

The Function of Narrative Obituary Verse  
in Northern Cape Breton,  
1894-1902

c. Ronald Caplan, 1989

A thesis submitted by Ronald Caplan in partial  
fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts  
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THESIS APPROVED BY:

---

Kenneth MacKinnon  
(Supervisor)

*Margaret Harry*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Margaret Harry  
(Reader)

*John Reid*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
John C. Reid  
(Co-ordinator)



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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is based on five narrative obituary poems, and tape recorded interviews with people from the Aspy Bay region of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. The interviews are principally from 1985 to 1989.

The aim of this study is to question the current definition of narrative obituary verse and to demonstrate the variety of both approaches, uses and functions within the genre, that the current definition does not address. As a sub-text, this thesis makes a contribution toward an operative definition of the folk poet.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the people who made this thesis possible: Helen Dunphy Curtis, George Rambeau, Bob Fitzgerald and Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald. They are all from the Aspy Bay region of Cape Breton Island.

I want to thank, as well, Richard MacKinnon, instructor in Folklore at University College of Cape Breton, for help in focusing on the subject of this thesis; Dr. Michael Taft, folklorist, for considerable help in organizing the ideas; and Dr. Margaret Harry whose reading and suggestions were particularly helpful.

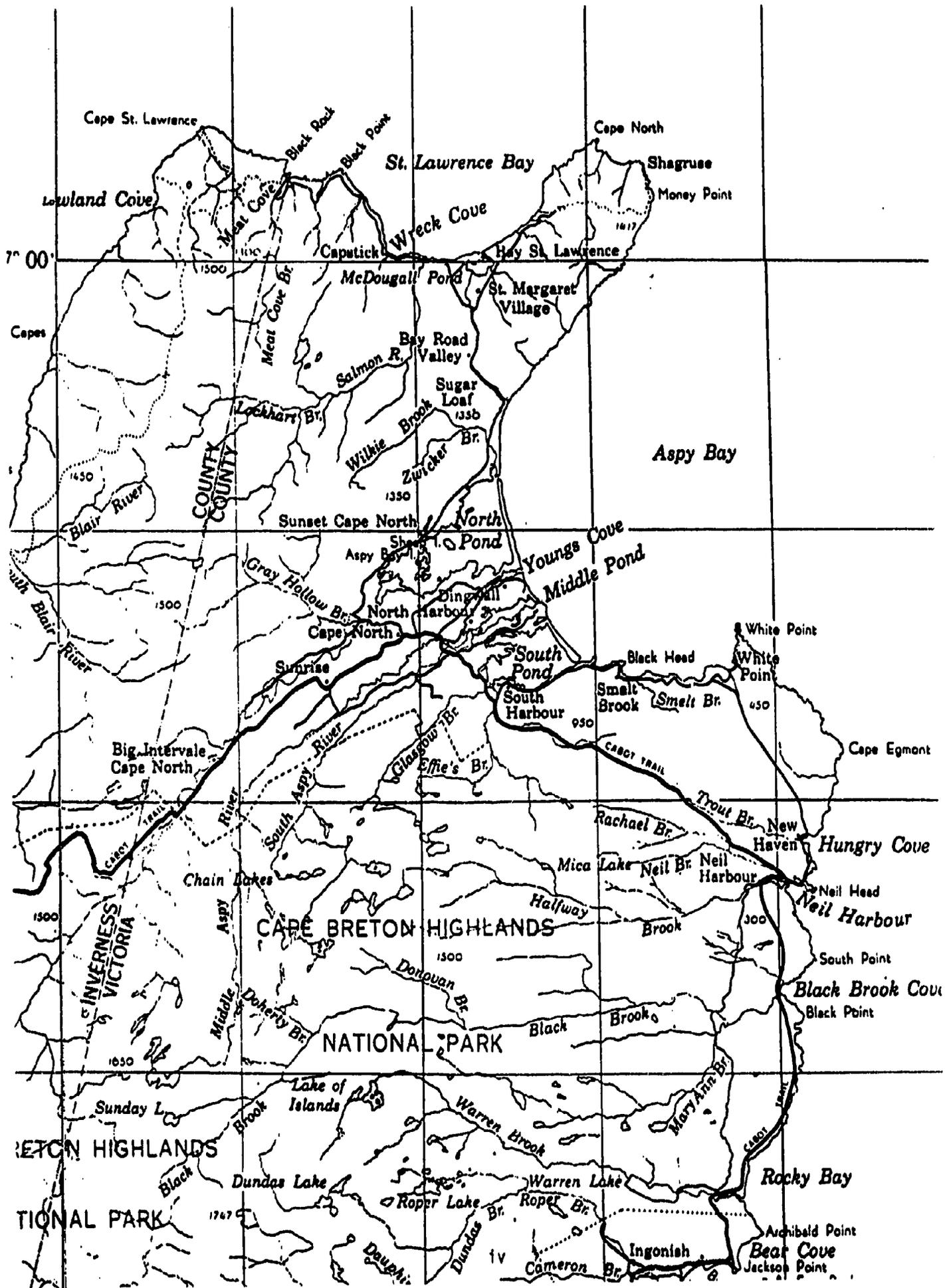
My thanks to Dr. Ken MacKinnon, my thesis advisor, for his help from preliminary conversations through the final editing. I deeply appreciate his enthusiasm for this particular study.

For efforts on my behalf, I want to thank Doug Vaisey of the St. Mary's University Library, and Laura Peverill of the library of the University College of Cape Breton. The staffs at both institutions were extremely considerate.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to Sue Wolstenholme and Perry Ronayne, whose hospitality made my participation in the Atlantic Canada Studies program possible.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will question the adequacy of current definitions of narrative obituary verse. Utley represents a precedent for an "operational" approach.<sup>1</sup> He prefers going from data to definition and dislikes searching for data that fits a pre-existing definition. Rather than a strict, limited definition of the genre, we will find that what is needed for an adequate concept of narrative obituary verse is a recognition of the variety of its expression even within the few examples to be seen in this study.<sup>2</sup> The survival or persistence of the genre may be rooted in its flexibility and in its ability to allow the poet to draw from various influences, while still meeting conventions.

This study will make a contribution to the related problem of defining the folk poet. Again, instead of looking for the ideal, we shall examine an actual obituary poet, giving a description that can be compared with others and can be included in the

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<sup>1</sup> "An operational definition is one used by a particular type of student for his special problems. Only, perhaps, by combining such definitions by a number of students who follow different paths of investigation could we arrive at a theoretical consensus." Utley, Francis Lee. "Folk Literature: An Operational Definition," in Allan Dundes, ed. The Study of Folklore. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965. 19.

<sup>2</sup> This variety suggests a kind of continuum not unlike that Roger Abrahams suggested for song. He draws "a spectrum, the poles of which would be action and emotion, a spectrum on which any song [with its particular degree of narrative, dialogue or lyric] could be placed." Abrahams, Roger D. and George Foss, Anglo-American Folksong Style. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968. 39.

complexities of the growing operational definition of the folk poet.

The narrative obituary verse examined in this thesis will also be studied in terms of how it functioned in the context in which it was made. Once the composition has travelled, it is subject to the processes of folk response. That is, it is accepted or rejected for repertoires in particular localities. It may be changed, or it may be retained though seldom if ever performed, or it may be performed for other purposes than those for which it was originally created in its initial context. Although a single composition can offer considerable place-specific information wherever it travels, by the time that it can be traced widely we are probably beyond knowing authorship, original audience, the world in which it was made and first shared, and how it functioned in that world. That sort of contextual information for most ballads, for instance, is simply unavailable.

In the case of the obituary verse of the Aspy Bay region of northern Cape Breton, however, limited contextual study is possible. We will look at local obituary verse in terms of its creation, put a name and way of life on the creator, establish some details regarding the audience and performers, and ask some the questions we would like to apply to every ballad.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Halpert writes: "A few scholars had the temerity to suggest that the ballad-making process of the past might be illuminated by examining the kinds of songs that were made up in the present," in "Vitality of Tradition and Local Songs." Journal of the International Folk Music Council. 3 (1951). 36.

This study centres on the work of Andrew Dunphy of White Point, Aspy Bay, northern Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. That focus has been suggested by members of the community in which he lived and for which he composed his verses. He is the single composer remembered as "The Poet." More of his obituary verse has survived than that of anyone else. And his work in various ways entered and to some small extent remains a living part of the community's repertoire. He was not only a bearer and composer of tradition, he served as well as a stimulus giving sustaining life to this persistent form of verse.<sup>4</sup>

The time period of this study (1894-1902) was determined by the dates of the Andrew Dunphy obituary verse which was found. According to local history, it is also an important period in the region's "old song" traditions.<sup>5</sup> A person wanting to commemorate a death in the region would not have to look far for models. The

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<sup>4</sup> Dunphy was a mentor to John D. Theriault, Smelt Brook, Aspy Bay Region. Now in his 90s, Theriault not only created obituary verses modeled after Dunphy, but expressed the kind of functions for, and ritualized approach to, his own work that oral testimony consistently links to Dunphy. This is discussed further in Footnote 20, Chapter 7, "The Obituary Poet."

<sup>5</sup> By "old songs," I mean the range of songs Edward Ives discusses. "It varied tremendously, to be sure, but all of its variousness centred in the British broadside ballad tradition, which is about what Emile Leavitt meant by songs 'about the girl they left behind' or what is generally meant by 'come-all-ye's.' Equally as popular were many native American ballads, especially those having to do with war and the sea...." Ives points out that "the so-called Child ballads were, with only a few exceptions, almost nonexistent in the woods tradition." Some Child ballads have been collected in the Aspy Bay region. "Occupational songs of lumbering and driving" were part of the repertoire, as were "popular songs, parlour songs, sentimental songs--call them what you will...." Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker. Urbana: U of Illinois Press. 1978. 390-91.

Family Herald and Weekly Star, one of the few papers that made it to the Aspy Bay region regularly, started its "Old Favourites" column in 1895.<sup>6</sup> Several new songs at least potentially entered the region's repertoire via that newspaper.<sup>7</sup> As I will show specifically in the discussion of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY and in THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, poetry printed in the schoolbooks, particularly in the "Royal Reader,"<sup>8</sup> influenced the region's narrative obituary verse. Additionally, as we shall see in Chapter 2, "Definition of Obituary Verse," there are at least three parallel obituary verse traditions active in the Aspy Bay region during the period under study. The compositions reveal evidence of shared influences between traditions.

Finally, several Joe Scott songs (written between 1894 and 1901), were known in the study area.<sup>9</sup> Like the local obituary verse, they are usually about untimely death. They were brought

<sup>6</sup> "The impact that this column has had on Canadian folksong tradition has yet to be measured; but it clearly was an important institution." Ives. 103-4.

<sup>7</sup> This is supported both by oral testimony, and by several scrapbooks and folders of clippings in homes in the study region.

<sup>8</sup> The Royal Readers: Prescribed by the Council of Public Instruction for use in the Public Schools in Nova Scotia, No. 1-No. 6. Halifax, A & W MacKinlay, 1875-. These readers were published variously in London, New York, and Halifax. I have seen editions as early as 1875 and as late as 1938.

<sup>9</sup> "No one, not even Larry Gorman, ever made a stronger impression on, or got more songs into the general tradition of Maine and the Maritimes than Joe Scott did." Ives, Edward D. "A Man and His Song: Joe Scott And 'The Plain Golden Band.'" Ives, H. Glassie and J. F. Szwed. Folksongs and Their Makers. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 1979. 75.

back to the region from the New Brunswick and Maine lumberwoods, by local men who often claimed to have known Scott. Scott demonstrated in such songs as GUY REED<sup>10</sup> not only the appropriateness of the "old song" style as a model for new obituary verse, but also the appropriateness of combining the styles of parallel song traditions. In this way, his songs demonstrated to potential composers the capacity of their audience to integrate new materials.<sup>11</sup> And as we will see particularly in Chapter 5, "Performance," singing for one another was an important part of the the region's culture. The social and economic organization of the community worked to encourage dynamic contexts for singing and new songs.

Bascom<sup>12</sup> delineated four functions of folklore (recognizing there are others he might have chosen): first, the function of "amusement," which must be extended to include the concept in its deepest sense. Second, folklore functions as a validator of culture "in justifying its rituals and institutions to those who

10 See "'Guy Reed': The Ballad as Lament." in Ives. 140-77.

11 "I have emphasized how innovative Joe Scott was, but we should not get the idea that he was introducing his audience to something totally foreign, something utterly new...What Joe Scott did was to combine them (what we might call popular, sentimental songs and traditional songs) in a special way." Ives. 168.

12 Bascom, William R., "Four Functions of Folklore." Journal of American Folklore. 67 (1954). 333-349. Rpt. in Allan Dundes. The Study of Folklore. Englewood Cliffs; Prentice-Hall. 1965. 279-298.

perform and observe them." A third function is that of "education." And fourth, folklore functions to maintain "conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior." Bascom concludes, however, that these functions "can be considered as grouped together under the single function of maintaining the stability of culture."<sup>13</sup> It is a position with which I have no quarrel, and which the present study confirms.

Merriam proposed ten functions for music.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly applicable in this study, since most of the obituary verse considered here entered the song repertoire of the culture in which the verse was composed. Merriam sums up his argument by saying that if music functions as "emotional expression, gives aesthetic pleasure, entertains, communicates, elicits physical response, enforces conformity to social norms, and validates social institutions and religious rituals, it is clear that it contributes to the continuity and stability of culture."<sup>15</sup> He adds that "There is little doubt that music functions in all societies as a symbolic representation of other things, ideas, and behaviours." And finally, he speaks of a "function of contribution to the integration of society."<sup>16</sup> Again, the obituary

13 Bascom. 298.

14 Merriam, Alan P. The Anthropology of Music. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1964. 219-227.

15 Merriam. 225.

16 Merriam. 226.

verse under study here functions to some degree in all of Merriam's categories, but the over-riding function continues to be that of preservation of the culture in which it was composed. That would not be the case, of course, once the verse travelled.

Bessie Lomax Hawes quotes Malinowski: "The functionalist view of culture lays down the principle that in every type of civilization, every custom, every material object, idea and belief fulfills some vital function, represents an indispensable part within a working whole."<sup>17</sup> Then she adds: "If this is true--and it seems at least to represent a sensible working premise--it suggests by extension that there should be some degree of appropriateness between a function and the group of items a culture uses to fulfill that function."<sup>18</sup> Ms Hawes is dealing with a variety of items used as lullaby. A similar, less obvious problem applies in the case of obituary verse in the present study. While containing superficial similarities, the obituary verses are in fact a group of very different approaches toward achieving a similar function.

In the present study I will test the adequacy of Tristram Coffin's hypothesis and his son Mark Coffin's conclusions regarding narrative obituary verse and the creation of native American ballads. The composition of ballads is what T. Coffin

<sup>17</sup> Hawes, Bessie Lomax. "Folksongs and Function: Some Thoughts on the American Lullaby." Journal of American Folklore. 87 (1974). 142.

