. GAELIC READINGS ARE COMMON FOR THAT WAS THE LANGUAGE OF CAPE BRETON'S EARLY SETTLERS. A FEW GAELIC SONGS ARE ALSO IN ORDER, THESE HAVING BEEN PASSED ON LIKE FIDDLE TUNES FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION AND ALTERED ACCORDINGLY, THUS BECOMING UNIQUE TO AN AREA.

<p>(06:56)  <b>RON ON CAMERA:</b> in front of mountains and road on Cabot Trail</p>	<p><b>THE PEOPLE WHO GO TO A SCOTCH CONCERT ARE FOR THE MOST PART MIDDLE-AGED OR OLDER. YES, YOU'LL FIND SOME YOUNG PEOPLE THERE, BUT THEY USUALLY SEEM TO BE MORE INTERESTED IN PLAYING AMONG THEMSELVES THAN THEY ARE IN WHAT'S GOING ON ON STAGE. BUT IF YOU SIT ON ONE OF THE MAKE-SHIFT BENCHES AND STRIKE UP A CONVERSATION WITH THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU, YOU MAY MEET SOMEBODY LIKE SANDY MACLEAN.</b></p>
<p>(07:16)  <b>SANDY MACLEAN:</b> (looks to be in his late 60's, early 70's)</p>	<p>"Well, my grandfather played a little, my grand-uncle was a fair good player and I had an uncle that was a very good violin player, my father played and another uncle played the bagpipes. That was the music. There are bright young boys that are playing a little. If they keep it up, they'll become pretty good players, far as I can see. In my generation there was quite a few good players, I could mention Ronald Kennedy, the late Donald E. Beaton, Johnny MacDonald, and all those were good players, you know. That was a little before me. Before my time.</p>
<p>(08:04)  Scene of more fiddlers  • Same group as before playing tune, no narration</p>	<p>MUSIC (group of reels and strathspeys including "Lady Caroline Montague" strathspey, "Lady Loudon" strathspey, and "Rothmurches Rant" strathspey.)</p>
<p>(08:30)  <b>Fr. J.A. Rankin on camera</b>  Clip lasts 1:17 secs</p>	<p>"Well, as far as the category of music goes, it's the same. You will find the ones in Scotland playing the marches, slow airs, strathspeys, reels and jigs.</p>
<p>Cut back to fiddlers  voiceover Fr. Rankin</p>	<p>But the people who came over here seemed to have a different interpretation, or I'd rather say a different spirit to the music.</p>
<p>Music speeds up during pause in his narration.  (09:11) resume</p>	<p>They left for various reasons, economic reasons, religious reasons. They left for oppression you could say and once they arrived in this country they got the spirit of freedom and that spirit of freedom is expressed in the music, which is not found in the music in Scotland. You have a kind of sadness or sorrowful feeling in the music as played by the violin players over there.</p>

(09:45) Fr. Rankin on camera again	There's more gaiety and more joy and more freedom in the music here. That'd be my interpretation of the differences."
(09:53) <u>RON ON CAMERA tighter shot</u> Standup lasts 43 seconds	<b>AS I'VE ALREADY EXPLAINED THIS BUSINESS OF THE TAPPING OF THE FIDDLER'S FEET CAN PROGRESS TO SOME RATHER COMPLEX ENDS, SO BEFORE WE INTRODUCE OUR NEXT FIDDLER, FREDDIE WRIGHT OF MULL RIVER AND TURN HIM LOOSE, MAYBE I CAN GIVE YOU A WEE LESSON IN CO-ORDINATION AND THEN YOU CAN TAP ALONG TOO. IN FACT I THINK YOU'LL SEE WHAT I MEAN BY COMPLEX. NOW HERE'S WHAT YOU DO. ALTERNATE HEEL AND TOE OF ONE FOOT AND KEEP TIME WITH THE MUSIC LIKE THIS.</b>
(10:21) (Shot of his foot tapping for 3 seconds, then cut back to him)	THEN AT THE SAME TIME, KEEP A SYNCOPATED BEAT WITH THE TOE OF THE OTHER FOOT, LIKE THIS.
(shot of other foot tapping) Ron says over shot:	ALL SET? GOOD LUCK
(10:32) dissolve to New scene of man's feet tapping to music	FEET TAPPING TO "My Cat's Tail" REEL FOR 30 SECONDS
(11:00) <u>RON TRYING TO PLAY FIDDLE and failing (side of mountain and sea behind)</u>  Standup lasts 39 seconds	<b>THERE ARE MANY ASPECTS TO THE CHARACTER OF THE CAPE BRETON FIDDLER THAT GIVE HIM A UNIVERSAL APPEAL AND CHARM, PERHAPS NOT THE LEAST OF THESE IS THE STORY OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S VIOLIN. NOW LET ME EXPLAIN. IF YOU TAKE A GUITAR OR A BANJO OR A FLUTE OR ANY OTHER MUSICAL INSTRUMENT THAT YOU WANT AND TRACE THE HISTORY OF THAT INSTRUMENT, YOU'LL PROBABLY FIND THAT IT HAS A VERY BLAND AND UNINTERESTING BACKGROUND. BUT THE HISTORY OF THE CAPE BRETON FIDDLER'S VIOLIN IS MORE OFTEN THAN NOT A STORY IN ITSELF.</b>

<p>(00:39)  <u>New scene of Dan R MacDonald</u>          wide shot of Dan R, picks up fiddle starts playing, camera pushes in on him          he stops playing and sets it down on table) Cut to clip, tighter shot:</p>	<p>Dan R plays his composition "The Picnic Jig"</p>
<p>(12:05)  <u>Dan R MacDonald</u>          Head and shoulders shot          Clip lasts 1:55 seconds</p>	<p>"This violin I got now, there was a French man from Quebec working at Chrysler's Corporation, Windsor, Ontario, working with me on the line, who mentioned one night he had a fiddle in a closet and a guitar that his uncle took from Texas across from thirty years.</p>
<p>Camera moves in on extreme closeup of his face, but as he moves around, camera is forced to pull back to wider shot</p> <p>(At end of clip Dan R, stops talking, leans back and crosses his arms)</p>	<p>And he'd sell me either one of them. Well, I wasn't interested in the guitar. I said, I'll buy the violin from you. And you see, since he was working the same shift with me, he called with the violin. I gave him 20 dollars. I took that violin to Wonderlich, a professional violin maker and expert of violins in Detroit and he looked inside of it and he said that that's where his grandfather was born, Appen-Kessen-Bremerfield, Germany, and it's hand-made and there were only 5 of them made. So then he strung it up and he played. He played in a Scandinavian orchestra; he was a violinist; he tried this hard stuff on it...an arpeggio; he said you got a \$1000 violin there. Take care of it."</p>
<p>(13:35)  <u>RON ON CAMERA</u></p>	<p><b>IF IT CAN BE SAID THERE'S SUCH A THING AS A GURU OF CAPE BRETON FIDDLE MUSIC, THEN YOU'VE JUST MET HIM. HIS NAME IS DAN RORY MACDONALD. FOLKS JUST CALL HIM DAN R. AND HE LIVES IN MABOU, JUST A FEW MILES FROM ALL THIS RUGGED BEAUTY. DAN R.'S A KIND MAN WITH A HEART AS BIG AS ALL OUTDOORS, WITH A UNIVERSALLY RESPECTED ABILITY TO WRITE MUSIC. WE VISITED DAN R. IN HIS STUDIO IN MABOU TO FIND OUT WHAT WAS INVOLVED IN COMPOSING A FIDDLE TUNE.</b></p>

(14:09)shot of Dan R MacDonald tight shot chin to forehead	"Well, it comes to you like a dream. You can think up anything in the middle of the night or whatever time of day it is by whistling, and you go and you put that together.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shot of clock on table showing 6:20</li> <li>• shot of music on music stand</li> </ul>	And you make sure it's an original. That it don't look like anything that was composed in Neil Gow's time, or William Marshall, or Skinner. You got to keep away from all that stuff."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide shot Dan R drinking whisky, push in again</li> </ul>	SO HOW MANY TUNES COULD A GUY LIKE DAN R. COMPOSE IN HIS LIFETIME?
Dan R answers	"Oh, I guess roughly the old manuscripts what I done from the 30s was pretty handy two thousand anyways."
(no shot change)	AND WHAT HAPPENS TO THE TUNES THAT HE WRITES?
Dan R MacDonald	"I got a manuscript and I give it to my friends, Buddy MacMaster and Donald Angus and anyone who wants 'em."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tight shot of hand taking whisky</li> <li>• wide shot drinking it</li> </ul>	DAN R. HAS SEEN AND HEARD MANY FIDDLERS OVER THE YEARS. HE TALKS ABOUT A FEW OF HIS FAVOURITES NOW.
Tight shot Dan R. clip	"Little Jack was one of my favourites. He's dead now, he died about two years ago, and Sandy MacLean, which (sic) has played in Glendale at a concert, which is very good; he's up in his 70's; other players like Dan J. Campbell, Glenora Falls, good player."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide shot of Dan R listening, hands folded</li> </ul>	AND THE MAN HE THOUGHT WAS THE GREATEST OF THEM ALL?
(15:50)	"I suppose I'd have to say Big Ronald MacLellan, Theresa MacLellan's father, was the best I ever heard. Course, I could not read music then, but he sounded awfully good to me. He raised the hair off my head. He was that good."
<p>(16:10) <u>RON ON CAMERA with old water pump behind him</u>  (40 second standup)</p>	<b>BIG RONALD MACLELLAN INCIDENTALLY WAS A LEGEND IN CAPE BRETON. HE WAS A GIANT OF A MAN. SIX FEET SIX INCHES TALL AND A BLACKSMITH BY TRADE. HE HAD HUGE HANDS AND LARGE POWERFUL ARMS AND HE COULD BEND A HORSESHOE INTO A FIGURE EIGHT WITH LITTLE OR NO EFFORT. BUT IF YOU PUT A VIOLIN INTO THOSE SAME HUGE HANDS, BIG RONALD COULD COAX OUT A MELODY AS SWEET AS ANY YOU EVER HEARD AMONGST THE</b>

	<b>HILLS OF CAPE BRETON. BUT THAT WAS THE PAST AND OUR CONCERN IS WITH THE FUTURE. FIDDLING, LIKE ANY OTHER ART OR TRADITION, IF IT'S GOING TO LIVE ON, IT HAS TO BE CARRIED ON BY YOUNG PEOPLE. YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE JOHN MORRIS RANKIN.</b>
(16:50) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tight shot of young boy, John Morris</li> <li>• wide shot showing siblings with JMR voiceover JMR</li> </ul>	(John Morris plays "Jimmie's Favourite Jig" and "Heather Hill Reel")  "I've been playing the fiddle for 3 years. I'm 12.
• Tight shot face	I play the piano, I just pick at the guitar, the recorder
• Foot tapping	and the ukelele and I have a set of drums upstairs.
• Tight shot face, as he plays	I just picked it up myself."
Shots of girls playing piano and guitar, JM with fiddle...sequence of girls and JM as tune changes,	(Music – "Heather Hill Reel")
05 39 45 nice wide shot of group, followed by tight shot of JMR face	
05 40 02 tune ends, camera's tight on JMR's eyes, drifts off	
(18:10) cut to Scene of elderly man dancing	(Set of dance tunes starting with the "King's Reel", "Willie Davis Reel", "the Lads of Tarland Jig.")
RON VOICEOVER	THIS IS SYDNEY'S ASHBY LEGION, WHERE THERE'S A SQUARE DANCE EVERY WEDNESDAY NIGHT AND THIS IS EIGHTY-TWO-YEAR OLD JIMMY DIXON.
Jimmy dancing and laughing	
(18:41) Ron voiceover shots of dancing	SOMETIMES JIMMY GETS A LITTLE CARRIED AWAY BY ALL THE EXCITEMENT. BUT ONE THING YOU CAN BE SURE OF, HE'LL BE THE FIRST ONE THERE AND THE LAST ONE HOME.
(19:21)Scene of more people dancing man calling dance	
new tune	(Music: "The Gerhard Heintzman Piano Reel" and the "Water in the Sea Polka.")

shot of caller, Theresa MacLellan playing new tune	
end as caller says "one more (21:15 - commercial break)	
Resume program for 2:43 00:00 RON ON CAMERA  14 second standup	<b>SO WHAT'S TO BECOME OF THE CAPE BRETON FIDDLER. WILL HE LIVE ON? OR WILL HE BE DROWNED OUT BY THE HARD BEAT OF MODERN ROCK AND OTHER SYNTHETIC MUSIC. ONLY TIME WILL TELL.</b>
(00:14) Fr. John Angus Rankin	"The vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler." What is that? As long as we have Scotchmen, Irishmen, French men and Mic Mac Indians who love Scotch music we're going to have this Gaelic Cape Breton fiddler with us."
(00:28)	(Fiddlers play "King George IV strathspey")
shot of 3 fiddlers playing in field. Voice-over of Dan R.	"Oh, I don't know in the world. But, sometimes I think that Scotch music is dying in Cape Breton. Sometimes I think.
(00:44) Voice of Sandy MacLean	"Now, you take it here in Sydney years ago, there were violins for sale in the music store. You can't see one there now, because there's no demand for violins."
05 44 04 (00:23:16)Unknown speaker	"In the old days, you could go on Saturday nights, to different dances. There'd be one round dance and four or five square dances. What we called square dances ...with Scottish fiddlers. Today there's very few except out in the country."
(01:16) Unknown speaker	"Well we're very, very fortunate to have a good abundance of good Scottish players in Cape Breton.
Same voice continues as shot changes to closeup of thistles and farmhouse on hill	But I'm sorry to notice, but young fellas are not taking the interest in the violin music."
(01:33) change shot to house and barn, Dan R and John Morris walk into shot, away from camera as credits roll Title: Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler Closing credits: Dan R walking with John Morris. Cameraman: David Carr Sound: Jim Snow Lighting: Clary Phillips Sound Mix: Bob Theakston	(Music: "The Balkan Hills" march.)

Film Editor: Christine Zinck Writer and Commentator: Ron MacInnis Producer/director: C.F. Reynolds	
interior of cabin violin and old photographic portraits, and tilt down old violin CBC Halifax Film Production 02:39 cut to black music ends at (02:43) end program	

#### F. Analysis of the Documentary.

After I viewed this documentary for the first time I was confused. The title was clear and unambiguous. But there was very little in the body of the piece which seemed to provide evidence that the title was accurate. In many ways, this is what enticed me into pursuing the study of this work and the response it provoked. It seemed mild and vague. How could this have sparked the response that it did? It seems obvious to me that most of the network audience would have viewed this show, even thirty years ago, and derived the same message that I did on viewing it for the first time. The message to people like myself, unfamiliar with Cape Breton culture and its people, seemed straightforward: that while some people in Cape Breton were mildly concerned about the transmission of the fiddle tradition, others seemed to think there was nothing to worry about. This latter belief was reinforced by the visual impact (and entertainment value) of seeing and hearing in the film quite a lot of the very music which was supposed to be vanishing.

Furthermore I was engaged by three of the people in the piece who left a strong impression on me, the viewer. One was an erect, stubborn looking Catholic priest with a



shock of white hair. Another person we meet is a large man with coke-bottle lenses in his glasses and who speaks at length about his violin and the music he composes, which comes to him at all times of the day or night. Finally, the presenter, Ron MacInnis himself appears frequently in the piece. He is striking for the long sideburns he sports and for the sense of personal discovery he projects. He comes across, to the first time viewer as a “nice guy” – a respectful person who wouldn’t want to upset anyone.

But as we will see, the piece is full of cues (or code if you will) that have particular meaning to a relatively small group of people inside the general viewing audience. Those cues were aimed at and received by the people who were interviewed in the show and by their friends in Cape Breton. Were these intimations deliberate? Yes. Was the message in the body of the show contradictory? Yes. But no matter how elusive or vague the signals were in the body of the show, two things remained clear as a bell. A well-known fiddler is heard to say several times he knows very few young fiddlers; and the provocative title predominates, both at the beginning and the end of the program.

The television show can be divided into four sections: 1) the studio introduction to the film which lasts (1:06) one minute and six seconds. 2) The opening of the film with its title and quick interview clips which sets out the tension in the piece and which lasts (1:33) one minute and thirty-three seconds. 3) The main body of the program which provides background, and develops some of the argument, lasting (21:15) twenty-one minutes and fifteen seconds. 4) The conclusion which lasts (2:43) two minutes and forty-three seconds and which suggests suspense about the future of the music tradition, repeats the pattern seen at the beginning with a series of clips providing tension, and then runs the closing credits. The credits feature one of the most powerful images in the film.

The script contains twelve references to change and loss. It contains six references to hope of continuity. At least one of these overlap due to ambiguity. And there are other visual cues which add to the message that there are only aging people playing the fiddle music.

#### 1) Studio Introduction:

The host, Jim Bennett introduces Ron MacInnis. He identifies Ron's role as writer and narrator, and the fact that he comes from Cape Breton. Ron then establishes that he'd been away and that producing the documentary allowed him to discover new parts of Cape Breton and brand new people.

Surprisingly, the introduction makes no mention of the subject of the film or even that it's about music! We know it involves Cape Breton and the people who live there, who in Ron MacInnis' terms "are a unique breed [. . .] and sure know how to have a good time." The overall tone of this introduction is that the people we are about to meet are different from the viewer. While some might object to the words "unique breed" as being patronizing or condescending, there is no doubt in my mind that Ron MacInnis really believes they are an admiring description of the people he came to know. Jim Bennett's reference to the Cape Breton people being more important than the scenery or the industry seems redundant. He is doing what many television hosts and their producers felt they had to do: prepare an audience, usually urban, for a visit to an exotic and poorly understood rural environment. Thus the host becomes an interpreter, usually betraying a bias. The host is urbane and urban himself – more polished and articulate than the people of the country we are about to meet. In this case, though, Bennett has only a superficial role as interpreter. The real storyteller in this documentary is Ron MacInnis.

## 2) Documentary Opening:

The opening establishes that Ron MacInnis is on a journey through rural Cape Breton. We see him driving a convertible along the picturesque highway of the Highlands and we listen to the jaunty notes of Angus Chisholm playing Glengary's Dirk strathspey. One shot is interesting. It is the rear view mirror of the car seen on a diagonal with the road behind clearly visible. While some might suggest the cameraman was attempting to use the rear-view reflection as a visual metaphor of a journey into the past, I find the composition of the shot itself more intriguing. With the mirror crossing the frame on the diagonal it signals, to me at least, a notion that the director's aim is to tell a story in a way that is slightly quirky and off-side: that what we will be seeing is different from our normal reality.

The camera rests on a shot of thistles and then switches focus to reveal an old farmhouse in the distance. As the fiddle music fades out we cut inside to a carefully lit interior of a wooden house. The camera pans past a pair of snowshoes and stops at a fiddle with no strings leaning in the corner. There is an unusual emptiness in the film because it has fallen silent. In a way, it is as if we are in a museum, and the fiddle has become an artifact on display.

The sequence comes to life with five unidentified clips, or extracts of interviews, making short declarative statements. The opening clip introduces us for the first time in the show to the words "Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler." But the speaker, a priest, asks, "What is that?" The next three clips introduce the notion that there are few young fiddlers. The last clip comes from the same priest, who reiterates his belief, that Cape

Breton fiddling will survive. Thus we have the tension, or controversy, established. And the program breaks for commercial.

### 3) The Body of the Documentary:

Coming back from commercial, we see the ruins of a rickety barn roof as another fiddle tune fades up. The title of the documentary appears: Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. Ron MacInnis walks into the frame carrying the fiddle (with no strings) and addresses the camera (and the viewer) in what is known in television language as the “on camera standup.” There is nothing ambiguous in what he says next. He says the barn and the fiddle in his hand are symbolic of a way of life that’s disappearing as a result of change brought on by urbanization and time. He speaks about the violin as if it has a past but no future. It is natural now, at this point in the show, to learn about that past, and that is where MacInnis takes us. We meet the Catholic priest again and learn his name: Father John Angus Rankin.

The stand-up lasted forty-three seconds and the next clip from Father Rankin runs for fifty-six seconds. This is almost unheard of now in the formats of the twenty-first century but the long clip commands our attention and provides useful information. It is a thumbnail sketch of the way the music from Scotland was brought over after the rebellion of 1745 and transmitted through the generations in Cape Breton.

The next two and a half minutes bring us to a new scene. They do not advance the narrative so much as illustrate the point just made by Fr. Rankin. It is a kitchen ceilidh with four men and a woman fiddling, a piano player and two women who begin to step dance. We see Father Rankin and several other people clapping and obviously enjoying the music. We hear Ron MacInnis explaining how these kitchen parties are part

of the culture, and even though it's not demonstrated in the film, he tells us that the fiddlers share the tunes and try new ones out in public.

Then we change scenes again. For the next five minutes we are taken to the Broad Cove Concert of Scottish music. (This event was originally established as an annual summer event in 1941.) It would seem from this event, that there are lots of opportunities for fiddlers to play, and a large appreciative audience who comes to hear them. We see a dozen fiddlers being directed on a stage during an evening concert, and several dancers who move on and off the stage. MacInnis tells us that the step dancing may have originated in Scotland but is "frowned upon" there now. As we learned in the last chapter, this group performance, with Fr. John Angus Rankin directing, was unrehearsed, but the fiddlers stand straight and confident. The music is strong. The film cuts to a large pipe and drum band, with quite a few members who are girls and women. (This image supports the notion proposed by Campbell and MacLean that piping was likely to last longer in Cape Breton culture than fiddling would. There WERE a lot more pipers performing at Broad Cove than there were fiddlers.)

Change scenes again. Ron MacInnis is standing in front of a hillside highway, and reintroduces the concept that most of the people who are really interested in the music are middle-aged or older. But, as if to mitigate the sting in this comment, he introduces us to the elderly Sandy MacLean, back at the Broad Cove Concert. MacLean describes how music was part of his family from his grandfather on down and then states there are "bright young boys" with talent.

Still at Broad Cove we hear more of the fiddle music and listen while Father Rankin speaks for another minute and seventeen seconds about the difference between

the music in Scotland and the music in Cape Breton. Some of his comments are covered with shots of the Broad Cove fiddlers as they play a set of strathspeys and reels. Father Rankin speaks eloquently of the way the spirited Cape Breton music is connected to the Gaels' search for freedom in the New World. This clip seems to establish the notion that Cape Breton fiddle music has evolved and is now quite different from the way the music is played in Scotland. However Father Rankin was also known for his belief that Cape Breton style music had NOT changed much from the time when the pioneers arrived "after the '45." In The Fiddle in the Highlands, the authors use him as a source for saying that in Cape Breton, "the style of Niel Gow, Marshall and Simon Fraser is still most admired, but that of Scott Skinner has never taken on: nor has the accordion. This suggests that Cape Breton fiddling today should still represent an older style."<sup>174</sup> Frank MacInnis, who spent many hours with Father Rankin, says the priest would often speak of the freedom Cape Breton fiddlers had to express their individual styles, using flourishes and grace notes and ornaments in different ways than other players would. Still, the reference in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, while evocative, remains ambiguous. Unfortunately, Father Rankin is not alive to ask his opinion now.

We cut away again to another standup with Ron MacInnis. It provides another pause in the narrative, as he attempts to explain the way fiddlers and listeners tap their feet in time to the music. Then we see a demonstration of the rhythm provided by Freddie Wright of Mull River, although we never see his face, but only his feet.

So far, we've had about ten minutes of a history and background lesson interspersed with the kitchen ceilidh and the Broad Cove Concert. We are about half way

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<sup>174</sup> Alan Bruford, Aillie Munro, The Fiddle in the Highlands, (Inverness: An Comunn Gaidhealach, 1973) 10.

through the whole show. One might expect, given its title and the statement at the beginning of the documentary, that we might begin to have the evidence put forward to support the thesis.

Instead, for the next five minutes, Ron MacInnis takes us to Mabou to meet a man for whom he has a great admiration. But he doesn't tell us who he is right away. This scene becomes a tribute to fiddler Dan R. MacDonald and a number of other well known Cape Breton fiddlers. But the scene derives its impact from the originality of "Dan R" as well as the tight confines of the house in which he is filmed. Dan Rory is a very large man, with a wide face. The thick lenses in his glasses obscure his eyes. He is a large man in a small room, in the same way he is a well-known "star" in the small world of Cape Breton fiddling. The cameraman and director have chosen to amplify this notion by employing extreme close-ups during the course of the shooting. At times, this leaves the viewer feeling very uncomfortable, although it forces us to look more closely at an individual than we normally do.

At no time in this segment does anyone express the concern that Cape Breton Fiddling is dying out. If anything, the purpose of this section is to emphasize the eccentric and appealing nature of the fiddler and his music tradition. It ends with Dan R praising the music of one of his own idols, Big Ronald MacLellan.

With that, we break away again to see Ron MacInnis on camera in front of an old water pump. (Another cue connecting Cape Breton with the past.) He gives us more detail about Big Ronald MacLellan and his ability to play. And now, for the first time since the opening standup, Ron states clearly that "our concern is with the future." He says if fiddling is going to live on, it has to be carried on by young people. But rather

than telling us there are very few of those, instead he introduces us immediately to a young John Morris Rankin. If anything, this next section should be re-assuring to the viewer. We see the 12-year-old boy playing with energy and skill, accompanied by his sisters and brother.

The audience in Toronto might not recognize the tune he is playing, but the fiddling community in Cape Breton would. John Morris is playing the Heather Hill reel, one of Dan R. MacDonald's best known compositions. (The scenes involving John Morris Rankin acquire greater significance in the twenty-first century, but since that significance did not exist for the audience of the 1970s I will address it later on.)

From the Rankin home, we move to a dance hall identified as the Ashby Legion in Sydney. The camera singles out of the crowd an elderly man, dancing with energy and joy. He is eighty-two-year-old Jimmy Dixon. There is little narration in this segment. No comments are made about age, or youth, other than to focus on Jimmy. (When he tries to kiss his young dance partner, Ron MacInnis excuses it, saying Jimmy "gets carried away" by all the excitement.) The hall is full, the dance caller is hot and sweating. The fiddle music of Theresa MacLellan is strong and smooth. This is the end of the main body of the piece as we break for the second commercial.

#### 4) The Conclusion to the Documentary:

It is in this section that the message of loss, first heard in the opening standup is repeated. Ron MacInnis appears again on camera and articulates for the first time his concern that the Cape Breton fiddler will be drowned out by rock and roll and other synthetic music. But he couches the statement as a question answered with a common phrase, "only time will tell." If the piece had ended with this, it might not have had as



much power. But it finishes the way it began, with a series of disembodied declarative statements. The first is from Fr. John Angus Rankin, who challenges the listener to define the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. He links the "Gaelic Cape Breton fiddler" to the multi-cultural populations of the Island (Scottish, Irish, Acadian and Mi'kmaq), stating that as long as any of them are around, the music will survive. This statement is immediately contradicted by Dan R. MacDonald who maintains that he believes the music is dying out in Cape Breton. A third speaker says fiddles are no longer for sale in Cape Breton (although as we learned earlier in this paper, the owner of the store says that was not the case). A fourth speaker says the custom of Saturday night dances has died out, except out in the country. (Ashby Legion in Sydney was still holding dances on Wednesdays but the big Saturday dances weren't the Scottish kind.) The last speaker ends with a more general lament saying there are lots of players, but not many young ones interested in the violin music.

The program ends to the sound of a determined, steady violin march, the Balkan Hills, and the sight of the lumbering Dan R walking up a road away from the camera in the company of the young John Morris Rankin. This image by itself would have suggested hope and continuity. But as it begins, the credits start to roll. The first line of the credits is the title repeated: Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. While this is a standard practice in television production it has the inadvertent effect of labeling the two characters walking away from us. They have now been identified as the vanishing Cape Breton fiddlers. A Toronto or New Brunswick audience would not notice this. But for the fans of the music watching closely in Cape Breton this coincidence would have a powerful subliminal effect.

Of all the things in the program, it is the title, the expressed “concern” for the future and the staccato series of clips that bookend the documentary which will resonate in living rooms and kitchens across Cape Breton for years afterwards. But as so often happens to the media, rather than engage in debate with the fiddlers like Dan R. MacDonald who express their opinions that fiddling is dying, the people who took issue with the show’s premise blamed the messenger.

#### G. Writer’s Stated Intent.

I interviewed Ron MacInnis three times over the course of two years. The first time was in March of 2000. The second was in the fall of 2000 when I interviewed him on camera for the production of a television program on this subject, entitled The Wakeup Call. The most recent one was in May of 2002. On all three occasions we explored his recollections of the events of the late 1960s and early 70s. On all three occasions his position has remained the same. As it happens most of the quotations in this thesis come from our first meeting. I have also asked if he retained his original radio or TV script or a scrapbook of clippings or correspondence relating to the documentary. His answer, invariably, has been that he may have such material, but he doesn’t know where it is. He and his family moved to their new home at Indian Harbour and immediately embarked on a massive renovation project, so boxes of archival material are misplaced. Therefore any of this discussion about his intent relies on his memory of the events and no other documentation.

Ron MacInnis believed in 1970 that Cape Breton Fiddling was a doomed musical tradition. He based this belief on his observations that there were very few young people

playing the fiddle at the time. He says he never had any notion that his documentary could effect any change. He wasn't trying to stir the pot, or be provocative for its own sake. "It was a lament like any of the writers, Scottish (violin) writers like J. Scott Skinner, it was a lament for something that was passing."<sup>175</sup>

As we have seen, Ron MacInnis did his own informal survey of Cape Bretoners and he knew there was disagreement. "It was quite simple. A black and white thing with people in the community and they either agreed with it or they didn't."<sup>176</sup>

MacInnis stuck to his position even though he was surprised at the strength of the objections he encountered. "After all, there were still dances on Saturday night, and 50 year old so-and-so that would play and they didn't really get the point that there weren't kids coming along, so it took awhile for that point to sink in, and it stirred things up."<sup>177</sup>

MacInnis says there were two young Inverness County children he'd encountered. One of them, John Morris Rankin, was featured in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. The other one, Kinnon Beaton, went to the same school as John Morris did in Mabou. Kinnon is the son of renowned fiddler, Donald Angus Beaton. His brother is Joey Beaton, the pianist. They were all children with musical talent in the 1960s. Kinnon has said they were often teased by their peers, and embarrassed about playing the fiddle. That didn't stop them, though. John Morris and his siblings formed a family singing group that gained enormous popularity in the 80s for its blend of Celtic style traditional

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<sup>175</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>176</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>177</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

and rock music. Kinnon combines a retail business in Port Hawkesbury with playing for dances on weekends, as well as recording his music.

During his research MacInnis would challenge the disbelievers who questioned his premise:

I'd always put out the challenge. John Morris Rankin and Kinnon Beaton and who else in another 25 years are going to be playing fiddle in Cape Breton? Who else? Name one.

'There are lots of them' [They'd reply.]

Well, name me one.

'Well, plenty of them in back.' [They'd reply.]

Well, name me one, just one.

'Kinnon Beaton, John Morris Rankin' [They'd reply.]

And who else?