<sup>18</sup> Hawes. 142.

called the "broadening"<sup>19</sup> of narrative obituary verse. In an essay encouraging further study, he wrote that he felt "narrative obituary verse fed ballads to the folk." And, although he could not substantiate it in a scholarly way, he also felt that nearly all ballads had that same root: "It is not too much to suggest that once the British form for the ballad was established it [i.e. ballad composition] drew largely on the reservoir of narrative obituary verse for its inspiration and subject matter."<sup>20</sup> It was Tristram P. Coffin's contention that "All love, crime, execution ballads follow narrative obituary patterns and are close to being, if indeed they are not, funeral elegies."<sup>21</sup>

Bethke addressed the subject in 1970. He wrote that "it would be a distortion of extant evidence at this point in the investigation...to exaggerate the place of narrative elegiac verse per se in the formation of most native ballads."<sup>22</sup> Bethke suggested the influences on the ballad were much more complex than the rather direct line diagrammed by T. Coffin.<sup>23</sup> He offered a

<sup>19</sup> Coffin, Tristram P. "On a Peak in Massachusetts: The Literary and Aesthetic Approach." in M. C. Boatright, ed. A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press. 1964. 207.

<sup>20</sup> Coffin. 207.

<sup>21</sup> Coffin. 206.

<sup>22</sup> Bethke, Robert D. "Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry." Journal of American Folklore. 33 (1970). 61-68.

<sup>23</sup> Coffin. 208. See page 9-a of this chapter for Tristram P. Coffin and Robert D. Bethke's diagrams.

diagram of possible influences on native American balladry,<sup>24</sup> with narrative obituary verse itself open to several influences. Bethke warned against any particular set of elements to be searched for as evidence. His unspoken conclusion is that the folk poet works out of what is available, can be quite eclectic within traditional forms, works from a wide variety of potential influences, and allows his audience [it may loosely be seen as the market] to determine acceptance. In the present study, I will demonstrate some of this eclecticism in terms of the Aspy Bay region obituary verse.

As we will see in Chapter 2, "Definition," Mark Coffin set up a series of elements to identify (and to that extent define) narrative obituary verse.<sup>25</sup> In brief, evidence of narrative obituary verse depended on the inclusion of data regarding the nature of the death, death date, the name of the dead, details of the death, the impact on friends and relatives, the possible search for a body, and probably a homiletic ending which might include a warning. As well, the whole narrative was suffused with melodrama and sentimentality.

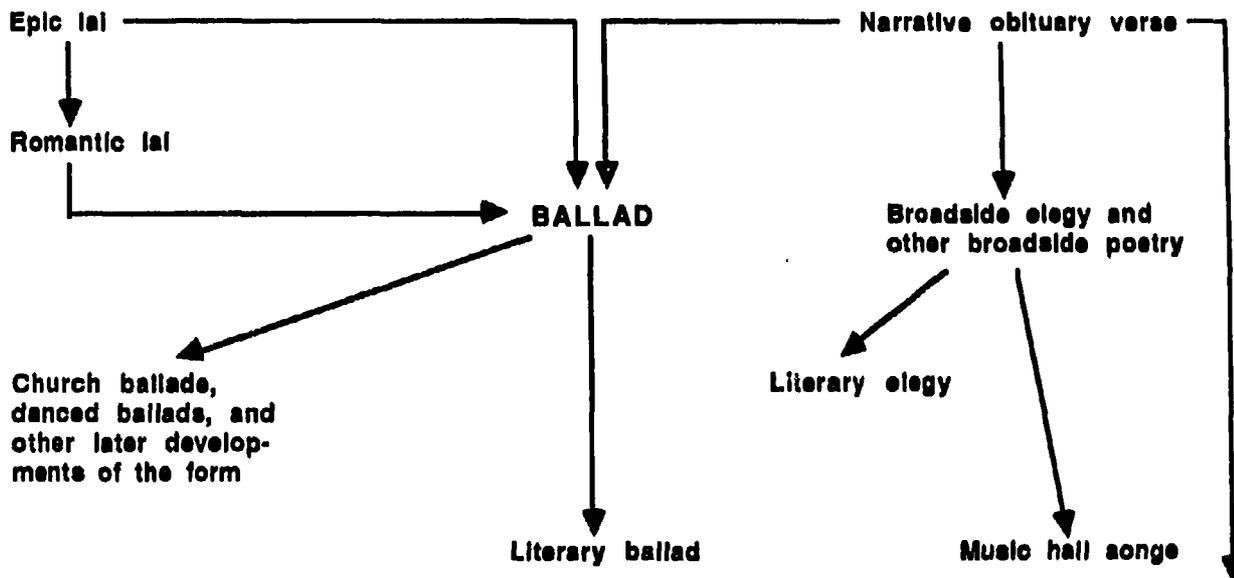
Using G. Malcolm Laws's Native American Balladry,<sup>26</sup> which

24 Bethke. 68.

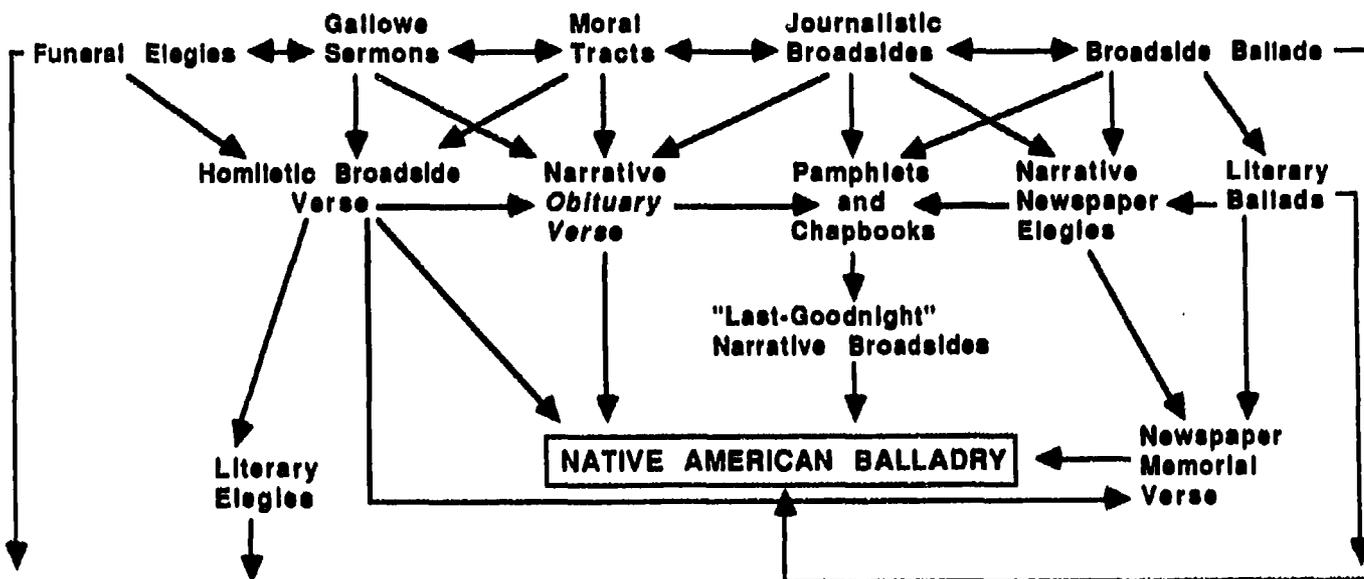
25 Coffin, Mark Tristram. American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. Norwood: Norwood Editions. 1975.

26 Laws, G. Malcolm, Jr. Native American Balladry Rev. ed. Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, 1. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society. 1964.

### Tristram P. Coffin's Diagram



### Robert D. Bethke's Diagram



"contains all narrative obituary poems (Type 'A') which have appeared in major, published folksong collections,"<sup>27</sup> Coffin sorted the ballads into four categories and tested them against the elements that served as proof of influence.

The first, or 'A', category contains all those songs that have all the characteristics of narrative obituary verse. The 'B' division is composed of all those ballads which contain a significant combination of the characteristic funeral poem elements, illustrating important influences from that tradition.<sup>28</sup>

The "C" group includes "not only subjects like 'last-goodnights' and 'murdered girl' ballads, but songs about natural disasters, outlaws, shipwrecks, and industrial accidents...."<sup>29</sup> Coffin's "fourth division is composed of those songs that are not related in any known way to narrative obituary verse."<sup>30</sup>

Essentially, Mark Coffin was creating a bare-bones definition of narrative obituary verse. He is certainly aware that "the narrative obituary verse tradition is much more complex than a description of the characteristics of the form can reveal."<sup>31</sup> He indicates he considers that questions covering the reasons for its composition are important: "how it was used, who wrote it, where,

<sup>27</sup> Coffin, M. T. 127-8.

<sup>28</sup> Coffin, M. T. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Coffin, M. T. 168.

<sup>30</sup> Coffin, M. T. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Coffin, M. T. 19-20.

when, and why."<sup>32</sup> But he does not address these questions. Moreover, he is aware of but does not apply Bethke's other possible influences.

Mark Coffin remains with the basic elements and ends up with a simplistic definition of narrative obituary verse. His purpose is to prove finally, that "the bulk of native American ballads show signs of influence by narrative obituary poetry,"<sup>33</sup> which is essentially an argument in support of Tristram Coffin's hypothesis.

While not wishing to ask of Coffin more than he intended to accomplish, I wonder finally about the value of his conclusion, what his fuss was about. Having so delimited the definition, we are not surprised to find that it includes almost all songs, even those in the "C" group. He includes the "C" group arguing that while "there are no concrete criteria," there are "other, subtle indications that such ballads owe their preservation to narrative obituary verse."<sup>34</sup>

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32 Coffin, M. T. 20.

33 Coffin, M. T. 182.

34 This is of course not exactly the case. The ballads owe their preservation to people remembering them and sharing them. In every case, survival of folklore represents choices (among the folk and among the collectors of folklore). Choices indicate information about the individual and the community (the performer and the audience) and suggest how the ballads functioned in that particular community. The obituary verses in the present study, for instance, are local creations still under scrutiny of local people. These creations are realized in social events. And, while that does not mean the facts will be correct, I contend the verse will not stray far from characteristic local ideas.

It is necessary to protest Mark Coffin's narrow (albeit workable) definition of narrative obituary verse. Coffin touches for a moment on what is required: "Mahoney concludes that nothing less than careful research at the local level in Britain will shed any light on the relationship of British balladry and narrative obituary verse." Coffin points out that he confines his study "to American examples of the form, and their influence upon native American balladry."<sup>35</sup> Confining itself to form alone, Coffin's study addresses neither context nor behaviour regarding the verse.

Tristram Coffin's complete point is "not only that tradition of narrative obituary verse has fed ballads to the folk for generations, but also that normal ballad composition is but a 'broadening' of the tradition of writing narrative obituary poetry about routine lives and people."<sup>36</sup> But what is "normal" ballad composition? I recognize that Coffin means simply that the writing of ballads is an extension of the narrative obituary tradition. But what do we know about composing? Roger Elbourne points out that a considerable number of English ballads and broadsides were the work of "anonymous hacks commissioned by the printers.... If nothing was forthcoming from his usual sources, a printer like Catnach was quite capable of producing a ballad himself".<sup>37</sup> Repertoire alone is not necessarily revealing of a

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<sup>35</sup> Coffin, M.T. 30-31.

<sup>36</sup> Coffin, T. 207.

<sup>37</sup> Elbourne, Roger. "A Mirror of Man? Traditional Music as a Reflection of Society." Journal of American Folklore. 89 (1976). 466.

culture. Elbourne writes that "It is striking how often themes which are foreign to the mode of life and experience of a group are found in their traditional song."<sup>38</sup>

How then are we to get at information regarding the composing of folk songs and the place of the composer and song in society? To quote Elbourne again: "It is vitally important to study actual musical behaviour in any society--the structure of the relationship between creator, form, performer, and audience."<sup>39</sup> In the present study of obituary verse in the Aspy Bay region, there has been enough time for the folk process to work. There has been time to change or not change the song, to give it an opportunity to travel, to incorporate it into repertoire, to sort out elements of the legend of the folk poet, to distinguish the parameters (albeit in a nostalgic light) of the contexts for performance, and so forth. And it is still not too late to talk to some of the participants in the tradition. Compositions that are the work not of hawkers, but of local folk poets, will be more precisely definable if seen in terms of the context out of which they sprung--the status of song, singer, and poet in that world--and in the context of particular local behaviour regarding specific songs. This, in turn, will demonstrate the function of obituary verse, and contribute to a more complete definition.

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<sup>38</sup> Elbourne. 465.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 465-66.

My approach will be to some extent speculative, based on the texts and oral testimony. In some cases specific and unusual uses of the obituary verse are revealed. In most cases, the findings are what one would expect, but with varying stress on particular functions. The obituary verse appears to have functioned (and in some few cases continues to function) as history, memorial, religious guidance and social guidance, entertainment and as personal icon. I find that these are all uses--they may have been intended by the creator or applied by the audience--and that the obituary verse functions in a deeper, more general way, to preserve the community in which it was created.<sup>40</sup>

While there are few surprises, there are sufficient elements revealing a particular character in the verse that in turn reflects something of the character of the Aspy Bay region, an otherwise poorly documented region. The local nature of the verse encourages one (with some trepidation) to go against Elbourne's warning regarding traditional songs as reflective of the society in which they are sung. Elbourne's observations may or may not hold true for local creations in the local context, and especially in the case of obituary verse wherein, as we will see in discussion of examples, the function may disallow accuracy. I do

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<sup>40</sup> Merriam makes the distinction regarding use and function that, "Music is used in certain situations and becomes part of them, but it may or may not also have a deeper function....'Use' then, refers to the situation in which music is employed in human action; 'function' concerns the reasons for its employment and particularly the broader purpose which it serves." 210.

not think, however, we can expect people to sing local obituary verse that is not true to essential local ideas.

It should be pointed out, that it is not my purpose to sort out the European influences on narrative obituary verse found in the Aspy Bay region. Rather, while this thesis attests to the ethnic and religious intermingling, it concentrates on a limited manifestation of obituary verse as a test of the most recent detailed attempt to define the genre. The role of the folk poet comes in as a sub-text. I have confined this study to narrative obituary verse in North America, and in English.

My interviewing was not systematic. I have gone to those identified as singers but I do not believe that I have reached everyone who bears the exact local traditions I am looking for. The original search was for "old songs" (without a clear definition beyond something like "songs they used to sing"--and at first there was no mention of obituary verse). Helen Dunphy Curtis, a singer and life-long resident of the Aspy Bay region, introduced me to a local obituary song. After that, I regularly asked questions about locally made song.

In that first interview, Helen named Andrew Dunphy as the one who composed JOHNNY NICHOLSON, a song about a drowning at White Point in Aspy Bay in 1894. Helen was willing to talk about old songs but wanted to talk about Andrew Dunphy. After that, I went

to the few people left who knew Dunphy, regardless of whether they sang. Each further discovery of an obituary poet was serendipitous: poetry by John T. Gwinn, Charles A. Gwinn, and "Aunt Lexa" were found while looking for the copy of Dunphy's THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN in the Gwinn family Bible. While I was in the North Highlands Community Museum looking for another version of THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN for comparison, Theresa Curtis MacDonald [Mrs. John D. MacDonald, Helen's daughter] showed me a poetry album with TO THE LOVING MEMORY OF THOMAS MACAVOY by Duncan MacDonald; and THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, claimed for Andrew Dunphy but possibly composed by Thomas W. Gwinn. Visiting Bob Fitzgerald, who was born at White Point, for information on the Aspy Bay region, I uncovered a chapter of local songs in his historical manuscript. This added to my collection of material apparently complete versions of Dunphy's JOHNNY NICHOLSON, THE SILENT RIVER and THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN--plus a humorous poem by Dunphy, THE WILLIE CRAIG.

Helen Curtis was herself a Dunphy of White Point, the same village Andrew came from. I went to her because her husband, Jimmy Curtis, had been a noted singer in the Bay St. Lawrence community. He had sung in the church choir and at concerts, and their home was the focus for gatherings where the old songs were heard. I emphasize Jimmy Curtis because just about everyone except the immediate family would draw my attention to Jimmy. As an aside, I was told that Helen had a nice voice, that she would often sing along. While Jimmy still lived, the family (especially

daughters Rose and Monika) put together a typescript of his songs. He had written them out some years before in a scribbler, since lost in a windstorm. They called this typescript, "A Collection of Songs Sung by James Curtis, Our Daddy." It is dated March, 1972. It was not intended to be complete and, as it happens, it does not include a number of songs he both loved and sang.

The daughters recognized their mother's status as a singer. The book is dedicated to "James Curtis, and to his little songbird, who always sang with him through the years, and who has a repertoire of songs all her own, Helen, our Mother." As it turned out, Helen had been the source of some of Jimmy's songs, some included in the songbook as his, and some not included.

But when a collector of folksongs came around 1970, the focus remained Jimmy: "No one seemed to notice Mom until after Daddy died."<sup>41</sup> Possibly I too would have been drawn to Jimmy, had he been alive. And had that been the case, not only would I have missed Helen, I would have probably never learned about Andrew Dunphy and local obituary verse. Although Jimmy knew at least one Andrew Dunphy song that he had learned from Helen [THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN], and although he sang it enough times for others to learn it, no Andrew Dunphy song was included in the songbook.

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<sup>41</sup> Burton, Rose Curtis. Personal conversation. 1986. For a consideration of sex and status in a song tradition see Pocius, Gerald. "First time I thought of it since I got Wed: Role Expectation and Singer Status in a Newfoundland Outport." Western Folklore. 35 (1976). 109-122.



my questions about old songs--and that was my first hint as to Dunphy's separate status in the Aspy Bay world and to the special function of his songs.

The final section of this chapter will examine the previous work on songs in the Aspy Bay region. Virtually no work in English song was done in northern Cape Breton Island until recent years. Richard MacKinnon's 1979 review of work in Cape Breton limits itself to "Scottish" folksong, and is valuable in that it reveals how little work has been done, and how very little of what has been done is publicly available.<sup>43</sup> This is particularly surprising regarding northern Cape Breton, as it would seem to have been an ideal remote place for folklore research. While some Gaelic and Acadian French songs have been collected here, there are very few collections in English from the study area. They would include the self-collected typescript of 45 songs, gathered by the Jimmy and Helen Curtis family and mentioned above. The Curtis typescript includes three Cape Breton-made songs: "The [Wreck of the] John Harvey" and "My Old Cape Breton Home" by Lillian Crewe Walsh, and "John Timmons" (a Cape Breton boy's tale of travels and woe). Tape collections of songs from the study region include Dan Watts (circa 1965), Mary Elizabeth MacNeil (1972), Dennis Ryan

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<sup>43</sup> MacKinnon, Richard. "Cape Breton Scottish Folksong Collections." Culture and Tradition. 4 (1979). 23-39.

(1975), Ronald MacEachern (1977), Debra Meeks (1978), E. MacNeil (circa 1977), and Ronald Caplan (1984-).<sup>44</sup>

Although Dr. Helen Creighton collected tales in English from Rory MacKinnon at Sugar Loaf, Aspy Bay region<sup>45</sup>, the only songs she collected from the region came from Augustine MacDonald when he was living permanently in North Sydney.<sup>46</sup>

While MacKinnon's article is in itself incomplete, there is not a great deal to be added regarding the study area. All in all, what work has been done indicates dip-net collections. A positive aspect of this is that no theory restricted what was taken as song, giving a variegated portrait of song repertoire for the Aspy Bay Region. They reveal a range of songs including Child Ballads, native American ballads, Irish Patriot and Newfoundland songs, popular sentimental pieces, sea songs, disasters, humorous songs and local songs. Nothing has been published analyzing these collections, nor do the bare-bones accompanying notes indicate an informing theoretical approach.

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<sup>44</sup> The Watts, MacEachern, Meeks and two MacNeil collections have been deposited in the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton. The Ryan collection has been deposited at Memorial University of Newfoundland Language Archives. It includes a copy of the Curtis family songbook, notes about the singers and the songs, and a tape of first stanzas of the songs. The Caplan collection is a Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>45</sup> MacKinnon, Rory. "Tales from Rory MacKinnon, Sugar Loaf." Cape Breton's Magazine. 40 (1986). Inside Front Cover, 50-53.

<sup>46</sup> Creighton, Helen. Helen Creighton: A Life in Folklore. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson. 196-97.

The Meeks tapes include interviews which provide some useful background to the songs and poems she collected. She worked with both singers and interested non-singers, and has provided some biographical and collecting data in her guide to the tapes in the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton.<sup>47</sup> Ryan concentrated on Jimmy Curtis of Bay St. Lawrence in the Aspy Bay region, encouraging the family to write a few pages of biography and notes on favorite songs and sources, and getting Jimmy Curtis to sing the first verse of several songs onto tape. Jimmy's wife, Helen, added two entire songs at the end. As Ryan was not present for the actual taping, there is little additional comment. A few songs from the MacEachern collection, and five collected by Caplan, have appeared in issues of Cape Breton's Magazine.<sup>48</sup> These articles include some additional information about the songs and the places they were sung. MacEachern has written two brief reports on his collecting.<sup>49</sup>

A number of homes in the region have scrapbooks and boxes of clippings and handwritten songs and poetry, and a few songs and poems have been found in family Bibles. There are examples of

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47 Meeks, Debra. Untitled guide to her tape collection. Beaton Institute archives, University College of Cape Breton. 1978.

48 "MacDougalls, Whittys and Song." Cape Breton's Magazine. 23 (1979) 1-11, "Searching for Cape Breton Folksong." Cape Breton's Magazine. 41 (1986) 16-23, "An Elegy by Andrew Dunphy." Cape Breton's Magazine. 44 (1987) 77-78.

49 MacEachern, Ronald "Collecting in Cape Breton Island." Canadian Folk Music Society Newsletter. 13.3 (1978): 7-10, and "Report from Cape Breton." Canadian Folk Music Society Newsletter. 14.1 (1979). 10-11.

Aspy Bay region song and poetry at the North Highlands Community Museum, collected by the community itself.

CHAPTER II  
DEFINITIONS OF OBITUARY VERSE

Tristram Coffin introduced the term "narrative obituary verse" to denote an obituarial verse with details of the central event akin to the storytelling of British ballads.<sup>1</sup> It is related to all verse forms occasioned by death, such as lament, dirge, epitaph, the Scottish coronach, Irish keening, and so forth. The distinguishing factors are not only form but the function of the verse, the degree of relationship to the dead, the audience or the performer, whether it is narrative, homiletic, lyric, epigraphic; and whether it is sung or recited.

Verse devoted to the occasion of death--at once folklore and literature--is particularly difficult to define. Definition is plagued by insufficient folkloric attention to the subject and a preponderance of literary definitions. The literary term "elegy" has been applied to a wide range of verse meditation about love, war and other serious matters, although mock elegies and satires exist as well. By the seventeenth century, elegy in English usually referred to a poem about death, sometimes focused on the dead and sometimes using the dead as an excuse for a discourse aimed at the wider audience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abrahams, Roger D. and George Foss. Anglo-American Folksong Style. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1968. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Frye, Northrop, Sheridan Baker and George Perkins. "Elegy." The Harper Handbook to Literature. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers. 1985. 161. "Elegy." Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Ed Alex Preminger. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1974. 215-17. C. Hugh Holman and William

The obituary verse central to this study was composed by men, although some related examples by women have been found and will be mentioned. The sex of the composer is not a definitive characteristic. Aspy Bay balladic obituary verse served as both poetry and song, and was sung by both men and women as in-home entertainment. Very few stanzas are directed to the dead.

The funeral elegy came to New England via the Puritans , "where it flourished practically to the exclusion of all other poetry."<sup>3</sup> It was at first the province of the clergy, usually written in praise of the clergy. "They were clearly intended...to promote edification of the spirit...."<sup>4</sup> John Draper explains its diffusion beyond the clergy:

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, the traffic in rum and slaves had brought wealth and distinction to some of the laity, and the subject matter of the funeral elegy is duly extended and the element of eulogy duly enlarged.... Its rigor of macabre detail was not even slightly lessened until it began to be applied to social groups that were not professionally imbued with the tenets and tone of Calvinism.<sup>5</sup>

Tristram Coffin continues, paraphrasing Draper with a summary of the persistence of the form until the twentieth century:

By the sixteenth century and through the eighteenth century it was common enough to recite or sing elegies at funerals, that elegies were composed specifically for funeral rites, and that

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Harmon. "Elegy." A Handbook to Literature. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company. 1986. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Draper, John W. The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism. 1929. Rept. New York: Octagon Books, Inc. 1967. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Draper. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Draper. 175-76.

these pieces were affixed to the hearse or thrown into the grave.... Both in the Colonies and in Britain, obituary poems were often printed on broadsheets and distributed among the mourners. In more recent times, favourite hymns have replaced such elegies at funerals; but poetic elegiac composition is by no means unknown to the twentieth century world, and it is still a simple matter to find memorial verse, some of it narrative, in local newspapers.<sup>6</sup>

In a simplistic way, all of the verse discussed in the present study will fit definitions of narrative obituary verse as formulated by Mark Coffin in American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. They often meet, as well, much of John Draper's defining terms for funeral elegy in Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism.

Draper focuses on obituary verse as a literary genre, often printed as broadsides. He is aware the verses were sometimes sung:

A nice definition of the elegy in general and of the funeral elegy in particular is not easy of formulation.... the word elegy in our language has usually been associated with poetic substance rather than form--especially with death, and most especially the death of some particular individual.... if it be short, [it] shades into epitaph; or, if long, into the extended versified eulogy. When it is more general, it shades into epigram...or versified treatise. Sometimes it snatches a grace from satire...and in Christian writings, it may have affinities with the hymn, the sermon, or the funeral oration.... it usually expresses sorrow of immediate loss rather than the permanent aspects of grief.<sup>7</sup>

Draper goes on to say that "If the elegy be hard to disengage from allied poetic genera, it is equally difficult to subdivide

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<sup>6</sup> Coffin, Tristram P. "On a Peak in Massachusetts: The Literary and Aesthetic Approach," in M.C. Boatright, ed. A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press. 1964. 206.

<sup>7</sup> Draper. 6-7.

into species."<sup>8</sup> He points out that Oliver Goldsmith in his "Life of Parnell" offers as a distinct category "elegiac poetry of an obviously funereal tone." Draper goes on to describe the funeral elegy as "individual rather than general in subject; and, in its literary tradition, Christian rather than Classical." It may contain any number of funeral related elements, a "touch of nature-description," "the disease and death-bed scene," "charnel-house," "worms," "decay." "Then, if not before, description and narrative give place to pensive moralizing on the uncertainty of life and on death, the great leveller of all." There is possibly a reference to hell, but the latter part is almost sure to be taken up with a panegyric of the dead and a declaration of his heavenly reward."<sup>9</sup>

Mark Coffin sees "narrative obituary verse as essentially a type of sub-literary poetry which tells the story of someone's death."<sup>10</sup> I would quarrel with the term "sub-literary" as a bias rather than a definition. A second common element is the fact that "Death from natural causes is the subject of none of the surviving examples of narrative obituary verse."<sup>11</sup> The third essential ingredient is a formal one: "Unlike ballads and

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<sup>8</sup> Draper. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Draper. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Coffin, Mark Tristram. American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. Norwood: Norwood Editions. 1975. x.

<sup>11</sup> Coffin, M. T. 24.

broadside, whose composers worked with several forms, funeral poem writers stuck almost exclusively to one pattern. The typical stanza has four lines in iambic tetrameter, riming AABB."<sup>12</sup> The verse, Coffin says, has:

...the descriptive subtitle, which obviously is only present in printed and manuscript versions and perhaps is a later addition to funeral poems composed orally.... The funeral poem also features a characteristic opening. These verses invariably begin their narrative account of a person's death by giving the known facts of the event--setting the scene as to who, where, how, and when...rarely does the composer...omit this information.<sup>13</sup>

Then there are the narrative elements:

...the events before, during and after death.... Interspersed in the body of the verse are sentimental elements,...the heavily sympathetic view of death.... The ending is as highly conventionalized as are the opening and middle stanzas. Almost without exception, it is homiletic.<sup>14</sup>

And Coffin defines the typical narrator's stance:

Composers ...invariably combined sympathy for the mourners' sorrow with a lecture on the deceased's improved condition.... These poems seem never to have been composed in the first person. Instead, the composers have invariably adopted the viewpoint of an omniscient observer.

And finally, there are "four main thematic cliches":

..."warning",... moralization,...melodramatic stress on the lamentation of friends and relatives...[and] whenever consistent with events, the search for, and recovery of, the body... [Also, there is] great similarity of phraseology in different examples of narrative obituary verse.<sup>15</sup>

What we are looking at here in Draper and Coffin is an approach

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12 Coffin, M. T. 3.

13 Coffin, M. T. 6-7.

14 Coffin, M. T. 8-9.

15 Coffin, M. T. 11-15.

to the verse as literature, as compared to an approach as folklore. Coffin's "sub-literary" is an attempt to isolate the verse he is particularly interested in. There will undoubtedly be folkloric distinctions: a repetitive verse form and exceptionally conventionalized phrases will distinguish the verse of an oral culture.<sup>16</sup> Draper's interests are clear in the following:

There is a parallel stream of elegiac poetry belonging to the aristocracy that can be compared in both matter and manner with contemporaneous bourgeois compositions. Even in its origins, the funeral elegy shows this duplex tendency: its sporadic beginnings appear among the aristocratic authors of the School of Donne...and, at about the same time, there are London broadsides intended for the consumption of the less pious cities in which the death, usually of a notorious criminal, but occasionally of an ordinary respectable townsman, is lamented, or at least detailed for public contemplation.<sup>17</sup>

Draper recognizes (if only in passing) that the streams would not remain separate. Folk elegy contained:

Touches reminiscent of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton, the first two of whom had long been dear to the ordinary Englishman, and the last two of whom were directly connected with the Puritan cause: such literary traditions, together with the English Bible, were those most obvious in the newly developing form.<sup>18</sup>

We then should not be surprised to recognize, for instance, elements of the classical verse of Moschus which Poggliolli

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<sup>16</sup> "Formal patterns are also found in sophisticated poetry, but rarely are they as prominent as in folklore." Paredes, Americo. "Some Aspects of Folk Poetry." Texas Studies in Literature and Language. 1964. 217.

<sup>17</sup> Draper. 315.

<sup>18</sup> Draper. 316.

convincingly illustrates in Milton's Lycidas,<sup>19</sup> finding its way via elegy, funeral sermon, narrative obituary verse or any of the several other sources, into the corpus of song and verse produced in twentieth-century Aspy Bay.