And that was the conversation.<sup>178</sup>

For this reason, Ron MacInnis decided that "it was a fait accompli. It was gone, dead and gone

and then it was very sad."<sup>179</sup> He did not consider the possibility that a short hiatus of a few years could be followed by a new spurt of creativity, as Alan Jabbour has suggested. Nor did he consider the possibility that the children who were turning to Rock and Roll in the 60s would ever in later years renew their acquaintance with the traditional fiddle music. He is very aware of the activity which followed the broadcast of the show. He

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<sup>178</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>179</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

became acquainted with some of the leaders and organizers of the fiddlers association. He even produced two stage productions about the history of Cape Breton fiddling, which included the revival of fiddling in the 1970s. He still stands by his earlier assessment of the state of the tradition. But he admits to the surprise he felt “when it began to bubble and somebody picked up the challenge, and challenge the thought and encourage the fiddlers. I had no idea where it would go.”<sup>180</sup>

MacInnis attributes the response to the power of television. Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler did not have the same impact when it aired on radio, although the radio broadcast must have served to promote and provoke interest in the television piece. MacInnis says television and the media commanded greater respect at the time than it does now: “Television just has a wider audience. And credibility. [. . .] I don’t think it has it anymore, but it used to. People believed what was said on television.”

In this case, a group of people in Cape Breton did NOT believe what was said on television. But their reaction attests to the power of the medium. They didn’t realize that their resistance to the message would shape a revival. In the end, it didn’t matter whether Ron MacInnis was right. It simply motivated them to seek for the music a status it had never had before.

This type of program was typical of the kind of television programming the CBC produced in Halifax from the beginning in 1954. In fact Ian McKay has written (in a somewhat ironic tone) that it was through the medium of television “that Nova Scotians first encountered the truth of their pre-modern essence.”<sup>181</sup> He says it was an essence

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<sup>180</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 Mar. 2000.

<sup>181</sup> Ian McKay, The Quest of the Folk. Anti-modernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens U P, 1994) 93.

that folklorist Helen Creighton was determined they come to understand. Creighton and the CBC used each other to reach an audience. They may have had different reasons, but the reasons served each other's purposes. McKay is critical of Creighton and later "neo-pioneering" writers, such as Silver Donald Cameron, for constructing notions of the "Folk" which limit them and create stereotypes out of them. In the 1920s when Creighton began her work, McKay says her "folk" were "kindly, god-fearing, law-abiding and decorous; the Folk imagined by the neo-pioneers were happy-go-lucky, hedonistic and anarchistic."<sup>182</sup> Because of the CBC's role in transmitting Creighton's work without challenge, McKay would likely include the broadcaster in the same group with Creighton and Cameron.

And what of Ron MacInnis? He did know Creighton and spent time with her. He met her as a teenager and accompanied his father when he did a story with her in Cape Breton. He even kept in touch with her in later years. But he insists he was not conscious of trying to emulate her work in his own career. It seemed to him, Helen Creighton notwithstanding, as if few people around him were interested in Gaelic culture and music at all. Furthermore, he argues that the world of the Cape Breton fiddler of the 1960s was not an artificial construct he created. He believed that there was a difference between the aging culture and the "modern" one. The differences were found "in a whole set of values back in those days, and a quality of life, and there were some things wrong, but there was a whole set of things, appreciations and cultural values and family that would easily argue with the notion that it's an artificial construct."<sup>183</sup> He defines the

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<sup>182</sup> McKay, The Quest of the Folk 285-6.

<sup>183</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 May 2002.

Cape Breton Gaelic values of the past as holding a strong sense of community, sharing, spirituality and non-materialism. "There's a whole lot of world views and values that I could see slipping away. And I guess I didn't think about it that much at the time, but in retrospect that's probably why I did that [production]." <sup>184</sup>

Television is an eye on the world, but it is not unblinking; film and tape is edited; there are as many metaphorical filters as mechanical or electronic ones. Documentary producers seek to portray a certain "truth" as they see it. In my experience, they are all motivated by different individual philosophies and visions. Broadcast and libel law requires them to be responsible and accurate in the journalistic profession, but at the same time they seek to express unique creative views. This uniqueness and creativity is often what's rewarded (at least outside of the daily news and current affairs environment). Television, more than radio, imposes considerations for entertainment value, both for commercial reasons and esoteric ones.

In the early days of television, there was a sense of self-consciousness and urgency. Television was the medium which would usher in a science fiction world. Therefore it was necessary to record for posterity images of the pioneering past. At its most basic level, that is how CBC television producers and executives of the 60s would view Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. As we will see, it was part of the mandate. <sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ron MacInnis, 8 May 2002.

<sup>185</sup> Bill Harper, telephone conversation, 27 Aug. 2002.

## H. Communication Theory.

The nature and power of television is held in suspicion, contempt and even fear by a large number of eminent social critics (not to mention many members of the ordinary public). This is evident in the survey by Robert Babe of the lives of ten Canadian communication theory intellectuals.<sup>186</sup> John Grierson, the pioneer of documentary film in the English speaking world, feared it could be used as a tool for propaganda; although nestled as it is within the home, he suspected it would have the effect of anaesthetizing viewers: "The people themselves like television to be cozy. And they don't like to be hurt. When you show brutal things on television they have no effect."<sup>187</sup> Marshall MacLuhan suggested it would massage people; put them to sleep. Northrop Frye wrote of "the alienation of progress" and the sense of powerlessness that went with people's inability to take charge of their destinies. The American communications critic Neil Postman and others document how television broadcasting has accelerated people's loss of their capacity to hold information in their memories, as speeches and statements are cut up into smaller and smaller bites.<sup>188</sup> Lorimer and MacNully, in Mass Communications in Canada, write of the damage to Northern Canadian aboriginal culture which took place after satellite technology improved radio and television transmission: "In place of traditional values of sharing, young people were introduced to individualism and greed. Social status was linked not to an ability to provide for more than one's own

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<sup>186</sup> Robert E. Babe, Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000).

<sup>187</sup> Robert Babe 102.

<sup>188</sup> Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).



family but to the ability to collect and hold material goods for oneself.”<sup>189</sup> Lorimer and MacNully go on to explore a framework for television in Canada. It has developed, they propose, according to Harold Innis’ concept of “center-hinterland.” Canada, they say, “is the cultural hinterland of the United States.”<sup>190</sup> Public television in Canada was developed to “help hinterland Canada survive the onslaught of the entertainment centres in New York and Los Angeles.”<sup>191</sup> They go on to quote Judy Lamarsh who hoped that Canadian broadcasting would be a “means of preserving and strengthening the cultural, social and political fabric of Canada.”<sup>192</sup>

So how do we reconcile Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler in the context of these opposing and contrasting views of the power of television? In the first place it is easy to see a belief in the Canadian hinterland concept reflected in Ron MacInnis’ assertion that Rock and Roll, whether from England or the United States, could easily “drown out” the Cape Breton fiddler. And while MacInnis did not see his show as an attempt to preserve a tradition, the CBC would certainly have argued that the subject matter fit nicely into Lamarsh’s definition of its role of strengthening the cultural fabric of the country. And what of the belief of the early media gurus that television would leave the viewing public disconnected and powerless; that they would be seduced and brainwashed into an easy acceptance of them? Such theories would never have predicted the response of the Cape Breton community to the message in the documentary. But, by the 1970s, thanks in part

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<sup>189</sup> Rowland Lorimer and Jean MacNully, Mass Communication in Canada (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991) 305.

<sup>190</sup> Lorimer and MacNully 306.

<sup>191</sup> Lorimer and MacNully 309.

<sup>192</sup> Lorimer and MacNully 310.

to the popularization of theorists like MacLuhan, the viewing public was more sophisticated about the role of the media than it was in the 50s. This was certainly true for the group of university-educated Cape Bretoners who watched the show. They may have been living in the hinterland, but the very media that LaMarsh hoped would serve the hinterland was now accessible to them. The radio programs on CJFX and CJCB were an important part of the lives of many of the fiddlers, who had become recording artists in their own right, university-educated or not. So while some might see the response from the community as the development of a "special interest" group, others like Northrop Frye and John Grierson might be pleasantly surprised to see such people taking their destinies in hand.

#### I. Conclusion.

In closing this section, it is easy to see that the CBC and its freelancer, Ron MacInnis, formed a powerful combination. The documentary contained images of Scottish Cape Breton heritage which it celebrated as a valuable part of Canadian culture. Yet at the same time, it announced, rather summarily, that one particular element of that culture, fiddle-music, was vanishing. Ron MacInnis did his research in advance and the documentary "shoot" was organized in such a way as to obtain the evidence on tape to back up his thesis. The number of fiddlers in the younger age groups may very well have fallen off in the 1960s, but, as we will see in the next chapter, an infrastructure in the culture, built on elite institutions and shared history, was very strong. It resisted the reflection of itself as a quaint and fading community. In this case, the "folk" lashed back at the cultural producers who tried to define them.

## V. THE RESPONSE: MESSAGE RECEIVED LOUD AND CLEAR.

*“Grandfather once said” she continued, “that on Culloden Moor the Highlanders sang. Standing there with the sleet and rain in their faces, some of them sang. To cause fear or to bolster confidence or to offer consolation. None of the Highlanders ever went into battle without music.”*

From No Great Mischief.<sup>194</sup>

### A. Introduction.

This story from No Great Mischief is full of power and emotion because it adds pathos to what is already an event full of tragedy and meaning. The defeat of the Jacobite Highlanders at Culloden in 1746 is widely acknowledged to be a turning point in Scottish history. It allowed a new rule of law which provoked, over the next 80 years, a series of migrations away from Scotland to the New World. The Grandfather in No Great Mischief recounted the story of Culloden Moor to his grandchildren in the 1950s. The history of the Highlanders was as alive and important to him, 200 years after the battle, as if he had been there himself. It is a useful image as we consider the revival movement of Cape Breton fiddling. The Highlanders didn't carry fiddles with them into battle, but the importance of their music, including song and the bagpipes, remained with them in the journeys ahead of them. In their new homes in Cape Breton the music continued to bolster confidence and offer consolation. At Culloden, lives and kingdoms were at stake. In 1972, after the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, the stakes were lower. But if the Highland Scots carried music with them into every battle, it's not surprising that 200 years later, their descendants would go to battle over their music. As fiddler

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<sup>194</sup> Alistair MacLeod, No Great Mischief 228.

Kyle MacNeil says, "Cape Bretoners are renowned for when something gets in their [blood]. Don't ever get us mad!"<sup>195</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the immediate response to the broadcast of The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddle. The people involved came from a wide range of interests and from many parts of Cape Breton Island and Antigonish County on the eastern mainland of Nova Scotia. They were men and women, Catholics and Protestants, fiddlers and non-fiddlers. This narrative cannot include all of them. Many are deceased.

I have chosen to rely on the accounts of half a dozen people, two more so than the others. Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris organized several meetings in the winter of 1972 to put together a committee dedicated to some kind of fiddling festival. Then they spent the summer traveling around the island in search of fiddlers. A third person, Father John Angus Rankin, now deceased, provided the musical inspiration and direction for the fiddlers as they prepared for the first festival. Finally, I am relying heavily on Frank MacInnis' personal archives of correspondence, clippings and records of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association to provide written documentation for many of the assertions in this paper. Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris have said at many steps along the way that the fiddlers association had no leader or president. Nothing could have happened without the cooperative spirit which was clearly alive in the area at the time. If I have neglected the hard work and efforts of any particular individual, it is because I ran out of time. There's a whole long list of people Frank provided me with that I could never exhaust.

Ray MacDonald, now retired from a long career at radio station CJFX, calls these people "activists." He says "I'm not sure Ron [MacInnis] would have known about the

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<sup>195</sup> Kyle MacNeil, CBC interview conducted by the author, 12 Oct. 2000.

'activists' who existed in all of the small communities. They were there then as they are now; they are the shakers and movers for whatever there is: fiddle, highland dancing, bagpipes, step dancing. There are 'pockets' where they're big on one thing and less on another, but collectively they make a major contribution to the Scottish culture."<sup>196</sup>

What makes the response I am about to describe unusual, is that it was not initially a public one. Unlike other responses we will discuss later, this began as a relatively small but powerful impulse. There was no outcry immediately published in the local newspapers. There were no letters to the editors. If once there were files of letters at the CBC they are gone now. In fact, the show is not mentioned in Television Listings in any of the local or provincial newspapers; in the CBC files at the National Archives there is only one reference to the budget of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, but nothing about its broadcast date. It's as if, in the official records, it never existed! We know it did because the CBC retains several video copies; the Public Archives of Nova Scotia holds the original film. And it exists in the memories of many people who have given me a fascinating and encouraging lesson in community action and cultural vibrancy.

#### B. Responders: Non-elected Community Leaders.

Frank MacInnis was born in 1943. His parents had lived on Creignish Mountain before leaving to settle in the increasingly industrialized town of Port Hawkesbury on the Cape Breton side of the causeway. The MacInnises were devout Gaelic Catholics. But in Port Hawkesbury their use of Gaelic subsided, although the connection to the Catholic Church remained strong. Frank graduated from St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1967 and an education degree in 1968. His

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<sup>196</sup> Ray MacDonald, letter to author, 26 Aug. 2002.

first job was as a teaching principal at the Port Hastings primary school, just down the road from Port Hawkesbury, where he taught grades seven and eight. After a year of teaching in Grand Prairie, Alberta, he returned in 1971 to Port Hawkesbury to teach mathematics at the Canso Regional Vocational School. In 1973 he married his old friend Mary Ross. They built their home in Creignish, raised five children and are involved in education, health care, recreation and sports, both professionally and as volunteers. Frank has always been active in local politics. He happily identifies himself as a Progressive Conservative. He keeps horses and races them in the harness racing tracks around Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. And he has a deep and abiding love for Cape Breton traditional music and dance.

Frank's upbringing was full of music. His parents taught him Scottish step dances and square set dances. An uncle next door would frequently drop in and play the fiddle. His friends were the children of people who had moved from all over Inverness County to work at the pulp mill at Port Hawkesbury, people who spoke Gaelic and loved Scottish style music.

Frank says he was not conscious, as a child, of the Scottish music being particularly unique or especially important:

It always seemed to be something that was there. There were always musicians coming to the house and they would play tunes and we would go to concerts in the summertime. [. . .] We were probably aware that it was a Cape Breton tradition. The local radio station, CJFX in Antigonish, they played it so

you grew up hearing it every day as well. So it was just part of life growing up in this part of Cape Breton.<sup>197</sup>

Still, the music achieved a greater importance and significance to Frank in his early twenties, when he became a co-host with Gus MacKinnon for a daily, fifteen-minute radio show called Scottish Strings. The two men would record a batch of programs once every couple of weeks. This connection would become very important to the organization of the first fiddlers' festival in 1973.

In his twenties, Frank became a good friend with Father Eugene Morris. Eugene grew up in Mabou, but the two men met for the first time in Port Hawkesbury while he was still completing his seminary work. They shared an aptitude for softball and a love of Scottish music and dancing. Father Morris, like Frank, did not play a musical instrument. But they both enjoyed attending square set dances and Father Eugene in particular loved to step dance. After his ordination, he was assigned as assistant priest in the Port Hawkesbury parish. Frank says, "there was a group of us that hung out together. He was involved as part of his pastoral duties, I guess, with a youth group at that time, the Young Christian Workers, and there was probably about eight or ten of us that hung around together. He was very active in a leadership role."<sup>198</sup>

Frank says he knew in advance that the television show was to be broadcast. He thinks it was promoted on the CBC. His reaction, and those of his friends, was immediate:

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<sup>197</sup> Frank MacInnis, CBC interview conducted by the author, 23 Oct. 2000.

<sup>198</sup> Frank MacInnis, personal interview, 16 Aug. 2002.

I guess my family and my circle of friends, it was probably a reaction that had elements of surprise, disbelief; maybe a little bit of frustration or anger that this was being portrayed when I guess we didn't really feel it was at the time. [. . .] our initial reaction, I guess, was this guy is wrong, it's not vanishing, he's telling a story here, that's really not true and I guess that was probably the initial reaction.<sup>199</sup>

Several things happened in the succeeding weeks. Frank says the predominating feeling in his circle was that there was a need to tell Ron MacInnis that he was wrong and to actually do more than that: to show him he was wrong. But no one knew quite what to do. Frank MacInnis (who is no relation to Ron MacInnis) fired off a letter to him, dated January 16, 1972.<sup>200</sup> Frank expressed views which he said, with some exuberance, were "representative of the vast majority of the people of Cape Breton Island and in particular those of Inverness County." He wrote that the show, which only featured aging fiddlers, left the impression that the only fiddlers still alive were about to expire. This he said, "was a grave misconception as well as an unpardonable injustice to the many fine and talented Cape Breton fiddlers who were neglected." MacInnis also defended other aspects of the culture which he felt had been maligned in the show: "There are more step dancers, piano players and pipe bands than ever before."

Finally, he invited Ron MacInnis to spend a summer with him so Frank could act as "guide for you and thus give you the opportunity to see for yourself at the numerous concerts, dances and ceilidhs that the Cape Breton Fiddler is far from vanishing, but is

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<sup>199</sup> Frank MacInnis, personal interview, 23 Oct. 2000.

<sup>200</sup> Frank MacInnis, letter to Ron MacInnis, 16 Jan. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers, Creignish, Nova Scotia.



actually flourishing.” As we will see, the pairing of the word “vanishing” with “flourishing” will become a familiar combination. In time the adjective “flourishing” will dominate the popular literature published about the revival. But while he was waiting for a response from Ron MacInnis, Frank kept talking about the TV show with his friends and trying to figure out something else to do.

Around the same time, Father Eugene Morris was driving from Halifax to Port Hawkesbury with a carpenter, Hugh John Gillis, who also happened to be a “kitchen” fiddler. Father Morris, by this time was not only an assistant parish priest, but he was a field worker for the Coady Institute. The two of them were chatting about Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler and Hugh John suggested that it would be nice to have a festival just for fiddlers. “He thought it would be an excellent idea to gather all the fiddlers together for a concert or festival ‘just for themselves.’ They are asked to play with other performers at concerts, socials and different events but I would like to see them recognized and honored as a group of fiddlers alone, with their accompanists.”<sup>201</sup> As they were nearing home they arrived at the causeway over the Strait of Canso. Hugh John remarked at how impressive it had been to see the spectacle of 100 pipers marching and playing the bagpipes at the opening of the causeway in 1955. He suggested it would be a wonderful thing to hear one hundred fiddlers playing all at one time.

A few days later, the two men met at Frank MacInnis’ home and all agreed it was the kind of thing they thought could be achieved. They started writing down names of fiddlers they knew on the back of an envelope. When they exhausted their memory they called Father John Angus Rankin on the telephone. He jumped on the bandwagon with

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<sup>201</sup> Father Eugene Morris, letter to author, 11 Dec. 2000.

more names and enthusiastic encouragement. As Frank tells it they were soon up to 100 fiddlers: 'Now not all of them were playing, some of them were old, some of them were infirm, some of them were young. That was probably the initial seed that was planted.'<sup>202</sup> They decided to put a committee together to see how much support there could be for such an idea. And over the spring, summer and fall a great deal was accomplished.

The group they formed was made up of people with experience working for community events and who in some cases had positions of authority and influence. They were not elected, but they had access to local cultural institutions such as radio and the resources of the Catholic Church. In one instance, a parish priest announced from the pulpit that he would give away fiddles to anyone who wanted to learn how to play. Yet, despite their connections, it would prove to be a difficult task. They were to learn some hard lessons about the practitioners of the music tradition and encounter resistance and discouragement from some of the larger provincial institutions. This resistance would suggest that if the fiddlers were not exactly vanishing they were obscure, and if neglected, they could conceivably vanish.

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<sup>202</sup> Frank MacInnis, 23 Oct. 2000.

C. Goals of Group as Described in Correspondence Held by Frank MacInnis –  
1972.

In the winter of 1972, Father Eugene Morris was transferred to a new assignment at a parish in North Sydney. And after three months of waiting, Frank received a reply from Ron MacInnis, who apologized for his tardiness, saying Frank's letter had been misplaced in the trunk of his car!<sup>203</sup> But Ron's brief letter would give Frank no comfort. Ron maintained his position, stating, "I do feel, after countless hours of research, that I am indeed right in my stand that the fiddlers are disappearing. I am relying on statistics and interpolation, and it is in that light that I take my stand." Ron MacInnis did not take Frank up on his invitation to spend some time in the summer meeting the fiddlers.

So on April twentieth Frank sent a letter out to eleven people. It makes no mention of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. Instead it introduced the notion of a concert with 100 fiddlers, as it had been discussed by Frank, Father Eugene Morris and Father John Angus Rankin. The people who were sent the letters were identified as being interested in "the culture and music of Cape Breton."<sup>204</sup> The letter points out that no firm plans or decisions have been taken, but that it might include "a week long concert, with sessions being held for individuals and smaller groups every afternoon, and evening with several finales bringing all the fiddlers together." There may have been no plans finalized but the ones under discussion were certainly ambitious! Everyone who received the letter was invited to a meeting at some point in the near future.

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<sup>203</sup> Ron MacInnis, letter to Frank MacInnis, 5 Apr. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>204</sup> Frank MacInnis, 20 Apr. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

The letter was sent to Sandy Campbell, the publisher of The Cape Breton Highlander newspaper who was also involved in the ownership of CHER radio in Sydney. Linden MacIntyre was a reporter for the Halifax Chronicle Herald, a native of Port Hawkesbury, and closely connected to the Gaelic Society of Nova Scotia. Ron MacInnis was invited as well. All three men had written or reported on subjects of Cape Breton culture.

The next man to be invited to the meeting was Evan Lloyd, the director of the Cape Breton Tourism Department, a wing of the provincial tourism agency. The organizers wanted access to the new provincial park for the festival, as well as publicity. They assumed it would have lots of tourism potential. Evan Lloyd was the man for that.

Next on the list was John Allan Cameron from Mabou. He was Dan R. Macdonald's nephew and had acquired a great deal of popularity for his singing and his traditional music played on a twelve-string guitar. He was well known for his performances on CJFX, and the CBC's Gazette show, out of Halifax, and was embarking on a television series, called Ceilidh, also at CBC Halifax.

Another musician to be included, was Archie Neil Chisholm, who was a fiddler and school teacher, popular as the Master of Ceremonies at the Broad Cove Concert and increasingly well known for many other events on radio and television. His brother was the highly respected fiddler, Angus Chisholm and his niece, Maybelle, an accomplished piano accompanist.

Finally, the last three names on the list, Ray MacDonald, Gus MacKenzie and Rod Chisholm were all from Antigonish (although Rod Chisholm was living in Port Hawkesbury at the time.) The first two were mainstays on CJFX radio, along with J.

Clyde Nunn. Rod Chisholm also acted as a “Master of Ceremonies” at many of the Scottish music events.

The very next day, Ray MacDonald wrote Frank giving his wholehearted support to the project.<sup>205</sup> On May 11, John Campbell, a brother and associate of Sandy Campbell, wrote that the Highland Press Company would be “anxious to do all we could to assist” in the “ambitious and worthwhile undertaking.” Although rather than Whycocomagh, he suggested a site “nearer to the industrial area would be more advisable.”<sup>206</sup>

The first meeting was held on June 4<sup>th</sup>. Frank sent out a brief summary to an even longer list of people. Hugh J. MacPherson, an Antigonish provincial court judge was in the loop, as well as Joey Beaton, an avid supporter of the culture as well as a busy piano accompanist.

The summary is a twelve-point statement of intention.<sup>207</sup> It identifies the committee’s purpose – to promote the Cape Breton fiddler. It would seek public reaction to the idea. The venture would be non-competitive. They would seek government assistance. They would contact politicians. They would aim for a three-day festival in July or August, following the Antigonish Highland Games. It would be non-profit, and no remuneration would be available, except for fiddlers invited from Scotland. They would aim to hold it at the provincial park in Whycocomagh. Committee members would seek more volunteers to attend the next meeting. The “multi-cultured aspect of the

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<sup>205</sup> Ray MacDonald, memo to Frank MacInnis, 21 Apr. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>206</sup> John Campbell, memo to Frank MacInnis, 11 May, 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>207</sup> Frank MacInnis, letter, 6 June, 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

project could be a point of interest. /Scotch/, French/, Indian.”<sup>208</sup> They would meet again in July.

Several things are important here that will become characteristics of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association over the years. They would avoid competition, be a non-profit, non-paying group, and they would be multi-cultural. This is clearly evocative of the sentiments expressed by Father Rankin in the documentary. As long as there were Scotch, French and Mi’kmaq fiddlers, there’d always be a Cape Breton fiddler!

Frank MacInnis immediately started talking about the idea on Scottish Strings, his CJFX radio show with Gus MacKinnon. He says he received many phone calls from listeners encouraging the committee to continue. In September, John Campbell of Highlander Press in Sydney offered to do some publicity, including a newspaper feature and an interview on the subject on their Gaelic radio program, Faillte is Furan.<sup>209</sup>

An editorial appeared in The Scotia Sun on August 23, 1972 under the headline “Fiddling in Cape Breton.”<sup>210</sup> It summarizes the history of the tradition in Cape Breton, saying “contrary to some opinion, which is misdirected, the fiddle is alive and extremely well in Cape Breton.” It goes on to mention the plans for a festival of fiddling sometime in the following year.

On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1972, the group received encouragement from a powerful source. The Member of Parliament for Cape Breton-the Highlands, Allan J. MacEachen, was one of the most powerful figures in the federal liberal government of Pierre Elliott

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<sup>208</sup> Frank MacInnis, letter, 6 June, 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>209</sup> John Campbell, memo to Frank MacInnis, 19 Sept. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>210</sup> “Fiddling in Cape Breton,” editorial, The Scotia Sun [Port Hawkesbury] 23 August 1972: 3.

Trudeau. In a letter to Archie Neil Chisholm, he gives them advice as to whom they should contact at the Cape Breton Development Corporation and the Secretary of State to get some kind of assistance. This could cover stages, and facilities or equipment rentals. It would not help in covering the costs of performers coming from Scotland, but might cover Canadian performers. He asks to be kept "informed of the results of these contacts, so that I might follow the progress of your plans and be of assistance, whenever possible."<sup>211</sup>

An article in another newspaper reports on a meeting of the organizing committee for the Festival of Scottish Fiddling which was held in Port Hawkesbury on October 5<sup>th</sup>. It mentions the group will apply for a "LIP [local initiatives project] grant," repeating the optimism surrounding potential government funding.<sup>212</sup>

The letters and phone calls were sent out and on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1972 the committee met again at the home of Judge Hugh MacPherson in St. Andrew's. The tone at this meeting as expressed in the minutes was optimistic and it would serve to further define the nature of the festival.<sup>213</sup> Dave MacLean was there. He was the executive assistant to Allan J. MacEachen. Frank MacInnis, Father Eugene Morris, Rod Chisholm, John G. Gibson, and Father John Angus Rankin were in attendance. The group was told that "Allan J. MacEachen is agreeable to attempts to raise \$15,000 from Government sources." They were still hopeful they could use Whycocomagh as the venue, but had received mixed messages from the province. The committee decided "to keep the

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<sup>211</sup> Allan J. MacEachen, letter to Archie Neil Chisholm, 29 Sept. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>212</sup> "Fiddlers Meeting at Vocational School," no name of publication, c.1974, collection of the Port Hastings Museum, Port Hastings, Nova Scotia.

<sup>213</sup> John G. Gibson, letter to Frank MacInnis, including minutes of meetings on 12-13 Nov. 1972, Frank MacInnis papers.

Festival of Scottish Fiddling strictly to Cape Breton fiddlers. This will be taken to include native Cape Bretoners, Eastern Nova Scotians and Cape Bretoners living outside the province and the country. . . The festival will be strictly Scottish Fiddling.”

This focus indicates the recognition of the makeup of the committee (Cape Breton Island and Eastern Nova Scotia) and the geographic roots and offshoots of the music tradition they were promoting. Judge Hugh J. MacPherson was widely respected as being the successful organizer of the Antigonish Highland Games. Many fiddlers and pipers lived in Antigonish county. In addition, some of the Cape Breton fiddling stars, such as Bill Lamey and Joe Cormier lived in Boston. Others worked in Detroit and Windsor and Toronto. These people would all be encouraged to attend and participate in the festival. These minutes also state that Father John Angus Rankin would be the director of the festival with Joey Beaton as his assistant. Everyone on the committee is asked to forward ten dollars to Frank MacInnis to establish an operating fund.

The optimism of the November 12th meeting is dashed in some ways by one held the very next day with civil servants from the provincial Parks and Tourism departments. An account of this meeting is an “addendum” to the minutes of the meeting of the previous day. The manager of the Whycocomagh Park told Father Eugene and Father John Angus that Whycocomagh was not available: “the festival would mean that the Park would be closed for at least a week, allowing for preparations and post-festival activities. At the height of the Tourist season this is more than the government is prepared to endure.”<sup>214</sup> Perhaps the civil servants had little faith in the success of the venture. Or maybe they were being asked to provide the campground for free, thereby

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<sup>214</sup> Frank MacInnis, personal interview, 16 Aug. 2002.



giving up revenue. Whatever the case, they did not see how hosting a fiddling festival could possibly fit into their tourism mandate at the Park. It was a blow to the organizers who had been hoping for the park from the beginning. The priests drove with the director of Cape Breton Tourism, Bill Chisholm, to the Gaelic College at St. Ann's to discuss using that facility. No decisions were taken, and the year closed with no venue chosen and no firm commitment from government to help pay for the festival.

#### D. Volunteerism and Community Support 1972-73.

In the summer of 1972, while the organizational committee was putting out feelers for government and community support for a festival, Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris took matters into their own hands. Besides the financial means to put on a festival, the most important requirement was a supply of fiddlers. So after the initial positive response from the listening public through CJFX, Father Eugene Morris and Frank MacInnis spent the summer traveling around the island looking for fiddlers and to see if the fiddlers themselves would support the idea. Frank MacInnis recalls what he thought at the time:

The biggest doubt were all these kitchen fiddlers, that never played in public before, ninety percent of them didn't read music. Would they be willing to get up on a stage and perform? That was probably the biggest. I don't think we ever had any doubt the fiddlers were there, it was just to determine whether or not they were willing to. And it's not easy for an older fiddler who never played on a

public stage, all of a sudden to be out in front of a couple thousand people. And probably didn't have a whole lot of confidence in his own playing.<sup>215</sup>

Throughout the summer the two men met fiddlers of different ages and abilities. Frank MacInnis says he always had Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler in the back of his mind: "I think there was an awareness of Ron's program out there, because when we'd say we're thinking of maybe getting a concert or festival together, that 'vanishing fiddler' wasn't right, they'd say, 'you're damn right it wasn't right, let's do something about it,' that sort of thing." Father Eugene Morris recalls his motivation for these travels somewhat differently: "Our main objective was to organize a three day event to which we would try to attract as many fiddlers as possible where they could meet one another, share tunes and just be together in a festive atmosphere of sharing and friendship."<sup>216</sup> In a letter to the author, dated December 11, 2000, Father Morris states that during the year and a half of preparations for the festival, "we never mentioned Ron MacInnis' program but unconsciously it may have spurred us on in our endeavors."<sup>217</sup>

The trips throughout the Island were entirely their own idea, although both men were helped by the fact that they were receiving salaries and could manage their time on their own. Frank was on his two-month summer break from teaching. Father Morris was able to take holiday time to travel outside his parish, and his search for fiddlers in his parish was considered part of his pastoral duties. If there were overnight stays, they had an extended network of friends and family to rely on for a place to sleep. By the end of the

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<sup>215</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>216</sup> Father Eugene Morris, letter to the author, 11 Dec. 2000.