Poggioli argues for Moschus' Lament to Bion as the archetypal work in the genre. [While I recognize it is always dangerous to pick the "first," Poggioli's points regarding elements of the funeral elegy genre are useful to the present discussion.] Although most identifiable influences on the Aspy Bay verse will be more contemporary examples, even casual comparison with Moschus' lament shows remarkable relationship: "The stance of friendship is dominant and the mood is that of the elegiac, if not tragic, pathos of death." Poggioli contends further that "The funeral elegy is not part but the whole; that the lament is a direct, rather than quoted, pastoral song; and finally that the character whose death is lamented, even though fully transfigured by the poet's imagination, is not a literary creation but a real person." While the motif of survival by "deification in the pantheon of the mind" is absent in Moschus, Poggioli assures us that this is an element "no Alexandrian or Renaissance author would fail to develop"--and the motif of remembrance comes down to twentieth century Aspy Bay.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Poggioli, Renato. "Milton's Lycidas." The Oaten Flute: Essays in Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. 1975. 83-103.

<sup>20</sup> Poggioli. 68-9.

"Moschus introduces for the first time in the funeral elegy the 'dead ere his prime' motif, or the theme of the cruel, violent, or untimely end." He does not focus on the crime or name the guilty, as "the only evil that concerns him is death itself." It will be left for the future Christian imagination ["foremost...will be Milton"] "to merge into a single strain the contrasting accords of the pastoral and of the Christian conception of death"--to bring in triumph and immortality. "Moschus contrasts our destiny with the herbs in a garden: they fade at the end of a year to reflower at the beginning of the next, but we, unlike them, never awaken from the sleep of death."<sup>21</sup> These sentiments are echoed in Andrew Dunphy's verse and in a poem like Joe Scott's GUY REED.<sup>22</sup>

Further to the argument that sources of the verse in this study were available to all classes in England (with influences ultimately spreading to Northern Cape Breton) is Dianne Dugaw's response to Albert Friedman's assertion that while there is ample evidence that practitioners of English literature drew upon folklore: "the ballad revival did not really affect either the stall or folk ballads, but only the literary world's perception of them...."<sup>23</sup> Dugaw demonstrates that in eighteenth-Century England "common people in the countryside and in the city purchased songs

<sup>21</sup> Poggioli. 71-72.

<sup>22</sup> See the discussion of THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN in Chapter 6.

<sup>23</sup> Friedman, Albert. The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1961. 9-10.

that were unmistakably proffered as 'antiques.'"<sup>24</sup> That is, they had more than simply access to what we might now look on as literary influence; evidence of additional printings indicate they vigorously sought out printed ballads.

Dugaw thus establishes a wide range of potentially influential elements reaching all classes,<sup>25</sup> and neatly foils any insistence on a strict dichotomy between literature and folklore, along with the consequent implications of the folk's immunity to sophisticated literature.

Moreover, Bethke in his critique of Tristram Coffin mentioned in Chapter 1, contributes the suggestion of a wide range of possible influences available to "the untrained folk poet" in early nineteenth-century New England:

...thousands of journalistic pamphlets, narrative chapbooks, and moral tracts describing memorable events of all types, but particularly sensational crimes and personal misfortune--traditional favorites for the making of folk balladry.<sup>26</sup>

Narrative obituary verse was among many models the ordinary person had available in creating his own response to local death.

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24 Dugaw, Dianne. "The Popular Marketing of 'Old Ballads': The Ballad Revival and Eighteenth-Century Antiquarianism Reconsidered." Eighteenth-Century Studies. 21 (1987). 75.

25 Ibid. 84.

26 Bethke, Robert D. "Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry." Journal of American Folklore. 33 (1970). 65.

In turning to obituary verse composed in the Aspy Bay region of northern Cape Breton circa 1894 to 1902, I find at least three distinct parallel traditions:

One. There is a genre of Gaelic lament poetry. The following is three stanzas and the chorus of the 21 stanzas of ORAN BROIN, composed by Archibald (Archie Ronald) MacDonald of Big Intervale, Cape North, on the death of his wife, Effie. She died "April 29th, 1905, in the 41st year of her age, a few weeks after the death of their dear little boy, David, who received fatal injuries by going over a high bank while coasting:"<sup>27</sup>

Gur e mise tha fo mhulad  
O na bhuinig an t-eug thu.

Fonn:--Tha mi trom 's tu gam dhith,  
Mo bhean fhin, m'eudail.  
Tha mi trom 's tu gam dith.

Tha mo chridhe ro bhronach,  
'S air beag solais as d'engmhais.

'S beag an t-ioghnadh sin dhomhsa,  
'N deigh m'eolais mu d' bheusan....

(I am sorrowful  
Since death took you away.

Chorus: I am heartbroken and I need you  
My sweet girl, my darling  
I am heartbroken and I need you

My heart is mournful  
Deprived of the light of your presence.

That is no surprise to me  
After knowing your virtues.)

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<sup>27</sup> This is from the afterword in English on the printed card for ORAN BROIN. See APPENDIX A for the complete text with an English translation.

While I have collected only one example of Gaelic lament from the Aspy Bay region, the Cape Breton publication MacTalla,<sup>28</sup> published [usually weekly] from 1894 to 1902, carried an example of lament in nearly every eight-page edition. The lament was either locally composed or taken from the body of Scottish Gaelic literature. Although published in Sydney, a readership in Northern Cape Breton is implied by the regular "Letter from Cape North" signed "M.D." The amount of lament indicates enthusiasm for the form. Obituary verse in Gaelic is not the subject of the present study.

Two. JOHNNY NICHOLSON is representative of the balladic type of obituary verse in English found in the Aspy Bay region:

from JOHNNY NICHOLSON

'Twas on the fifth of August,  
Oh, loving friends draw near  
A sad accident did occur  
Which cast a gloom 'round here

When three of our brave comrades  
They left their native shore  
But sad to say one of the three  
He'll never return no more....<sup>29</sup>

The subject of this study, balladic verse has distinct kinship with the old song tradition. Besides having many of the

<sup>28</sup> MacTalla. Ed. J. G. MacKinnon. Sydney. 1894-1902.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 5 for the complete text.

elements of obituary verse discussed above, the form is that of many traditional songs, the verse will often fit any number of common airs, and many of the phrases are conventional and formulaic. Bethke would call this type of verse "narrative elegiac"<sup>30</sup> and it would most closely meet Mark Coffin's defining elements for "narrative obituary verse." These are also the kind of obituary verses which have been most performed in the study area.

Three. Bethke calls the following kind of obituary verse "homiletic:"<sup>31</sup>

Death has been here and borne away  
A brother from our side  
Just in the morning of his day  
As young as we he died.

We cannot tell who next may fall  
beneath God's chastening rod  
One must be first but let us all  
prepare to meet our God.<sup>32</sup>

Homiletic verse is a less obviously singable, sermon-like presentation which concentrates on homily rather than narrative. While it shows kinship with the type of obituary verse carried to North America via the Puritans, the verse found in the Aspy Bay region was tempered in the hands of the Methodists, who apparently

<sup>30</sup> Bethke. 65.

<sup>31</sup> Bethke. 65.

<sup>32</sup> For the complete text of "Death has been here...", see APPENDIX A.

brought at least the homiletic genre to Cape Breton.<sup>33</sup> It is influenced in form, tone and sometimes specific lines by Methodist hymns. Draper writes that it presents "death as a happy release and Salvation almost as a certainty....Their unvaried theme is the ecstasy of heaven."<sup>34</sup> While not the principal focus of the current study, some attention will be given to homiletic obituary verse.

While these three types are distinct, parallel streams of verse response to local death, there is evidence of many shared elements. For example, not only do they share the impetus of untimely death, but in no case is the verse made in honor of the death of a person of elevated social status. Despite the characteristics the Aspy Bay region obituary verse does share with the general definitions suggested by Draper, Coffin and Poggioli, it is important to note what they do not share with similar verse from other times and places. For example, whereas the Puritans composed lurid elegies focused on the decay of the body and the dankness of the grave, I find little of that kind of detail in the balladic verse and a very restrained use of it in the homiletic verse of the Aspy Bay region. In this way, the character of the verse is particular to, and revealing of, the character of the place and people for which it was made.

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<sup>33</sup> Bethke points out that Puritan verse had already been considerably tempered in North America by the later 1770s. "The content and tone...reflected the growing contemporary interest in secular concerns...." 63.

<sup>34</sup> Draper. 287-88.

The texts in this study suggest a degree of influence of one type of obituary verse on the other. Balladic examples (such as JOHNNY NICHOLSON) show influences of the homiletic style--and the balladic THE LOST MACKINNON BOY shows a considerable degree of drawing from secular and religious literature. It is expected that there are influences of both homiletic and narrative verse from and upon the Gaelic verse composed in Aspy Bay. Moreover, all three streams of verse were potentially influenced by the constant inflow from Newfoundland, Maine, New Brunswick, Wisconsin, and anywhere else Cape Bretoners from the Aspy Bay region went for seasonal work, bringing back new songs, one of the most transportable cultural items available to the traveller.

My own working definition of narrative obituary verse recognizes the basic defining elements of Draper, Mark Coffin and Poggiolli, as all of these elements undoubtedly appear in some obituary verse. These elemental definitions are inadequate, however, when they are not read in terms of a particular community's verse, beginning with the determination of whether a given community has any obituary verse at all. Based on examples that have lasted to some degree in the Aspy Bay region, balladic narrative obituary verse--the verse central to this study--is a composition that has the final say in terms of a death in the community. It may ostensibly be made for an individual or the community at large. In Aspy Bay, I have found it used as entertainment, as memorial, as a Sabbath Day reading and as a tool

for social sanction. But as I will demonstrate, close reading suggests in every instance that its function is recovery, stabilization, and maintenance of the community. Its subject matter will obviously be death-related. If it concentrates on details of the event, it will be narrative. If it concentrates on religious duties toward the dead or oneself, it will be homiletic. In most cases it will be some combination. It may contain social warning, but not to the extent of disrupting the peace-making function. It will be composed out of appropriate forms, styles, phrases and attitudes that make it acceptable in the particular community where it is composed. Obituary verse will thus be an example of the cycle that any element of folklore represents. By example it will instruct the community in the composition of that which preserves the community.<sup>35</sup> But obituary verse is not static. On the contrary, the variety exhibited in even the few examples in this study is evidence of the dynamism possible within the conventions of tradition, and belies ideas of the purity and homogeneity of the folk and their lore.

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<sup>35</sup> Merriam, Alan P. The Anthropology of Music. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1954. 161-163.

## CHAPTER III

### Aspy Bay Region Geography and History

The Aspy Bay region is on the northeastern tip of Cape Breton Island, open to the Atlantic to the northeast, and shaped by sandbars that form North, Middle and South Ponds to the west. The entire region is blocked to the north, northwest and south by the face of the massif of the Cape Breton Highlands. This tableland averages 1200 feet with a peak of about 1700 feet, part of "a once continuous plain [called by Goldthwaite] the 'Atlantic upland,' [running] from the coast at Yarmouth, Halifax and Cape Canso where it rises from the sea, northwestward to the highlands of New Brunswick and northeastward to the tablelands of Newfoundland and Labrador."<sup>1</sup> The North, Middle and South Aspy Rivers and Effie's Brook drain the uplands, feeding the ponds. Arable land is found in the "small marginal plain" of varying width between the uplands and the ponds, and along the river valleys. Beyond Cape Breton Island this upland is cut by the Cabot Strait. On Cape Breton, the eastern face of this upland massif "is abrupt, with only a narrow, discontinuous lowland strip along the sea; the coastal fishery lodgement of the eighteenth century had no room to expand

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<sup>1</sup> Goldthwaite, J. W. Physiography of Nova Scotia. Memoir  
Ottawa: Canada Department of Mines, Geological Survey, Memoir  
140. 1924. p. 4.

inward."<sup>2</sup> The present inhabited area in the Aspy Bay region runs from north of Sugarloaf around to the tip of White Point.

Many believe this northern upland was John Cabot's first land seen in North America in June of 1497, although others continue to argue that it was in Newfoundland. Regardless of that discovery, contacts became more frequent through the 16th century.<sup>3</sup>

"The name of the little cape, northeast of Louisbourg, that was attached to the whole island, probably goes back in cartographic record even beyond the certainty of the Maggiolo map of 1527 and before 1600 its use to mean all of the island, and the recognition of Cape Breton's insularity, was common."<sup>4</sup> Cape Breton Island served as an international fishing area, by tacit if not official arrangement. McLennan quotes an anonymous memoir of 1706:

...de tems immemorial, les vaisseaux ont fait la pesche seche sur les cotes du Cap Breton, le Forillon, l'Isle plate, l'Indiane [probably present-day Lingan], Ninganiche [Ingonish], Achpe [Aspy], Le Chadie, carceaux, le havre a l'Anglois [Louisbourg] et la Balaine qui en dependent, ne sont jamais sans vaisseaux en temps de paix....<sup>5</sup>

Despite the Portuguese presence in an attempt at settlement on

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<sup>2</sup> Clark, Andrew Hill. Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. 1968. 15.

<sup>3</sup> "The coastings of Verrazano and Gomez are well known; Fagundes may have wintered there with some Portugese in 1520; Richard Hore of London paid a putative visit in 1536, and so the record continues." Clark. 265.

<sup>4</sup> Clark. 265.

<sup>5</sup> McLennan, J. S. Louisbourg from its Foundation to its Fall. 1713-1758. 1918. Rept. Sydney: Fortress Press. 1969. 23.

the present-day site of Ingonish (about 27 miles south of Aspy Bay),<sup>6</sup> no one country attempted a serious claim of sovereignty in Cape Breton until the eighteenth century.

With the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, says Clark, "France lost mainland Acadia... (and) its only settlement base for the fishery at Placentia,"<sup>7</sup> and established Louisbourg in Cape Breton as an entrepot and fishing station, as well as a fortress to protect shipping in the St Lawrence. It was captured by the New Englanders in 1745, and by the British in 1758--the fortress itself razed in 1760. Cape Breton island became part of the British colony of Nova Scotia in 1763.

Under the French, pursuit of inshore fisheries included a significant settlement at Ingonish and possibly some form of settlement at Aspy Bay, both in northern Cape Breton. The latter region is the focus of the present study. Prior to 1763,

there are frequent references to the fishery at Aspy, but if there was any permanent settlement it must have been recorded with that of Ingonish. In the report of his survey of 1765-67, Holland estimated that some 45 boats had fished there [at Aspy Bay] in the middle fifties as compared with 160 at Ingonish.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Patterson, George. "The Portuguese on the Northeast Coast of North America, and the First European Attempt at Colonization There. A Lost Chapter in American History." Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada. Second Series, 8, Sect. II. 1891. 127-73. Hoffman, Bernard G. Cabot to Cartier: Sources for a Historical Ethnography of Northeastern North America, 1497-1550. Toronto: U of Toronto Press. 1961. 35, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Clark. 268.

<sup>8</sup> Clark. 281.

McLennan refers to "...Ninganiche [Ingonish], which did not exist in 1720, but in 1726 was much larger than any other place, except Louisbourg, and put out more than twice as many fishing boats as that port."<sup>9</sup> Settlement patterns for Aspy Bay can only be assumed, based on evidence of nearby Ingonish. It is possible the Ingonish fishery followed the northward movement of cod and that the Aspy Bay fishery was simply an extension of the fishery of Ingonish. In any case, Innes says "the autumn fishery [at Ingonish], which was carried on almost entirely by residents, fluctuated materially, and reached its highest point in 1730."<sup>10</sup> Johnston reports three Recollect priests at Ingonish during this period, and in 1729 a substantial church was erected.<sup>11</sup> Both the Ingonish population and production declined but continued through the summer of 1744 and the first fall of Louisbourg.