<sup>217</sup> Father Eugene Morris, letter to the author, 11 Dec. 2000.

summer they had a list of almost two hundred fiddlers and began to plan for the practice sessions with Father John Angus Rankin. These would be aimed at familiarizing fiddlers with the notion of playing together, as well as help those who needed to polish up on their tunes.

Donald Gillis of North Sydney says he helped Father Eugene Morris in the North Sydney area of industrial Cape Breton. It was after the Catholic priest had been re-assigned from Inverness County to Cape Breton County.

He was here about two months and didn't know anybody. He came here one night and asked me if I could round up...go see some fiddlers and round them up and try and get a hundred fiddlers to play in Glendale. This was '72, in the summer, and I went around and got 18 fellows here on the North side, but about half of them came to the practice in Glendale.<sup>218</sup>

Donald says some of the people who were approached wanted to be paid. But he could never understand that. Just the notion of having a hundred fiddlers together would make it too expensive if they were all to be paid! He recalls another fiddler who was respected as a good musician, but who was reluctant to play with others who were not as capable as he was. He "said it should be graduated, classified. Number one fiddlers, number two fiddlers, number three and after all that, he said I won't bother with it Father, and furthermore, I won't play with the riffraff."<sup>219</sup>

Still there were lots of other fiddlers willing to meet and practice with Father John Angus. Donald Gillis, who ran a successful fish buying operation, became one of the

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<sup>218</sup> Donald Gillis, 18 June 2002.

<sup>219</sup> Donald Gillis, 18 June 2002.

chauffeurs for the trips to the rehearsals. He provides a colourful description of their travels:

A lot of them were only too glad to come out. The fiddlers were a temperamental bunch. I remember we had a car. The cars were big then. The gas was cheap. I had an LTD. You could put six in without any problem at all. I'd gather up some of these fellas and somebody else would gather up a bunch. At that time we'd have practices all over the island, southwest Margaree, St. Joseph du Moine, Glendale, Iona, Mabou, North Sydney and Sydney and they'd have them in different places so people wouldn't have so far to go, kind of split up. But everywhere we went I'd fill the car and coming back, I'll never forget it, they'd be growling, some of them, 'we played too long, my arm is sore, my neck is sore,' another fella said, 'aw, the tea was cold' and I'd be going along with all this foolishness and driving the car and gritting my teeth.<sup>220</sup>

Donald and Margaret Gillis laugh as they good-naturedly recount these stories. They have been dedicated to this movement since 1972. But back then no one knew it was a movement. It was simply an effort to get one big festival organized. So the wives of the fiddlers would prepare sandwiches and tea for the practices. Others would organize fund-raisers.

This all became extremely important when in the winter of 1973, the Festival of Fiddlers' request for funds was turned down by the Federal government's Local Initiatives Program. At the same time the Secretary of State announced it could not give them any support either. A final letter from Allan J. MacEachen closed the door

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<sup>220</sup> Donald Gillis, 18 June 2002.

completely. He wrote to Frank MacInnis, "I have found that there are no existing programs under which such a grant could be made. I suggest that you make inquiries with the Department of Tourism for the Province of Nova Scotia."<sup>221</sup> This letter contradicts the one MacEachen sent to Archie Neil Chisholm, six months earlier.

Frank MacInnis doesn't know why they were turned down. He points out that many of the applications are never seen by the politicians who may wish to endorse them: "I never gave it much thought. They could have been very skeptical [. . .] there probably wasn't much money going into festivals at that time. I don't think they were considered a tourist attraction."<sup>222</sup>

Father Morris says they often had trouble with government sponsorship: "At that time, the fiddle wasn't all that important. Now they use it for advertising. You can't sell two chickens without a tune. The fiddle was definitely [. . .] they looked down their noses on it. It was kind of hickish."<sup>223</sup>

There is no more correspondence recording further searches for funding in this year. The most important hurdle they faced was finding a venue. At some point, the organizers looked at the Glendale Parish church site. It is in Inverness County, situated right next to the main highway from the Causeway to Baddeck. In the fall of 1972 a bad storm had demolished the small outdoor stage the parish council kept for its outdoor concerts. The organizers offered to rebuild the bleachers and stage at Glendale if they could have the use of the facilities for their concert. Sometime in the spring of 1973 a deal was reached.

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<sup>221</sup> Allan J. MacEachen, letter to Frank MacInnis, 12 Mar. 1973, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>222</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>223</sup> Father Eugene Morris, 16 Aug. 2002. Things change quickly. On April 9, 2003 the provincial government chose a British rock tune for its promotional campaign, instead of a Cape Breton fiddle tune.

The fiddlers were busy practicing their tunes, and the non-musical volunteers had their work cut out for them to prepare the site.

#### E. Glendale 1973.

Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene took guidance from Judge Hugh J. MacPherson, and they worked together with a group of other people devoted to the cause. But in addition to finding willing hands for physical labour, they had the support of institutions like local newspapers. From September of 1972 to June of 1973, Port Hawkesbury's Scotia Sun published a biography of a different Cape Breton fiddler every week. This had never been done before. A Scottish-born, staff reporter with an encyclopedic knowledge of Scottish music, historian John G. Gibson, wrote most of them. Frank MacInnis and Joey Beaton wrote others. On one occasion, Frank and Joey Beaton traveled to Boston to interview one of the fiddlers there for inclusion in the newspaper. These articles carried no overt headlines promoting the festival. But they would have served to make the reading public more aware of the fiddlers in their midst. On June 20, 1973, page one of section two in The Scotia Sun carried an article about Cheticamp fiddler, Arthur Muise. It was the twenty-seventh in the series of Scottish Fiddlers. And just below it, was another headline: "100 VIOLINISTS EXPECTED AT FESTIVAL OF SCOTTISH FIDDLERS."<sup>224</sup> Jeanette Beaton, the secretary of the festival, is quoted as saying a schedule will soon be out.

By early July, posters were printed and distributed. The organizers must have known they had serious competition. The town of Port Hawkesbury had organized the

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<sup>224</sup> "100 Violinists Expected at Festival of Scottish Fiddlers," The Scotia Sun [Port Hawkesbury] 20 June 1973: 2-1.

Straits Festival for the same weekend, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. Some of the organizers loaned the festival money. Frank says they borrowed a few hundred dollars from the local Credit Union. A sawmill operator cut lumber for them to build the stage, willing to wait to be paid. Frank says he wasn't worried about the attendance: "Sort of like Field of Dreams: Build it and they will come."<sup>225</sup> Several men including Frank, Father Eugene and Burton MacIntyre had to move manure piles off the land, mow the grounds, and bale the hay, donating it to a nearby Indian reserve.

On the Wednesday before the festival weekend, both the Port Hawkesbury Scotia Sun and The Cape Breton Highlander of Sydney published articles about the coming event. The latter publication provides very interesting information although there is no by-line attached. It is titled "Flourishing Cape Breton fiddlers festival Friday."<sup>226</sup> This is the first time the word "flourishing" appears in print in reference to the fiddlers of Cape Breton. The adjective is a code word whose face value is obvious. But for the organizers and fiddlers in the traditional music groups it evokes the unspoken and opposing adjective, "vanishing." The article emphasizes that the event harks back to the large gatherings of fiddling competitions, although it stresses this one is not competitive. It informs us that more than two hundred fiddlers have been invited, although it emphasizes fiddlers don't need an invitation and do not need to be able to read music to take part. We learn that the organizers have borrowed a sound system from DEVCO (Cape Breton Development Corporation) which is made available to non-profit groups. It promotes nearby Whycocomagh as a convenient campground and even suggests the Port

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<sup>225</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>226</sup> "Flourishing Cape Breton Fiddlers Festival Friday," The Cape Breton Highlander 4 July 1973: 6.

Hawkesbury Straits Festival, which will be running concurrently might provide additional diversion. The writer says it is hoped the festival will become an annual event. Clearly the sources for the article and the writer seem to be confident it will draw a large crowd. In hindsight, Frank MacInnis and Father Morris admit they had no idea whether they'd get 100 fiddlers to perform or 50. But the practice sessions leading up to the event had gone well and the organizers were totally committed to being there, even if the event fizzled.

It didn't fizzle. The Scotia Sun called it an outstanding success.<sup>227</sup> More than 130 fiddlers participated over the weekend, and it was reported that ten thousand people came to hear the music. They stayed and listened to different groupings of fiddlers, pianists, step dancers and pipers. But unlike the other Scottish festivals around the island, the fiddlers were always the most prominent of the musicians. And the most anticipated event of the festival was the performance of the massed fiddlers for the Sunday finale. Would they succeed in having 100 fiddlers on the stage?

The organizers had even arranged for a professional recording to be made of the finale, so that vinyl records could be pressed. It is obvious from the coverage in the paper and the notes on the cover of the album that Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler's message was never far from their minds. The first line of the article in The Scotia Sun trumpeted "The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was forever laid to rest this past weekend."<sup>228</sup> The album cover, printed after the festival, was even more direct:

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<sup>227</sup> "Festival of Scottish Fiddlers – Outstanding Success," The Scotia Sun [Port Hawkesbury] 11 July 1973: 5.

<sup>228</sup> "Festival," The Scotia Sun 11 July, 1973: 5.



“this festival evolved to disprove the myth of the vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.”<sup>229</sup>

One hundred and two fiddlers squeezed on to the small stage as Joey Beaton and Father John Angus Rankin took them through a wide range of marches, jigs, strathspeys and reels. If some played better than others, it was not apparent. The Scotia Sun article says the real highlight “from a participant’s point of view was the feeling of universal friendliness and co-operation that ran among the fiddlers themselves. There were no ‘stars’ among the ranks as each fiddler was recognized for his own ability and accepted as an equal by all. It was a common sight to see fiddlers helping each other with patience, loan violins, older violinists assist the younger members and general good feeling toward each other.”<sup>230</sup>

Whether they realized it or not, putting more than 20 fiddlers on a stage with a music director was a dramatic change of common practice. But it made a big impact on the musicians. Eddie Rodgers, who was part of the filming of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, was on stage that night at Glendale: “What was special to me was the proudness. I was just proud to be a part and I guess I had played the violin like many of the others and it really was never recognized, but at that time there were guys and gals who we got together, we were on the stage, we were powerful and we played well and we knew it.”<sup>231</sup>

As for Frank MacInnis, he says that evening was a high point in his life:

I remember standing beside Father John Angus in front of a stage and it was a very euphoric experience, it was almost like my spirit was leaving my body.

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<sup>229</sup> “Live Performance,” Festival of Scottish Fiddling LP, Intermedia Services, Festival Records, 1973.

<sup>230</sup> “Festival,” The Scotia Sun 11 July 1973: 5.

<sup>231</sup> Eddy Rodgers, CBC interview with author, 21 Apr. 2001.

I've never felt or experienced anything like it before, because it seemed to be the accumulation of a big effort and it was so successful and just such a tremendous experience. I don't expect I'll ever experience anything like it again.<sup>232</sup>

Frank's testimony has the ring of a Christian charismatic experience. In my youth, I was exposed to the Catholic Challenge which was an offshoot for youth of the Cursillo movement. The word "cursillo" means "course" in English. And that's what the program was for both youth and adults: A course to renew one's acquaintance and commitment to Roman Catholic doctrines. I recall a similar feeling of euphoria after spending a weekend with a small group of teenagers and volunteer teachers. By the end of the weekend we'd had little sleep, and although we felt renewed in our faith, as teens in the 1970s, we felt it would be difficult to go back "out there" and practice our beliefs. However the climax of the weekend was a highly emotional folk Mass attended by more than a hundred other adherents of the cause. The message we received was we were not alone. And it provided a jolt to keep us going in our commitment.

While the fiddling festival was not a sanctioned Roman Catholic event of that nature, it seems obvious that the people involved experienced some of the same things I did. They discovered they were not alone in their love for a musical tradition. Some felt a sense of euphoria resulting from fatigue, satisfaction and the joy of hearing a new sound for the first time. And as we will see, it gave them a jolt to keep them going in their organization for succeeding festivals.

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<sup>232</sup> Frank MacInnis, CBC interview with Marie Thompson, 23 Oct. 2000.

I have interviewed Father Eugene Morris on two occasions. Unfortunately I never asked him about these similarities. But I recently came across a comment he made to (Silver) Donald Cameron in an article in the Weekend Magazine from October 4, 1974:

Father Morris is involved in the charismatic revival in the Catholic Church and he makes the hesitant suggestion that music is a spiritual gift, an outpouring of praise and that it may not be so very far from the gift of speaking in tongues. Perhaps the combination of church, language and music has a more profound importance than one might expect. "Some people," he says, "call this Cape Breton soul music and that's really what it is."<sup>233</sup>

I will explore the role of the Catholic priests in the next section. But in closing this section, simply put, the festival was an unmitigated success. It proved to the skeptics that there were many fiddlers around. There was even a class of eighteen young people under the tutelage of John MacDougall, who had begun to learn to play the fiddle in 1972 and who were able to perform on the Glendale stage. (We'll hear more about that in the next chapter!) The number of fans who turned out elevated the role of the fiddler and provided a rallying point for many more festivals to come. Filmmaker Ron MacInnis was in the crowd. He even performed a few tunes. Father John Angus Rankin knew he was there. That Friday night, the redoubtable pastor stood on the stage and announced to the audience: "If Ron MacInnis is in the audience, I want him to know that the fiddlers are alive and well."<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Silver Donald Cameron, "Old Time Soul," Weekend Magazine 18 Oct. 1975: 14.

<sup>234</sup> Ron MacInnis, CBC interview with author, 27 Oct. 2000.

#### F. Roman Catholic Priests and the Antigonish Movement.

While the Charismatic movement of Roman Catholicism may have had a number of followers in Cape Breton, the teachings and philosophy of Father Moses Coady and Father Jimmy Tompkins had an even wider reach. The two men were committed to a belief in adult education because it would encourage the poor to free themselves from poverty through self-help, education and co-operative thinking. The two men worked through the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Antigonish and Saint Francis Xavier University in the same community. Father Coady achieved more fame than Father Tompkins, but they and their adherents gave rise to a philosophy identified as the Antigonish Movement.

Alexander Laidlaw describes Coady as "the leader of a small group of rebels in Canada who spoke of social change and the inevitability of change in modern times. [. . .] Though tending to conservatism in many matters moral and theological, he became radical when he spoke of the role of the Christian churches in social matters."<sup>235</sup> Laidlaw called him a man before his time, urging nuns to come out of their convents and preaching ecumenism twenty-five years before Vatican II endorsed it. The Coady philosophy, embraced "knowledge for power, education for action, learning for change."<sup>236</sup> He encouraged study groups and rural co-operatives; actively organized credit unions and preached the notion that power and influence could come through the concerted efforts of people in groups with shared interests.

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<sup>235</sup> Alexander F. Laidlaw, The Man From Margaree (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971) 12.

<sup>236</sup> Laidlaw 17.

Those who knew him say he spent little time promoting the arts. Father Eugene Morris said "he was interested in the arts but he felt that people couldn't enjoy the arts if they were hungry."<sup>237</sup> Indeed, if Coady believed in the inevitability of change, he might have been skeptical of those who attempted to hold on to tradition such as Scottish or Cape Breton fiddling. But the very things he taught about organizing co-operative groups of rural citizens would be invaluable tools for the organizers of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. Many of the Roman Catholic priests who worked in Cape Breton in the 1970s came from Cape Breton. They usually did part of their university/seminary work at St. Francis Xavier University. They would all have had contact with Moses Coady. Indeed, Father Morris was trying to organize co-op housing in Port Hawkesbury in 1971 at the time of the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

Quite apart from the Antigonish movement many of the Catholic priests in Inverness and Cape Breton Counties liked traditional Scottish music. Some of them were dancers; some were fiddlers; some were piano players and educated musicians. They did not discourage dances, although they were wary of the drinking and alcoholism that sometimes went with music.

Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris attest to a situation that bears more study at another time. They believe that up until about 50 years ago, the Catholic clergy in Cape Breton did not get as involved with community events as they do now. But after the World War Two they did more to encourage summer parish picnics, dances and concerts. It was a way for the parish councils to raise money and to celebrate, as the clergy saw it, the parishioners' God-given talents.

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<sup>237</sup> Father Eugene Morris, 16 August, 2002.

Against this backdrop, Father Eugene Morris and Father John Angus Rankin had no trouble justifying the organization of a fiddlers' festival as part of their pastoral duties. Traveling around looking for fiddlers, or encouraging them to meet for rehearsals became part of the job. They were not alone. After the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, the parish priest in Mabou, Father John Allan Gillis, announced from the pulpit that he would give fiddles away to anyone who wished to learn how to play.<sup>238</sup> Ray MacDonald of CJFX radio says all of this was natural: "A lot of Coady's success, the early beginnings, a lot of that was based on kitchen meetings and small gatherings: who do you ask, who do you go to, it's always the power of the people." At the same time, Father Morris says he saw an opportunity to encourage kitchen fiddlers who were intimidated by the abilities and reputations of some of the better-known performers: "I was in some way trying to help people to see that if they can play or dance or sing, this is something given to them by the Creator, and it's something to be shared, not so much MY gift."<sup>239</sup>

As for Father John Angus Rankin, he was a proud Gaelic speaker and musician. He even told Ron Caplan that when he got mad he was like Moses Coady.<sup>240</sup> That's what happened after he saw Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. Ron MacInnis says Father Rankin usually scolded him when they met afterwards, although in later years they came to like and respect each other. But Father Rankin took on a task which had never been done before: to direct large groups of fiddlers with wide differences in ability and style

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<sup>238</sup> "100 Years Makes a Difference – Scottish Fiddling Flourishes," The Scotia Sun 29 Aug. c.1973: 2, 4.

<sup>239</sup> Father Eugene Morris, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>240</sup> Father John Angus Rankin, "With Father John Angus Rankin" Cape Breton's Magazine 45: 69.

to make the music sound stirring and united. He had to earn their trust. They had to know he wouldn't make them look foolish, either on an individual basis or as a group: "If it wasn't for the fiddlers, I'd be nobody. They know I like music; they know I know a little bit about music. They know I'll never stick them anywhere. Even if I have a hundred of them, I have a pretty good idea of all the tunes they have. [. . .] It just happens that they'll play their hearts out for me."<sup>241</sup>

One of the other characteristics that gave them satisfaction was how inclusive the group was of religious and ethnic backgrounds. Frank MacInnis estimates about three quarters of the group was Roman Catholic. The rest were for the most part Scottish Presbyterian. Many of the Protestants were Gaelic speakers or from Gaelic speaking backgrounds. This helped in the sharing of interests, in spite of religious differences. In some way, it is surprising that these Protestants were willing to work in a group which was dominated so completely by Roman Catholics and their clergy. The priests were visible as organizers and would not hesitate to incorporate a Christian message into the motivation for playing. Yet Father Morris maintains that denominational religion was not an important element: "After the first few festivals, even the most staunch non-Catholics became very comfortable with the clergy. Even if we would have a Mass, and we would have a group of fiddlers playing at a Mass, they would be in there playing."<sup>242</sup>

Still, there were some Protestant fiddlers who would not perform on Sundays. And in 1983, they would encounter direct opposition from certain Presbyterian churches to the establishment of the annual festival at St. Ann's College, which had long been considered

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<sup>241</sup> Father John Angus Rankin, Cape Breton's Magazine, 45: 69.

<sup>242</sup> Father Eugene Morris, 16 Aug. 2002.

a Protestant institution. Father Morris admits at times they would forget that certain people are still very suspicious of music and dancing, especially on Sundays: "That [the move to St. Ann's] was a pretty bold step on our part. But we were almost assuming too much. Maybe we weren't as sensitive as we should have been because when you look back at it now, they didn't have much exposure and in some other Protestant groups, this dancing and fiddling is . . ." Father Morris pauses. But Frank MacInnis finishes the sentence. ". . . From the devil!"<sup>243</sup>

The North American Roman Catholic Church in the 60s and 70s was motivated by the spirit of ecumenism promoted by Vatican II. A headline in The Cape Breton Post in January of 1971 announced on the front page of the paper that the Anglicans and Catholics were close to an agreement on shared liturgy. Ray MacDonald adds it was all part of the times:

Don't forget what was happening in the world, in the country: the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was in the 60s, and the whole ecumenical movement in the Church. [. . .] People began to say to each other "why should we be small about this [religious differences]. We're all in the same boat, and we're trying to get it done. . ." They looked at the Acadians and the situation and began to feel for them, and say that was unjust and so we have to kind of respond to that and I think that was happening anyway. So it wouldn't be unusual for it to happen in Glendale if it was happening everywhere else on another level.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Father Morris and Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>244</sup> Ray MacDonald, personal interview, 6 June 2002.



### G. Conclusion.

Despite the local activity of the Clergy and their parishes, the organizers of the first Glendale concert worked very much outside of the wider view of the Roman Catholic Bishop or the clerical establishment of St. Francis Xavier University. The Antigonish Movement may have provided organizers with the tools to reach their goals, but a lack of formal support from the big institutions remained an irritant for many years. In the meantime, local priests did not hesitate to elevate the status of the kitchen fiddlers. There was no longer a need for them to play "second fiddle" to the first rung players. And by encouraging them to step forward, it would keep their numbers at a critical mass. Once they were visible, it would be a lot harder for them to "vanish."

## VI. CAPE BRETON FIDDLERS: COMMITTEE TO ASSOCIATION 1973-1983.

*There is a 'Celtic revival' in the area now, fostered largely by government grants, and the younger children are taught Gaelic words in the classroom for a few brief periods during each month. It is a revival that is very different from our own, and it seems like so much else, to have little relevance for us and to have largely passed us by.*

From "The Closing Down of Summer" in As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.<sup>245</sup>

### A. Introduction.

"The Closing Down of Summer" was published in 1986 and describes a period in the mid to late 1970s when the Gaelic language was taught in primary schools in certain parts of Inverness County. Yet the government funding for the language classes lasted only a few short years. At the same time, various government agencies began to support, at less expense, the teaching of traditional fiddling. Government also jumped on the concert bandwagon. Never again would the fiddlers have any trouble getting some level of subsidy for their event.

The passage from "The Closing Down of Summer" distinguishes between the artificial revival paid for by government and the actual revival the miners practiced:

I had been working as part of a crew in Uranium City all winter and had been so long without proper radio reception that I knew nothing of the music of that time's hit parade. There was always a feeling of mild panic then, on hearing whole dance floors of people singing aloud songs that had come and flourished since my departure and which I had never heard. As if I had been on a journey to the land of the dead.[. . .] Musically most of us have gone, instead back to the Gaelic songs remembered from our early youth. It is these songs that we hum

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<sup>245</sup> Alistair MacLeod, As Birds 19-20.

now on the hotness of this beach and which we will take with us on our journey when we go.

We have perhaps gone back to the Gaelic songs because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar.<sup>246</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the work of the ad hoc organization to which the first Glendale Fiddling festival gave birth. Many of its outer trappings and activities may have been, in later years, part of an artificial, government-sponsored revival. But it is my belief the evidence shows the revival succeeded because the music spoke in a voice which was “privately familiar” to all the people who participated, young and old alike.

#### B. From Single Goal to Broader Goals: Reflected in Archives and Articles.

Frank MacInnis says it took him two days to recover from the dehydration and exhaustion following the Glendale festival. But within several weeks the organizing committee had agreed there would be another festival. Long-play records of the festival were pressed and made available for sale. By the fall, Frank began receiving cards and letters that would ultimately fill many boxes in his basement, as an ever-increasing number of people from North America and Europe became aware of the Cape Breton Fiddlers.

It took six years before they incorporated themselves as the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association, although the name had been in wide usage before 1979. At that point, when it registered its name, the group was committed to holding concerts and ceilidhs

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<sup>246</sup> Alistair MacLeod, *As Birds* 19.

throughout each year, all the while rehearsing for the big “100 fiddler concert” to be held every two years.

But before that, they had to stay in touch with each other. The Committee For Cape Breton Fiddlers instituted a Newsletter. Printed in October, 1973, Newsletter No. 1 states its goal. The organizers hope it will “act as a unifying force so that all those with an appreciation of Scottish Music will be able to maintain a closer link with each other and that the good spirit arising from the Glendale Festival will continue to flourish and grow.”<sup>247</sup> Frank MacInnis says that for the first few years he was the one who put them together, using the cut and paste method! It would be a simple, one or two page information sheet with news of births, deaths, marriages and musical events. Newsletter No. 2 in February, 1974, is the first one of the year, and congratulates participants at a Ceilidh which was held in Glendale on November 25, 1973.<sup>248</sup>

Newsletter No. 2 establishes that “the committee” met on a regular basis, and that the next “gathering” of fiddlers and their wives would be on February 24<sup>th</sup> 1974. It announced that fiddle classes were underway and that the initial enrollment had risen to “approximately” 200 students. It said the “committee” was planning the next “one hundred fiddler Festival” for the summer of 1975. The Committee was made up of ten people, eight men and two women. All but one of the men had been part of the original response group in 1972. Burton MacIntyre became involved in 1973, as did Anne Marie MacDonald and Jeanette Beaton.

Finally the newsletters provided a collection of tunes, new and old, which were

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<sup>247</sup> Committee for 100 Fiddlers, Newsletter No. 1, Oct. 1973.

<sup>248</sup> Committee for 100 Fiddlers, Newsletter No. 2, Feb. 1974.

transcribed by musicians and/or photocopied. Some were taken directly from the few collections of music which a small but select group of people had in their possession. Others were new or unpublished compositions written by local fiddlers. This became one of the most important roles for The Cape Breton Fiddler newsletter over the succeeding years. While it was clear that not all of the fiddlers were able to read music, many others were. But their exposure to a wider repertoire had been limited by the lack of printed material. It is true that many tunes were available to be learned by listening to recordings. But the newsletter became a new source for old tunes and a new outlet for the publication of new tunes. Frank received many offerings of music from a variety of individuals. Not all of them could be included in the Newsletter. Most of this chapter relies on information obtained from 370 items I perused in several boxes of material in Frank MacInnis' possession. They include personal correspondences, newsletters, bills, photographs, financial statements and newspaper articles. I arranged 194 items chronologically. The remaining 176 items had already been roughly organized in a series of file folders by Frank and I itemized those items accordingly.

Obviously, while this is a valuable archive, it is haphazard and it does not represent the complete body of material in other people's possession. But I believe that relying on this single archive for this thesis goes a long way to describing the activities, problems and inter-actions the fiddlers association experienced during the ten-year period following the first Glendale Festival. I will not go into all of it. Rather I will try to touch on the significant contributions the "committee" and later "association" made to the fiddle tradition, as well as its evolution. I have attempted to fill some of the gaps with

information from interviews with various people. Nonetheless, the dated documents from the time tend to be more reliable than the memories of individuals thirty years later.

### C. Fiddling lessons – John MacDougall.

One of the biggest changes encouraged by the Cape Breton Fiddlers was the acceptance of group fiddling lessons, especially in Inverness County. Professor James MacDonald had already been conducting fiddle classes in the Sydney area.

The “Fiddlers Committee” did not even introduce the effort. They’d been beaten to the punch by Father Colonel MacLeod of Dunvegan, Inverness County, when in 1972 he hired well known fiddler John MacDougall to teach a class of young people.

MacDougall says Father MacLeod was prompted to do this after Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler broadcast. MacDougall’s first class included John Morris Rankin who’d been featured in the documentary and who later became one of the tradition’s most admired players. MacDougall, who is in his late 70s now, recalls his old students with a somewhat sanguine viewpoint: “They’d come and make the best of it. They were very nice. Some of them got good. John Morris Rankin was my first. Neil Beaton was one of them. There was others too that could have been good. They’re still playing at home I guess.”<sup>249</sup> John’s class performed at the first Glendale festival. But the organizing committee had had time to think a bit more about the future. If it hadn’t been for that class of 18 students, formed in 1972, there would have been very few young people on the stage in 1973. Frank MacInnis says:

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<sup>249</sup> John MacDougall, personal interview, 6 June 2002.

Looking back there probably weren't that many young ones, and probably not a whole lot of opportunity for them to play because the fiddlers I mentioned, they were in their fiddling prime at that time, so they were the ones in demand at dances, so there probably wasn't the opportunity like the young people have today to get out there. So I guess there weren't a lot of young people playing at the time.<sup>250</sup>

In January 1974 the provincial department of Education sent the Committee a cheque for \$2,925 to pay for a teacher to provide free fiddle lessons. The covering letter says "we consider this to be a radically different project and might have a bearing on the financing of other projects." He asked the committee to provide information on the different students and their abilities. It underlines an inherent bias in the education department in favour of classical music instruction and against the more colloquial and non-literate performance of traditional forms.

Still, \$2925 was a lot of money in those days, and John MacDougall embarked on a winter of travel throughout the island. On May 10, Frank MacInnis reported to the director of the program at the Department of Education that 240 people had begun classes in January and that it was deemed to be a success. Later that month, A.G. Scott-Savage writes back saying he will drop in on the lessons at some point to see how they are conducted. In November of 1974, the department sends the Committee another cheque, this time for \$4000. A year later Frank MacInnis drafts another letter to Mr. Scott-Savage asking for continuing support, as many of the novice fiddlers are moving up. But

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<sup>250</sup> Frank MacInnis, CBC interview with author, 23 Oct. 2000.

in September, Scott-Savage replies that there will be no more money. Government cutbacks mean that “cultural projects will not be considered.”<sup>251</sup>

This was a setback, but by this point the Committee had staged another big festival and were maintaining an operating budget of more than five thousand dollars. John MacDougall’s teaching efforts were joined by Stan Chapman of Antigonish. The Fiddlers’ committee continued to raise money to pay the teachers and make the lessons either free or very inexpensive.

These lessons and the way in which the fiddle music was transmitted became the subject of a doctoral dissertation published in 1985 by Virginia Hope Garrison. Her work provides a valuable glimpse into the informal world of the fiddle classes. She interviewed a twenty-nine-year-old student, Lionel Leblanc, on July 2, 1979. He had first learned to play the violin on his own, by ear, and continued playing throughout his teenage years despite the fact that his peers did not appreciate his music. Leblanc recall that “the rest that grew up around there [Belle Cote], hardly any of them had any interest in violin music. It was all for the rock[. . .] back when Elvis Presley was big, that was just the big thing.”<sup>252</sup> He goes on to tell Garrison that he liked the teacher’s method:

I think if I was pressured into learning this part of a class, and we all had to play the one tune, and just a bunch of theory and write it all out on the board or whatever the case may be,[. . .] I probably wouldn’t stick with it.[. . .] I think if I

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<sup>251</sup> A.G. Scott-Savage, letter to Frank MacInnis, September, 1975.

<sup>252</sup> Lionel Leblanc, interviewed by Virginia Garrison, “Traditional and Non-Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices in Folk Music,” 166.



didn't have individual attention from John in the class, that I wouldn't have progressed to where I did this winter, anyway.<sup>253</sup>

Garrison states that it was natural for those who were frightened by the message in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler (that modern society was encroaching on traditional fiddle music) to turn to "education – teaching fiddling – to insure its survival."<sup>254</sup> She warns that fiddle classes can only accomplish this if they are combined with several other things. Concerted efforts should be made to expose young people to all the forms of Scottish style music and dance both at home and in the community. Garrison writes that the survival and revival of the tradition will depend as much on the transmission process as the performance context. The transmission of the tradition should be a

combination of teaching and learning practices and contexts – [and] should be such to insure that the learner of this folk music tradition continues to be highly self-motivated, loves the music he hears and plays, assumes responsibility for his own learning and is aware of his own natural talent so that he may be encouraged and challenged to develop it – for the joy of the music.<sup>255</sup>

Garrison relied on Frank MacInnis and members of the fiddler's associations for some of her survey work. She met them at their semi-regular rehearsals for the upcoming festivals.

These rehearsals became another new and innovative way for young fiddlers to find encouragement, as well as for older, less accomplished fiddlers to acquire new skills. In

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<sup>253</sup> Lionel Leblanc, interviewed by Virginia Hope Garrison, 170.

<sup>254</sup> Garrison, 274.

<sup>255</sup> Garrison 297.

order to perform as a large group, the fiddlers had to have a minimum repertory of tunes. They would all have to have an idea of the tempo required for the performance, and would have to know at what point they would switch from one tune to the next. Father John Angus Rankin was responsible throughout the 1970s for choosing the line-up of melodies that would be played at each big concert. The sheet music would be distributed via the Newsletter. For those who could not read music, tapes were provided, so they could learn by listening. Then, several times a year they would get together at a central point to practice.

Kyle MacNeil was only eight years old at the time of the broadcast of The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddle. He was encouraged to learn the violin by his parents, but was conscious of the peer pressure against it. Two years later, he began attending the rehearsals of the fiddlers group along with the adults:

When I first started going to the practices I was ten years old. It was quite overwhelming. All the top fiddlers would be there. It was very intimidating. But every one made you feel right at home; they put you right up to the front of the row. We all have pictures home where we're all sitting in front. But the biggest influence from that period for me was the tunes. You were forced to play along with them, so every practice you went to, you got a little better at playing the tunes. Because of that, my repertoire is definitely a lot larger than it would have been without that.<sup>256</sup>

Garrison reported that by 1985, many of the fiddle lessons had stopped. But the group sessions that Kyle MacNeil describes never did stop. While I have not surveyed the

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<sup>256</sup> Kyle MacNeil, interview for CBC with Marie Thompson, 12 Oct. 2000.

period from 1985 to the present day, it seems apparent to me that fiddle lessons are available on an ad hoc basis. Some years there are more than others; John MacDougall no longer teaches; Stan Chapman does, although his classes are in Antigonish (and he retired from full-time teaching in 2002.) In 1982 the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association pressured the Gaelic College at St. Anne's to offer fiddling during their summer program. They felt it was just as important to the Highland arts offered at the college as Highland Dancing. In 1983 fiddle lessons were offered there for the first time. The Cape Breton Fiddlers Association does not sponsor classes now but many of its members are regular teachers at the summer schools. But the only youth group recognized as a member of the association is, ironically, based in Guysborough on the Eastern mainland of Nova Scotia. Their teacher is Eddie Rodgers, one of the fiddlers present for the filming of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. He did not make a career of fiddling. But after he retired from his job in Sydney with the federal government he chose to begin teaching students in Guysborough where his family has roots. He insists that his students travel regularly across the causeway to attend the events of the Association and rehearsals for the festivals that have now become annual events.

#### D. Money and Social Acceptance – Achieving Identity.

Frank MacInnis was one of several on the committee who had signing authority on spending matters. However he accepted responsibility for many of the smaller spending decisions. As stated previously there was no president or committee chair. Frank MacInnis said he wanted to be involved in a direct way, even though he was not a fiddler.

I've always been a leader, all my life. When I was a kid, when there was a ball game to be organized, I'd be the leader, the coach, manager, player, ball, hockey, any organization I was always in, I always – not that I went looking for it, I was just willing to do it and never mind it. And some people are happy if some people do that. I guess that's just what happened. So if anybody inquired about the fiddlers, Fr. John Angus would say, "well you better call Frank" and it just kind of happened. But I never thought that in our organizing group, I never felt that I was the leader, it was a group of equals always. Each one would take an area of responsibility, and say well I'll look after this and I'll look after that, and that's the way it worked and I think that's the only way it would have worked.<sup>257</sup>

At the end of 1977, they had taken in a total of \$22,857. This amount included the balance left over from 1976 combined with ticket receipts and the sale of records. Their total expenditures for the year, which included advertising, wages, phone hook-up for the festival, grounds rental and newsletters, was \$16,950.89. This left a balance at the end of the year of \$5,906.69. (Admission to the festival was three dollars per person. Fiddlers and their families were admitted free of charge.) This is a sample of the accounts Frank kept in a scribbler amongst his files:

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<sup>257</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

## Cape Breton Fiddlers Association Financial Statement (1979) [handwritten]

Total receipts:	\$30231.85
Total expenditures:	\$28097.20
Balance Dec 31/79	\$ 2134.65
Receipts: Balance, Jan 1, 79	\$ 2562.20
Records	\$ 1410.00
Festival	\$26259.65
Expenditures:	
Total expenses for ceilidhs and festival (includes food, refreshments, rentals, etc.)	\$ 4328.15
Newsletters	\$ 2760.68
Postage Expense	647.13
Telephone expense	472.93
Flowers, tributes, plaques, etc.	774.34
Workers at festival (collectors, parkers, etc.)	\$ 2760.33
Advertising (radio, TV, newspapers)	\$ 1326.91
Trip to PEI (bus, motel, meal)	\$ 1131.71
Rental to Glendale Parish	\$ 4200.00
Material and Labour for new stage and canteen For Festival	\$ 5962.67
Fee for moving Building purchased by CBFA	\$ 2000.00
Miscellaneous (violin lessons, pre-festival tapes, Sound system, fire dept., St. John Ambulance, piano Tuner, backhoe, etc.	\$ 1768.35
Balance in bank Dec. 31, 1979	\$ 2134.65

Besides keeping track of many of the bills, Frank handled most of the correspondence. He initiated some. For example on October 2, 1974, he received a letter, in reply to his own, from Weekend Magazine's managing editor, promising to assign a writer to cover the festival the following year.<sup>258</sup> This would be valuable publicity. In 1975, the festival went ahead and made two major accomplishments in the area of public relations and "myth-building." First of all the committee paid for a thirty page newspaper entitled Fiddlers to the Fore written and edited by local writer and Gaelic

<sup>258</sup> Sheena Patterson, letter to Frank MacInnis, 2 Oct. 1974, Frank MacInnis papers.

culture specialist, John G. Gibson.<sup>259</sup> There were two articles in it that he didn't write. One was a reprint of an article in the Chronicle Herald by Linden MacIntyre, entitled "Hard Times bring out beauty, verve in Islanders' music." The other, on page three, is by Frank MacInnis, entitled, "Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler???...Never!!!"

In the spring of 1971 the followers of Cape Breton style violin music were jolted by a CBC radio and television production entitled "The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler." The theme of this production by Ron MacInnis of Halifax was the gradual phasing out and eventual extinction of this particular style of music.

The immediate result of this presentation was an aroused Cape Breton public and the formation of a Committee by a group determined to disprove the myth of the Vanishing Fiddler. This they did, in convincing fashion in July of 1973 when over one hundred and thirty fiddlers appeared in a three-day Festival of Scottish Fiddling.<sup>260</sup>

This is the first time that the "myth" is deliberately set out in print. Ron MacInnis is identified as someone "from Halifax," suggesting that he is not from Cape Breton. It is a subtle reminder that he is viewed as an outsider. The story is recounted again and given a narrative in the article by Silver Donald Cameron published in the 18 October 1975 issue of Weekend Magazine. In this version, Cameron starts with Ron MacInnis, but being someone "from away" himself, he emphasizes Ron's "Cape Breton ancestry."

MacInnis, a black-bearded young Haligonian of Cape Breton ancestry, made a film for CBC television four years ago. Called *The Vanishing Fiddler*, it

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<sup>259</sup> John G. Gibson, ed., Fiddlers to the Fore (Port Hawkesbury, Scotia Group Publications, 1975).

<sup>260</sup> Frank MacInnis, "Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler???...Never!!!" Fiddlers to the Fore, ed., John G. Gibson (Port Hawkesbury: Scotia Group Publications, 1975) 3.

was a tribute to what MacInnis perceived as a musical tradition killed off by records and television, by good roads and mass communications. In Cape Breton the Gaelic language was virtually gone, the French language was going, and the music was fading. Mass society levels us all out; as the philosopher George Grant observes, liberal capitalism and its technology are the universal solvent of tradition.

But another mood is abroad these days, a mood of rebellion against mass culture, a mood which treasures human difference and local tradition. In Cape Breton the response to MacInnis' film was a slightly shamefaced roar of outrage.

The fiddlers are not vanishing. They *can't!*<sup>261</sup>

Aside from the fact that he got the title and the airdate wrong, Cameron does a good job in the article of probing the motivation of the people involved in the revival and promoting it himself.

In 1975 the "organizing committee" decided to find out more about the subscribers to the newsletter as well as ask them some questions about the committee makeup. The September newsletter included a questionnaire. It asks for comments and criticism on the summer festival and requests comments and suggestions for the newsletters and the ceilidhs. It wonders what readers think of the idea of a music resource center. The questionnaire invites comments on how money is spent and solicits demand for violin lessons or interest in a summer school at the Gaelic College. It seeks interest in a fiddler's trip to Scotland.

One of the more interesting subjects raised in the questionnaire is whether or not a

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<sup>261</sup> Silver Donald Cameron, "Old Time Soul," Weekend Magazine, 18 Oct. 1975: 14.

fiddler should be on the Committee. At first I found this a strange question, because I'd assumed that at least one person on the committee was a fiddler. (This was the case in 1972 when Archie Neil Chisholm joined the organizing group, although by 1975 he was no longer part of it.) Frank MacInnis, however, says the subject was an issue for some people at the time:

I think the reasoning behind that was, the people on the committee, none of them were fiddlers and fiddlers have some [pause] quirks and characteristics; would we better not to have a fiddler on there that might take a specific stand that might alienate other fiddlers? Basically something like that, and we did go along for a couple of years and finally decide it would be better if we did have a survey and I think as a result of the survey we did start having fiddlers on the committee.<sup>262</sup>

Frank says the fiddler presence on the committee didn't make much difference one way or another. In fact in later years, it was one of the few requirements that became permanent, so clearly the fiddlers felt it did make a difference to have a "representative" on the board.

Establishing a simple "raison d'être" and doing a survey are all part of building an institution. In many ways, it could be seen as the invention or construction of a tradition. However, throughout this time period, there was more emphasis placed on the adherence to the old ways rather than on creating new traditions. But in effect, that's what was happening. Gathering the fiddlers together for massed concerts was entirely new in Cape Breton, as was the sharing of tunes among "kitchen" fiddlers from different parts of the

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<sup>262</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.



island and eastern Nova Scotia. While these new practices might have been considered radical and daring, the motivation was to maintain and “conserve” older values and music styles.

Of course, at the same time, the fiddlers and their fans came to know who and where they were. In May 1974, even before the “Committee of 100 Fiddlers” did their survey, a traditional piano accompanist from Sydney, Doug MacPhee, put together the Cape Breton Talent Directory. It was funded by the Cape Breton Development Corporation and the Industrial Cape Breton Board of Trade. It was the first one of its kind. It included names, phone numbers and sometimes addresses of musicians, singers, equipment rental agencies, set designers, square dance callers and a wide assortment of halls and venues. The emphasis seems to be on industrial Cape Breton and Inverness County. It gives us an interesting glimpse into the popularity of music of any kind in Cape Breton. The directory included 54 “Scottish” fiddlers and 31 piano players (Scottish accompanist and soloist). Of the 54 “Scottish” fiddlers, 20 were in the Sydney area. At the same time, there were 67 dance bands listed, 53 of them based in the Industrial area of Cape Breton. Some of the band names were: The Blue Barrons, the Civil Intervention Band, Grin and Barett, Miller’s Jug, The Savoy’s, the Trade Winds Orchestra and the Yachts Men. Of the 67 bands, four had leaders who were well-known Scottish fiddlers: Marie and Theresa [MacLellan], The Rankin Orchestra (its leader was twelve-year-old John Morris Rankin), Winnie Chafe and Co., and Lee Cremo’s Orchestra. There was another category for Cape Breton Fiddlers (Country and Old Time). There are only nine names listed here, although a note says some of them also play Scottish music, like Lee Cremo. For a region of high unemployment and low

income, and a population of 170,000 in 1971,<sup>263</sup> the support for music, at least from hopeful musicians, was high!

But let's take one more look at the 54 Scottish fiddlers in MacPhee's directory. I was able to cross-reference their ages and identities through a list compiled in 1981 by Allister MacGillivray, for his book The Cape Breton Fiddler.<sup>264</sup> Only six people listed in the 1974 directory were born after 1950. Ron MacInnis has claimed that he could only find two in 1971. Given that only six are registered in 1974, perhaps that's not surprising. Kinnon Beaton was eighteen in 1974. John Morris Rankin was fifteen. Brenda Stubbert was fifteen; Arthur Muise was twenty-four; Rannie MacLellan was twenty-three, and Kyle MacNeil was eleven! Others of that generation, not in the 1974 directory include Dave MacIsaac, and Jerry Holland (although at the time neither were living in Cape Breton), Clifford Morais, and John Ferguson.<sup>265</sup>

There is no indication in Frank's records of how many people subscribed to the Newsletter in the 1970s. The current secretary-treasurer, Betty Matheson says it is stable now at about 500 people, (350 within Cape Breton). But Frank's boxes are full of letters from all across North America advising him of changes of address, or new names for the list, or simply expressing appreciation for his work. In the early days there are many letters which include hand-written notations of fiddle tunes, or requests for information about where music can be purchased.

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<sup>263</sup> Department of Development, Government of Nova Scotia, Perspectives Nova Scotia (Halifax: Government of Nova Scotia, 1971) Table 1.3, 6

<sup>264</sup> Allister MacGillivray, The Original Cape Breton Fiddler (Marion Bridge: Sea-Cape Music, first reprint. 1997) 179-187.

<sup>265</sup> Kate Dunlay, e-mail to the author, 2 Jan. 2003.

One of the most obvious indications of social acceptance and recognition for the Cape Breton Fiddlers happened in 1976. For the first time, the Olympic Games were held in Canada. Governments spent millions of dollars on cultural events and thousands of dignitaries came to visit. One of them was Queen Elizabeth II. The Committee for 100 fiddlers was invited to play for her on July 16 in Halifax. This was a high point for many of the fiddlers who had never performed in such a fashion outside Cape Breton, let alone for Royalty. (One member of the group at the time, who requested anonymity, chose not to go. He points out the original title of "God Save The Queen" was the Hymn of Thanksgiving for Victory at Culloden Moor, first performed in September of 1746, only five months after the battle.<sup>266</sup>) Still this person did not attempt to dissuade others. It was felt that the recognition afforded the group was an honour.

It was compounded a week later when a smaller group of fiddlers traveled to Montreal to perform as part of the Cultural Olympics sponsored by the Federal government. (The group included John Morris Rankin, Greg Smith, Stan Chapman, Sandy MacInnis and Theresa MacLellan, Buddy MacMaster, Donald Angus Beaton, Father Francis Cameron and Joey Beaton.)<sup>267</sup> Towards the end of the year, a newspaper editorial congratulated the work of the organizing committee for the Scottish Fiddling festival:

Some 200 fiddlers participated in the last biennial festival which was held in 1975. Next year's edition of the gathering will be the third with enthusiasm

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<sup>266</sup> "God Grant that Marshall Wade,/ Shall by thy mighty aid,/ Victory Bring./ And may he sedition hush,/ And like a torrent rush,/ Rebellious Scots to crush,/ God Save the King."

<sup>267</sup> Photograph by Frank MacInnis, July 1976, Frank MacInnis papers.

mounting for what has been described as “the most exciting, most popular and most accomplished form of folk music being played in Cape Breton.”<sup>268</sup>

At the time of the next festival, July 8, 9, and 10 in 1977, the committee had obtained a sponsor to pay for a program. It was Belvedere Tobacco. They printed up little brochures, with the company logo and the schedule for the festival on the front page. Inside, the history of the movement was recounted, almost word for word from the 1975 Fiddlers to the Fore article. The story of the documentary and the response it provoked is repeated: “The immediate result of this presentation was an aroused Cape Breton public and the formation of a Committee by a group determined to disprove the myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.”<sup>269</sup> In addition to the small cardboard program brochure, the organizers arranged for a forty-page newspaper to be printed for the Festival. It was called Highland Heritage and included a wide variety of original and reprinted articles on Cape Breton Scottish culture. It was published by John Gibson and Joey Beaton. The 1977 Festival had lots of local media coverage. CBC Television attended. The Cape Bretoners hosted visitors from Scotland: members of the Inverness Strathspey and Reel Society, on their first visit to Canada. (See next section.) The Committee received letters from both the Nova Scotia Tourism Department and the Minister of Social Services (who happened to be a local member of the legislature) congratulating their success.

One interesting letter was from the Catholic Bishop of Antigonish, William Power. Frank MacInnis had complained about the assignment of priests to parishes where their music skills would not be put to good use. Looking back, now, Frank says:

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<sup>268</sup> “Fiddling Festival,” editorial, newspaper unknown, 17 Nov. 1976.

<sup>269</sup> Belvedere: Festival of Scottish Fiddling, program for festival, 1977, Frank MacInnis papers.

It didn't make much sense, because you had Father Allan MacMillan for example, who was a Gaelic scholar and a beautiful Gaelic singer and he put him in Petit de Grat for example. Father Francis Cameron, a great fiddler, put him down in Larry's River. Those people should have been in Judique and Mabou and Glendale and Inverness and Father Angus Morris down in Glace Bay, it just didn't make sense from a cultural point of view, Father Joe Gillis, another great fiddler was up in Pictou County, that was my complaint, that he could have made better use of his priests by putting them in a cultural setting where they would not only tend to the spiritual needs but to the cultural needs.<sup>270</sup>

Bishop Power responded:

While I agree with you that the priest is a member of a community and, therefore, participates in the life of the community and contributes towards it according to his talents, nevertheless this can only be a consideration in the appointment of priests to parishes. However, I wish to assure you that in the measure that it is possible, consideration is given to the ability of a priest and the way in which he may be able to help the community in a cultural dimension at the time of making appointments. Thank you for drawing this matter to my attention. It is indeed important that the cultural dimension of our people be preserved for we cannot live our Christian faith in a vacuum.<sup>271</sup>

Frank MacInnis says he doesn't believe the Bishop got the message, because Cape Breton priests continued to be assigned to places that didn't make sense to the fiddling fans.

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<sup>270</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>271</sup> Bishop William Power, letter to Frank MacInnis, 11 Feb. 1977, Frank MacInnis papers.

In the fall of 1977, an opinion piece in Oran Inbhirnis (Inverness Oran) provoked one of the few controversies surrounding the fiddlers ever to be made public. On July 7, Frank Macdonald wrote an editorial anticipating the 1977 festival of fiddlers at Glendale. He says: "You don't have to be a 'mac' to attend. The proof of the Cape Breton sound is in the ethnic origins of the players. They are fiddlers with French and Indian names from around the Island. These fiddlers won't stand in the shadow of any Campbell or MacLean when it comes to expressing the poetry of Cape Breton in music."<sup>272</sup> This editorial prompted a long and rancorous letter from a "concerned advocate of Cape Breton fiddle music" whose name was withheld by request. The writer suggests that Mr. Macdonald is not a qualified judge to be able to say whether "fiddlers with French and Indian surnames are just as capable as a Campbell or a MacLean when it comes to expressing the poetry of Cape Breton in fiddle music." The letter goes on to state that "there are no longer the outstanding fiddlers of a past generation around.[. . .] the fiddlers of today are not maintaining the original style." Finally the writer is highly critical of the Glendale festival saying it "can be compared to any other media event where the main purpose is to make a buck. . . Your paper refers to the new era of the Cape Breton fiddler. I say it is only a substitute for the real thing – margarine rather than butter!"<sup>273</sup>

This letter provoked three long replies from readers which were published on September 15, 1977. One was from Donna Davis, the second was from Joey Beaton of Mabou, and the third was from Jessie Beaton of Windsor, Ontario.

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<sup>272</sup> "Frank Macdonald's COMMENT," Oran Inbhirnis, 7 July, 1977, Port Hastings Museum collection.

<sup>273</sup> Concerned Advocate, letter, Oran Inbhirnis 8 Sept. 1977, Port Hastings Museum collection.

Donna Davis was a member of the organizing committee for the Fiddlers festival, and for the first time (that I could find) refers to the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. She berates the anonymous critic for what she perceived as an insult towards French and Indian fiddlers. She defends the amount of media attention given to the Glendale festival: "Their purpose in being there was not to sensationalize the Festival but to record for posterity North America's largest Festival of Scottish Fiddling." She further states that the money that was raised at the festival, "will go towards promoting Scottish music – to finance the four hundred plus quarterly newsletters containing latest compositions, the practice sessions and the violin classes." Finally she chastises the "concerned advocate" because such negative comments only serve to discourage the young fiddlers and "comes dangerously close to romanticizing the Gaelic culture. Such misrepresentation and exploitation can only be likened to the Lowlander who took the kilt out of its practical, natural Highland environment and made it fashionable in the ballrooms of Edinburgh."

Joey Beaton takes up the fight by defending the talent of the French and aboriginal violinists in the Scottish tradition. "It is naive to believe that Scottish music has to fountain from only true Scots." Beaton seems to think he knows the anonymous writer because he refers to that person in the female gender, wondering why "she" used the pen name. He, too, upholds the non-profit nature of the Glendale Festival. The last letter from Jessie Beaton refers to 13,000 people who attended the festival, saying they obviously enjoyed the musicians: "Rather than getting the margarine, I think we got the cream of the crop!" Public controversies like this were rare. For the most part they stayed within the circle of the organizing committee. At one point in 1977, the manager

of CJFX complained in writing that the radio station had not been given due recognition at the Festival.

In 1979 the committee finally registered itself with the Nova Scotia Registry of Joint Stocks. Henceforth they would be known as the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. This would aid in their application for grants. If governments were reluctant to support a fiddling festival in 1973, that soon changed. In 1979 the Association applied for \$25,000 through the Canada Works Program. It would employ people to upgrade the grounds at Glendale. The Fiddlers Association would add \$10,000. While I did not find the record stating how much they actually did get, Frank MacInnis states that it was close to the amount they asked for.

Disputes over money would lead to the Cape Breton Fiddlers' departure from the St. Mary's Parish site at Glendale to a new location for their festivals. Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris had negotiated with Glendale Parish Council from the beginning in 1973, paying them rent and a percentage of the proceeds. It was also necessary not to get in each other's way, because Glendale Parish Council had a smaller concert of its own:

So at that time [1974] we went back to Glendale and said why don't we alternate years, you have your concert one year and we'll have our festival the next, and that lasted for the first four or five festivals and then Glendale said, well, we want to have our concert every year, so you have your festival as well, and it just became too much.<sup>274</sup>

In addition, Glendale had been asking for regular increases in the rent paid to them by the Association. So the Fiddlers Association left Glendale for good after the 1981 event.

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<sup>274</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.



Two years later they negotiated an agreement with the Gaelic College at St. Ann's. But this sparked another controversy. Reverend Glenn MacDonald, representing local Presbyterian congregations, wrote to the Board of Directors at the College, complaining about fiddling at the College on Sundays:

While we applaud the efforts of the College to promote and maintain the Scottish culture and traditions; and while we understand, to some degree, the difficulty that the Board of the College experiences in generating and acquiring funds to maintain the facility and programs; we protest in the strongest manner against the Sunday concert which is a part of this Fiddle festival.<sup>275</sup>

Just over a month later, the Chairman of the Board, A.W. MacLeod, replied:

I share your concerns as my roots are also in the Presbyterian tradition. I can however assure you that this is approved to be a single occurrence of its sort this summer and we have no further plans to hold concerts or commercial activities on the Sabbath. The College is struggling financially, indeed its survival could hinge on resolution of our financial condition. It is necessary to experiment with the two day fiddlers' festival, which has to be held on a Saturday and Sunday because the performers are working people who cannot alternatively take days off during the regular work week.<sup>276</sup>

Frank MacInnis had been invited to join the board of directors of the Gaelic College and was anxious to see some of these financial problems resolved. He had already lobbied the college to begin holding fiddle classes as part of their summer school

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<sup>275</sup> Glenn MacDonald, letter to the Board of Directors, Gaelic College, 12 May, 1983, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>276</sup> A.W. MacLeod, letter to Glenn MacDonald, 14 June 1983, Frank MacInnis papers.

activities. This began in 1982. Looking back on this period, both Frank MacInnis and Father Morris admit they had not anticipated the extent of the opposition from the Protestant sector. But as with other things, in the past, they tried to make the music acceptable to everyone. Frank MacInnis says in later years he and Glenn MacDonald became good friends.

Two other issues bear mentioning in the 1980s. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1980, Gertie Coffin wrote to Frank MacInnis inviting the Fiddlers Association to present the First Prize at the First Annual Scottish Fiddle-Playing Competition to be held in Port Hawkesbury on July 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>. The prize was to be donated in memory of Dan R. MacDonald, who died in 1976.<sup>277</sup> Frank MacInnis has a hand-written draft of a letter to be signed by the new secretary treasurer of the Fiddlers Association, Betty Matheson. The letter, dated May 4<sup>th</sup> declines the invitation: "Having examined and discussed your proposal in detail.[. . .] our organizing committee has taken the position that competition of any nature is contrary to the aims and objectives of our association and therefore we cannot encourage or participate in any form of competitive event."<sup>278</sup> They go on to say that one of the articles in the constitution condemns any competition among members. This statement was of interest to me, as the by-laws submitted to the Registry of Joint Stocks in 1979 are a standard form and make no mention of such an article. After discussing this with Frank MacInnis, I realized that there was no such specific article, other than the statement of principles drafted in 1972 for the organizing committee of the first Festival. Yet the opposition to competition had remained so strong and so ingrained that it had

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<sup>277</sup> Gertrude Coffin, letter to Frank MacInnis, 15 Apr. 1980, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>278</sup> Betty Matheson, letter to Gertrude Coffin, 4 May 1980, Frank MacInnis papers.

become an “unwritten” pillar of their organization. In 1981, the organizing committee challenged their old ally, CJFX for its apparent willingness to abandon much of its fiddling programming. In July of that year, Frank MacInnis wrote a covering letter to the new station manager, Dave MacLean, (the former executive assistant to Allan J. MacEachen).<sup>279</sup> It accompanied a brief presented by a “Committee of Concern,” which was dated, in turn, August 10, 1981.<sup>280</sup> The brief contains 20 points which amount to criticism of the radio station, “given the absence of a broadcast policy regarding the transmission of traditional highland music by CJFX radio.” It contains sweeping demands for recognition of the popularity of Scottish music, implying that the station management no longer feels a responsibility to the listener for its role as “educator in a sociologically diverse listening audience.” It asks for language instruction on-air in Gaelic, English and French, directed primarily at pre-school aged children. It demands that CJFX appoint a full time Scottish music consultant and that a weekly ninety minute Celtic music program be added to the broadcast schedule. The reason for this aggressive stance arose out of the new manager’s attempts to water down the amount of fiddle music on air. While none of these demands were actually met, management did reconsider its position and allowed the on-air staff to continue with their old formula, at least for the next few years.

Finally, in 1982, the fiddlers renewed their acquaintance with Ron MacInnis. By this point he was an executive director for the Nova Scotia Medical Society. He was able to act as an impresario to raise funds for the Isaac Walton Killam Children’s hospital in

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<sup>279</sup> Frank MacInnis, letter to Dave MacLean, 13 July 1981, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>280</sup> Committee of Concern, brief presented to Dave MacLean, 12 Aug. 1981, Frank MacInnis papers.

Halifax by mounting an "Evening with the Cape Breton Fiddlers" at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium in the same city. This was repeated in 1985. The show retold the story of the history of Cape Breton fiddling.

In the 1980s and 90s, the Fiddlers Festival became an annual event. Frank MacInnis stayed active on the board until the mid 90s. Father Morris continues to help out at the Festival each summer, but could no longer contribute to the activities on a regular basis because he was transferred to a parish in Central Newfoundland, where he now resides. During the 1980s the Fiddlers Association took part in numerous trips around North America, sponsored research and violin lessons, and maintained annual bus trips to the Rollo Bay Concert sponsored by their counterparts in Prince Edward Island.

I cannot go into detail for this period because it is simply beyond the scope of my research. However, I feel that the 1983 switch to the Gaelic College is a natural end point for me. By this time, the Fiddlers Association had done several things: It had established itself as an amateur musical group which represented the vast majority of Scottish style fiddlers in eastern Nova Scotia. It had a dependable financial base. And it had a mythology: That roused by the alarmist message in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, they had proven to themselves and to the world that the fiddler was not vanishing, but was instead flourishing.

This does not end the chapter. There are still two areas I will address which were important parts of the evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association in the 1970s and early 80s.

#### E. Scottish connections.

Fiddling in Scotland, influenced by the huge popularity of J. Scott Skinner at the end of the nineteenth century had developed into a very different form of entertainment than the one in Cape Breton. Large groups of musicians formed orchestras, known as Strathspey and Reel societies, which included base viols and large drums in their arrangements. They did not play for dances, since square dances and set dances of the types enjoyed in Cape Breton were unknown in Scotland. The Societies held competitions and maintained newspapers. In all the research I have done I have come across nothing to indicate that the organizers of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association were attempting to imitate such orchestras. There are points of comparison, though, simply because of the attempt to get 100 fiddlers to perform together on one stage.

Cape Bretoners had been exposed to the music of Skinner and the Strathspey and Reel Societies during their service in Scotland during World War Two. And there were frequent visits between the New World and the Old throughout the fifties and sixties. In 1972, Father John Angus Rankin, Joey Beaton, Buddy MacMaster and John Allan Cameron visited Scotland, meeting one of the most respected artists of the Strathspey and Reel Societies, Hector MacAndrew.<sup>281</sup> They saw the various Societies at work. This would influence John Allan Cameron and his brother John Donald, in some of their future work with Cape Breton symphony. The Scots knew very little about the Cape Breton style of fiddling. There may have been some exchange of records, since there were lots of them produced in North America. The Cape Bretoners were familiar with

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<sup>281</sup> Hector MacAndrew, letter to Frank MacInnis, 14 Feb. 1974, Frank MacInnis papers.

some of the better known Scottish fiddlers, but because the music from Scotland was not performed as dance music, it was admired but not emulated.

Most of this section is based, again, on the correspondence maintained by Frank MacInnis, as well as comments on the subject by John Donald Cameron of Port Hawkesbury. Sometime in the preparation of the first Festival of 100 Fiddlers at Glendale, Frank MacInnis wrote a letter to Hector MacAndrew.<sup>282</sup> In it he asks for tips in organizing the upcoming festival for the summer of 1973, where they hope to have “up to two hundred fiddlers participating, with the vast majority coming from Inverness County.” MacInnis says he was motivated to write the letter after hearing a record entitled Scottish Fiddlers to the Fore. (This language – Fiddlers to the Fore – appeared in 1975 as the title of the souvenir newspaper for the second Glendale festival.) There is no copy of a response, but in 1974, Mr. MacAndrew writes to Frank, thanking him for the program brochure from the 1973 festival as well as the tape. He says, “I listened to the latter and observe great enthusiasm in the playing.” It is significant I believe that this “expert” could find nothing else to say about the fiddlers.