With the return of Cape Breton to France in 1749, the fishery resumed at Ingonish. In 1752 Pichon reported:

Sometimes you see one hundred and fifty boats employed in this business at Niganiche. There were at this time very few inhabitants at Niganiche, and none whatever between that place and Just' au Corps (Port Hood).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> McLennan. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Innes, Harold Adams. "Cape Breton and the French Regime." Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada. Series 3, 29 (1935, sec. 2. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, Rev. Angus Anthony. A History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia. Antigonish: St. Francis Xavier University Press. I (1960) 56.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, Richard. A History of the Island of Cape Breton...with Some Account of the Discovery and Settlement of Canada, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston.

Pichon is saying, in effect, that there was no settlement in northern Cape Breton beyond Ingonish. The Aspy Bay was empty. Harassed by the British navy, fishing ended in Ingonish in 1755.<sup>13</sup>

Possibly significant to the present study is the evidence of continued contact between people of Isle Royale (Cape Breton) and the people of the Southwest coast of Newfoundland, during the French regime. French contact with Newfoundland after 1713 was intended to be seasonal and confined to the so-called French Shore. There is evidence of French ships heading to Newfoundland under pretext of going to Isle Royale and of New England ships declaring their destination as Newfoundland and then heading for outports of Isle Royale.<sup>14</sup> Olaf Janzen cites records establishing the Irish at Cape Ray, and of men living at Cape Ray crossing to Isle Royale for wives.

Scatari and Niganiche (Ingonish, which is about 30 miles from the Aspy Bay region) were invariably mentioned whenever this practise attracted the attention--and disapproval--of French Officials."<sup>15</sup>

This continued contact may have contributed to the ethnic mix found in the Aspy Bay region and discussed below, as well as to

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1869. 271.

<sup>13</sup> Donovan, quoting Desbarres, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Janzen, Olaf Uwe, "'Une Grande Liaison': French Fishermen from Isle Royale on the coast of Southwestern Newfoundland, 1714-1766--A Preliminary Survey." Unpublished essay. 10. Thanks to Ken Donovan, Historian, Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Park, for bringing this paper to my attention.

<sup>15</sup> Janzen. 12.

the formal social rituals that developed between people of Aspy Bay and Newfoundland fishermen which will be discussed in Chapter 5, "Performance."

With the second fall of Louisbourg in 1758, northern Cape Breton is considered emptied of people from Western Europe. Census and surveys through the eighteenth century support the contention that the area was uninhabited.<sup>16</sup> When Cape Breton was annexed to Nova Scotia in 1763, "the Governor of Nova Scotia (was) forbidden to make grants of land in Cape Breton...."<sup>17</sup> Having no freeholders of land meant no one from Cape Breton could serve as a representative in the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. The inability to grant land was also a disincentive to settlement in Cape Breton.

However, with the defeat of the French, the Gulf of St. Lawrence was opened to New England fisherman. This pattern continued through the American Revolution and in varying degrees up until the American Civil War. It is difficult to believe there was not continued use of northern Cape Breton, especially once there was settlement there. Harold Innis writes that:

The Convention of 1818 granted fishing rights to American fisherman on the southern coast of Newfoundland between Cape Ray and the Ramea Islands, on the western and northern coasts between Cape Ray and the Quirpon Islands, in the waters surrounding the Magdalen Islands, and on the coast of Labrador from Mount Joli

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16 Fergusson, C. Bruce. "Introduction." Uniacke's Sketches of Cape Breton and Other Papers relating to Cape Breton Island. Ed. C. Bruce Fergusson. Halifax: The Public Archives of Nova Scotia. 1958. 24-32.

17 Fergusson. 26.

east to the Straits of Belle Isle and north on the Labrador coast.<sup>18</sup>

By the Convention of 1818 the United States renounced:  
 ...any liberty heretofore enjoyed to take, dry and cure fish on or within three marine miles of any coasts, bays, creeks or harbours [except] for the purpose of shelter and of repairing damages therein, of purchasing wood, and of obtaining water, and for no other purpose whatever.<sup>19</sup>

The wording suggests an attempt to control the Americans. Campbell and MacLean write that American vessels fished and cured their fish within the three-mile limit. "Nor did Nova Scotians see anything wrong in this. Since many of the American vessels had Nova Scotia crewmen, and masters who knew the coasts well, it should occasion no surprise to learn that the regulations were often disregarded and that smuggling was carried on."<sup>20</sup>

When Cape Breton became a separate colony in 1784, the policy regarding land grants was reversed, and "about 400 Loyalists settled in the island."<sup>21</sup> One of these Loyalists was Captain John Gwynn, who is considered the first settler at Cape North [in the Aspy Bay region].<sup>22</sup> Although Capt. Gwynn's father was born in

<sup>18</sup> Innis, Harold A. The Cod Fisheries. The History of an International Economy. Toronto: U of Toronto Press. 1940. Revised Edition 1954. Rept. 1978. 224.

<sup>19</sup> Innis. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, D. and R. A. MacLean. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Fergusson. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Gwynn, John T. "The First Settlers of Aspy Bay, Cape North" in Rev. D. MacDonald. Cape North and Vicinity. 1933. Cape North: Privately published. Rept. 1980. 12.

Ayr, Scotland, the family considered themselves of Welsh ancestry.

Elva Jackson writes of him:

A sea captain, he had been master of a large topsail schooner engaged in carrying lumber from the Kennebec River in Maine to the Carolinas. [During the Revolutionary War] he served on His Majesty's ship Scarborough. Coming to Cape Breton in 1800, he settled at the Strait of Canso [that separates Cape Breton Island from mainland Nova Scotia] where he obtained 300 acres, and interested in fishing and trading, he built the 43-ton Hale at Arichat in 1801. While sailing around Cape Breton coasts, he observed the uninhabited lands around Aspy Bay and saw their agricultural potential.<sup>23</sup>

Capt. Gwynn settled at Aspy Bay in 1812. According to Patterson, "some months later came Guinn's (sic) son-in-law, George Carter, and three of their former neighbours, David Bades, Job Stanley and Elab Whitney, and a man from Mabou, by the name of Thomas Burnett."<sup>24</sup> In the next four years, settlers came from the Strait of Canso, Northwest Arm, Little Bras d'Or and Sydney (all Cape Breton Island locations), as well as from Newfoundland and mainland Nova Scotia (then still a separate colony). In the fall of 1833, "eight families arrived from the islands and Highlands of Scotland, and at the same time another branch of the Celtic race was represented by a few Irish."<sup>25</sup>

We do not know precisely how each pioneer discovered Asby Bay as a place for settlement. Thomas Dixon and William Daisley were

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<sup>23</sup> Jackson, Elva. Cape Breton and the Jackson Kith and Kin. Windsor: Lancelot Press. 1971. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Patterson, G.G. History of Victoria County, with related papers. Comp. and Ed. W. James MacDonald. Sydney: U College of Cape Breton Press. 1978. 61.

<sup>25</sup> Patterson. 61.

each shipwrecked in Aspy Bay, and James A. Wilkie first saw Aspy Bay when he was shipwrecked further along the coast. That the first settlers were all American Methodists suggests some former connection. But the ethnic and religious composition of the region soon became complex.

At Cape North in 1871, there were 70 English, 47 French, 116 Irish, 542 Scotch and 8 Spanish or Portuguese.<sup>26</sup> No one religion became dominant in the region. In 1871, there were 22 Baptists, 210 Catholics, 18 Church of England, 36 Methodists and 491 Presbyterians.<sup>27</sup> By 1891, there were 391 Catholics, 14 Church of England, 476 Presbyterians, 159 Methodists and 6 Baptists.<sup>28</sup>

Oral testimony suggests that affiliation with the community was more important than affiliation with the church. The following genealogy for Helen Dunphy Curtis is instructive in that regard: Her grandfather Alexander MacDonald was a Presbyterian. He married the Acadian Catholic Harriet Cormier. Harriet became a Presbyterian. Their daughter Annie Victoria was raised a strict Presbyterian. She married Patrick Dunphy, a Catholic, and became Catholic herself. Years later, after Patrick's death, she married Willy Morrison and became like him a Presbyterian. Helen, Victoria's daughter, was raised a Catholic, but she grew up and

<sup>26</sup> Census of Canada. 1871. Table: "Origins of the People." 332-33.

<sup>27</sup> Census of Canada. 248-9.

<sup>28</sup> Census of Canada. 1891. 250.

"went to school from [Presbyterian] Grandfather Alexander's home."<sup>29</sup> A name such as that of obituary poet Andrew Dunphy [Scottish and Irish] is suggestive of regional flexibility regarding ethnic influences. And there are many local stories the point of which is disobeying the clergy for the sake of supporting a community value.<sup>30</sup>

These evidences of flexibility and lack of hegemony in the Aspy Bay region are important when looking at the variety of the obituary verse composed there, the influences of one form of the genre upon another, and the composition of obituary verse by a Catholic at the death of both non-Catholics and Catholics.<sup>31</sup>

A constant theme in published descriptions of northern Cape Breton well into the twentieth century is that of isolation. The focus is usually on the lack of roads or poor roads. Mention is

<sup>29</sup> Curtis, Helen. Personal communication.

<sup>30</sup> Helen Curtis told of going to a Protestant's funeral against the priest's telling her she must not. Personal communication. Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald delighted in telling about the priest's attempt to haul him over the coals for playing the fiddle at an Orangeman's dance. The gist of the story had the priest saying, "What was the idea playing for them?" Winston replied, "I was trying to make a dollar"--handing three dollars to the priest--"to pay my church dues." And Winston added, "He damn well took it." Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>31</sup> Bob Fitzgerald said: "Burials are a good example of neighbourly love.... When there was somebody died, the whole community mourned the loss of one of their number. Regardless of what religious denomination it was--it didn't make any difference at all." "How We Buried Our Dead." Down North: The Book of Cape Breton's Magazine. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited. 1980. 238.

made of a path cleared from St. Ann's to Bay St. Lawrence in 1850 and of a road from Aspy Bay to Ingonish in 1853, but it was some time between 1873 and 1887 that anything like a carriage track was opened between Ingonish and Cape North.<sup>32</sup> Most of our detailed accounts of road conditions come from tourists and ministers. C. H. Farnham wrote in 1886 that:

For over twelve miles the route was a bridle path, partly over swamps, partly up and down the beds of stoney brooks. We were on top of the barren plateau ... It is wearisome to pick your way for miles in such ground [as exists on the barren Plateau], jumping from bog to bog, stone to stone, or walking single poles laid as bridges over peat holes.<sup>33</sup>

All accounts agree there was not a substantial road in northern Cape Breton prior to the 1880s, and travel (in season) depended on water. In 1893, even J.M.Gow, an ardent island promoter, wrote that the Aspy Bay-Ingonish road was "in places, simply desperate."<sup>34</sup>

Particular to the present study, this isolation suggests kinds of community self-dependence. For instance, there was no resident professional clergy for some years after settlement. There are records of people sailing to Sydney to be married.<sup>35</sup> Catholics

<sup>32</sup> MacDonald, R.H. Transportation in Northern Cape Breton. Ottawa: Parks Canada Manuscript Report Number 363. 1979. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Farnham, C. H. "Cape Breton Folks." Harpers New Monthly Magazine. No. 430 (March 1886). Quoted in Transportation in Northern Cape Breton. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Gow, John M. Cape Breton Illustrated: Historic, Picturesque and Descriptive. Toronto: William Briggs. 1893. 415.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson. 110.

were served by means of brief, intense ministerial visits. Fr. McKeagney in 1825 wrote that he "baptized about 20 children on another day between Neal's (sic) Harbour and Cape North, both Catholics and Protestants."<sup>36</sup> Bishop MacKinnon in the summer of 1853 was the first bishop to visit Cape North. He said he confirmed 400 persons there. There was a priest in residence at Bay St. Lawrence for a short while in 1857, but by 1860 the residence was Ingonish with Cape North considered a mission.<sup>17</sup> There was a resident Presbyterian minister at Cape North from 1860 to 1863; otherwise they were supplied occasionally.<sup>38</sup> The Anglican Rev. Simon Gibbons included Aspy Bay on his trips north as far back as 1877.<sup>39</sup>

The Aspy Bay community depended on lay ministers and catechists. Colonial missionary Mr. Farquharson described Presbyterian Cape Breton settlers as:

...sober, industrious, kindly neighbours, among whom are some pious persons who kept a knowledge of the Scriptures and some measure of reverence for the Sabbath, by reading and expounding the Scripture, catechizing, etc.<sup>40</sup>

Again he speaks of the Highlanders at and around Cape North as

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<sup>36</sup> Johnston, Rev. Angus Anthony. History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia. Vol. 1. Antigonish: St. F. X. University Press. 1960. 488.

<sup>37</sup> Johnston. 355-6.

<sup>38</sup> Murray. 128-29.

<sup>39</sup> Hatfield, Leonard F. Simon Gibbons, The First Eskimo Priest. Hantsport: Lancelot Press. 1987. 28-35.

<sup>40</sup> Patterson. 88.

employing "a man to read to them on the Sabbath."<sup>41</sup> Fr. MacKeagney wrote: "I have established the catechism and prayers in every part of [my] mission, and appointed good moral people to teach it."<sup>42</sup> As we have noted, Captain John Gwinn was a lay preacher and is considered the founder of Methodism in the Aspy Bay region.

Oral testimony makes it clear that people without any official title often took care of the community in times of crisis. At a death, family and friends would wash, dress and wake the body; they would build the casket and dig the grave.<sup>43</sup> I have found no evidence of a resident doctor in northern Cape Breton before the twentieth century. There are stories told of doctors travelling north for particular cases.<sup>44</sup> Women would attend one another at

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41 Patterson. 88. This man may have been Angus MacLean, "the Cape North catechist....His was the thankless lot of the prophet in his own country with its many drawbacks and scanty rewards." Rev. M. Campbell. Cape Breton Worthies. Sydney: Don MacKinnon. 1913. 24-28 and 31.

42 Johnston. Vol.1. 488. Johnston also notes that catechists were introduced "Not...as a new custom, but as one that had been with them in 1560, when the penal laws began in the land of their birth." (86). While I have not found detailed evidence, it is likely these catechists had roles similar to those Fr. Maillaird appointed in 1761 for the Acadians and Micmacs, which included education, baptism, marriage and funeral officiation.

43 "How we buried our dead." Down North: The Book of Cape Breton's Magazine. Ed. Ronald Caplan. Toronto and New York: Doubleday Canada Limited. 231-238.

44 MacMillan, Dr. C. "Preface." Memoirs of a Cape Breton Doctor. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited. vii-xiv.

births, although each community evolved a few specialists.<sup>45</sup> Midwifery usually included household chores, as well as several days' follow-up care for the new mother. Testimony from various parts of Cape Breton indicates this work was done for little or no money.<sup>46</sup> The community was dependent largely on traditional cures, such as using a seventh son's blessing against king's evil, sheep's manure tea for measles and salt herring tied to the feet to draw fever.<sup>47</sup> Again, although there were people considered specialists in this field, these too seem to have been cultural items shared without fee.

It is possible to over-emphasize the impact of apparent isolation. Campbell and MacLean (1974) see isolation as a significant factor in the retention of culture, but deplore the way isolation cut the community off from scientific and literary

<sup>45</sup> Effie MacLeod is singled out by John T. Gwinn for having "nursed many a mother through child-birth, and who for many a long year was the only doctor in Cape North." MacDonald, Rev.D. Cape North and Vicinity. 14.