John Donald Cameron, who is brother to John Allan Cameron and nephew of Dan Rory MacDonald, explains how he sees the differences in the Scottish and Cape Breton styles: “The technique, certainly, the tones were clearer [in Scotland] and they played chromatics; they stressed chromatics which we don’t here so much, to a lesser degree at least. But as far as being lively, I think you’d get kind of bored, listening to some of them.”<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Frank MacInnis, letter to Hector MacAndrew, N.D., c. 1972-1973, Frank MacInnis papers.

<sup>283</sup> John Donald Cameron, interview with Marie Thompson, 5 June 2002.

John Donald points out another big difference. As Ron MacInnis explained in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, Cape Breton fiddlers often use their feet to keep time to their own playing. In some cases, it's almost like a dance, itself, with one foot tapping a different beat than the other. John Donald was annoyed when he saw an National Film Board documentary which followed his brother John Allen Cameron and Winston Fitzgerald on a 1977 trip to Scotland.<sup>284</sup> They met Hector MacAndrew and as the camera rolled,

Winston ripped into a set of reels and the feet were going and Hector, more of a classical style, a fine fiddler, but Hector looked over at him, with the two feet going and he walked across the room and tapped his feet with the bow and then walked back. I don't think it was a very nice gesture of him and he seemed to be saying you don't need to do that to produce good music.<sup>285</sup>

Frank MacInnis says Strathspey and Reel Societies would not work as a model for Cape Bretoners:

No, the difference, if you go to the Glasgow Golden Fiddle Orchestra, they're like a symphony orchestra, they have a director there, they're turning the pages, there's no spontaneity at all[. . .]. that's too formal and too structured. Once you start doing that, you lose the spontaneity and it becomes more of a chore than a fun thing.<sup>286</sup>

Nonetheless, Frank MacInnis maintained a close relationship with one of the groups,

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<sup>284</sup> Celtic Spirits, dir. James Littleton, National Film Board of Canada, 1978.

<sup>285</sup> John Donald Cameron, 5 June 2002.

<sup>286</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

the Inverness Strathspey and Reel Society. It began during a trip Frank made to Scotland with his father in 1976. He had brought some of the Festival records with him. He attended a concert in Inverness given by its Strathspey and Reel Society, conducted by Donald Riddell:

After the concert, I went in, there was this Donald Riddell and I said did you ever see this, and he said, "What's this" and I said, well I'm from Cape Breton, and we had a fiddle festival and actually, this was after the '75 one, a couple of hundred fiddlers, and he was kind of flabbergasted about the whole thing. So I said would you guys be interested in coming over, and he and I carried on a correspondence and I think there was about thirty of them, the next year [1977], come over, and I organized the reception. I had Sheldon [MacInnis] and Burton [MacIntyre] help, they never paid a night's lodging, they stayed at the convent in Mabou, and St. FX and the Gaelic college, and when they weren't in those places, we had them, I had two of them here for two days, it was great. It was great for them, I remember talking to Donald Riddell's wife, and we were talking about the Highland clearances and she said to me, 'you're the lucky ones, you're the ones that come over here.'"<sup>287</sup>

The correspondence shows it was a huge undertaking. MacInnis received a tremendous boost just spending time with the Scots and learning more about them. He also felt they got something in return: "Well that Inverness Strathspey and Reel, those

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<sup>287</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.



guys got right up in our finale with the others playing along. They couldn't get over the spontaneity and the informality [...] and they loved it, and it encouraged them."<sup>288</sup>

On July 30, 1977, Mr. Riddell wrote Frank a thank you letter from Scotland. He was preparing for the next big concert at a national gathering of Scottish Gaels known as "The Mod." But he provides a glimpse into one of the bigger differences between Cape Breton and Scottish style fiddling, as well as the impact of television:

The BBC has arranged a project – picked one of the young competitors for the junior Fiddle competition and commencing late September will televise the activities of this young person and show her home life, practice sessions, coaching and generally follow her up to the actual competition. After interviewing all the competitors concerned, they picked Sheila Graham. Trouble right away! Lorna and her mother are furious and there is going to be a major row. I hate all this – you have the right idea in making your Festival non-competitive.<sup>289</sup>

This was the only time such an organized effort would be made to bring the Scots to Cape Breton, although many musicians and music fans from Scotland have discovered their shared musical heritage by traveling to Cape Breton and attending the Festivals. Conversely, a steady stream of musicians are regular visitors to Scotland to perform at workshops and music schools, even teaching many of the step dances which until recently were either unknown or long forgotten.

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<sup>288</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>289</sup> Donald Riddell, letter to Frank MacInnis, 30 July 1977, Frank MacInnis papers.

#### F. Offshoots: Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland.

Fiddlers from Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland were present at the time of the first Festival of 100 Fiddlers at Glendale in 1973. So was another Catholic priest from PEI, Father Faber MacDonald. As James Hornby writes, the revival of Scottish style fiddling on the Island seems to be “largely a subsidiary of Cape Breton fiddling.”<sup>290</sup> Hornby laments the influence of Cape Breton on the subsequent PEI revival because, instead of seeking out old Island tunes, the PEI Fiddlers began to rely more on the Cape Breton repertoire. There is no closer parallel to the Cape Breton experience than what happened on Prince Edward Island. It had a large Scottish immigrant population although its profile is not as high as it is in Nova Scotia. The fiddle tradition, too, had begun to falter.

For the first half of the twentieth century, fiddling was popular in just about every rural community on the Island. Ken Perlman in his book, The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition, describes the role of the fiddler:<sup>291</sup> “Word would go out that the event was in the offing, a kitchen would be cleared, the fiddler would set himself up in the corner and the neighbors would gather together for an evening.”<sup>292</sup>

In 1963 one of those fiddlers was the newly ordained Father Faber MacDonald. He was based in Charlottetown but came from the rural community of Little Pond on St. Peter’s Bay. He did not frown on fiddling and partying. He says that he, like many other

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<sup>290</sup> James Hornby, “The Fiddle On the Island” 129.

<sup>291</sup> Ken Perlman, The Fiddle Music of Prince Edward Island: Celtic and Acadian Tunes in Living Tradition, (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 1996)

<sup>292</sup> Ken Perlman, 13.

Catholic clergy, understood that the music was a vital part of the culture on the Island. But he recalls how modern music and media began to erode the popularity of fiddling.<sup>293</sup> By the 1970s Father MacDonald had begun crossing the Strait along with other Island fiddlers, to attend the new festivals of Scottish fiddling that had begun at Glendale. He heard the story of how the fiddle tradition's supporters had organized themselves following the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. He thought the fiddlers of Prince Edward Island would likely benefit from a similar movement.

He went home, and after consulting a number of people he sent out a letter to 25 or 30 fiddlers, inviting them to a meeting. Many more showed up, having heard through word of mouth what was afoot. In subsequent meetings, Father MacDonald suggested they should answer the two following questions: Were they interested in forming an association of violin players? Were they interested in playing together and learning to read notes? The fiddlers answered in the affirmative to both questions and formed three sections of the PEI Fiddlers Association. Father MacDonald, continuing to act as chief organizer, suggested they needed a kind of constitution. On May 6, 1977 he sent out a draft of proposed guidelines and arranged a meeting. In addition to expressing a devotion exclusively to Celtic music of the Scottish type, and encouraging young people to get involved, it states: "The unity and fellowship in the society will flow from each members [sic] love for this music as a gift from a loving god."<sup>294</sup> This clearly echoes the philosophy espoused by Father Eugene Morris and Father John Angus Rankin in Nova Scotia, two men with whom he had close contacts.

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<sup>293</sup> Faber MacDonald, telephone interview with author, January 2002.

<sup>294</sup> Faber MacDonald, "Proposed Guidelines for the PEI Fiddlers Society," 6 May 1977, Frank MacInnis papers.

Faber MacDonald is now the bishop in Saint John, New Brunswick, after spending 19 years as bishop in Grand Falls, Newfoundland. He continues to play the fiddle, has just recorded his first CD and speaks authoritatively about the revival of fiddling on PEI. "It was an inter-faith thing. And we were addressing, without knowing it, the loss of the young people. It was an awakening of young people to the sound."<sup>295</sup> They held their first fiddling festival at Rollo Bay in 1975 and the association continues to attract new players. Still, as Hornby found out, there were dissenting views to the attitudes adopted. He found a backlash to the new society and its emphasis on note reading. Some fiddlers blamed the society for a loss in individual styles. Hornby also questioned whether the increasing Cape Breton influence would lead to a complete loss of the Island styles of playing fiddle.

One important distinction separates Cape Breton and PEI Scottish fiddlers from the "old time fiddlers" across North America. The Cape Bretoners and Islanders avoid competitions. Contests are common and popular, especially as summer events for "old time" music and dancing societies across the continent. Perlman says fiddling competitions had been held on PEI but had led to hard feelings "among fiddlers and even among the families of fiddlers...[that] persisted for decades."<sup>296</sup> Consequently, in the 1970s, the revival movement discouraged such contests altogether. As for Cape Breton Island, Ian McKinnon suggests the same is true for Scottish style fiddlers. There have been a few contests over the decades. But where contests serve as a focal and gathering

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<sup>295</sup> Faber MacDonald, January 2002.

<sup>296</sup> Perlman 14.

point for the “old time fiddling societies” across North America, in Cape Breton, the communities didn’t need contests to be able to find fiddlers:

The frequent dances and concerts as well as other private ceilidhs or house parties provide ample opportunity for fiddlers to hear each other and play together. What is suggested is that contests might have negative social repercussions for people who work and live and relate in all other ways so closely. Many fiddlers I spoke with suggested that competition would only serve to stir up ill feelings between musicians on the Island.<sup>297</sup>

It is not surprising that such parallels occurred between PEI and Cape Breton. In some respects, their island heritage aided their self-awareness. The rural nature of their communities did too, not to mention the ease in which many of the musicians and community leaders shared information between PEI and Nova Scotia. Eastern PEI and in particular Kings County is just as Scottish as many parts of Cape Breton. However it is less well known, at least in my experience, that there are several communities of Cape Breton Scots and Acadian descendants in Newfoundland. They too were touched by the movement to support Scottish style fiddling.

On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1982, Gordon Bennett, a fiddler from the Codroy Valley in Western Newfoundland, sent out a notice to Scottish Music Lovers. It was an invitation to a meeting to elect an executive and adopt a proposed constitution: “It is very similar to the constitutions adopted by the associations of Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island but may still need some ‘tailoring’ to suit the needs of our members”<sup>298</sup> Many of the people

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<sup>297</sup> McKinnon 38.

<sup>298</sup> Gordon Bennett, form letter to “Scottish Music Lovers,” 30 Mar. 1982, Frank MacInnis papers.

who lived in this area of Newfoundland had moved from Inverness County, Cape Breton in the mid 1800s. They came from the towns of Inverness, Margaree and Cheticamp. They were Gaels and Acadians – Scottish Highland Catholics and French Catholics. They brought their music with them. 120 years later some of their descendants, including Gordon Bennett, Walter MacIsaac and Joe Aucoin attended the Glendale Festivals in the 1970s. They had been connected to the music via the radio signals of CJFX and CFCY, which had a better reach than did any radio signals at that time from Newfoundland. Joe Aucoin says he attended high school in Charlottetown with Faber MacDonald, who later became active in the PEI Fiddlers Association.<sup>299</sup> Mr. Aucoin of Tompkins, in the Codroy Valley had learned to play the fiddle as a teenager. But he says he learned to “jive” to Rock and Roll in Charlottetown. He and his compatriots brought the modern music back with them to the Codroy. And it was in the 1960s that he was conscious of a loss in interest in his fiddle music. One more thing bears mentioning. Mr. Aucoin says he was never aware of any discouragement from the parish priests of the Valley. In the 1940s and 50s fiddlers were features of the “garden parties” held as Parish fund-raisers. Perhaps it is not surprising to discover that the Coady movement was felt in Western Newfoundland much more than in other parts of the province. While I cannot claim to have done a complete study of this issue, it seems as if the influence of the Catholic Church both in western Cape Breton and Western Newfoundland had a different tone than that described by Patrick O’Flaherty. He notes in his article about the Catholic Church in Newfoundland Irish communities, that the pastor “preached a dark Jansenist version of Christianity.[. . .] Our lowly place in the scheme of things was emphasized. It

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<sup>299</sup> Joe Aucoin, telephone interview with Marie Thompson, 17 Sept. 2002.

was somewhere between the angels and brutes, but tipping greatly towards the bestial side.”<sup>300</sup>

#### G. Conclusion.

In closing this chapter, I wish to return to the questions raised at the beginning as a result of the MacLeod quotation referring to a “government-sponsored revival.” There are also issues of authenticity, motivation, changing traditions and new traditions. We have learned that Frank MacInnis was one of the “myth-makers” of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. While it is clear he was motivated to prove the CBC documentary wrong, others in the organization were motivated slightly differently. The correspondence and records he holds largely substantiate his description of the events of 1972-77.

Others may suggest fiddling groups in Europe and Scotland and the United States were the models for “The Festival of 100 Fiddlers” at Glendale. But the account by Father Morris of Hugh John Gillis’ recollection of the 100 Pipers on the causeway is so local and so individual that it would be difficult to challenge it as the true inspiration for the event. Later, when the other types of fiddling groups were considered, very little was borrowed from them.

The fiddlers did not benefit from government financial support for several years, although it is clear the organizers were part of elite provincial circles with direct access to influential leaders at the national level. It did not take long for the bureaucrats to

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<sup>300</sup> Patrick O’Flaherty. “Growing up Irish in a Newfoundland Outport,” R. O’ Driscoll and L. Reynolds, eds., The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada, vol. 2 (Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988) 725.

recognize their efforts with some financial support. In 1981 the Canada Council, DEVCO, the Beaton Institute and the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association helped to pay Allister MacGillivray to write a book entitled The Cape Breton Fiddler.<sup>301</sup> This type of project would have been inconceivable ten years earlier. The book alone attests to the changing status of the fiddler in Nova Scotia society. Not only does it describe the revival, the book is part of the revival. It also begins to rewrite the myth that the CBC documentary was wrong. MacGillivray suggests the film was right, although he does not say so directly. Allister MacGillivray is a respected musician and academic and an integral member of the musical community. His assessment of the situation in the late seventies, leaves no doubt: "Soon old men, whose violins had been gathering dust, took them up again. Young people, who formerly thought the music "dated," joined newly-established fiddle classes and sought out these elder players for advice and tunes. In an age where people are searching for their roots, their link with the past and ultimately, their own identity, Cape Breton's fiddling tradition appears, once again, to be strong and secure."<sup>302</sup> Things had changed a lot in ten years. In 1971, Ron MacInnis was roundly criticized for his predictions. In 1981, he was given his own page in MacGillivray's book.

The broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler had repercussions throughout the East Coast. The Cape Breton Fiddlers Association became a model for those on PEI and Newfoundland. The Cape Breton group established an infrastructure for the fiddlers; it facilitated communication and promoted lessons for young people.

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<sup>301</sup> Allister MacGillivray, The Cape Breton Fiddler (Sydney: College of Cape Breton Press, 1981).

<sup>302</sup> MacGillivray 4.



It seems increasingly evident to me that there were few young fiddlers willing to identify themselves as Scottish style fiddlers in the 1960s. In 1974, only six young people were so listed in the directory of musicians. But by 1981, when MacGillivray published his book there were fourteen young musicians worth mentioning. In many ways, this is still a small number and attests to the difficult job the Scottish fiddle fans had in countering the homogenizing effects of the Rock and Roll culture.

But in the next chapter, we'll have a look at one Canadian institution which was trying to resist the American cultural juggernaut. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had an influence on the Cape Breton fiddle revival, even after the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, although not in quite the way one might expect.

## VII. THE CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION: 1954 – 1980.

*"Some of the songs were long, verse after verse. It wasn't until the radio came along that we thought maybe our songs were too long. The ones on the radio only lasted a few minutes."*

From No Great Mischief.<sup>303</sup>

### A. Introduction.

The speaker is the narrator's grandmother, trying to put in context the differences between her native Gaelic songs and the modern songs heard on the radio. The Gaelic songs generally WERE long. They were part of a sophisticated, oral, bardic tradition and did not fit the formula for AM radio. This would be especially true of television, which evolved from freewheeling live programming in the 1950s to highly choreographed, carefully-rehearsed and edited productions in the 1970s.

While the account from No Great Mischief relates to song and not instrumental music, it does speak to the way in which the broadcast media changed people's perceptions of their cultures (and maybe even the tempo of their cultural forms). And it is an account that can be applied to fiddling. If the Gaelic songs were too long to be played in a tight commercial format, so were the sets of fiddle tunes. Ray MacDonald and the programmers at CJFX may have appreciated long sets because it helped them fill time and meet the demands of an appreciative audience. But elsewhere on the dial, this was not the case.

Television was even more demanding. As we will see, even when the TV star was a fiddler (albeit not a Scottish-style fiddler) strict time limits were imposed. Not only did you get only one jig, as opposed to a jig-strathspey-reel combination, you may not have gotten the whole jig, either. Yet television, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,

did allow fiddle music (and the occasional Gaelic song) to be played on the air. It did try to pursue a description – if not an encouragement – of a living culture. For many of the producers, this culture was actually dying. But for others, the wider Celtic culture was just beginning its musical expansion in North America.

This chapter has two purposes. First it is to examine Canada's public broadcaster and the role it played in the fiddle revival of the 1970s alongside the efforts of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. I will focus on CBC Television because it funded and broadcast Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. We will explore even further what was begun in chapter four, by looking more closely at two CBC television programs which are directly related to the fiddle tradition. CBC TV enhanced the awareness of the Scottish tradition in Canada. Secondly, we will follow the story of a controversy that engulfed the CBC and a Cape Breton Gaelic language radio show. This controversy involved a cultural response from Cape Breton Gaels and their supporters that was very different in style and effect from the response we saw with the fiddlers. At the time the outburst around the Gaelic program was thought to be the sign of a language revival. But the two movements had very different outcomes. Learning about the language manifestation will help to define more clearly the elements of the fiddling revival.

#### B. Overview of CBC Television Production in Nova Scotia: 1954-79.

CBC Television began broadcasting in Nova Scotia in 1954 and by 1956 it was producing a wide variety of music, drama, news and documentary programming. The Halifax production center became one of the busiest in the country (even though it was

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<sup>303</sup> MacLeod, Mischief 270-271.

quite small compared to Toronto and Montreal) and would produce Canada's most popular television program, Don Messer's Jubilee. CBHT's broadcast area was boosted in 1955 with a new 100,000-watt transmitter on Geizer's Hill, extending its coverage to western and northern Nova Scotia.<sup>304</sup> Mainland Nova Scotia audiences tuned in to a ninety-minute local news show, called Gazette, with hosts, Don Tremaine, Max Ferguson and Rube Hornstein.

From the beginning, judging by the types of documentary and special interest programming which were being produced, the CBC attempted to record and reflect the society of the Maritimes. Its main goal was to combat the culture intruding on the airwaves from the south. To do that, the producers had to create programming with brand new Canadian entertainers, storytellers and journalists. But Maritime society, like the rest of Canada, was a society in flux. It was changing with post-war technology. Television was one of the vehicles of change. Television producers were very aware of that. Another one of their goals was to get as many elements of that society as possible recorded on film before it disappeared. (The assumption they made was that these elements were doomed to extinction.) It is in this context that Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was produced in 1971.

William Harper has published a book, A Picture By Christmas, on the history of the CBC in Nova Scotia.<sup>305</sup> He has generously provided me with the results of some of his research. He worked for the CBC as a TV producer from 1954 to 1986. His best known effort was a regional series called Heritage that focused on Maritime history. He would

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<sup>304</sup> Doug Kirby, Geoff D'Eon, "CBC Halifax History," unpublished CBC document, April 1996, 1.

<sup>305</sup> William Harper, A Picture By Christmas, (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2002).

travel with a crew and host, Neil Copeland, to interview individuals about their involvement in and their memories of historical situations. (For example, it included a two part series on Nova Scotia's gold rushes.) Heritage ran from 1974 to 1986. Harper says the CBC was involved in documentary television even before it signed on. In early 1954, "film was being shot of the construction of the Angus L. MacDonald bridge.[. . .] Then when it opened in 1955, we filmed that ceremony and came up with our first "doc" just a few months after we all met to learn about television."<sup>306</sup>

The main network which had been in production since 1952 already had an information show called Country Calendar which provided advice about modern farming techniques to viewers in rural areas. (Network programs were run on tape delay which meant they were seen a week later in the Maritimes! This changed in 1958 when CBHT was connected to the live network via microwave relay.) Country Calendar was supported by local teams across the country who provided inserts to the show, and later produced regional versions of the show. This service was viewed as an extension service for farm families and it later expanded in 1967 to include a fishery show, Fisherman's Log. In 1970, this became Land and Sea, which proved to be one of the most durable and best-loved Maritime information shows.<sup>307</sup>

But back in the 1950s Halifax crews contributed stories to several network shows, such as Here and There. Bill Harper says these included: "Fe Fi Fo Fum," a story about Nova Scotia giants Anna Swan and Angus McAskill; "Atlantic Shipyard" re: ship and

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<sup>306</sup> William Harper, e-mail to Marie Thompson, 28 Aug. 2002.

<sup>307</sup> When it was dropped in 1991 as a result of budget cuts, Maritime viewers petitioned government and the CBC to renew it. This happened in 1992, and it has survived as a regional and network show ever since.

boat building in NS; and “the Tatamagouche Arts Festival.” We did four or more of these half-hours each year for many years.<sup>308</sup>

Because the mandate for Country Calendar and Here and There required a lot of rural coverage, Harper and his crews were often in Cape Breton. They also did a number of special event programs and had no difficulty getting money from the network for them as well as time in the schedule. So on February 23, 1959, they produced a live program from Baddeck celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the first airplane flight in Canada, John McCurdy’s flight in the Silver Dart. They did specials on Captain Angus Walters of The Bluenose, Alexander Graham Bell’s work in Baddeck and the fiftieth anniversary of the Canadian Navy. They did a show in 1960 on the building of the replica ship Bounty both in Lunenburg and in Tahiti where she was used in the production of a major motion picture. They produced a feature on the people who lived along the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton; one on the Gaelic College and a special broadcast in 1958 commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the siege of Louisbourg. Harper says that even though the private Sydney station, CJCB, was carrying the CBC signal and was broadcasting a number of its own live programs, the Halifax production team felt they had a mandate to do Cape Breton programming too:

We felt an obligation to originate programs there as part of the mandate to be an active production centre in and for Nova Scotia...as well as NB and PEI (so the same things were done there as well.) With that in mind and remembering that

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<sup>308</sup> William Harper, e-mail to Marie Thompson, 28 Aug. 2002.

CJCB continued to be a CBC affiliate until 1972...Ron's VANISHING idea became attractive, despite the fact that he'd had no TV experience.<sup>309</sup>

In entertainment programming as in documentary, there were three streams to access: network, regional and local. There were different criteria for each one with the Network stream providing the most money and setting the highest standards for talent. Bill Harper says their goal was "the seeking out and development of 'talent' . . . including musicians, singers, storytellers (in the context of being interviewed re: events in their lives and/or events which had had a profound result, as in the case of the Halifax Explosion)."<sup>310</sup>

These were some of the shows that needed talent:

Regional and local music and variety shows:

<u>Graves Hi Society</u>	High school talent show sponsored by a Nova Scotia juice company. (1950s)
<u>Student Showcase</u>	More high school talent
<u>The Alibi room</u>	More music
<u>Don Messer Show</u>	Regional pilot (1956)
<u>Frank's Bandstand</u>	Frank Cameron hosted and it also went to the full network
<u>Souvenir</u>	
<u>Journey into Melody</u>	
<u>Lullaby of Broadway</u>	
<u>Kingfisher Cove</u>	
<u>Showcase</u>	Offshoot of student show which featured adults(1973-78 )
<u>What's New</u>	No host. Found talent like Doris Mason ...(1975)
<u>Carrousel</u>	Hosted by Sharon Timmins (found Ken Inman, John Gracie)
<u>Country East</u>	Hosted by Debbie Chambers
<u>22 Hazelwood</u>	Drama format with regular musical numbers
<u>Symphony shows</u>	
<u>Maritime old time fiddling competitions</u>	(annual specials)

Often, performers who did well on the regional shows graduated to the national networks.

<sup>309</sup> William Harper, 28 Aug. 2002.

<sup>310</sup> William Harper, e-mail to Marie Thompson, 29 Aug. 2002.

Network Shows produced in Halifax (Selection of total output)

<u>Pick the Stars</u>	Halifax inserts (late 50s)
<u>Don Messer's Jubilee</u>	Network (1957 – 1969)
<u>Alf Coward</u>	Featured the Alf Coward Trio
<u>Music Hop</u>	(1960s including Frank's Bandstand)
<u>Ceilidh</u>	(early 70s)
<u>Singalong Jubilee</u>	(late 60s –70s)
<u>Take Time with Noel Harrison</u>	(1974-75)
<u>The Denny Sho (sic)</u>	(1976)
<u>Sunshine Hour</u>	(1975-76)
<u>Revival Hour</u>	
<u>Canadian Express</u>	theme contributions from all regions
<u>Marg Osborne's Maritime Feeling</u>	

While it's evident that any local traditional fiddling music might get lost in the wide variety of entertainment in this schedule, two shows in particular featured fiddling. One, from 1972 to 1974, coincided with and encouraged interest in the revival that was taking place in Cape Breton in the early seventies. That was the Ceilidh show, hosted by John Allan Cameron. After a dispute with CBC management, he took his show to CTV, while Ceilidh continued with a different host on the CBC. We'll learn more about that in a later section of this chapter. Other programs produced in Newfoundland for the network audience, such as Ryan's Fancy and the Ontario-based show featuring the Irish Rovers, allowed traditional fiddlers to see themselves and be recognized. These productions frequently traveled to Nova Scotia and made a big impact on fiddlers in the audience because many of the tunes they were playing were part of the Cape Breton repertoire, even though the style was different. But one show which predated all of these raised the profile of fiddling across Canada. Unfortunately for Cape Bretoners, it did little to enhance the status of their own style of fiddling. That show was Don Messer's Jubilee.



1) Don Messer's Jubilee.

Don Messer's Jubilee defied the Rock and Roll trend by featuring regular performances of "down-east" country style music. Fiddlers and step-dancers were prominent, as well as singers of East Coast ballads and tunes. Its host was New Brunswick native, the late Don Messer. He was widely acknowledged by East Coast musicians as a formidable musician, bandleader, and businessman. Cape Bretoners and Prince Edward Islanders recognized his musical talent. But they didn't then and still don't see any similarities between his music and theirs. Hornby reports that Messer was a flexible performer which made him popular across the country.<sup>311</sup> He would play anything. His style influenced other fiddlers. But it had little impact in Cape Breton.

Jack O'Neil started as a studio cameraman with Don Messer in 1956 and worked for many years as a production assistant and then producer on Variety and Entertainment programs for the CBC in the Maritimes. He has worked with hundreds of musicians, including many of the fiddlers from Cape Breton Island. O'Neil says Don Messer had a simple formula he'd honed on his long-running radio show and which he brought with him to television. In hindsight the formula seems obvious, but at the time television was still young and experimental. Messer insisted that his show open with the same signature tune every week; it had to have an obvious beginning, middle and end. According to O'Neil, Messer was always in control, picking the guests, approving the music and literally calling the shots for the television crew. But there was one more thing he insisted on:

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<sup>311</sup> James Hornby 105-106.

Give the audience as much as possible but never enough! [. . .] His fiddle tunes were a maximum minute and a half. The only variation on that was the second dance number which would run up to two minutes. Guaranteed. You could put a stopwatch on Don and 96 bars was a minute and a half, every tune that they played. Fiddlers played the same way. [. . .] he would say [. . .] “you’re not playing four minutes of a fiddle tune on my show. You’re playing a minute and a half, minute 45” and everybody understood that.<sup>312</sup>

O’Neil says Messer’s goal was to keep the television audience wanting more.

He said, if you did the whole song, whether a fiddle tune or a guest appearance or “Marg and Charlie” song, if you did the whole thing then you’ve satisfied them, if you sing Danny Boy and you sing the whole song, they don’t want to hear it again, they’ve heard it already. Why would they want to tune in a month from now to hear Danny Boy again?<sup>313</sup>

So what did this have to do with Cape Breton fiddlers? Don Messer had a few of them on the show from time to time: fiddlers such as Bernie Lay or Joe MacDougall. But O’Neil says traditional fiddling from Cape Breton wasn’t popular at the time and that’s why it wasn’t featured often on Don Messer’s show.

[It wasn’t popular] because of the regimentation of the music. They only ever had a piano player and less guitar. The two things they had at ceilidhs [. . .] was

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<sup>312</sup> Jack O’Neil, interview with Marie Thompson, 12 June 2002.

<sup>313</sup> O’Neil June 2002.

rhythm. People would use their feet or their hands and the fiddle and that doesn't work for television.[. . .] It was too pure, too traditional.<sup>314</sup>

What O'Neil and the CBC were looking for was an orchestra with regular use of drums and other instruments. They believed that this added a more sophisticated depth and production value to the broadcast. These were the kinds of shows that audiences were tuning in to watch. Don Messer had already developed success on radio with his use of an orchestra, or band. A wide variety of instruments complemented his fiddle playing.<sup>315</sup> As O'Neil points out, that was not part of the Cape Breton tradition, although later attempts would be made in other shows to apply that approach in Cape Breton. Furthermore, Cape Breton fiddlers played long medley sets of strathspeys, jigs and reels, which could last as long as ten minutes. (In fact much of the artistry is discerned in the arrangements of these different tunes, and the transitions between them.) This certainly didn't fit into Don Messer's formula. So despite the fact that the most popular television program in Canada featured a Maritime fiddler, Cape Bretoners did not derive much validation from it. The show ran for 12 years until the CBC axed it, to great protest, in 1969. Don Messer took his show to the CTV network where it broadcast out of Hamilton for another four years. But it was never to achieve the popularity it had on the CBC. And to this day, people across the country still hold a grudge against the CBC for its decision in 1969.

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<sup>314</sup> O'Neil June, 2002.

<sup>315</sup> Ken Perlman, e-mail to author, January 2002.

## 2) Ceilidh.

Less than a year after the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, its producer, Charlie Reynolds, put together a pilot for a program which featured Cape Breton and Scottish music. It was called Ceilidh, which is the Scottish Gaelic word for a house party or get-together with food, music and story telling. Its host was a young Nova Scotia folk singer and guitarist, John Allan Cameron. The show began as a regional hour-long studio production and featured the host wearing a kilt, and a variety of singers, dancers and musicians playing the music of Cape Breton and Scotland. It was then given a slot on the network. As time went on, the host changed and the show began to feature more and more acts from Scotland.

John Allan, had become well known in the 1960s singing contemporary folk songs about Nova Scotia and playing his twelve-string guitar. He has a strong fiddling heritage in his lineage: Dan Rory MacDonald was his uncle. Both John Allan and his brother John Donald learned to play the violin at their home in Mabou, but John Allan switched to the 12-string guitar, discovering that it was an instrument which could emulate the drone of the bagpipes. This fitted in to his musical act in which he wore a kilt and promoted the Scottish heritage of his Cape Breton home. (As we will see later, some critics, led by Ian McKay would view this as the worst kind of promotional branding, but Cameron remains defiantly proud of these symbols which he continues to use in his musical act to this day.)

John Allan had almost reached his ordination at St. Paul's University in Ottawa, when he left the seminary and taught school for a year in London, Ontario. Throughout his university studies, he had continued to perform. While he was at Saint Francis Xavier

University in Antigonish, he was given a small room at radio station CJFX, in exchange for his work. Ray MacDonald says John Allan's music was among the most popular on the air. John Allan Cameron was invited to perform on Don Messer's Jubilee, and its successor, Singalong Jubilee. He'd had a lot of radio play with several songs, and had signed a contract with an American record label, although he says now he never received any money from the contract. In addition to the variety shows, he was also featured from time to time on CBC Halifax's daily news show, Gazette. It was here that he first met Charlie Reynolds, the man who also produced Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

Charlie Reynolds is dead and no one knows exactly whose idea it was to produce Ceilidh. John Allan says, "I had a lot to do with the formation of the Ceilidh show. Charlie Reynolds saw that such a show would be 'salable' to the CBC viewers and he had the initiative to get the process put in motion."<sup>316</sup> But none of the people involved believe that it was an offshoot of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

John Allan lasted as the host of the show for the first season in 1972. He was replaced by Scotsman, Alistair Gillies, after a series of acrimonious arguments with Charlie Reynolds over the musical direction of the show. The producer had made contact with professional singers and dancers in Scotland and was bringing them over to perform. It was also apparent that Reynolds didn't worry about musicians' feelings or egos and this also upset John Allan. There were some fiddlers from Cape Breton on the show, including John Allan's uncle, Dan R. MacDonald. Reynolds publicly scolded the unassuming fiddler for rejoicing to others that he was receiving the princely sum of \$132 a show plus expenses. Dan R. apparently laughed it off, but John Allan was very upset:

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<sup>316</sup> John Allan Cameron, e-mail to the author, 22 Aug. 2002.

So at the end of this, when we did 13 shows, I wanted to meet here [CBC Halifax] and I wanted to say[...] we have lots of talent here in Nova Scotia . [...] We're bringing these people over here from Scotland. I said "some of them are OK, but some have no idea where Nova Scotia is for God's sake, it's just a gig to them. And they add nothing to the show. And I don't give a shit if they're from Scotland or from India, and if they don't fit . . ." and I never got an answer. Never got in here to argue. The next day, I wasn't invited back to host it. They got Allister Gillies. Allister Gillies came over and he took my place, and then they changed the whole thing.<sup>317</sup>

This version of events is more or less confirmed by two CBC employees who worked there then and went on to produce more Cape Breton music programming. They were Fred Martin and Peter MacNeil. Fred says, "I can still remember him standing up on the corner of the stage and going into the control room and there was a controversy over something. I remember that. Charlie wanted this and wanted that. And John wanted this and wanted that, and the next week he was gone."<sup>318</sup>

In addition to the fight over musical direction, as John Allan tells it, it was also a clash over the misrepresentation of Cape Breton musical identity. The CBC held Scotland as the holy grail of Highland music. Yet the corporate programmers had no real understanding of the evolution of the music in Nova Scotia. It encouraged performers to wear kilts and tartans, as John Allan did, and even had dancers performing the types of country-dances and couple dances or "Scotisches" that had come into popularity in

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<sup>317</sup> John Allan Cameron, interview with Marie Thompson, 6 Aug. 2002.

<sup>318</sup> Fred Martin, interview with Marie Thompson, 22 June 2002.

Scotland in the late nineteenth century, but had never been common in Cape Breton. At the same time, the young musician, who had a lot at stake, wanted “Cape Breton fiddling to be front and center” in the show. But Reynolds clearly wasn’t prepared to share the artistic direction of the show with his host, who knew more about Cape Breton music than he did. Fred Martin recalls how the crew was impressed when the new host, Alistair Gillies took over:

He won one of the top awards over in Glasgow when he was 18 years old, as a vocalist. And they brought over a fella with him, his name was John Carmichael and he was from Giffnock, and John was the accordionist and he was a schoolteacher and taught history in the classroom. So they weren’t just off the back of turnip trucks. They traveled over in Scotland doing gigs.<sup>319</sup>

Peter MacNeil, who was the technical producer for the crew agrees:

And Alistair Gillies had guested on the Ceilidh show with John Allan Cameron and then we saw how smooth Alistair Gillies was, he was smooth as silk, and it also showed up the differences on the show, you’d see right away, he was almost a host when John Allan was there.<sup>320</sup>

In fairness to the CBC, despite Ron MacInnis’ naming of Cape Breton music, most programmers in Halifax and Toronto would not have made the distinction between Cape Breton and Scottish music. Perhaps they were seeking a Scottish equivalent to the Irishness of Ryan’s Fancy or the Irish Rovers. In the end, the Ceilidh show only lasted a couple of seasons and then it was canceled. While it did provide employment to many

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<sup>319</sup> Martin 2002.

<sup>320</sup> Peter MacNeil, interview with Marie Thompson, 22 June 2002.

well known Cape Breton fiddlers such as Dan R. MacDonald, Buddy MacMaster and Winnie Chafe, it sent mixed signals to revivalists in Cape Breton. Father Eugene Morris wasn't impressed:

It seemed, I shouldn't use the word, seemed a little bit phony in a way. It didn't seem to fit our culture. It was something almost that came from there and we'll put it on here. The type of [. . .] accordion music and the Schotische[. . .] that wasn't really our dance. No[. . .] they were playing Cape Breton tunes but with a Scotland beat to it. Using drums and everything[. . .]<sup>321</sup>

After he left CBC, John Allan created the John Allan Cameron Show for CTV. In the late 70s he returned with it to CBC. Jack O'Neil produced it in Halifax until 1981 when it was canceled. John Allan, by then had developed a back-up band which included his brother, John Donald and Buddy MacMaster. They had drums and a base player and a guitarist and they called it the Cape Breton Symphony. The Symphony traveled around the world. Again, it employed a number of Cape Breton fiddlers and attracted attention to the Cape Breton style of fiddling, but was not true to the Cape Breton tradition. It was more like a Scottish fiddle orchestra.

Still, the CBC spent a lot of money in the 1970s sending crews around Cape Breton looking for music. That gave rise to a team effort which earned a nickname from fellow employees and Cape Bretoners alike. They were the "M & M productions."

### 3) "M & M productions."

Fred Martin and Peter MacNeil are retired CBC employees who have remained close friends after careers of more than thirty years in television. Fred was a production assistant whose duties included being the floor director on the Don Messer show and then



on Singalong Jubilee. Peter was a technical producer who was responsible for making sure all the technicians and their technical requirements were in place for each show. Fred was later given the opportunity to act as producer on a few of the shows. When he convinced management to let him go on a talent search in Cape Breton he also prevailed upon them to let him bring Peter MacNeil to help out assessing technical needs for future shoots. Then, MacNeil traveled with the crew on those shoots to make sure things went smoothly. They didn't know it at the time, but the "Golden" era of CBC Television production was drawing to an end.

Towards the end of the Ceilidh years, Fred and Peter convinced Charlie Reynolds that a trip to Scotland would be in order. Many of the episodes talked about Scotland, but there was no footage of the country. So, in 1975, the CBC sent them over with producer Ted Regan and a camera crew to shoot some scenes with the host, Alistair Gillies. Shortly after their return from Scotland, the two friends and their wives attended a concert in Iona where Peter had a cottage and long family connections. They heard a young boy singing in Gaelic and were very impressed, but somehow failed to find out who he was. They went back to Halifax and asked their boss, Darce Fardy to let them go back and look for him. In an act of faith that would likely never happen today, he agreed. Fred Martin recalls the details of their trip back to Cape Breton:

So when we were down there trying to find this young fella singing the Gaelic, we traveled most of all Cape Breton Island, we were down in Queensville, [found] little Dougie MacDonald who was five years old, the Bisson sisters in Sydney, the Barra MacNeils in Sydney Mines, there was only three of them at the time, Lucy was crawling on the floor; and the Rankins in Mabou, lived across the street

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<sup>321</sup> Father Eugene Morris, 16 Aug. 2002.

from John Allan. And that's how it started and we came back and told the boss, wrote a proposal, did some financial work and he said go ahead.<sup>322</sup>

They went back with a crew and shot at various summer concerts for three weeks in a row and then edited the highlights together for an hour-long show later in the winter. They called it In Your Footsteps. On one occasion they needed a stage on which to place their talent, and showed up unexpectedly at the Glendale Fiddlers' Festival. But the organizers were reluctant to let them have the stage for their shoot. They were afraid the CBC was going to take over the Festival and upset their lineup! It led to a meeting of the board of the Festival and some heated words between the CBC producers and the organizers, including Father Eugene Morris. Peter MacNeil admits now that it wasn't surprising: "We found they were a little bit apprehensive, first, it was hard to explain to them what we were trying to do and they didn't know how it would turn out."<sup>323</sup> Father Morris recalls the incident another way. He thinks the crew was there to tape the talent performing at the Festival as well as the performers they brought with them, and that would be intimidating to the amateur players: "We thought it was an imposition and could be an embarrassment, especially if they (the performers) came not expecting it to happen. We used to fight that quite a bit. Keep the TV cameras at a distance. Film up there on the hill!"<sup>324</sup> Eventually, in that case, the Festival organizers relented and allowed the CBC onto the stage.

This anecdote gives some insight into the relationship between the powerful medium

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<sup>322</sup> Fred Martin, 22 June 2002.

<sup>323</sup> Peter MacNeil, 22 June 2002.

<sup>324</sup> Father Eugene Morris, 16 Aug. 2002.

of television and the people involved in the production of cultural content in Cape Breton. There seemed to be a feeling of distrust towards the CBC. But the incident also evokes the experience in Alistair MacLeod's "Tuning of Perfection" where the television producer attempts to adjust and manipulate the kind of performer who will be shown on television. The fictional story points out the singers' awareness of the manipulation as much as they sought the recognition and validation that might arise from the broadcast. In real life, the fiddlers were suspicious of the arrival of the TV crew and their impatient producers. Peter MacNeil and Fred Martin, who both enjoyed Gaelic singing, acknowledge that a Gaelic song could never last more than two minutes and thirty seconds on television. Peter MacNeil says, "if you don't understand it, it's pointless. As a matter of fact the fiddles are too long. You wonder if they're ever going to stop." He's speaking from the point of view of a television producer who needs to know down to the second how long a segment will last. It's a level of control that's resented by most performers. Peter MacNeil could be the embodiment of the producer in Alistair MacLeod's short story. But then so could many of the producers I know. Others would not even try to make such music conform to the medium. But MacNeil says he was motivated by a love of the music. His parents were both Gaelic speakers and he remembers hearing fiddling and Gaelic song from the time he was a child in Iona, Cape Breton. Fred Martin had a slightly different experience:

My people are Irish, and came here from Galway, and my Grandmother spoke the Gaelic in my house, when she was bringing us up, in Halifax, but I don't know what my thing in the music is. My thing is just that I'm so pleased to see the young people get a chance. . . What better feeling can you get?

CBC Management was pleased with the effort and allowed them to do it again the following year. They called it A Heritage Remembered. The last year they did it was 1977 when it was edited into a series of five weekly programs called Showcase to be aired over the winter. Fred Martin was concerned about how Cape Bretoners had received it. So he wrote to Ray MacDonald at CJFX to ask if he'd had any feedback. Ray replied with encouraging comments. But he enclosed notes from a ST. F.X. University employee, Roy Cameron, "who is really hooked on Scottish music." These are valuable comments since the actual tapes of the shows were not preserved:

Jan. 2, 1978 – Iona, Part Glendale & Broad Cove. Coverage very good, talent good, except I believe the general public would like to see the name of the performer flashed on screen or at least an introduction of the number, name with a brief background or the area where the performer is from.

Jan. 9/78 – Glendale and Mabou, again very good intro to the program with the scenic view of Glendale and the hills, nice shots of general area while performance on. Again the name of performer would add a lot to the program. One selection with Mabou dancers sound effects real bad, you do not hear the music of violin quite muffled. Selection in tuning room good music. Glendale.

Feb. 13/78 – Bisson Sisters – Very Good quality of scenery and sound. I would like to see a repeat of this one.

Feb. 20 – Missed.

Feb. 27 – Excellent, depicting some of the most scenic spots of C.B. good interview mixed with background of music. Could stand a weekly diet of this type of program

Overall excellent productions. Keep up the good work and lets have lots more!<sup>325</sup>

Obviously the scenery of Cape Breton was as important a visual character to the shows as was the music. Some might be critical of this, although it is a feature of many television shows "from the regions" at the time. I believe it was an effort – perhaps unconscious – to impress on urban Canadians in Central Canada that the country was more than just the Quebec City, Ottawa, Windsor triangle. It was also the kind of thing urban Canadians in central Canada expected to see from the hinterland. However, Ray MacDonald responded positively to the mixing of the scenery over top of an interview with fiddler John Campbell: "[he] made a point I had never really thought about till he expressed it; that was regarding the music being inspired by the land. I believe you captured that very well with the (visual) shots of the water and the mountains and the countryside."<sup>326</sup>

After 1978, they stopped the deliberate summer talent search in Cape Breton. Some of the supervisors thought it was too much of a good thing for the crew. Fred Martin and Peter MacNeil had other tasks in Halifax that made it more and more difficult for them to do it. Despite their initial distrust of the medium, the organizers of the Fiddlers Festival were always disappointed that the hours and hours of tape which was recorded for "M & M Productions" didn't lead to more programming. This is a universal complaint in all areas of interest, whether it is political reporting, arts and entertainment or documentary production. The subjects of the

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<sup>325</sup> Roy Cameron in letter from Ray MacDonald to Fred Martin, 2 Mar. 1978, Fred Martin papers.

<sup>326</sup> Ray MacDonald to Fred Martin, 2 Mar. 1978, Fred Martin papers.

shoot usually find it hard to see why the producers and crews record hours of footage only to include small snippets in the final product on air. It is difficult to explain that producers are often looking for what, in their opinion, is the best material. It may often take a lot of shooting to get it. Sometimes what the producer thinks is the best material doesn't always conform with what the subject thinks is the best material. It all comes down to control. Invariably, it is the producers who demand final control of the finished product. By 1972, CBC Television had set up its own station in Sydney to broadcast local news and entertainment programming to the Island. They, too, had producers seeking talent although their budgets were smaller than those in Halifax.

CBC Television had an important role to play in the fiddling revival of the 1970s. This is documented by Ian McKinnon in his discussion of the role of broadcasting in Fiddling to Fortune. He quotes fiddler Winnie Chafe and Winston Fitzgerald's longtime guitar accompanist, Estwood Davidson. Winnie Chafe told McKinnon that both Ceilidh and The John Allan Cameron Show "assisted greatly in promoting her career and the music of Cape Breton in general."<sup>327</sup> Estwood Davidson pointed out that he and Winston Fitzgerald did not employ booking agents to procure gigs. He attributed their success to the publicity they received from CJCB radio and their performances on CJCB and CBC Television. "The only agent we had was that we'd either be on radio or television and if there had been twenty-four nights in the week, we could have played twenty-four nights."<sup>328</sup>

Television brought its performers into people's homes. The viewer felt an intimacy

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<sup>327</sup> McKinnon 92.

<sup>328</sup> Estwood Davidson, interview, McKinnon 93.

with these entertainers. The fiddlers on television were familiar figures to Cape Breton audiences. Viewers saw them on the Ceilidh show and The John Allan Cameron Show. In addition, through the efforts of Martin and MacNeil, the CBC broadcast the fiddlers, singers and other summer performers throughout the year. Some TV producers applied their own “tartanized” ideas about Scotland into the mix. But the CBC kept the music out there. Meanwhile, the traditional fiddling revivalists kept doing their own thing, even though it did not fit into the modern entertainment concept of Don Messer’s philosophy, “Give the audience as much as possible, but never enough!”

#### C. Overview of CBC Radio Production: 1936-1980.

There is no doubt that CBC Radio both in Sydney and in Halifax contributed hundreds of hours of Cape Breton music and Gaelic language programming in the 1970s. While its reach and impact was not as great as that of television, the people it did reach were the ones who wanted the product.

The first live coast-to-coast broadcast in Canada was J. Frank Willis’ dramatic coverage of the Moose River mine disaster in Nova Scotia in 1936. This was provided by the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, formed in 1933 and which supported a series of “small production centres in many locations across the country, distributing programs to the private stations which could carry them, or not [ . . . ] as they wished.”<sup>329</sup>

CBC radio took over from the CRBC in 1936, with Halifax as a regional production center. The network reach expanded dramatically in April 1939 with the construction of a fifty-thousand watt transmitter, CBA, in Sackville, New Brunswick. (Most of the

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<sup>329</sup> William Harper, CBC Maritime Region – English Services Division Presentation to Parliamentarians, undated, c. June 30 1980, 1.

chronology in this section comes from an unpublished draft written by Bill Harper in 1980.<sup>330</sup>) This enabled the infant Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to be heard throughout the Maritimes. The first shows included the Farm Broadcast, School Broadcast and of course, during war time, news and war reports.

CBC radio actually maintained two different networks: One was the Dominion network which included one CBC station in Toronto and 34 private affiliate stations. The other was the Trans Canada network which provided programming to CBC owned and operated stations. In 1941, a separate CBC station was built in Halifax (CBH) with a 100 watt transmitter. It produced programming for troops in Halifax. In 1946, the Fisherman's Broadcast began out of Halifax.

In 1948 CBI in Sydney went on the air, producing local newscasts and providing programming to the network and regional services. In 1974 CBC dropped all commercials from the radio service. According to a 1980 presentation to Parliamentarians prepared by Bill Harper, there were three CBC radio stations in New Brunswick (St. John, Moncton and Fredericton) with eight other locations reached through low power relay transmitters (LPRT). In Nova Scotia there were two stations in Halifax (CBH) and Sydney (CBI), with seven additional locations reached by LPRT. However, there were still five affiliates carrying twenty-five hours per week. These were Antigonish (CJFX), Truro (CKCL), Kentville (CKEN), Bridgewater (CKBW) and Yarmouth (CJLS). On Prince Edward Island, CBC radio could be heard on Charlottetown affiliate, CFCY, until 1978 when the CBC radio studio (CBCT-FM) in Charlottetown began providing network and local service to the island. It was an AM

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<sup>330</sup> Harper, William, "The CBC in the Maritimes," 16 June 1980.



service broadcast on FM. (The CBC transmitter actually began broadcasting on the Island in 1970 but it carried Halifax programming.)

From 1947 to 1948, thirty-one dramatic productions were broadcast from CBH in Halifax.<sup>331</sup> But throughout the 1950s and 60s, programs produced in Nova Scotia were immensely popular across the country. These included The Gillans (a fictional farm family – part of the Farm Broadcasts), Harmony Harbour, Bill of Fare and Max Ferguson's Rawhide. Don Messer's Jubilee (the precursor to his television show) was produced for the Network out of the Charlottetown studios of CFCY.

But with the advent of television, in 1954, radio fell on hard times. According to the CBC, "by 1968, CBC radio in both French and English had become isolated and its audiences had declined to negligible proportions. CBC radio had to be revitalized – and new directions found."<sup>332</sup> Knowlton Nash gives credit to then CBC President Laurent Picard for initiating a radio revolution in the late 1960s and early 70s: "He launched a revival campaign designed to make radio programming more relevant and more popular." This helped to transform the schedules leading to a "total of seven hours a day of CBC local programming of news, current affairs, sports and weather."<sup>333</sup> This as well gave a great deal of freedom and air time to fill for local radio producers. It is in this context of the renewal of CBC radio's vitality and relevance that an unusual new radio program was born in Cape Breton. Not only did it contribute to the broadcasting of Scottish style

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<sup>331</sup> Kirby and D'Eon, "CBC Halifax History," 6.

<sup>332</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, The CBC – A Perspective, Volumes 1-3, Submission to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission in Support of Applications for Renewal of Network Licenses. (Ottawa: CBC Audience and Public Relations, 1978) 11.

<sup>333</sup> Knowlton Nash, The Microphone Wars (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994) 398-399.

fiddling on the airwaves in Cape Breton, but also it became the focus of a popular protest which contrasted quite dramatically with the fiddlers' movement.

1) Island Echoes and the Gaelic language.

The organized response to Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler began as a non-public one and grew to be a public one. The cultural response we are about to examine involves the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Cape Breton's Gaelic language. It happened about two years into the development of the fiddlers organization. Yet there are some clear differences, not the least of which is the level of publicity they both attracted. While it may not be possible to draw conclusions about the nature of the two responses and the relative health of their respective cultural expressions, it will be obvious that one, Gaelic radio, served the interests of Cape Breton fiddling. Yet, the same has not worked in reverse. Cape Breton fiddling was actively promoted, but the slow and steady decline of the Gaelic language continued.

In 1971, an article in the July 22<sup>nd</sup> issue of the Halifax Mail Star announced that "Gaelic is in a serious state of Decline."<sup>334</sup> The article, written by Linden MacIntyre, predicts the language which was alive and well in Cape Breton, could be as dead as Latin within twenty-five years. It goes on to make a comparison between the efforts of the BBC in Scotland, which featured a Gaelic programming division, and the CBC, whose weekly Gaelic program was plagued by incredibly bad luck: "Two program hosts – Hugh F. MacKenzie and Norman MacLeod – died unexpectedly within a month of each other."

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<sup>334</sup> Linden MacIntyre, "Gaelic is in a Serious State of Decline," Halifax Mail Star 22 July, 1971.

It's interesting to note that this is the same summer in which Ron MacInnis and Charlie Reynolds were shooting the material for their show, Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. It would have been articles like MacIntyre's with its dire prediction of the imminent death of a language which would have encouraged Ron MacInnis in his own work. Yet while Ron MacInnis and the CBC were ultimately viewed as outsiders by the Cape Breton audience, Linden MacIntyre was not.

MacIntyre had special insight on the subject. He grew up in Port Hawkesbury and is a contemporary of Frank MacInnis. MacIntyre worked for the Halifax Chronicle-Herald in Sydney as a reporter there. But he also joined the Gaelic Society of Nova Scotia in the early 70's and had been part of a lobby to urge the CBC to try such a program. Ken Hill, now a resident of Wolfville, was the station manager in Sydney from 1960 to 1972. He recalls little of the genesis of the show, except that he thought it was a good programming idea. He had a Welsh background and thought, "Why not put another Gaelic language on the air?"<sup>335</sup> It was called Mac Talla an Eilean or Island Echoes. The first program aired on May 8, 1971 and ran for fifteen minutes. According to Mr. Hill the CBC had already established relations with BBC Scotland. Gaelic speaking producers there had been recording Gaelic Cape Bretoners for several years. One of them, John MacPherson, is shown in the Halifax Mail Star article with his tape recorders and microphones sitting at a kitchen table with Hector MacMullin of Irish Vale. He was just one of six producers working for Fred MacCauley at the BBC.

Another Gaelic speaking contributor, who came from the Outer Hebrides and resided in Ontario, was Rosemary Hutchison. At the time, she was looking for work in Cape

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<sup>335</sup> Ken Hill, telephone conversation with Marie Thompson, 12 Feb. 2000.

Breton so she could be close to a Gaelic community. Through her connections with the BBC and MacCauley, she learned that the CBC was looking for a host for a Gaelic language program. She approached Ken Hill, in Sydney and was hired on the spot. The Cape Breton Highlander wrote an article about her appointment (included on the Women's page) saying, "MacTalla an Eielean (Island Echoes) is becoming one of Cape Breton's most popular radio shows."<sup>336</sup> We learn from the article that the original twenty minute all-Gaelic format is being expanded to an hour long Gaelic-English format from nine to ten on Saturday mornings.

Hutchison, now married as McCormack, recalls that the CBC approached the show with enthusiasm. The switch from unilingualism to bilingualism encouraged people to tune in who did not understand the language or had only a little of it. Ken Hill says he had no "highfalutin" ideas about saving the language but Hutchison had no doubt about her own motivations:

I had been aware of the contribution in Ireland and Scotland that broadcasting in the language makes to the whole strategy of language retention. If you don't have broadcasting and printing and publishing and papers and basically professional people doing stuff in the language, it's hard to make progress.<sup>337</sup>

The show, once it got going, featured playbacks of Gaelic songs and stories from Rosemary's own considerable collection. They brought people into the studio for tapings and they used material from the BBC. Story-telling has always been an important feature of Gaelic oral tradition. Many of these stories were said to have been passed down from

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<sup>336</sup> "Girl from Isles hosts Island Echoes," The Cape Breton Highlander 10 November, 1971: 5.

<sup>337</sup> Rosemary Hutchison McCormack, personal interview with Marie Thompson, 10 Mar. 2000.

the people who migrated from Scotland to Nova Scotia. Few would have been written down, so it required skill and persistence for a "story-teller" to learn the tales correctly.

But by the 1970s the story-telling tradition was in decline. Several things happened to change that, at least temporarily. Sister Margaret Beaton had already begun recording Gaelic language stories for the Cape Bretoniana Archives at Xavier College. In 1971, Island Echoes was initiated. In 1972 Cape Breton's Magazine began publishing. All of a sudden, people who had been finding fewer and fewer venues for their material were in demand. This is highlighted in an interview given by one of Cape Breton's foremost Gaelic storytellers, Joe Neil MacNeil, to Ron Caplan for Cape Breton's Magazine. Not only had he fewer listeners, due to the language decline, but he himself had begun to forget. "I was pretty near lost. I was so darn close to the line, that I was on the way out. But just between what you [Ron Caplan] picked up for the magazine and Sr. Margaret Beaton, she wanted to get some stories. And Rosemary Hutchison was anxious to get some of them, along those lines, it started coming back."<sup>338</sup> Caplan describes the recording process established by Sister Beaton at the Cape Bretoniana library in the old Xavier Junior College in Sydney where people such as Joe Neil would gather around a tape recorder and share stories with other Gaelic speakers.<sup>339</sup> In 1975, John Shaw heard those tapes and was drawn to the voice and strength of language he heard in Joe Neil's expression. "Together, Joe Neil and John Shaw did the work that led to their acclaimed book Tales until Dawn."<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Joe Neil MacNeil, "Joe Neil MacNeil: A Talk about Tales," Cape Breton's Magazine, 71: 51.

<sup>339</sup> The Cape Bretoniana Library later became the Beaton Institute at the University College of Cape Breton.

<sup>340</sup> Ron Caplan, "Joe Neil MacNeil: A Talk about Tales," 71: 52.

The broadcasting angle had its limits. Because Island Echoes was bilingual, the programmers tended to seek out people with shorter stories. That meant they could tell the tale, uninterrupted over 5 or 10 minutes, and then have it translated after they had concluded. This would have excluded, necessarily, many of the stories that were told over several hours! Still, for many years, the Gaelic tales were prominent features of the show. Gradually, Rosemary Hutchison McCormack was given more of a budget to travel with a tape recorder and a technician to record people in their homes.

The 70s was a decade of great hope and urgent expectation for the Gaelic culture and language in Cape Breton. As the article in the Mail-Star bluntly pointed out, the Gaelic language was in decline. One study submitted in 1988 to the 7<sup>th</sup> Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, in Edinburgh, suggested that the numbers of Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia dropped by half, every five years after 1950. So, at the turn of the century, 75,000 claimed the language. In 1920, 60,000. By 1931, there were 24,000. By 1950 there were 7500. And by 1970, there were 1900.<sup>341</sup>

The members of the newly formed Gaelic society hoped to turn the tide. Island Echoes was one of the pillars in their strategy. Their next goal was to have Gaelic recognized as a curriculum item in the schools in Cape Breton. But having achieved their first goal with a radio program, they came close to losing it two years later. To make things worse, the enemy turned out to be a Gaelic speaking Scottish-Canadian by the name of Lister Sinclair.

If the 1970s was a fertile period for the Gaels in Cape Breton, so, too, was it a time

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<sup>341</sup> Kenneth M. MacKinnon, "Two Peoples or One? The Shared Culture of Cape Breton and the Western Isles," (Hatfield Polytechnic, Lesser Used Languages Research Unit) Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Edinburgh, May 5-7, 1988.

of feverish activity for Canada's countless multicultural communities. The Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau had adopted the notion of the "cultural mosaic." For Canada, in the 70s, it was so much better to be what America was not. There, in the Great Melting Pot, immigrant communities lost their identities. Here in Canada, those communities would be celebrated and subsidized. It would foster the tolerance for which Canada wanted recognition.

The CBC didn't share that vision for its airwaves. It had only just accepted the idea of broadcasting in the north, using aboriginal languages. In 1973 in its quest to "regionalize," the Corporation applied for the license which had been attached to radio station CJSB in St. Boniface, Manitoba. CJSB, in its private role, had granted air time to a number of minority-language groups, including the Ukrainians. Would the CBC grant them the same air-time? No, it turned out, it would not. An internal memorandum prepared in advance of their appearance before the CRTC on February 19-20 of 1973,<sup>342</sup> reveals how hastily the CBC had prepared its language policy. The Vice President of Corporate Affairs, R.C. Fraser, drafted the document, unaware that a whole committee had previously been struck to report to management on the issue. Someone obviously wrote up the policy anyway, and he assures his correspondents (eight vice-presidents, general counsel, the president and executive vice president) that "this policy" is not at variance with the committee's findings. The policy reiterates the CBC's practice to broadcast in English and French. As it worked North, it says, the language policy was amended to include some broadcasting in the native languages of groups then called Indian and Eskimo. Broadcasting in other languages was confined to Radio Canada

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<sup>342</sup> R.C. Fraser, "CBC Language Policy" Feb. 1973, Records of the CBC, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

International, which sent its short-wave signals around the world. For people seeking those languages on the airwaves in Canada, privately owned radio would have to fill the bill.

Over three pages, the intent of the document is clear. The 1968 Broadcasting Act directs that the National broadcasting service shall be in English and French. Given the fact that the CBC's resources are finite, the "Corporation sees no way of adding broadcast services in other languages, while those responsibilities which have been specifically outlined by Parliament remain unfilled." Those responsibilities include serving geographic regions and providing northern languages. The memorandum points out that the CBC believes Canada's various cultures should be reflected adequately in its regular broadcast services. The document concludes by embracing "multiculturalism" but states that "multilingualism is not practical for the National broadcasting service in its present form." Shortly thereafter, the CRTC granted the license to the CBC, but asked the corporation to give the minority-language groups a year to phase out their broadcasts. It suggested the CBC sell the air-time to these groups. This presented a whole new set of problems for the CBC and it continued to be beset by protests and bad publicity throughout the 1973 calendar year.

Lister Sinclair, the Executive Vice President of the CBC, likely thought a trip to Cape Breton, to visit the "region" would be a nice change. Knowlton Nash, in his book The Microphone Wars, describes Sinclair as a brilliant programmer who failed to establish a working relationship of trust with then CBC president, Laurent Picard. He had been put in the executive position so he could bring a producer's creativity to the upper echelons. Nash says he had lots of ideas, but he did not have the ear of the French



and English network leaders, let alone the president.<sup>343</sup> Nash says Sinclair was rarely in his office. President Laurent Picard complained about Sinclair's "extensive traveling." It was one of these trips that led to more controversy for the CBC.