<sup>46</sup> "A Visit with Janie Nicholson, Baddeck." Cape Breton's Magazine. 31 (1982). 15-21. Emily Seymour talks about Granny Frickert of Neil's Harbour in "How We Cured ourselves." Cape Breton's Magazine. 18 (1973). 18-19. Mary Urquhart of the North Shore is discussed in "A Visit with Nan Morrison, Baddeck." Cape Breton's Magazine. 47 (1988). 2-3. Margaret MacRae tells a story of mid-wife Elly Urquhart of Cape North in "A Visit with Frank and Margaret MacRae." Cape Breton's Magazine. 46 (1987). 75-76.

<sup>47</sup> "How we Cured Ourselves." Cape Breton's Magazine. 18 (1973). 18-24.

advances.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Taft (1981) warns against such a blanket reading, pointing to several examples of contact between Newfoundland communities and mainstream world culture.<sup>49</sup> Without denying the impact of poor roads and harsh weather as isolating factors, we can attest to how the region's economic organization provided considerable opportunity for cultural contact between the people of Aspy Bay and the rest of the world. Campbell and MacLean suggest opportunities for significant cultural exchange when they discuss the large numbers of Nova Scotians joining American fishing fleets in the first half of the 19th Century.<sup>50</sup> In 1889, Viator is struck by the multi-national origin of people at White Point; he meets Dutch, French and English merchants.<sup>51</sup> Weather permitting, northern Cape Breton was served by both scheduled and transient movement of sail and steam vessels.<sup>52</sup> This

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48 Campbell, D. and R. A. MacLean. Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots. Toronto: McLelland and Stewart Limited. 1974.

49 Taft, Michael. "The Itinerant Movie-man and His Impact on the Folk Culture of the Outports of Newfoundland." Travelling the Outports: Two Studies in Newfoundland Itinerant Culture. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland Department of Folklore Reprint Series No. 6. (1981). 28-39.

50 Campbell and MacLean. 79-81.

51 "One could scarcely have expected to encounter in succession three men of different nationalities, living in such a primitive way, yet intelligent and entertaining, and with...strongly marked individuality." Viator. "A Tour in Northern Cape Breton." The Week. Vol. VI, No. 27-28 (June 7-14, 1889).

52 "As far back as 1827, small coastal schooners and trading vessel visited the northern parts of the island. One of the first regular packets in the coastal trade was the Flying Robin, built in 1882 by John Fitzgerald of Dingwall." Transportation in Northern Cape Breton. 17.

gave connection to ocean-going vessels and train lines at North Sydney, Sydney and the Strait of Canso. Coastal vessels traded between the Aspy Bay region and the French islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, and to Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and the Magdalen Islands. We have considerable oral testimony regarding walking long distances to find work.<sup>53</sup> And particularly relevant to the song traditions, men were travelling seasonally to the lumberwoods of New Brunswick and Maine.<sup>54</sup>

During the fishing season, White Point became home for both single men and for entire families from the Aspy Bay region. The families brought not only goods but their livestock as well, and considered White Point their summer home.<sup>55</sup> Many of the single men lived either in shacks or in the permanent residents' homes. Considerable oral testimony tells of song as a primary

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53 "Theodore Rideout: 'I went Sealing.'" Cape Breton's Magazine. 44 (1987). Dan Cameron and John A. MacIsaac. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

54 "Since before the Civil War, Maine woodsmen had been lured west by better wages, and the panic of 1873 only intensified their exodus, extending it into the late eighties. The vacuum in the Maine woods was filled by thousands of provincemen who would work hard for the wages offered, and they kept on coming right up into the early years of this century." Ives, Edward D. "A man and His Song: Joe Scott and 'The Plain Golden Band,'" in Glassie, Henry, Edward Ives and John F. Szwed. Folksongs and Their Makers. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 1979. 77.

55 "In Summer about 20 families move there for the fishing, chiefly from South Harbour, and move back home again for the winter. The population is about 35 individuals in winter, about 150 during the fishing season." Rev. D. MacDonald. Cape North and Vicinity. 144.

entertainment.<sup>56</sup> A further opportunity for significant cultural exchange is the Newfoundland fishing fleet that anchored overnight at White Point. A description of the relationship between Newfoundlanders and the people gathered at White Point is in Chapter 5 of this study. As pointed out above, this seasonal gathering may have been part of an on-going relationship with people of Newfoundland's south coast during the French Regime. In any case, at least as early as 1865 Uniacke was able to describe the economic organization as having been established for some time: "At 'White Point' which is nearly the western extremity of this extensive bay [Aspy Bay], has long been established a prosperous fishery, which gives activity and bustle to that remote quarter of the island at least during the summer months."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "That was the television of our day." MacDonald, John D. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes. George Rambeau: "And there'd be people come in, people were always visiting, and there'd be always some in could sing--well, that was our pastime, singing and that stuff. But there is no more of that--listen to that television." "Searching for Cape Breton Folk Songs." Cape Breton's Magazine. 41 (1986). 19-20.

<sup>57</sup>Uniacke's Sketches of Cape Breton and Other Papers Relating to Cape Breton Island. Ed. C. Bruce Fergusson. Halifax: The Public Archives of Nova Scotia. 1958. 41.

## CHAPTER 4

### Performance

I have found no manuscripts of the obituary verse discussed here. I have attributed four of the compositions to Andrew Dunphy and a fifth to either Thomas W. Gwinn or Andrew Dunphy, based on the ascription of local people. My three primary informants were Helen Dunphy Curtis, Bob Fitzgerald and George Rambeau. All three grew up in the Aspy Bay region, knew Andrew Dunphy personally, and were extremely interested in both his poetry and the local song tradition. Helen was related to Andrew Dunphy through her father. She is a singer of old songs and both her childhood home at White Point and the home she made as a woman in Bay St. Lawrence were significant contexts for song. A portion of her repertoire is active,<sup>1</sup> the performances always within the family context. A great deal of her repertoire is inactive and is called up only when she is questioned about it.

Bob Fitzgerald's childhood home at White Point was another important song context. The Fitzgerald's were a musical family, and while not a noted singer Bob still knows portions of a lot of

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<sup>1</sup> The designations of "active," "inactive," and "passive" are based on Kenneth S. Goldstein's expansion of Carl von Sydow's statement: "It is the active bearers who keep tradition alive and transmit it, whereas the passive bearers have indeed heard of what a certain tradition contains, and may perhaps, when questioned, recollect part of it, but do nothing themselves to spread it or keep it alive." "On the Application of the Concepts of Active and Inactive Traditions to the Study of Repertory." Journal of American Folklore. 84 (1971). 62-67.

old songs. He is a passive bearer of the song tradition. He is also a local historian. He now lives at Dingwall.

George Rambeau has always been a passive tradition bearer. He was not a singer and has not memorized the words. His parents were singers and their home at Smelt Brook on the White Point Road was a context for song. George recognizes the old songs. He was an adult when he spent time with Andrew Dunphy.

The people in the Aspy Bay region sang some of the narrative obituary verses in this study in typical song situations. No less than three were definitely sung [THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, JOHNNY NICHOLSON, and THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN]. The first two were sung rather extensively. THE LOST MACKINNON BOY was also sung in the region. The author's invitation to sing some of the obituary verses seems implicit in that they clearly fit song tunes already adopted by the community. On the other hand, as discussed below, the air may have been only an aid in the composition of the poem. We know, for instance, that THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN was treated by some people strictly as poetry.

Bob Fitzgerald told me that Dunphy sought help in setting at least THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN to music, although no actual written music exists and the man said to have helped him, Bob's

father George Fitzgerald, probably could not read or write music.<sup>2</sup> It is more likely George Fitzgerald was simply the first to sing it, whether he or Dunphy chose the tune. That Dunphy himself did not sing is fairly certain--he had a hare lip--and whether he sang is probably of no consequence.<sup>3</sup> Had he not offered a tune, and if the audience wanted to sing the verses, the community doubtless would have appended an existing tune they considered fit, as they did for other songs and poetry they found in print.<sup>4</sup>

It is unlikely that George actually wrote out the music for Dunphy. No written music has been found. What is much more reasonable is that George "put the air" on some of Dunphy's songs, either directly or by the influence of times Dunphy shared in the Fitzgerald home.

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<sup>2</sup> One of George Fitzgerald's children was the noted fiddler, Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald. According to Winston, George Fitzgerald at one time was the only fiddler at White Point, and Winston's only source of new tunes. Winston made it clear that his own repertoire was limited until he left home and took a correspondence course in reading music. The implication was that his father could not read music. "A Visit with Winston 'Scotty' Fitzgerald." Cape Breton's Magazine. 46 (1987). 2.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding this, however, it should be noted that Edward D. Ives writes that "the creator of songs will probably also be a singer (I have found no exceptions), but at the very least he would have to be someone who had thoroughly internalized the tradition." Ives, Edward D. "A Man and His Song: Joe Scott and 'The Plain Golden Band.'" in Ives, H. Glassie and J. F. Szwed. Folksongs and Their Makers. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 1979.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Helen Curtis was touched by the text of "The Newfoundland"; she found only the ballad in the North Sydney Herald; she memorized it and sang it to the tune she used for "Lake of Ponchatrain." Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

We are not going to know, finally, who made the choice of the air for a particular Dunphy song. It is probably not that simple. Consider the case of THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN. With the one exception mentioned in Chapter 6, all versions or portions I have found use the same air. I am told the air is very like the air of "The Wisconsin Soldier." According to his son Bob, this happens to be a song that George Fitzgerald did sing. It is possible Dunphy heard the air in George Fitzgerald's home, or the home of someone who learned it there. And it is quite possible Dunphy may well have chosen the air himself. He may have had the tune in mind when he made the verses.<sup>5</sup> So, in several senses of the phrase, George Fitzgerald might well have "put the air on" this and other Andrew Dunphy obituary verses.

The George Fitzgerald home is an example of a singing household in the Aspy Bay region. The parents and children sang, as did the visitors whose presence was often work-related. Winston Fitzgerald said, "They were mostly seafaring songs, old seafaring songs."<sup>6</sup> Winston used to play fiddle accompaniment as well, to tunes such as "Rose of Tralee." And friends would come in the evenings to listen and share songs. Bob Fitzgerald insists his

<sup>5</sup> "This composition process is the most common in the Northeastern part of North America and many parts of the world where the text and its story-telling qualities are dominant in the song performance." Szwed, John. "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-maker and Community of Song." Folksongs and their Makers. 155.

<sup>6</sup> "A Visit with Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald." 6.

mother had as much place in this as any man. Though women were present, however, they were usually the only women present and would be the women of the house. A similar situation is described for the Jimmy and Helen Curtis household at Bay St. Lawrence.<sup>7</sup> It was usually a group of men who visited in the evenings. There was usually drink. Helen Curtis would be present till a certain hour. But as her daughter Rose explained: "She had children to raise, and she'd go to bed earlier." Helen would often sing on these evenings in her own home, alone and with Jimmy. It was in later years they travelled out more to sing in other homes, when the children were older.<sup>8</sup>

And we are told Mary Fitzgerald (Bob and Winston's mother) sang as well in her own home at White Point. Bob said she travelled a bit to sing. Both Helen Curtis's and Bob Fitzgerald's mother are mentioned as particularly fine singers, but it seems clear that most of their singing was done in their own homes, among family. This is probably what Ives refers to as the "domestic" song tradition.<sup>9</sup>

There was also a formal, work-related, "public performance" song tradition at White Point. Despite taking took place in a home, it

<sup>7</sup> Burton, Rose Curtis and Monika Curtis McNenly. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>8</sup> Burton, Rose Curtis. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>9</sup> Ives, Edward D. Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker. Chicago: U of Illinois Press. 1978. 393-96.

is undoubtedly a leisure-time workplace activity. The George Fitzgerald and the Patrick Dunphy households were centres for this kind of leisure-time singing with the Newfoundland captains off fishing vessels that harboured nights at White Point. Winston Fitzgerald described these occasions:

Many's and many's and many's and many's a party we had at my home. God, yeah. The old captains, you know, they knew my father, he was harbourmaster. And they would come in there. Lots of liquor. Of course every fellow had a bottle when he came in. 'Uncle George--give it to Uncle George.' That was my father. They called him Uncle George. He'd take the bottle, put it over on the little cupboard in the living room. Oh, nobody had a bottle and sneak outside. No such a thing.

And there were a couple of old captains there: Capt. John Best, and Joe Cox, and Capt. Strickland, and some of them. And one of them would be the boss. Old Capt. John Best would be the boss. When he got up and went over and filled the tray, they got a drink. The other fellows--they wouldn't have furniture enough for them--would be sitting on the floor.

And everyone of them could sing--and good singers. Good songs, and good singers. And they would stay there all night. And if I was on oath, I would never, never remember hearing them say, "Damn it!" Nothing. Just gentlemen.

The old captain of one of the boats would take charge of the liquor. And when one fellow got a drink, you got one, I got one--everyone got one, and it was put back there till someone would sing a song. Maybe after a song or two, pass her around again. That's how they distributed it...

That's all going on in my house. In the evenings. Yes, you'd see them coming regular. Yeah, that was a get-together.

What a world.

Yeah, a great world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Beside being a context for the sharing of songs, the social control is evident, both in protection of inter-community relations and in protection of business interests. Controlled drinking maintained relations in the harbour as well as insuring the ability to fish. Ives sees "public performance" singing as "Saturday night...the end of the workweek, with the difference that now there's drinking involved." Ives. Joe Scott. 393.

An extraordinarily similar, detailed account of these kinds of gatherings was told on separate occasions by Bob Fitzgerald and Helen Curtis.<sup>11</sup> And it is not merely suggested that songs were learned at these gatherings; Helen quite clearly identifies Newfoundland Captain Jack Clarke and his sons as the ones who taught her "St. John's Girl," "Going Down to Newfoundland," and "My Own True Newfoundland."

Songs were also shared at White Point among Cape Bretoners from different villages in the Aspy Bay region. As we saw in Chapter 3, White Point was the focus for a migration of both individuals and entire families during the fishing season.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, specific singers can be placed in specific homes, such as William Gwinn at George Fitzgerald's. Others lived in the fish shacks and came in for the evenings. Some of the Aspy Bay region men would have spent the winter in Canadian and American lumberwoods and they would have brought back new songs. For example, Helen Curtis learned Joe Scott's "Howard Kerrick" from George Fitzgerald, who

However, at White Point it was a much more common event, actually a part of the work week through the fishing season.

<sup>11</sup> Cape Breton Magazine Tapes .

<sup>12</sup> "This seasonal migration, called 'booleying' in Ireland, was common in parts of that country, as in Northern Scotland and Newfoundland." MacKenzie, A. A. The Irish in Cape Breton. Antigonish: Formac Publishing Company Limited. 1979. 115. The school schedule took advantage of this concentration; once a school was established, it was opened for the summer months. "A Visit with Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald." 2.

had learned it in the New Brunswick lumberwoods. There are still men living from the Aspy Bay region who learned songs in a lumberwoods context.<sup>13</sup> And some would have learned the locally made songs. Bob Fitzgerald heard William Gwinn sing THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN when William and Allan Gwinn (Daniel's cousin and brother) stayed the fishing season at White Point.

Winston Fitzgerald continued:

You'd have anywhere from 30 to 40 fleet of boats in there. You know, fishing boats, in the summertime.