The summer of 1973 was a good summer to visit Cape Breton. The first Glendale Festival of 100 Fiddlers had been a huge success. Tourist visits to the Island were up. Rosemary McCormack was looking forward to meeting the Vice President, because she'd heard he had been raised by Gaelic-speaking parents. So in late August of 1973, he shook her hand and asked her what role she played in Sydney. She told him "I'm the host of the Gaelic-language program," hoping to engage him in a discussion.<sup>344</sup> But as she recalls, his smile froze. He stuttered and exclaimed, "what!" and quickly broke off the conversation, after telling her that she would have to stop using Gaelic. Within a few days, the new station manager, Bert Wilson confirmed that management was invoking the policy book and that they wanted "the Gaelic" off the air. In a state of shock, Rosemary recounted the story to her friends at the Gaelic society, which happened to include one Linden MacIntyre, the reporter for the Halifax Chronicle-Herald.

The next morning, August 15, 1973, in a small box below the fold on the front page, the Halifax daily broke the news: "Gaelic ruled out on weekly program." Sinclair, it reported, had told local CBC management that "minority ethnic groups in central and western Canada have been demanding special CBC attention and the existence of a Gaelic-English program in Sydney was a policy loophole that other groups might use if

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<sup>343</sup> Nash 408.

<sup>344</sup> Rosemary McCormack, 10 Mar. 2000.

they found out about it.”<sup>345</sup> The story goes on to point out that the show only cost \$150 to produce and that the station manager, while he supported the decision, wondered if Mr. Sinclair had even heard the program. It added, the listening audience of Mac Talla an Eilean was about five thousand people. The story, as quirky and regionally based as it was, quickly caught the attention of the national press.

The next day, August 16, 1973, the Globe and Mail correspondent had a story on the front page, also below the fold: “On the CBC, you can Sing in Gaelic, but don’t speak it.”<sup>346</sup> It recounted the same story but added some reaction from Gaelic speaking supporters of the show. It quotes John Campbell, editor of The Cape Breton Highlander weekly newspaper: “He thinks the ban could stir up a Gaelic storm and rekindle old resentments among many Cape Breton Scots against the Sinclairs.” Mr. Campbell pointed out to the Globe and Mail that it was a Sinclair who was responsible for beginning the hated clearances in Scotland, which forced many of the people to leave for Nova Scotia. Some of the references in the national media take on a patronizing tone. Yet, for many people in Nova Scotia, the decision of the CBC was an insult. The popular cartoonist of the Halifax Chronicle Herald/ Mail Star, Bob Chambers, drew an editorial cartoon, showing a livid Highlander, descending from Cape Smokey, in a kilt, smacking the bewhiskered Lister Sinclair (also dressed in a tartan suit) over the head with a picket sign bearing the Gaelic words “Ciad Mile Failte” or 100 thousand welcomes.<sup>347</sup>

Knowlton Nash refers to this episode by saying Sinclair had put his foot in his mouth

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<sup>345</sup> Linden MacIntyre, “Gaelic Ruled out on Radio Program,” Chronicle-Herald [Halifax] 15 Aug. 1973: 1.

<sup>346</sup> Lyndon Watkins, “On the CBC you can Sing in Gaelic, but Don’t Speak It,” The Globe and Mail [Toronto] 16 Aug. 1973: 1.

<sup>347</sup> Bob Chambers, “One Hundred Thousand Welcomes,” The Chronicle Herald 17 Aug. 1973: 6.

when he “publicly questioned the propriety of a popular local Gaelic radio program in Cape Breton.”<sup>348</sup> However, the files of the CBC at the National Archives (RG41) reveal that most of the senior managers actually supported the position, which was more than just a public questioning. But the CBC had a problem on its hands. A telex sent to senior vice presidents, Cec Smith, and Lister Sinclair, highlighted an editorial from the Winnipeg Free Press.<sup>349</sup> Remember, Winnipeg was the location of the contentious CJSB license. The editorial points out that old memories die hard, for Cape Bretoners who still recall the “clearances.” More problematic was the mail finding its way to the MPs on Parliament Hill. (Cape Bretoner, Allan J. MacEachen, was the President of the Privy Council, and one of the most powerful members of the government.)

Ian Gordon Darrach of Clayton Park in Halifax, wrote to Robert McCleave, the deputy speaker of the House, protesting the CBC’s position with respect to the Gaelic language:

I find it hard enough to stomach a two languages policy as it is, but sir, I will not tolerate the blatant discriminatory policy of the CBC.[. . .] I am given to understand the programme has a listening audience of some 5000 – Can the CBC say as much for the French station in Halifax or anywhere in Nova Scotia. Sir – we are living in New Scotland after all.<sup>350</sup>

A few weeks later on September 6, 1973, Mr. McCleave responds to Mr. Darrach saying he hopes the CBC’s decision will be re-considered, and that he will be writing to one of

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<sup>348</sup> Nash 409.

<sup>349</sup> Telex from N. Cowan to John Smith, 21 Aug. 1973, Records of the CBC, Vol. 772, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

<sup>350</sup> Ian Gordon Darrach, letter to Robert McCleave, 23 Aug. 1973, Records of the CBC, Vol. 772, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

the CBC vice-presidents "who is a friend of mine."<sup>351</sup> We have no copy of Mr. McCleave's letter to the CBC, but we do have a copy of the letter written back to him, by CBC vice-president, E.S. Hallman. It acknowledges their friendship, but gives him no satisfaction, simply regurgitating the CBC policy: "I am sure I have not convinced you about the soundness of our policy. Next time I am in Ottawa I will see if you are free for lunch and we will continue the debate."<sup>352</sup>

The CBC management thought the controversy would fizzle away. But they would soon learn, to their chagrin, that it would not. On September 21, 1973, Robert Muir, the Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament from Cape Breton-the Sydneys rose in the House and sought unanimous approval for his motion:

An action was taken recently by the CBC that shook the foundations of culture in Nova Scotia to their very roots. That action was the announcement in the form of an edict by Lister Sinclair, a vice-president of the CBC, banning the Gaelic language from a weekly radio entertainment program in Cape Breton....

Surely sir, you can appreciate the dangers inherent in such a decision. I would not like to see clan warfare between the MacEachens and the Sinclairs or any other Scots at this stage in international affairs. I urge all members to lend me their support in getting this program reinstated in its original form. I therefore move, seconded by the Hon. Member for Cape Breton-East Richmond (Mr. MacInnes) that this matter be referred to the Standing Committee on

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<sup>351</sup> R. J. McCleave, letter to Ian Gordon Darrach, 6 Sept. 1973, Records of the CBC, Vol. 772.

<sup>352</sup> E.S. Hallman, letter to Robert McCleave, 4 Oct. 1973, Records of the CBC, Vol. 772.

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Mr. Muir was wearing a kilt, as was MP Flora MacDonald, and all members present in the house that day agreed to Mr. Muir's request. As a result, the CBC would have to prepare for more submissions before yet another parliamentary body. The records of the Standing Committee are still sealed, but a press release from the office of the President of the Privy Council on January 8, 1974, reveals the outcome: "Privy Council president, Allan J. MacEachen today expressed satisfaction with a government proposal to the House of Commons broadcasting committee which would permit the continued use of the Gaelic language on a program produced by radio station, CBI, the CBC station in Sydney."<sup>354</sup>

Rosemary McCormack looks back at it all, and says she and her staff never once changed their format, or reduced their use of Gaelic. In fact, before the story hit the press, it was her understanding that they would let Lister Sinclair go back to Ottawa and hope he would forget about Mac Talla an Eilean.

The protests and pressure from highly placed individuals in Nova Scotia, along with a somewhat patronizing attitude from the central Canadians, helped to embarrass the CBC to back down. There's no doubt, either, that a "Gaelic" language program was viewed as less threatening than Ukrainian or other "foreign" languages of the time. McCormack says that the show continued unmolested for many years. She took a break from it, and then came back in the 80's. When the first round of cuts began in 1984, Island Echoes was left alone. But by 1992,

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<sup>353</sup> Robert Muir, Hansard, 21 Sept. 1973.

<sup>354</sup> Privy Council press release, 8 Jan. 1974, Records of the CBC, Vol. 772.

after many sessions of “refocusing” and “repositioning” the show, it became clear, even to Rosemary McCormack, that the Gaelic title and conversation would be dropped.

There was virtually no public protest about it at that time.

## 2) Additional Celtic music radio programming on the CBC.

Throughout the 70s and 80s, CBC radio in Sydney worked on talent development and promotion of musical recording. One CBC producer in Sydney, Brian Sutcliffe, says he never felt that the culture was threatened. By finding as “much good stuff” as he could to record, he was merely doing his job. His station manager, Bert Wilson, wanted CBI to put music on the air that Cape Bretoners would listen to. But it was also to show the region and the country that Cape Breton could produce good material.<sup>355</sup>

Sutcliffe was responsible for finding musical talent for Island Echoes, Talent Cape Breton and Archie Neil’s Cape Breton. They all featured local Cape Breton fiddlers, many of whom were original members of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. An example of another series, Cape Breton Do, would air on the weekends and feature Winnie Chafe, Carl MacKenzie and Sandy MacInnis. Its goal was to “create an atmosphere that one might find in Hughie and Allan’s living room [. . .] with stories related in a way that only Hughie and Allan can convey, toe tapping music that’s bound to set everyone dancing around their living rooms [. . .].”<sup>356</sup> (Hughie and Allan were two popular comedians who performed on radio, stage and television during the 50s, 60s and 70s.) Sutcliffe and his crew worked out of a studio in Sydney, but also went on the road

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<sup>355</sup> Brian Sutcliffe, personal interview with Marie Thompson, 7 Mar. 2000.

<sup>356</sup> CBC press release, “Cape Breton Do,” undated, c.1975, Frank MacInnis papers.

to record people like Winnie Chafe, Carl MacKenzie and Buddy MacMaster. In later years, as budget cuts took their toll, a lot of the recording shifted to Halifax.

Before that happened, however, one other thing worked against CBC radio in Cape Breton. That was the fact that the large radio transmitters in Antigonish and Guysborough broadcast the Halifax service to those areas as well as southern Cape Breton, including Inverness County. This has been a source of frustration and irritation both for producers in Sydney as well as listeners in those parts of the Island. It is a situation which continues to this day. So while many Gaelic speakers in western Cape Breton and eastern Nova Scotia may have wished to hear their language (and music) on the radio, they could not. Of course by 1990, it didn't matter. Gaelic was no longer a broadcast language on the CBC.

#### D. Conclusion.

The CBC played a major role in seeking, recording and disseminating the music of Cape Breton. Television producers (with the exception of Ron MacInnis) were still calling it Scottish music. But the radio producers based in Cape Breton, with their Gaelic programming, were attaching to it a Cape Breton identity.

In many ways radio played a more complementary role to the efforts of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association than did television. It had more local time to fill and studio time was cheaper. So the members of the Association were able to audition and at times appear in the different radio series. People like Frank MacInnis were involved in making suggestions to the producers.

But the examination of the protest against the CBC's decision to remove the Gaelic language from the airwaves leads to a number of questions. It happened only two years

after the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, but the nature of the protest was much more public and more far-reaching. The protest forced a large crown corporation to back down and allow the Gaelic to stay on the air.

Why was this protest more public than the response from the fiddling community two years earlier? This is not the subject of this paper, but I would speculate that overt threats to language almost always provoke angry response of some kind. This had happened once before when the Canadian government ordered a ban on the use of the Gaelic language over the telephone lines during World War Two. In 1941 The Board of Censors declared that Gaelic was a foreign language which was not be used in telecommunications. Both the Victoria County and Sydney Municipal councils swiftly drafted resolutions. They protested the characterization of the Gaelic language as a foreign language, saying the ban was “unfair, unjust, and a reflection on the loyalty of the Highland Scottish people of the Dominion of Canada.”<sup>357</sup> The ban was reversed after Gaelic was reaffirmed to be a language that was distinctly British.

It is strange that the people who responded to Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler did not write letters to the editors. Frank MacInnis’ letter to Ron MacInnis in January of 1972 says that his protest was “representative of the vast majority of the people of Cape Breton Island and in particular those of Inverness County.” This comment is not reflected in any immediate public expression from a wide variety of people. In fact it contradicts the only reference I’ve found to the show, which was in the Cape Breton Highlander, and which praised the documentary.

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<sup>357</sup> “Telephone call could land you in jail as recently as 1941,” The Cape Breton Highlander, 24 Nov. 1971: 7.



What this confirms, based on what we have learned about the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association, is that the response to the documentary was a narrow-based and non-public reaction. (It was more narrow, in that it did not spread to politicians or the House of Commons.) But as Kyle MacNeil says “I remember the buzz about it, and the thing I remember the most was how it riled everybody up.”<sup>358</sup> The reaction grew in number and gained more publicity over time, giving itself its own purpose, mythology and identity.

By contrast and despite the public outcry to keep Gaelic on the air, its supporters could not sustain enough Gaelic speakers to justify the CBC’s continued broadcasting of it, in the face of severe budget cuts. Yet it is not appropriate to compare the vitality of the fiddlers revival with the decline of the Gaelic language. The music and the language are connected. Many of their champions are the same. However it is much easier to develop an infrastructure to encourage the use of music than it is to encourage the use of a language. As we have seen for bilingualism in Canada and for unilingualism in Quebec, elected representatives of government have created pieces of legislation and spent vast amounts of money to provide language learning at all levels of society. This did not happen for Gaelic in Nova Scotia. Fortunately, for the lovers of Cape Breton fiddle music, it was not necessary to go that far to ensure that younger generations would continue to learn their music. In the CBC Television experience it is clear that there was constant struggle between the producers and the keepers of the music culture. The producers had the power to define the music through their choice of style; many of the music’s defenders tried to get on television without compromising their musical style. In later years, CBC Television did produce two documentaries about Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. One, Gzowski and Co., hosted by

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<sup>358</sup> Kyle MacNeil, 12 Oct. 2000.

the late Peter Gzowski, featured Ron MacInnis and his efforts in the 80s to mount a show with the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. The second came in 2001 when I produced a ten-minute documentary for the CBC Television network show, Country Canada, called the "The Fate of the Fiddle." This was later expanded to a full half-hour show in 2002, entitled, The Wakeup Call. These programs relied heavily on the material originally used in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler.

## VIII. OTHER FIDDLING "REVIVALS."

*He had been first attracted by the music, the sound of Eddie Arnold and Jim Reeves, that his father played constantly and of which both he and his sister were ashamed. They did not know of the aching loneliness of which it spoke and when it floated from the windows of their house on warm summer nights it branded their parents indelibly as hillbillies and they themselves as well, as extensions of those parents. And it was a label that they hated and did not wish to bear.*

From "The Golden Gift of Grey" in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.<sup>359</sup>

### A. Introduction.

This quotation describes the ambivalence a son feels for his parent's "hillbilly" music. He is ashamed of it and the associations it holds to poverty. Yet it is this music which tempts him to enter a forbidden place: a pool hall. Eddie Arnold and Jim Reeves actually were part of a movement in Nashville that abandoned old time string orchestras and focused more on slick vocals and high production values in music recording. Yet they had come into the business representing older values.

The narrator's feeling of shame for the "hillbilly" music parallels the attitudes of many young people towards old-fashioned fiddling and country music after World War Two. The response to these attitudes as well as attempts to preserve the fiddle music led to the creation of many Old Time Fiddlers Associations in the United States. This is well documented by Richard Blaustein in his 1975 dissertation, Traditional Music and Social Change: the Old time Fiddlers Association Movement in the United States.<sup>360</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to compare the experiences of the Cape Breton fiddlers and their revival with the history of "old-time" fiddling revivals elsewhere, especially the

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<sup>359</sup> Alistair MacLeod, Lost Salt 93-94.

<sup>360</sup> Blaustein, Traditional Music and Social Change: the Old Time Fiddlers Association Movement in the United States, diss., University of Indiana, 1975.

United States. Ian McKinnon provides an accessible definition of old time music as being music which “combined Anglo-Celtic fiddle tunes, square dance numbers, play-party tunes, Victorian parlour songs, Native American and British ballads, sacred songs and minstrel songs.”<sup>361</sup> While the Cape Breton and “old-time” styles are very distinct, their roots are similar. Yet, as we will see, what happened in the U.S. was very different from what happened in Cape Breton. The comparison is useful because it will further cement the notion that the Cape Breton revival of the 1970s was a direct result of the television broadcast.

#### B. The Old Time Fiddling Societies – United States.

Richard Blaustein tells a fascinating story of the evolution of fiddle music in the Continental United States. It is a story of arrival, borrowing and blending over four centuries. The violin was mainly an instrument to accompany dances brought over by settlers from the British Isles. Many of these dances had their origins in England, Ireland, Scotland and France. Then African born slaves and their descendants adapted the tunes. They learned not only how to play the violin, but invented the banjo as well and added their own forms of rhythm, since they were not allowed to use their drums. Itinerant dance teachers traveled the country, relying on music and dance books to help them meet a great demand for dance lessons. Fiddle contests were held as early as 1737. In the early 1800s, Christian religious revivals led to an abandonment of music and dance in many parts of the South, but Blaustein says the pressure “the Church people brought to

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<sup>361</sup> McKinnon 6.

bear on their sinful, sensual brethren was never strong enough to eradicate this tradition completely.”<sup>362</sup>

Blaustein describes how the fiddle and banjo were part of the “Black face” theatre tradition, made especially popular by the performances of Thomas Rice as “Jim Crow” in 1829.<sup>363</sup> It was also at this time that new compositions were featured. Yet many people in polite American society didn’t like the “black face” shows and looked for new dances in Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, square dances had fallen out of favour, giving way to couple dances such as waltzes, mazurkas and two-steps.

In the early twentieth century, Blaustein says there were always lots of fiddlers in the countryside, where sixty percent of the population still lived. But by 1920 that proportion had changed and so had a lot of other things. Radio and the automobile were invented: “The era of oral-aural and print culture was drawing to a close; modern post-literate culture based on mechanical and electronic communications media had arrived.”<sup>364</sup> People became aware of the phenomena of modernism, which included a loss of church influence, a loss of parental control over young people, and more permissive attitudes towards drinking, socializing and dancing.

The modern dances corresponded with the rise of one of the most important and radical forms of music developed in the twentieth century: jazz. It came out of the rural and urban black communities. The conservative elements of American society disapproved of this music. It was seen to be displacing older “white” forms of music, and

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<sup>362</sup> Blaustein 18.

<sup>363</sup> Blaustein 23.

<sup>364</sup> Blaustein 32.

it came along at a time when rural values were in conflict with new urban values brought about through industrialization and higher population densities in the cities. Sometimes it provoked anti-Semitic references in conservative newspapers, because their writers noticed many Jazz promoters (although certainly not all) came from the Jewish community. Blaustein identifies auto maker and industrialist Henry Ford Sr. as one of the leading proponents of a movement to popularize old time fiddling. (Ford was well-known for his anti-Semitic views and his encouragement of the publication of anti-Jewish hate commentary in his newspaper, The Dearborn Independent.) Blaustein describes Ford as “an old time fiddler of modest attainments and a better than average dancer of the post-Civil War Northern rural school.”<sup>365</sup> In 1923, he began organizing old-time dances. In 1926, Ford sponsored the largest fiddle competition in American history, which involved 1,865 fiddlers. He promoted it through his car dealerships, and advertisers. Old-time fiddling was featured on radio shows. It could be said that Ford bought and paid for his own “old-time” fiddle revival in an attempt to suppress interest in jazz. But by the 1930s with the Great Depression, the public lost interest in Ford’s musical obsession. World War Two, the increasing pace of urban modernization, the commercialization of radio and exposure to an ever-widening variety of musical forms put old-time fiddling on the back shelf. Yet in the 1950s there were people who began to worry about the loss of the old tunes and what they represented. They decided to do something about it. Unlike Ford’s revival, the next one would have a wider base of people to support it.

The Old Time Fiddlers Association movement began in 1953 in Weiser, Idaho with

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<sup>365</sup> Blaustein 36-37.

the re-introduction of a fiddling contest. Over the next few years a number of fiddlers and their fans formed fiddlers associations to support fiddle contests and music jams, newsletters and registries. In 1962, the Idaho Old Time Fiddlers performed at the Seattle World Fair. In 1964 the American Old Time Fiddlers Association was formed. Many new state chapters were formed in the 60s to commemorate centennial years.

One of Blaustein's informants, William Harrison, echoes the thoughts of Alistair MacLeod's narrator in "Golden Gift of Grey." Harrison, who helped organize the Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers Association of northern Alabama also evokes comments we heard earlier from Cape Bretoners like Donald Gillis, who had noticed that many of the old fiddlers in his area had simply stopped playing. According to Harrison after World War Two, "it seemed we entered an era then that people who loved the music and grew up with the music as I did became ashamed of it. They were a little bit embarrassed because they liked this music and pretended to like something else."<sup>366</sup> Harrison and organizers in other parts of the country were motivated because they noticed, not only a decline in popularity, but also a decline in repertory. One man in California expressed an awareness that traditional tunes and styles were disappearing. Soon another group, The National Old Time Fiddlers Association, was formed and by 1974 it had 11,244.

Blaustein summarizes this activity in the 1950s, 60s and 70s as a movement of people who had developed a love of the music in their youth and who "underwent deprivation of this particular mode of gratification at approximately the same time."<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Blaustein 83.

<sup>367</sup> Blaustein 98.

Through “informal communication of their desire to preserve the music with which they identified [it] led to the establishment of formal organizations that would provide that tradition with a new context of maintenance and transmission.”<sup>368</sup>

We can immediately see one difference between the Americans and their Cape Breton counterparts. Aside from Ron MacInnis, most of the people involved in organizing the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association did not feel deprived of their music in the 50s and 60s. They knew where to find it and they did not feel the repertory was suffering. In fact throughout Blaustein’s account of the formation of American old time fiddlers associations, there is no mention anywhere that a media report had any role to play. This seems to be unique for the Cape Breton fiddlers.

Blaustein describes a number of characteristics of the American groups which are similar to the Cape Breton (and PEI) Fiddlers associations. They hold jam sessions and charitable benefits, both for themselves and for other organizations. They encourage the sharing of stages between young and older players. They exchange audio tapes to facilitate learning. They publish newsletters and seek publicity in other media outlets. They tended to be male dominated, although within two years of formation, the original Cape Breton organization did have two women on the committee.

Yet there seem to be more differences than similarities. Old Time Fiddlers Associations across North America have always promoted themselves with the vehicle of fiddling competitions. Cape Breton and PEI are the two constituencies, which do not. Cape Breton and PEI fiddlers did take part in competitions in the 1930s and 40s, but since then the concept of subjecting oneself to the arbitrary opinions of a judge has been anathema to all the fiddlers I have met. This aversion to competition was encouraged by

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<sup>368</sup> Blaustein 98.



the Catholic priests. They, as we have seen, preferred to espouse the idea that any talent, no matter how good or how poor, was a gift from God. It must also have been a function of the fact that the Cape Bretoners stuck to one style of playing – the Scottish style – with a geographically identified repertoire. None of these concerns seemed to bother the Americans, who loved the competitions and used these events as motivation to improve their ability. In Cape Breton, the Fiddlers Association sponsored, instead, fiddle classes, where the students, young and old, male and female, were encouraged to learn at their own pace, with support from their families. Yet they had to be prepared to perform at the very least, every couple of years, in the safety of the massed group at Glendale.

Another difference between the Americans and the Cape Bretoners was the emphasis on the “old” repertory. This arises from the way in which contests are run, which “require that tunes be of traditional vintage, and some even reject tunes known to be composed after a certain date which may be 1900 or 1910.”<sup>369</sup> Cape Bretoners limit their repertory to tunes played in the Scottish or Cape Breton style. But composers such as Dan Rory MacDonald and Dan Hughie MacEachern have written a large number of their tunes since 1920. The contests also give rise to age classifications, which is not encouraged in Cape Breton. While everyone there recognizes learners, and people of varying abilities, they are all encouraged to play together in the rehearsals for the annual concerts and at the concerts themselves. The learners and the youth groups, within the fiddlers association get their chances to perform separately, but it is in an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance, rather than one of judgment. Blaustein also notes that contests put pressure on the participants to win both prestige and money, something that is not

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<sup>369</sup> Blaustein 113.

known in Cape Breton. Blaustein points out that the contests, not surprisingly, often cause divisiveness, although efforts are made to encourage players, no matter what their ability, to believe “that each fiddler [. . .] still makes his personality felt through his music and thus makes a unique contribution to the ongoing tradition.”<sup>370</sup>

Blaustein refers to another characteristic of American Old Time Fiddlers Associations which was not true of Cape Breton. He says that in the 1950s and 60s old time fiddling fans had a hard time finding recordings of their favourite music. As Ian McKinnon has documented, this was not true for Cape Breton. Nonetheless, it is also evident from his discography that the recording activity in Cape Breton fell off in the 1960s.

The major difference of note between the Americans and Cape Bretoners is the new tradition of the massed fiddlers, which happened for the first time at Glendale in 1973. While these performances (and their rehearsals) might serve some of the same purposes as the jam sessions do in the U.S. groups, the Cape Bretoners submit to musical direction in a way that is unknown elsewhere in the tradition. And while the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association is avowedly non-secular, nonetheless Catholics have had a huge influence. Blaustein makes no mention of religious influences in the Old Time Fiddlers Association movement. Finally, most of the original organizers of the association in Cape Breton were not fiddlers. This was not the case for the Americans.

So what conclusions can we draw from this comparison? Clearly the music, traditions and practices of the old time fiddlers of the United States were different from those of Cape Breton. Yet their roots were similar and their revivals have parallels. It is important to note that the organizers of the Festival of 100 Fiddlers in 1973 were

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<sup>370</sup> Blaustein 120.

provoked by the CBC documentary and not by a shared awareness of deprivation: certainly those who could listen to CJFX out of Antigonish were not deprived. Those closer to Sydney could still hear their fiddle tunes once or twice a week, but not as often as before. The amount of support for the festival and the subsequent fiddle classes attests to a recognition that more could be done.

This comparison confirms the unique nature of the Cape Breton fiddle revival of the 1970s. The people involved had no knowledge of Henry Ford Sr., or the Old Time Fiddlers Associations in the United States. They knew about the Woodstock and Mariposa Folk festivals, but as Frank MacInnis says, “fiddle music wasn’t folk music, in our minds. It was just a part of life.”<sup>371</sup> But after the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler they began to take it more seriously.

#### C. Old Time Fiddling: the Maritime Fiddlers Associations.

Ivan Hicks, from Riverview, New Brunswick, is a fiddler and cofounder of the Maritime Fiddlers Association, which was established in 1981. He states that the “1960s were not a good time for the fiddle anywhere in North America.”<sup>372</sup> Fiddling was viewed as old-fashioned. Many of the players could no longer find venues or local audiences. The young people were more interested in Rock and Roll. But Hicks says that a revival of interest began in the 1970s because formal teaching became more popular. Yet, as we have seen with the American example, the contests themselves provided a structure upon which to build. The Maritime Fiddlers Association was formed out of the annual efforts

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<sup>371</sup> Frank MacInnis, 16 Aug. 2002.

<sup>372</sup> Ivan Hicks, telephone interview with Marie Thompson, 5 Jan. 2002.

to mount the Maritime Old Time Fiddling Contest. It had a distinct advantage over the newly-formed Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. It had easy access to established lists of competitors and judges, with different categories already recognized that invited participation from young people. By contrast, the Cape Breton organizers, preparing for their Glendale festival, had to visit back roads and hamlets looking for fiddlers. Even then, they found a wide range of musical ability. Ivan Hicks describes the “old time” fiddling sound as being less Scottish sounding: there are some crossovers, but “we don’t play their strathspeys.”<sup>373</sup>

Even though their revival started in the 1970s there was less financial support for it, he says, than there is now. For example, students who wish to attend fiddle summer camps in New Brunswick, can apply to the New Brunswick Sound Initiatives for financial assistance. And currently there are hundreds of young people learning the fiddle in that province.

#### D. Newfoundland.

Traditional music in Newfoundland went through a huge increase in popularity with the youth of the 60s and 70s. Neil Rosenberg and the CBC documented this “revival” in 1999 in a two hour television show on the history of Newfoundland music entitled Ancient, Wild and Beautiful.<sup>374</sup> Rosenberg reports that “by the close of the 1960s a younger generation of Newfoundlanders was examining critically the impact of Confederation on their culture. In this climate a new generation of singer-collectors

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<sup>373</sup> Ivan Hicks, 5 Jan. 2002.

<sup>374</sup> Ancient, Wild and Beautiful, dir., Leo Williams, CBC TV, 1999.

sought fresh traditional music of more acceptable authenticity.”<sup>375</sup> He is referring specifically to Figgy Duff, a band identified as a “trad-rock” band and one which, starting in 1976, led the Celtic music movement in Canada. Anita Best and Pam Morgan, both members of Figgy Duff, told the CBC that young people of the 60s rebelled against a perception which had arisen after Confederation. They refer to a notion that anything associated with the old colonial past was inferior to a new Canadian future. It would be impossible to claim that the songs played today by a variety of folk and rock groups sound at all the same as they did in the outports of rural Newfoundland. But the fact that they are remembered and sung at all, is a tribute to the power of the music.

While this popularity focused on vocal music, it extended to the fiddle. Kelly Russell and others made special attempts to collect and record the music of two of Newfoundland’s pre-eminent fiddlers, Rufus Guinchard and Emile Benoit.<sup>376</sup> Both these fiddlers lived on the west coast of Newfoundland. Their repertoire includes some of the Scottish tunes, but their styles do not approach the Cape Breton style of fiddling.

The media focus on the Newfoundland music revival completely missed the Newfoundland and Labrador Fiddlers Association. Their style of music took a back seat to the unique Newfoundland-Irish sound provided by the combination of fiddle and accordion, played by Emile Benoit, Rufus Guinchard and others. The original Newfoundland Fiddlers Association, formed after the first Glendale festival, is no longer active. But one of its branches, the Codroy Valley Fiddlers Association (formed in 1980) remains involved in providing lessons and organizing an annual Folk Festival. This

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<sup>375</sup> Neil Rosenberg in Ancient, Wild and Beautiful, 1999.

<sup>376</sup> Ancient, Wild and Beautiful, CBC TV, 1999.

motivation derives directly from the example in the 1970s of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. Joe Aucoin of Tompkins, is one of the most active members of the Codroy group. He admits they don't have enough fiddlers to support a festival devoted uniquely to the fiddle, as they do in Cape Breton, but he adds they invite bagpipers, stepdancers, accordionists and singers to perform. The festival has been going for 18 years.

#### E. Quebec.

Lisa Ornstein writes that the 70s was a decade of wild success for Quebec traditional music on the public stage: "In the brasseries, CEGEPs and especially in the large demonstrations like la Veillee des Veillees and the Quebec Summer Festival, Louis 'Pitou' Boudreault, 'Ti-Jean Carignan, etc., played for enthusiastic crowds. It's a great discovery for a whole generation of urban youth more or less cut off from their roots."<sup>377</sup> She goes on to say that by the 80s, after the defeat of the sovereignty option in the referendum, the public lost its affection for traditional music, which she says had become a symbol of a lost dream. The music continued, though, and next the accordion experienced a revival in Quebec. Ornstein reports however, that young Quebecers now seem to be drawn to the Irish and Scottish repertory of the Ottawa Valley fiddlers, or to the Celtic movement. She also points to the rise of fiddling contests as vehicles for a homogenization of individual styles.

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<sup>377</sup> Ornstein, Lisa, "La Musique Traditionnelle au Quebec. 20 ans de vagues et de ressacs," Guide de la Danse et de la Musique Traditionnelle du Quebec (Ste-Hyacinthe: n.p., 1994) 2.

#### F. Conclusion.

It seems clear from this survey that traditional music fans in Cape Breton were marching to their own tune! They were connected to their musical roots in Scotland, but knew their music had already evolved in different ways. They were relatively unaware of the revival of "old-time" music in the United States, although, there, too, they knew their American cousins were playing music with similar roots. Finally, when they did respond to the message in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, it was not originally with the intention of mounting a revival. Rather, it was to prove a point. Yet, as time progressed, their activities and efforts began to resemble revival efforts in other regions and ultimately became one. Nonetheless they continued to hold on to their firm opposition to competition and to promote a populist mandate: Anyone with a musical interest should be encouraged to pursue that interest, whether they were powerful performers or shy kitchen fiddlers.

## IX. FIDDLING IN PRINT IN THE 1970s.

*Sometimes the articles bore titles such as "Cape Breton Singer: The Last of His Kind" or "Holding Fast on Top of the Mountain" or "Mnemonic Devices in the Gaelic Line" – the latter generally being accompanied by a plethora of footnotes.*

*He did not really mind the folklorists [. . .].*

From "The Tuning of Perfection" in As Birds Bring Forth the Sun.<sup>378</sup>

## A. Introduction.

The hero of "The Tuning of Perfection" is not a fiddler but a Gaelic singer. And the purpose of this chapter is not to review the academic papers written by folklorists. Yet somehow it seems to be an appropriate choice for this part of my thesis. My eye is drawn to the headlines – the titles of the articles. While they do not specify the instrumental music tradition of Cape Breton, they could, with a simple change reflect the kind of thinking that motivated Ron MacInnis to produce his documentary. The headlines could have read, "Cape Breton Fiddler: The Last of his Kind" or "Cape Breton Fiddler: Holding Fast on top of the Mountain."

But articles by folklorists are rarely read by the "folk." To be fair, the folklorists, usually share their articles and books with their principle informants. Yet, at times, academic language is difficult to understand – frequently as inaccessible to the non-academic reader, as Gaelic or fiddle music is to those who can neither speak the language nor play the notes.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the material about fiddling that was accessible. Cape Breton has an impressive history of publishing, both in the Gaelic language and in English. The fiddle became increasingly common as a subject of newspaper and magazine articles after 1970. In some cases the articles were written by

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<sup>378</sup> Alistair MacLeod, As Birds 92.



academics, who found a way to write in a manner that had meaning for Cape Breton readers. Their body of work is part of the awakening of wider public interest in the role of instrumental music in the Cape Breton Scottish tradition.

But more importantly, this chapter will show that although some elements of the Cape Breton culture were in trouble, publishing institutions such as the ones which follow had enough support to survive and thrive. These institutions helped the organizers of the fiddlers association to get their message out. It would have been a lot harder for them to succeed as they did, without the commitment of the people who ran these newspapers and wrote for them. In some cases, the publishers were very specifically aware of the message in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. But in other cases, they were not. Nonetheless, each publication tapped in to Cape Bretoners' appetite to read about their musical heroes. It was an appetite that had been whetted by the publicity surrounding the efforts to form the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. And in many ways the fact that most of these publications arose in the 1970s reflect the fact that Cape Bretoners were experiencing a wider cultural revival, brought on by their awakening awareness of the many threats to their economy and culture.

B. The Scotia Sun – Marcie MacQuarrie and John G. Gibson.

Port Hawkesbury businessman, Marcie MacQuarrie began publishing The Scotia Sun weekly newspaper on September 2, 1970. It was an amalgamation of two other papers, The Canso Breeze and The Inverness County Bulletin. Marcie MacQuarrie, who now lives in the Halifax area, had fiddling and piping in his family background and was

keenly interested in the Scottish heritage of the area. Among his staff, was reporter John Gibson, recently arrived from Scotland, who also shared a keen interest in the music.

MacQuarrie recalls in the first couple of years that they were looking for something to boost their readership. The circulation of the paper was between two thousand and five thousand readers. After Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was broadcast, MacQuarrie says he and Gibson decided to try to interview the fiddlers “while they were still alive.”<sup>379</sup> He says now, looking back on that time, that it was possible the tradition was simply at the bottom of a cycle, and might have come back on its own. But he agreed with the premise of the documentary that interest was waning. He also recalls being aware that the British Broadcasting Corporation had sent producers to Cape Breton to document the Gaelic language and music. He knew the members of Frank MacInnis’ committee who were trying to organize a festival. So he encouraged John Gibson to start a series about the fiddlers. From September of 1972 to June of 1973, they published 27 biographies, starting with Dan R. MacDonald and ending with Arthur Muise. (It should be noted that Frank MacInnis and Joey Beaton also wrote a number of these articles and continued to contribute to the paper over the years.)

MacQuarrie says the circulation spiked higher with each fiddler biography because people in the small communities of Inverness County simply loved to read about their local heroes. But it was also because of their interest in music. Throughout the 70s and 80s the paper published dozens of articles about the Glendale Festivals and other traditional music subjects, although never as intensely as it did in 1972-73.

I pointed out to Mr. MacQuarrie that there had never been a reference to the

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<sup>379</sup> Marcie MacQuarrie, telephone interview with author, 18 Sept. 2002.

MacInnis documentary film at the time it was broadcast. There was no advance promotion of it nor were there any letters to the editor afterwards. He says it might have been because it happened in the midst of a “cultural transition” when the decline of fiddling “was not really recognized as a big problem.” He adds, “Ron MacInnis was astute enough to see the transition and he did the documentary. It didn’t get much publicity but it must have been a bit of a sleeper. People talked about it and thought about it.” And as has already been fully explored, the “Committee for 100 fiddlers” had already begun its activities.

### C. Cape Breton's Magazine.

The same year Ron MacInnis broadcast his documentary a young American arrived in Cape Breton with his wife and child looking for a new life. Ron Caplan decided to try his hand publishing a magazine “devoted to the History, Natural History and Future of Cape Breton Island.” In 1972 he launched Cape Breton’s Magazine. It was a unique large format: about 10 inches wide by 14 inches high, it featured black and white photographs on a glossy front and back cover, while the pages inside were made of newsprint. There were four issues a year. He didn’t date them, he numbered them. There was something even more unique about it. All the articles were based on long, verbatim interview transcripts with citizens of Cape Breton who talked about their family histories, personal experiences of superstition, folklore as well as their own life histories. He interviewed people like Father John Angus Rankin who were well known figures of authority in their communities, but he also interviewed people who were less well known. They talked about the Gaelic and French languages, their story-telling, their poetry, their

songs and their music. In the first 60 issues of Cape Breton's Magazine at least twenty included stories about fiddling and music in the lives of the individual informants. Issue Number 29 has a cover photograph of fiddler Sandy MacLean sitting on a porch next to a border collie and playing his violin. That same issue features an interview on the work of Allister MacGillivray who spent two years collecting information for a book of biographies of Cape Breton Fiddlers.

There are no editorials in Cape Breton's Magazine. Caplan told a CBC television crew "there's no politics in Cape Breton's Magazine because by God those things will pass. But people, stories, the quality with which they've told them, the way they live their lives, the generosity of just sharing those kind of things that will still have effects on my life and the next generation. So that's what I care about."<sup>380</sup> Not only did this magazine contribute to the renewal of interest in Cape Breton style fiddling in the 1970s, but it was itself an expression of a culture that was in transition.

#### D. Inverness Oran.

Rankin and Eleanor MacDonald, Lawrence and Jackie Ryan and Father Bob Neville launched Oran Inbhirnis on April 9, 1976.<sup>381</sup> The Gaelic name means "Song of Inverness." Rankin and his wife, a bit like Ron Caplan, needed to find a way to make a bit of money and stay in the community in which they were raised. They also wanted to provide a community service. Rankin wrote about the genesis of the paper in the twentieth Anniversary issue:

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<sup>380</sup> Ron Caplan in Land and Sea, CBC TV, 11 May 1992.

<sup>381</sup> Rankin MacDonald, "The Oran: Shaped by the People it Serves," Inverness Oran, Apr. 1996.

Father Bob Neville, Lawrence Ryan and I sat in a room in the old post office, solving the world's problems and deciding what we could do for our community besides operating a clothing bank and running a small library. I looked down at the Halifax Herald on the table and said off the top of my head, "Let's start a newspaper." Father Neville's eyes ignited and immediately, he realized that this was the missing link, this was what the community needed, a voice.<sup>382</sup>

Hence the name "Oran." They knew their target audience would have a familiarity with the meaning of the Gaelic words and identify with the goals of the founders. (Unfortunately, the publishers discovered many had difficulty pronouncing the title, and they changed Inbhirnis to Inverness several years later. This was certainly another sign the language was fading.) It wasn't an easy task to launch a newspaper. None of them had any publishing experience. The first Oran was produced on a Gestetner machine. They ran off 400 copies. But they had able help. Here again, we have the involvement of a socially active Roman Catholic priest. Father Bob Neville was a much more visible activist than Father Eugene Morris or Father John Angus Rankin. He became involved in community development and the labour movement in later years. He didn't hesitate to lend his support to a new institution. The Scotia Sun, based as it was in the relatively prosperous Straits area, did not always reflect the depressed economy or the culture of the rural town of Inverness only 60 kilometers away. Within two years there was enough of a circulation and support from advertisers to pay the bills and small salaries for the staff.

The paper recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Over the years, it has published numerous articles and editorials about fiddling and the musical culture of Inverness County. It was the Oran that published the debate among contributors to its

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<sup>382</sup> Rankin MacDonald, Apr. 1996.

Letters section over the role of the Fiddlers Association and its supposed “commercial” character. It has an entertainment section that is filled with the various engagements of fiddlers, pianists, dance hall dates and anything else that would in some way fit the bill. You’d think that with the Scotia Sun and The Inverness Oran, the demand for local cultural information would have been satisfied in Inverness County. But it wasn’t and in 1979 another publication came into existence.

#### E. Partici-paper of Inverness County.

The Partici-paper of Inverness County was founded in 1979 to promote the heritage and culture of Western Cape Breton. It is published four times a year and is fully funded by the municipality on a budget of about \$20,000 a year. It is a unique publication in Canada. It was the brainchild of Inverness County Recreation and Tourism director, John Cotton. He consulted people of the county about their needs and discovered they wanted more information about their culture. They had enough news, but not enough about what was going on behind the scenes. As a result he instituted the Partici-paper (named after the well-known, and now defunct, federal government-sponsored physical fitness campaign, Participaction). It is distributed free-of-charge to 6500 mailboxes in Inverness County.

Here again, John Gibson and others found a publication interested in printing their stories about music. For example in December of 1982 Gibson wrote a detailed and lengthy article entitled “The Bard of Margaree – The Story of Malcolm Gillis.” In 1984, The Partici-paper published two more articles, “Strathspey tradition evident” and “Jigs, Reels and Strathspeys.” They are all carefully researched and often provide the kind of

notes and source information that one would find in an academic paper. However, they are written in a flowing, easy style which would appeal to most readers interested in the subject.

In addition to these publications, the daily Cape Breton Post and the weekly Cape Breton Highlander based in Sydney also took an active interest in the musical culture of the Island. They both pre-dated the four publications I've already highlighted. As we saw in Chapters Three and Four, Frank MacInnis kept in constant contact with Sandy and John Campbell who produced the Cape Breton Highlander. In 1972 and 1973 they worked both in the paper and behind the scenes to help in the organization of the festival. But the paper folded in 1976, with a brief effort to revive it in 1981. It closed for good in 1982 leaving the Cape Breton Post to do the job for the Sydney area.

#### F. Conclusion

The relative success of these institutions suggests that despite the influx of Rock and Roll, the loss in status of the fiddle tradition and the steady decline of the Gaelic language, there was still lots of interest in Cape Breton Scottish culture in the 1970s. It dramatically contradicts Pierre-Yves Pepin's dim view of the vibrancy of the Gaelic communities in western Cape Breton. The population was prepared to support, for a time at least, a variety of printed publications that reflected their societies and emphasized their culture. It also illustrates how influential a newspaper or magazine publisher can be, once they have found the pulse of their readership.

## X. CONCLUSION.

*My father and my uncles and aunts take the violin from its peg and play the complicated jigs and reels gracefully and without effort. All of them grasp the bow in the same spot and in the same manner and bend their wrists in an identical way. It is a style older than any of our memories and produces what we call "our sound." People remove harmonicas from handbags and pockets and the younger ones bring in guitars.*

From "The Road to Rankin's Point" in The Lost Salt Gift of Blood.<sup>383</sup>

Alistair MacLeod sets this scene in the early seventies. Earlier in the story we are told that two of the narrator's cousins are performing the music "of their time" in Las Vegas and Toronto. "They swivel and stomp beneath kaleidoscopic lights, stepping nimbly over the cords that bind their instruments to the high powered amplifiers."<sup>384</sup> MacLeod, in August 2002, says Rock and Roll did not displace fiddle music in the 1960s: "And I don't necessarily think that it's an 'either-or' situation.[. . .] I know my own children are in different bands; you can play fiddle music, but you can also sing 'Proud Mary'."<sup>385</sup>

Yet the situation he describes in "The Road To Rankin's Point" is very reminiscent of the situation Ron MacInnis saw in his travels through Cape Breton in the 1960s. The parents, aunts and uncles play the violin and dance to the music in a highly developed individual family style easily recognizable to other people in the vicinity. Yet the narrator, a young man of the seventies, does not join in. His musical cousins are far away, performing the music of "their time." Ron MacInnis wondered what would happen if this trend continued. He answered his question in the title of his film. It would vanish. Unfortunately for Ron MacInnis, though, he did not frame his documentary as a

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<sup>383</sup> MacLeod, The Lost Salt 149.

<sup>384</sup> MacLeod, The Lost Salt 139.

<sup>385</sup> MacLeod, 17 Aug. 2002.



speculation. He framed it as fact. He continues to state, to this day, that it was a lament – that he believed that the fiddle tradition we see so well described above by Alistair MacLeod to be on its last legs. So, given the responders' capacity to demonstrate there were large numbers of fiddlers, they could rightly retort "The Cape Breton Fiddler was not vanishing!"

As we have seen from our comparisons to the American fiddlers associations, Cape Bretoners did not suffer from the same perceived deprivation of "their" music. They had a radio station and small but active recording companies. Yet the Gaelic language was near extinction. The status of the Gaelic traditions in Cape Breton was in decline and had been for decades. The rural communities had lost their young adult workers. Despite the fact that there was a dependable group of talented fiddlers, it could be said that they were playing on very thin ice, because the poor economy was melting the support they needed to pass on their knowledge.

At the same time we have also seen that a small elite of university-educated professionals, volunteers and Catholic clergy had a solid foundation of personal resources committed to supporting certain aspects of the culture of rural Cape Breton. They were devoted to their traditional fiddle dance music and were shocked at the way it was portrayed on television. Although they did not write letters-to-the-editors or immediately launch public protests about the broadcast, they did canvas through word-of-mouth a wide group of people who shared their interest. Then they made a concerted effort to respond. They understood the power of symbolism. They had witnessed the sight of one hundred pipers marching across the causeway. They would produce the same number of fiddlers on one stage. It didn't matter that the public broadcaster did not show up for the

first Glendale Festival because they had access to their own media. The organizers published newsletters, organized lessons and concerts and for many years would point to the broadcast of the documentary as the provocation for their movement.

In the years that followed, the CBC would provide an outlet for many of the musicians who gained early experience in the fiddlers association. Both CBC Television and Radio did what the other local TV and radio stations could not. Local producers conducted talent searches and attempted (not always successfully) to provide a springboard for local musicians to a national audience. In addition, as we have seen, new publications were available to bring attention, in print, to the fiddle tradition.

This did not happen in a vacuum. Ken Donovan, in his introduction to The Island: 1713-1990, states that over the past 40 years Cape Breton has experienced a cultural revival.<sup>386</sup> He lists as many as 34 events which manifest it: they include the opening of the Alexander Graham Bell Museum, the reconstruction of Fortress Louisbourg, the founding of the Men of the Deeps Choir, the Glendale Fiddling Festival and the beginning of Mi'kmaw studies programs at UCCB. Out of this list of 34, almost half are the result of some kind of government funding. John Reid also lists increased political and cultural awareness within the Black and Mi'kmaw communities of Nova Scotia. Often government funding to support their demands for new institutions came as a result of pressure and lobbying. It was a legitimate and long-overdue recognition of their needs. Reid states that "the 1970s saw the growth of a new tendency towards self-

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<sup>386</sup> Kenneth Donovan, "Reflections on Cape Breton Culture: An Introduction," The Island, New Perspective: 1713-1990, ed., Kenneth Donovan (Sydney: UCCB P, 1990) 1-2.

direction, in the form of united action by those who faced disparities along the lines of geographical location, ethnicity, gender and social class.”<sup>387</sup>

Cape Breton culture was and continues to be threatened by a poor economy. It is subject to regular caricature (sometimes healthy) and ridicule (often damaging). But it is by no means vanishing. It is holding on, against all odds, perhaps because the communities of Gaels, Acadians, Mi’qmaq and even newer immigrants maintain the local soil and local memories that Wendell Berry prescribes.

It is necessary to avoid over-romanticizing the events that took place in the fiddling communities of Cape Breton thirty years ago. The idea to gather one hundred fiddlers on one stage and emulate the gathering of one hundred pipers at the opening of the Canso Causeway in 1958 was an invented tradition. Ian McKay has used the phrase “tartanism” to bring attention to the deliberate use of inauthentic Scottish paraphernalia in Nova Scotia tourist promotions of the 1930s and 40s.<sup>388</sup> McKay identifies the late Nova Scotia premier, Angus L. MacDonald as the great “tartanizer,” pointing out that it was he who first mused about the possibility of having one hundred pipers to play “Road to the Isles.” His suggestion was given life by the director of the Gaelic College, A.W.R. MacKenzie, “who seized the opportunity to involve the Gaelic College in a crash programme of training pipers – who for some reason MacKenzie thought should be child pipers.”<sup>389</sup> McKay calls this an interweaving of tartanism and commerce. And it provides ammunition for anyone who brings a skeptical regard to the “revival” of fiddling. First of

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<sup>387</sup> John Reid, “Sharpening the Skeptical Edge,” The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation, 504.

<sup>388</sup> Ian McKay, “Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia” Acadiensis, 21 (1992): 6.

<sup>389</sup> McKay 47.

all, massed groups of fiddlers playing on one stage were not part of the Cape Breton tradition at all. Secondly, the Gaelic language, which many believe to be one of the sources of Scottish-style fiddling, is dying as a home-based language.

I must emphasize that my research has not covered the last twenty years. But it is possible to summarize some of the effects arising from the broadcast of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler and the formation of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association. First of all, more attention has been paid to teaching children both in the home and through workshops. The fiddlers know who they are as a result of the registry provided by the Fiddlers Association. Other organizations throughout the world have been able to communicate with them, leading to invitations for Cape Bretoners to perform and teach their own style to others. In many ways, the efforts have fallen off as the Internet and the explosion of interest in Celtic music around the world have supplanted the need for hands-on organization. Some of the older members of the Fiddlers Association wonder if there is a need for them anymore. Frank MacInnis acknowledges that even as they celebrate thirty years of activity, there are those who question their purpose. But, he adds, every time the subject comes up, it is set aside. People such as treasurer, Betty Matheson and music teacher Eddie Rodgers volunteer many hours of their week as promoters and teachers of the music.

Has the tradition, which was once found only in church halls and kitchens, been completely transformed by the new Celtic music environment? I would argue that it has not. The massing of the fiddlers is an infrequent event. Kitchen parties and dances are just as informal and common as ever before. If anything, the popularity of "all-ages" dances, where alcohol is not served, has increased the place which fiddling and step

dancing hold in the community. The loss of the Gaelic language will mean one more change in the fiddling style, along with the advent of the recording industry, the sharing of tunes, the demand for fiddle classes and the popularization of the music. It has now reached a point where the Celtic music genre in Nova Scotia has become a monolith. It's a far cry from the day in 1971 when Ron MacInnis asked, on the CBC, "What's to become of the Cape Breton Fiddler? Will he live on? Or will he be drowned out by the hard beat of modern rock and other synthetic music? Only time will tell."

Father John Angus Rankin, in many ways the spiritual anchor for the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association, died in 1995. Shortly before his death, Ron MacInnis and television producer Ralph Waugh visited Father Rankin and interviewed him on camera. This interview has never been aired, but MacInnis and Waugh have carefully preserved it. They allowed me to view it and quote briefly from it for this paper.

The scene is a a living room. The man who commanded the focussed attention of a hundred fiddlers is now frail and leaning into his wheelchair. His hair is white and his words sometimes slur. But he is fully alert and very anxious to speak. Ron MacInnis, off camera, asks about the film Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler: "What was the state of affairs when that program came along? You and I had words." MacInnis asks Father Rankin to address him in the third person. Here is his answer about the fiddle music of the late 60s:

It was dormant and if it had continued that way it would have died out completely. It's like a person who goes to sleep and falls into a deep sleep and when he falls into a deep sleep it's pretty hard to wake a person up. But to my way of thinking that's the way the music was going – in a dormant state. There

were pockets of it here and there. It wasn't dead. But there were pockets. Mr. MacInnis came along. He got the Scots mad, in a good sense, and thank God for sending him there, because we knew it was there and we were letting it go. I'd never admit that he made me so mad. He got the dander up in me; I said I'll show that fellow that fiddling is not dead, because I'd traveled around and heard it. I knew where to go looking for it. But a stranger would never find it. And then the first concerts we had show that[...] the number of fiddlers turned out. They got bigger and bigger and bigger see? And Ron MacInnis is responsible for the revival of Scottish music, certainly on Cape Breton Island and probably all over Canada. That's my analysis of the situation.<sup>390</sup>

It is an answer that carries truth, exaggeration and poetry. Father Rankin knew it could become part of his own legacy, and true to the way others describe his character, he chose not to seek credit for his own role in the revival. Perhaps at some point the interview will be added to the public record, either through broadcast or through an archive. It will become part of the story that in a strange and unique way has bound a modern communications medium with an old yet universal musical form.

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<sup>390</sup> Father John Angus Rankin interviewed by Ron MacInnis, 1995, Ron MacInnis Collection.

## AFTERWORD.

On October 13, 2002, the international festival "Celtic Colours" sponsored a show at the Gaelic College in St. Anne's, entitled, "The Thriving Cape Breton Fiddler." It had acquired a copy of Ron MacInnis' film from the CBC and played it for about 350 paying customers. The Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, Myra Freeman attended and congratulated the CBC and the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association for their commitment to the tradition. Ron MacInnis, himself, was there to introduce the film and to speak to people afterward. A group of young members of the Cape Breton Fiddlers Association performed following the projection of the film, to celebrate the event that started it all.

I was there to watch the presentation, but I was more interested in the audience reaction. They chuckled at the hairstyles of the 1970s and at Ron MacInnis' attempt to play the violin. They laughed openly, and some spoke up, in almost gospel fashion, calling out the names of recognized fiddlers, and especially Dan R. MacDonald with his story of his fiddle, his glass of whisky in hand. At the sight of the young John Morris Rankin, people gasped and then fell silent. For both Dan R. and John Morris have died. Dan R. MacDonald passed away in 1976, at a natural end to a long life. But John Morris Rankin died tragically in 2000 when his vehicle flew off the highway, over a Cape Breton cliff, landing in the sea below. His passengers, including his own son, survived. It is a loss that is keenly felt in Cape Breton. The footage of John Morris in Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler is powerful and poignant, now, in light of his death. But as the film rolled on, the mood improved and the audience laughed at the exuberant, eighty-two-year-old Jimmy Dixon flirting with the dancers at Ashby legion in 1971. So by the time the

closing shot of Dan R. MacDonald and John Morris Rankin walking away from the camera passed the screen, there were smiles on most faces.

It was a satisfying punctuation mark to my own three years of research and exploration of this subject. In 1999 when I first heard of Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler and its reputation in Cape Breton traditional music circles, I felt a sense of personal discovery. It was new to me. Few of my Nova Scotia friends had ever heard of it before. Some, including my partner, CBC editor Blair Meagher, knew Ron MacInnis and had worked with him, but were unfamiliar with the story of the 1971 film. Other employees who knew of the controversy first hand, had died, or retired. I was struck then, as I am now, with a somewhat naive sense of wonder that a single documentary could provoke such a response.

I know a lot more now than I did when I started. I have discovered of course that the story was well known in Cape Breton. But it was a lot more complicated and perhaps, even prosaic, than it at first seemed. I have discovered a rich context of history and a complex web of reactions that were in some ways unique and in other ways predictable. There's still more to be said about the instrumental music culture of Cape Breton: the role of women fiddlers and organizers; the persistence of the instrumental Acadian tradition; the adoption of fiddle music by Mi'qmaq musicians. A lot has happened in the last twenty years. My study stops in 1982. I am leaving it to others, more knowledgeable in music, to address the current situation. I hope they do. It's a rich vein.



## APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEW INFORMANTS.

Leanne Aucoin  
Father Francis Cameron  
John Allan Cameron  
John Donald Cameron  
Joseph Cotton (telephone)  
Donald and Margaret Gillis  
Ivan Hicks (telephone)  
Bishop Faber MacDonald (telephone)  
Ray MacDonald  
John MacDougall  
Carl MacKenzie  
Frank MacInnis  
Ron MacInnis  
Dave MacIsaac  
Alistair MacLeod  
Betty Matheson  
Kyle MacNeil  
Peter MacNeil  
Marcie MacQuarrie (telephone)  
Fred Martin  
Rosemary Hutchison McCormack  
Father Eugene Morris  
Jack O'Neil  
Ken Perlman (telephone)  
Charles Dan Roach  
Eddie Rodgers  
Greg Smith  
Mac Skinner (telephone)  
Brian Sutcliffe

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW INFORMANTS.

**SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY**  
**ATLANTIC CANADA STUDIES PROGRAM – INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM**

**Conditions for the Cape Breton Fiddle Music Revival: 1960 - 1980**

**Marie Thompson**

I am a graduate student in the Department of Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University. As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Ken MacKinnon, and I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of the study is to examine the role of a 1971 CBC television documentary (The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler) in identifying an apparent decline in popularity of traditional fiddling with young people in the 1960s, and the subsequent efforts in the 1970s to reverse that trend.

This study involves interviews with fiddlers, fans of the music, and members of the Nova Scotia media who recall the 1960s and 1970s. Participants will be asked to take part in individual tape-recorded interviews conducted by me. These interviews should last no more than one hour and will ask you to recall the role of the fiddler in Cape Breton society in the 1960s, the participation of young people during that time, the impact of "The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler" and your perception or participation of the revival which followed.

**Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any individual questions and you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.** I invite participants to allow their names to be used. However if any participant requests anonymity, this will be guaranteed. To protect identities of those who seek anonymity, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. The anonymous participant will be identified as "Participant X, Y or Z". Any questions or concerns may be directed to the Interviewer, to the Faculty Supervisor, to the university's Coordinator of Atlantic Canada Studies (Dr. John G. Reid, Coordinator, Atlantic Canada Studies, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3C3. Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ or the Chair of the university's Research Ethics Board (Dr. John E. MacKinnon; e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_) Thank you for your time and cooperation.

**Response of Interviewee:**

**I agree to be interviewed by the Interviewer named above. I realize that portions of the interview may be cited or quoted in his/her Master's thesis and I give permission for this to be done. I am aware that copies of the thesis will be deposited at the Saint Mary's University Library and at the National Library of Canada, and that they will be available for consultation or purchase by the public.**

I give permission for my name to be used:

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**I give permission for the interview to be tape-recorded, with the understanding that one copy will be retained by the Interviewer, to be used for scholarly purposes only, and one copy will be deposited at the Saint Mary's University Archives.**

**Yes** \_\_\_\_\_ **No** \_\_\_\_\_

**If yes, I wish public access to the Archives copy to be granted on the following basis:**

**Unrestricted** \_\_\_\_\_ **Restricted (please specify)** \_\_\_\_\_

If the Interviewer eventually publishes her thesis or portions of it, in the form of an article or book or radio or television broadcast, I require her to seek my further permission for any citations or quotations from this interview.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. John MacKinnon at \_\_\_\_\_ Chair, Research Ethics Board.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

## APPENDIX C: FEEDBACK LETTER TO INFORMANTS.

Month, day, 2002

Name of Informant

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am writing to thank you for your assistance in my research about the conditions for traditional Cape Breton Fiddling in the 1960s as well as the revival that followed the television broadcast of *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* in 1971. Portions of your accounts and anecdotes will be used in my written thesis for Saint Mary's University. The tapes and transcripts will be held by me and by the university for approximately five years.

I am providing you with a copy of the transcript of your interview, taped by me at \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_, 2002. Please let me know if you wish to add anything to this record. You can reach me at \_\_\_\_\_ by mail at \_\_\_\_\_ :. B3K 1E7

Thank you once again for your assistance.

Sincerely yours,

Marie Thompson  
6048 Compton Avenue  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
B3K 1E7

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Halifax, Nova Scotia  
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## **Saint Mary's University**

### **Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Human Subjects**

**This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal or other type of study submitted by:**

**Principal Investigator:** Marie Thompson

**Name of Research Project:** The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler 1955-1975

**REB File Number:** 2002-044

**and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Conduct of Research Involving Humans. Please note that approval is only effective for one year from the date approved. (If your research project takes longer than one year to complete, submit form #3 to the REB at the end of the year and request an extension.)**

**Date:**

**Signature of REB Chair:**

 **Dr. John E. MacKinnon**



Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Canada B3H 3C3

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**Date:**

**Signature of REB Chair:**

**Dr. John E. MacKinnon**

CBC  Radio-Canada

*for  
Marie T.*

December 5, 2002

Dear Dr. MacKinnon:

I am writing to you at the request of Marie Thompson. She is a CBC employee and you are supervising her Master's Thesis in Atlantic Canada Studies.

As Regional Director for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Atlantic Canada, I give Marie permission to include a transcript of The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler television documentary in her thesis. The CBC holds the copyright on this program.

This permission is for use only in Marie Thompson's thesis. If she or anyone else is to use this in any further publishing effort, she must seek new rights.

Sincerely yours,



50 years  
ans

d material

From:  
To:  
Date:  
Subject  
CC:

To Whom it May Concern:

I am writing a thesis for an MA in Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University. The subject of the thesis is the revival of Scottish style fiddling in Cape Breton in the 1970s. It is essentially a social history study, but I am relying on the work of Alistair MacLeod's fiction to help illustrate Cape Breton and Cape Breton music from the 1960s and 1970s. To that end I am quoting from his first two collections of short stories as well as from No Great Mischief. One section of my thesis is an analysis of the theme of Gaelic music in his work. I interviewed Prof. MacLeod in person, as well, and am using the interview material, with his permission.

My question is: Do I need your permission to use references from the books in my MA thesis. My original understanding is that I did not. But one of my referees is asking now if it is required.

If you can help me with this, or if you need any more information, please contact me, either at this e-mail address, or by phone at Thank you very much.  
Sincerely yours,

Marie Thompson