Newfoundlanders mostly?

Mostly. Americans sometimes. At swordfishing time, you'd get Americans in there.... We'd have a dance on the old wharf every night. Lots of company.

Who would be playing?

Oh, mostly me, mostly. And the Newfoundland fellows had some accordion players, they'd play for themselves. Because no one could play fast enough for them. They'd play fast, you know. Their music is very much faster than ours.

Local people--would they mix with the Newfoundlanders?

Oh yes, very muchly so. They were great people. Oh, we thought the world of the Newfoundland people. God, yes. The boat would come in, they'd be up on the government wharf shaking hands with all those folks, you know, back for the summer. Oh yeah, we were just great neighbours.

How often during the summer would this happen, that they'd come in, and there might be a dance on the wharf?

Well, they'd fish. Probably make two trips in the season home to Newfoundland. But they would come in to White Point every night. They would go out and haul their trawl gear, and get

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Dan Cameron aged 94 in 1988 and John A. MacIsaac aged about 89. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

whatever they had on their trawl gear. Then they'd start back for White Point. They dressed their fish coming in. Come in and anchor, tie up at the wharf or, if there were too many boats, anchor in the stream, anchor in the cove for the night. So we had them just about every night.

The girls would come out on the wharf in the evening. And somebody'd suggest, "Go get the violin." So, I was the only player at the time there, at White Point. And I'd get the old violin out, and some other chap would get an accordion, and we'd play turnabout.

#### Turnabout?

We very seldom played together. They had their Newfoundland tunes, and of course I had the Cape Breton tunes.

#### So the dances would go to your rhythm, and then to the Newfoundland rhythm.

Yes. But the Newfoundland fellows had jobs sometimes converting our girls to Newfoundland women. You know, a different speed, and they were faster. But they got used to them. And after a while they could dance the Newfoundland dances as well as they could with us fellows.... Probably you'd get 50 or 75 people out on the wharf in the evening there. Telling stories.

#### Getting along?

Oh yeah, got along. Never--I never remember having any trouble with them at all, at all. Greatest people in the world. Mannerly people.

#### It wasn't wild fishermen taking advantage of a little community.

No way. I saw as many as 15 or 20, at our homes. At my home, anyway, and they'd visit at other homes too....<sup>14</sup>

Winston said there would not be singing at the wharf. The formal song occasions seem meant for the older crowd, in the home. But even on the wharf, the sense of sharing of tunes is certainly clear. And it is important to repeat that this is not one storm-stayed day or a party once in a while. Bob Fitzgerald said it was

<sup>14</sup> "A Visit with Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald." 4-5.

"night after night after night."<sup>15</sup> It was an excellent arena for exchange, and for teaching the acceptable cultural conventions.

While I cannot place Andrew Dunphy at any specific song gathering, we are told that Andrew Dunphy would have been at many of them. We know that Dunphy was a caring, entertaining traveller welcomed in the Aspy Bay region. Dunphy visited in several homes of noted singers, including the Fitzgeralds and the Patrick Dunphys. He had ample opportunity to know what his audience would accept in their song repertoire in a region where there was considerable inflow of new songs. He had, as well, the opportunity for an insider's knowledge of the religious convictions and social attitudes in this region where, as we have shown in Chapter 3, no one religion was dominant. This would be the process of learning Merriam underlines, that culture is not only what is learned but that "culture [also] provides the conditions for learning."<sup>16</sup> As part of that culture, Andrew Dunphy knew the non-professional responsibilities taken on by his individual neighbours who acted as lay preachers and catechists and mid-wives. As well, he was intimate with the communal handling of death-related rites: waking, coffin-making and grave-digging, burial and lay services. And, from at least 1894 to 1902 via his poetry, he took an active role in those events. This

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<sup>15</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

<sup>16</sup> Merriam, Alan P. The Anthropology of Music. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1954. 162.

education would have served as a guide and an encouragement. And in a few poems he carved out an individual role in a rather homogeneous community.

It should be made clear that the coming of outsiders is not the only significant influence on the cultural repertoire of the Aspy Bay region. Important as well is the annual local migration of people of the region to the fishing shacks at White Point. Entire families often moved from their winter homes to homes at the shore.<sup>17</sup> We see at White Point an intermingling of religions and nationalities economically and socially organized to provide considerable context for song. I have not heard a single negative comment about that period of in-gathering, neither regarding the local seasonal migration, the dances, or the singing in the homes. While it is true that I am a stranger, it is remarkable that we do not hear of it as a typical sailors-in-port event. There are women and men together. There is drinking. There is love and marriage and love without marriage--but never talk of anything negative. In not one instance is there even a hint of the feeling of being overwhelmed by the swelling of the community five times its size, or of any resentment towards the "outsiders," whether Newfoundlanders or Cape Bretoners from around Aspy Bay. The insistence was, "It was heaven."

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<sup>17</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes. For a description aspects of daily family life at White Point during the fishing season, see , "A Visit with John J. and Sadie Theriault." Cape Breton's Magazine. 50 (1989). 99-116.

The opportunity for exchanging tunes, songs, dances and so forth is evident. I am describing events as witnessed in the 1910s and '20s. We know that White Point was the only such centre in northern Cape Breton till 1873. Until then, White Point was the only place they could find a merchant to buy their fish or provide them with staples (for which read credit). While other merchants located in the region after 1873, it remained the most important centre and a base for the Newfoundland fishermen well into the twentieth century.

Dunphy made his songs from 1894 to 1902. There was no lack of opportunity for him to learn what was acceptable to his potential audience. In that sense, the various contexts of song "put the air on the verse." The texts of songs in the local repertoire told him that as far as his community was concerned, songs in themselves were a legitimate response to death. The dates of his known work exactly parallel the height of songwriter Joe Scott's productivity. Every singer I have met in the Aspy Bay region knew at least one Joe Scott song. I am tempted to suggest that the community's demonstrated enthusiasm for Scott's sung memorials (songs that told stories of untimely deaths of average people in the community immediately affected by those deaths) was a significant encouragement for Dunphy to compose.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Several Joe Scott songs meet elements of Mark Coffin's description of narrative obituary verse discussed in Chapter 2. Edward Ives refers to GUY REED as a lament, but does not discuss that designation in any detail. Ives. Joe Scott. 140-77.

Moreover, Dunphy heard the repetition of codified phrases in many of the songs, both contemporary and old. These were phrases laden with communally understood meanings and reassurances in their conventionality--that is, Dunphy acquired the tools of a songmaker's trade. He realized that working within those confines he could produce verses his neighbours would understand, approve of and want to learn. On the other hand, Joe Scott's acceptance demonstrated the acceptability of creativity within the cultural limits.<sup>19</sup> The texts of the Aspy Bay obituary verses in this study demonstrate this combination of creativity within convention.

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<sup>19</sup> Ives wrote regarding the making of "Guy Reed," a song once well-known in the Aspy Bay region: "I have emphasized how innovative Joe Scott was, but we should not get the idea that he was introducing his audience to something totally foreign, something utterly new... songs like "Little Nell," "The Letter Edged in Black," and "When You and I Were Young, Maggie" were very popular among the same people who sang and enjoyed "The Jam on Gerry's Rock"...What Joe did was to combine them in a special way." Ives. 168-69.

## CHAPTER V

## ASPY BAY NARRATIVE OBITUARY VERSE

In this chapter I will discuss in more or less chronological order five narrative obituary verses from the Aspy Bay region of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Four of them were composed by Andrew Dunphy. The fifth, THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, although ascribed to Dunphy, is possibly the work of Thomas W. Gwinn. I have located newspaper accounts that support the dating of JOHNNY NICHOLSON in 1894, THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN in the winter of 1900-01, and THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN in 1902. I have not yet established the date of Jessie MacKinnon's death [THE SILENT SPRING]. All copies I have seen of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY refer to the death as occurring in the early 1890s.

## 1. JOHNNY NICHOLSON

Regarding Andrew Dunphy's JOHNNY NICHOLSON and THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN Helen Curtis said:

Those are two important songs. Two real life, real things, real facts. Happenings. I think they were important because, well, I imagine they're two human beings, those people. And both of them met a very sudden death--Johnny Nicholson, and so did Dannie Gwinn, a young man, he was only very young. (Helen's daughter, Rose: They were our people.) Helen: Most certainly, they were our people. (Rose: Local people.) Helen: And the Dunphy man was very near to my father. Something happens like that, it brings it right to you when you hear.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Searching for Cape Breton Folksongs." Cape Breton's Magazine. 41 (1986). 17.

And it happened nearly 100 years ago. JOHNNY NICHOLSON was probably composed in 1894, shortly after the event.

JOHNNY NICHOLSON was a song Helen's mother, Victoria [Queenie], had sung at White Point before Helen was born, and continued to sing after she came to live with Helen's family at Bay St. Lawrence. George Rambeau:

Helen Curtis's mother sang that JOHNNY NICHOLSON for me when she was 105. You wouldn't believe it, would you? I went to see her on Christmas Day. Now, I knew her from the time I was a kid--I went to see her--she stayed up at Jim Mac's there. I went upstairs with Jim to see her. She was laying in the bed and, my God, she had got small. And Jim said, "Do you think you could sing JOHNNY NICHOLSON for him yet?" She was a beautiful singer--ah, hardly any like her. She said she thought she could. She laid on her back there and sung every word. If I didn't see it I wouldn't believe it. I didn't think anyone that old had wind enough to do it.<sup>2</sup>

#### JOHNNY NICHOLSON

'Twas on the fifth of August,  
Oh, loving friends draw near  
A sad accident did occur  
Which cast a gloom 'round here

When three of our brave comrades  
They left their native shore  
But sad to say one of the three  
He'll never return no more.

With gentle smiles and spirits high  
He left his mother's side  
But little she thought she'd see no more  
Her dear and only child.

A gentle breeze from the westward blew  
Which did those men beguile  
When a treacherous squall capsized their boat  
Before they went a mile.

Upon the waves they struggled hard  
Upon a mast and oar

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<sup>2</sup> "Searching for Cape Breton Folksongs." 20.

Until their cries for help were heard  
By a female on the shore.

A boat was launched by three brave men  
Who pulled with all their might  
And when they reached that awful spot  
Oh what a solemn sight.

Upon the angry waves ahead  
That now began to roar  
Were two exhausted human beings  
Upon a mast and oar.

Poor John was gone, he lost his hold,  
All by some cruel wave  
He sank beneath the briny deep  
Down to a watery grave.

And when his mother heard the news  
Her senses soon was gone  
She rang her hands, she tore her hair  
And called her loving son.

His body has been searched for  
But it cannot be found  
'Twould ease his mother's aching heart  
If he lay in the ground.

No enemy he left behind  
But loving friends who'll weep  
And long remember his sad fate  
While sailing o'er the deep.

He's on that bright and heavenly shore  
Where angels dwell on high  
So weep no more but fervently pray  
For your well-cherished boy.

And you that's in your youth and bloom  
It's up this steep hill climb  
So come dear friends take my advice  
And do prepare in time

For if this song I have composed  
Will lead your steps to light  
It will lead you on that narrow path,  
'Tis there you will rejoice.

And everything you've said or done  
Will appear before your eyes.  
It's then you'll answer for the past  
When far beyond the skies.

His body it lies in the deep  
 Where his struggle first began  
 So pray he'll sleep his last long sleep  
 In happiness, Amen.

Debra Meeks collected this song in written form from John Wilkie of Sugar Loaf, Aspy Bay, November, 1978. Meeks notes that it was collected by Wilkie "from an elderly lady in Cape North who has since died."<sup>3</sup> This was probably Helen Curtis's mother. Helen Curtis sang it for me in 1986. There is a typescript of the song in Bob Fitzgerald's manuscript history of the Aspy Bay region.

The only difference in the narrative portion of the three versions is the number of men who went to the rescue. Wilkie has it as two. Helen sang "three brave men" and later told a story of the three being Andrew Dunphy, his brother William and his sister Selina, "a big rugged woman and she went to help row the boat to rescue those people, and launch the boat."<sup>4</sup> George Rambeau remembered the song as referring to three rescuers. But he wasn't sure about Andrew Dunphy being one of them. George expressed his skepticism this way:

I don't know if he was or not--I couldn't say. Don't think that Andrew was with them. Andrew only had one arm. He had two but the other one was only just like an infant's arm, never developed. The ones that went out--there were three men went out...Said there in the song, "Their cries were heard by a female on the shore...a

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<sup>3</sup> Meeks, Debra. Tape Collection. Beaton Institute Archives, University College of Cape Breton. Additional information [such as the date of the interview] is from an unpaginated outline of the tapes prepared by Ms. Meeks and deposited with the collection.

<sup>4</sup> "Searching for Cape Breton Folk Songs." 17-18.

boat was launched by three brave men who pulled for all their might....<sup>5</sup>

In the light of this, Andrew's presence seems unlikely. As for the woman on the shore, Bob Fitzgerald's manuscript history has it: "Julia (Mrs. Solomon) Turbide was a Paquet, heard the cries of Frank Rambeau and Jimmy Challoner, when J. Nicholson drowned."<sup>6</sup>

Both Wilkie and Helen's version ended after the 11th stanza: "No enemy he left behind / But loving friends to weep / And long remember his sad death / While sailing on the deep." It makes a pretty good, albeit abrupt, ending. It would not, however, meet the general description of similar obituary verse, which tends to contain a religious element. The day Helen sang for me, she knew there was more to the song. She later sent me the last part written out--a five-stanza, homiletic warning. Her song now matched the Fitzgerald version. Over a year later, Helen told me that she knew the entire song, and used to sing it all--and in fact worded out some of the ending. But it was not nearly as well remembered as the portion she first sang. The Wilkie version (which ended where Helen's had first ended) was given to Meeks in written form and as complete. The fact that Helen's memory failed her just where the Wilkie version ended suggests some rejection of the last five stanzas.

It is useful to recall Mark Coffin's observation that "Pure

<sup>5</sup> "Searching for Cape Breton Folk Songs." 20.

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. "History of the Settlements of Aspy Bay region." Unpublished manuscript.

narrative obituary verse frequently loses many stanzas of sentiment and moralism in oral transmission."<sup>7</sup> Such loss makes a song shorter and might even indicate passing of the singing of old songs. It may also indicate rejection of the tone and emphasis of this particular homiletic ending. It is possible that had there been more singers alive in the region, I might have found several who always sang the entire song. But as we will see below, the five stanzas may have been rejected for reasons that suggest the function of the region's obituary verse.

JOHNNY NICHOLSON has the longest homily of any Dunphy obituary verse. It also has more of a preaching, strident tone than any of his compositions. And it is a warning aimed directly at his audience. Rejection may be a kind of ducking of the poem's lesson; it might simply be that the audience found this particular message tiresome. As we will see, in the several versions I have found of Dunphy's last obituary verse,<sup>8</sup> THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, there has been no attempt by performers to remove any of the homily. On the other hand, in THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN there is no explicit warning to the listener. There is instead a gentle encouragement of hope that we will all meet in Paradise. Moreover, the homily in DANIEL GWINN is artfully woven through the verse in a way that would be difficult to remove.

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<sup>7</sup> Coffin, Mark Tristram. American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. Norwood: Norwood Editions. 1975. p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> The last I have been able to find, that is.

The maintenance of one homily and the apparent rejection of the other may tell us something about community standards. Or it may simply indicate a section of the song that was just too difficult to sing. The lengthy homily may tell us something particular about the Nicholson family, since all informants agree that Dunphy composed his verses only on request. But this would be conjecture.

Dunphy suggests in the poem that the religious emphasis is his own decision: "For if this song I have composed / Will lead your steps to light / It will lead you on that narrow path, / 'Tis there you will rejoice."

In any case, we won't see such blatant moralizing from Dunphy again. It is as though he was trying hard to meet the standards of traditional song and obituary verse--and perhaps he was.

JOHNNY NICHOLSON was probably Dunphy's first obituary verse. It is an extremely cautious production, obeying locally accepted rules. It says practically nothing that is not formulaic. It is filled with evidences that Dunphy was well-informed as to the song conventions acceptable to his community. It is like a quilt of phrases out of other songs, arranged in the traditional pattern. And it suggests that he also had experience of both the narrative and homiletic obituary verse composed in the Aspy Bay region. The homiletic verse may have influenced both the length and direct, sermon-like delivery of the last five stanzas. However, the moralizing is couched in conventional phrases of the old song traditions.

And JOHNNY NICHOLSON is solidly within the local tradition. If in fact it is Dunphy's first obituary verse, then it is a remarkable achievement. As a song, it might have moved off into the song tradition of another place and the composer's name might have quickly detached from it. Johnny Nicholson could become someone else who drowned on another date far from Aspy Bay.

The only school for Dunphy to learn such composition is to have been part of the audience again and again, to hear the same phrases come up in one new song after another, to see the organization of phrases and the variable patterns and the seemingly countless stories that conventional phrases are able to tell. In terms of the folk poet, Pearce's sense of "his words were their words"<sup>9</sup> would seem to apply. Where the words were not theirs, they rejected them. Dunphy's community apparently normalized the song, and then sang it for about 90 years.

Although the ABCB rhyme scheme differs, in large measure JOHNNY NICHOLSON meets many of the defining elements Mark Coffin would consider evidence of narrative obituary verse. If there ever was a descriptive sub-title, that has been lost. The dead person is named in the title; and, while in the come-all-ye opening stanza we have a date, no year is mentioned. The opening stanza contains an announcement of the death and its general effect on the

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<sup>9</sup> Pearce, T. M. "What is a Folk Poet?" Western Folklore. 12 (1953). 246.

community. This is followed by seven stanzas narrating the events before, during, and after death. There is the mother's lamentation [the formulaic phrase, "She rang her hands, she tore her hair"], the search for the body, and five full stanzas of homily, including both the hope of heaven and the warning regarding dying suddenly and unprepared.

Dunphy clearly states the use of the poem--to "lead you on that narrow path"--but that does not tell us how the poem actually functioned. The audience apparently rejected the portion Dunphy ostensibly considered his aim. That the obituary verse continued as part of the song repertoire seems to indicate it functioned as entertainment. Lacking considerable detail, it probably functioned only slightly as history.

On the other hand, despite the contradictory story remembered 90 years later, would it be remembered at all without the unifying influence of the song? A number of stories that were related in interviews come up only because the song was first mentioned.<sup>10</sup> JOHNNY NICHOLSON has functioned in a relational, organizing manner in which people retain their local history. It has thus

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, there were others involved in Johnny Nicholson's death whom Dunphy could have named, such as Frank Rambeau, Jimmie Challoner, Julia Turbide and the "three brave men" who rowed out. There might have been mention of the fact that Frank Rambeau had survived a similar incident that same year in Dingwall Harbour in which Neil MacKinnon drowned. Helen Curtis: "And that Frank Rambeau, when they rescued him, he told somebody, 'There's not enough water in Aspy Bay to drown me.' He was drowned out of Gloucester. Fishing out of Gloucester." Bob Fitzgerald, when he told the story, said Frank Rambeau drowned "in the River Platte." Personal communication.

functioned as memorial. This kind of cultural marker is particularly significant in the case of a drowning where there is no grave.

I contend that JOHNNY NICHOLSON has yet another function, that of "maintaining the stability of culture."<sup>11</sup> My view of this function needs explanation in the context of blame.

In JOHNNY NICHOLSON, blame for the death is carefully placed on Nature. Dunphy does call it "a sad accident." That is, no blame shall be put upon any of the three young men. He speaks of a "gentle breeze" that beguiled them and of a "treacherous squall" that overturned the boat, putting them into the sea. Their screams are heard by a woman, and "three brave men" row out to help them. They find only two men holding onto a mast and oar, on "angry waves" that have now begun to "roar." Johnny Nicholson is gone; he has been taken "all by some cruel wave." Nature conspired to lure them out and then quickly to attack them with a change to foul weather. And Dunphy's verse does not respond with a warning to others to be more careful. He does not suggest that proper care had not been taken, that "our brave comrades" might in some way be responsible for the death.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bascom, W.R. "Four Functions of Folklore." Journal of American Folklore. LXVII (1954). 333-349. Rept. in Ed. Allan Dundas. The Study of Folklore. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1965. 297.

<sup>12</sup> Such social warning is not the function of this particular obituary verse. As I will demonstrate later, it is clearly part of the function of another obituary verse, THE LOST MACKINNON BOY.

We will see this motif of leaving everyone blameless, of settling up the story and giving relief all around, running through all the obituary verse in this study. In THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, despite Dunphy's personal anguish over the death of three children, he does not speak about the diphtheria that killed them or hint that better medical care could have helped. In THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, there is no discussion about the implications of a country boy who travels from Cape Breton to work in Maine only to be whacked by a machine and killed. In those verses, as in JOHNNY NICHOLSON, the specifics of the event are "glossed over" (as Poggioli demonstrates in terms of classical funeral verse).<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the time it was actually composed, the community immediately involved, JOHNNY NICHOLSON is really a very practical poem, spreading peace and giving guidance and settling confusions. The poem is for the mourner, who has been reminded by the fact of Johnny Nicholson's death, that he too will die. Dunphy unambiguously places the dead ("he's on that bright and heavenly shore"). He acknowledges the mourner (the mother who has lost her "only child"). The "poetry italicizes" and "publicly acknowledges the new status."<sup>14</sup> Dunphy states that the body was searched for

<sup>13</sup> Poggioli, Renato. The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1975. 64-82.

<sup>14</sup> Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Poetry: Its nature, significance and social context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1977.

but not found. Again, no blame; all that can be done has been done. And he acknowledges that the only relief the mother can hope for is to have his body in a grave on land.<sup>15</sup> A conventionally phrased stanza assures us that he left no enemies (no unresolved conflicts) and that this event (and thus Johnny Nicholson) will long be remembered in the minds of his friends.

The next stanza announces that he is at "heaven's shore," and that it is time to stop crying. He does not mention that the boy died unprepared nor indicate there might be a period spent in limbo. He draws the community in close around the fact of death and indicates appropriate action the community might take. "So weep no more but fervently pray" for him. Dunphy then warns the audience: that any one of you can be cut down at any time, and that the purpose for which this verse was made was to keep you on the straight and narrow. You are asked to pray for Johnny: "Amen."

But having argued for verse as a peacemaker in the community, I want to refocus and look at the obituary verse again. All is not quite settled in JOHNNY NICHOLSON. He is not in heaven; he is on

222-23.

<sup>15</sup> This concern for proper burial is a recurring theme in Aspy Bay area obituary verse, Dunphy's and others, and is reflective of the local community. It is a continuing motif in the literary genre as well. In his discussion of Milton's *Lycidas*, Foggioli points out the concern for proper burial. Milton's call for flowers "To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies" makes the grief more vivid in that the drowned Edward King will not be returned to the ground. Milton asks the sea creatures to bring back to shore the body of *Lycidas*. There will not be a proper burial. 96-97.

the "heavenly shore," that is, at the gate. We are told to stop crying and to "fervently pray" for him. And we are immediately reminded to prepare for death, with the suggestion that Johnny had not been prepared. Because when you are where he is now, "everything you've said and done will pass before your eyes."<sup>16</sup> We are left, as in no other obituary verse I have found in the region, with only the physical certainty ("His body it lies in the deep"), and (instead of the assurance of his eternal rest) with a second call for prayers that he will find rest.

My point is this: The community may have rejected the last five stanzas for any number of reasons.<sup>17</sup> Since they sang much longer songs, length was probably not a factor. The tedium of the homily may have led to its rejection. But, based on the other examples we will look at in this study, I think those stanzas were rejected because they were a continuing destabilizing element. They posed a significant unanswered question in the community's fabric. As I will demonstrate when I examine other obituary verse kept by the community, this function as stabilizer of the culture is evident in all the examples. And as we shall see, in the one other instance where a destabilizing element is left, THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, the community again seems to have normalized the verse and omitted the uncertainty.

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<sup>16</sup> As perhaps his life may have passed, drowning.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, if more singers were available, I might have found several who sang the entire song.

## 2. THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN

### The MacPherson Children

- 1) Oh friends draw near and listen  
To this mournful tale I tell  
It's of two little children dear  
And them I loved full well.
  
- 2) It was Annie dear and Flora May  
Scarce nine and seven years  
And while I write with trembling hand  
I can't restrain my tears.
  
- 3) The first took sick was Flora May  
My darling and my pride  
We watched her through long hours of pain  
Scarce ever left her side.
  
- 4) From day to day she weaker grew  
Until that final hour  
We saw her slowly pine away  
Then wither like a flower.
  
- 5) The long and weary night wore on  
Her hour had come to die  
All nature seemed in slumber bound  
The moon shone bright on high.
  
- 6) A vision to this child appeared  
Sent by the Father's hand  
The misty veil was cleared away  
She saw the Promised land.
  
- 7) The Gates of Heaven were opened wide  
Forth came the angel band  
For to take that darling child away  
To that bright happy land.
  
- 8) Her arms were around her papa's neck  
With him she feign would stay  
Bright angels hovered overhead  
She saw them where she lay.
  
- 9) "The stars in Heaven shine bright," she says  
"And angels there above.  
Oh I shall soon go home with them  
For Jesus do me love."
  
- 10) More restless she at length became  
Moving from place to place  
And dimmer grew her once bright eyes  
And paler was her face.

- 11) We mournfully stood by her side  
 We knew the end was near  
 In silence we gazed on her face  
 In silence fell each tear.
- 12) The look she gave right through me went  
 From that face so fair and young  
 Her dying eyes they pierced my heart  
 My nerves were all unstrung.
- 13) Our hopes were gone, our cares in vain  
 Full well we knew 'twas death  
 And slowly that weary night wore on  
 And fainter grew her breath.
- 14) Grim death he came and a cruel hand  
 On her tender form did lay  
 Now she is dead and the coffin lid  
 Conceals my Flora May.
- 15) In death her sufferings were relieved  
 By His all powerful will  
 But scarcely had she passed away  
 When Annie became ill.
- 16) Much the same as Flora May  
 She too lay sick in bed  
 We nursed her there most tenderly  
 And eased her aching head.
- 17) My heart was filled with sorrow too  
 But I could stand somehow  
 To rest her head upon my hand  
 And fan her fevered brow.
- 18) And to her papa she did say,  
 "Oh all on earth I'd give  
 With you and Mama for to stay  
 As long as you would live."
- 19) Her parents near distracted were  
 Overcome with toil and grief  
 Their children dying in their arms  
 And could give no relief.
- 20) Few friends there were around her bed  
 Their sorrow for to share  
 For blessings o: that dying child  
 We asked the Lord in prayer.
- 21) What feelings crowd that mother's breast  
 For the children dear she bore  
 That they from her were forced to part  
 On earth to meet no more.

22) Clasped in her mother's loving arms  
She quietly passed away.  
"To Heaven I'm going Mama," she said  
"With God and Flora May."

23) Now to the cold damp earth they are borne  
There to sleep side by side  
A solemn gloom o'erspreads this home  
Since those dear children died.

24) No more will Annie tend those flocks  
As she had done before  
No more we'll hear her merry voice  
Or footsteps at the door.

25) I'll never forget them while I live  
Though the tomb do intervene  
The loving smile and merry words  
And places we have been.

26) Their hand in mine we have roamed the shore  
Close by the rippling sea  
Or rambled o'er those flowery fields  
Among the busy bees.

27) The songsters too in yonder grove  
Full well they do their part  
Sweet nature dressed in beauty's robes  
Did cheer my lonely heart.

28) But oh those girls were crown on all  
When them I would behold  
Their forms appeared more bright to me  
Than all earth's glittering gold.

29) For they were all I'd ever ask  
And all on earth I'd crave  
My love has gone with those dear girls  
Down in their silent grave.

30) In silence I have always mourned  
I'll mourn in silence still  
Although we're parted for a while  
It's God's most holy will.

31) At night when I'd lay down to sleep  
With my sweet Flora May  
Her loving arms around my neck  
Slept calmly and peacefully

32) Till early morning sun would rise  
Send forth its glittering ray

Then she'd awake and sweetly smile  
My darling Flora May.

33) In fancy I can see her yet  
And feel her hand on me  
As when she'd come and stand beside  
Or climb upon my knee.

34) Now they are in Heaven full well I know  
Both angels bright above  
Some day or night I too will go  
To meet each child I love.

35) Oh how I long to meet them there  
Dressed in their robes of white  
A sunny smile upon each face  
And eyes of glittering bright

36) Those eyes that fondly gazed on me  
When round their own sweet home  
Those eyes no more on earth I'll see  
I feel I'm much alone.

37) Those children's work on earth were done  
Their mission ended here  
Now they have left us all alone  
Gone to a brighter sphere

38) But I'll be kind to those that's left  
As long as I will stay  
We do not know the day or hour  
They may be called away.

39) Think how sad we then would feel  
If we used them unkind  
For grief and sorrow is the lot  
Of those that's left behind.

40) Now fifteen days have passed away  
Yet cruel death was here  
And called another flower away  
They we had loved so dear.

41) It was Agnes dear was called this time  
A child of beauty rare  
With sparkling eyes and ruby lips  
And long and flowing hair.

42) She passed away that fair young child  
No earthly skill could save  
Now her poor little lisping tongue  
Lies silent in the grave.

43) Her little pure and stainless soul  
To Heaven above did soar  
To join her other sisters there  
On that bright and happy shore.

44) Now sad and lonely is this home  
That once was filled with glee  
Each little smiling face no more  
Within those walls we'll see.

45) Dear Aggie died, the last of three  
And buried with the rest  
Her little soul in glory crowned  
And mingling with the blessed.

46) Many a time I walked those fields  
When the glorious sun did shine  
And many a time they met me there  
When the day was warm and fine.

47) Each fair young brow and flowing hair  
Fanned by the balmy breeze  
With them I sat and talked for hours  
Beneath the shady trees.

48) The little birds high overhead  
Sang sweetly on every bough  
Those children now alas have fled--  
Where are those children now?

49) Now every moment seems an hour  
Each day is like a year  
No loving smile to greet me now  
Or fond young face to cheer.

50) Great God how wretched do I feel  
Here in this loneliness  
Is there no sunshine left for me  
Or am I doomed to this?

51) Oh no dear Lord in thee I trust  
Turn darkness into day  
And give me some companion dear  
For those you took away.

52) For barren now is nature's face  
Stripped of its once bright charms  
This so wide I can never replace  
Those children in my arms.

53) But they are not dead, they are only gone  
Beyond that misty veil  
Now there is none left but Martha dear  
And the little baby Neil.

54) So let us pray these may be spared  
 To live for many a year  
 To take the place of those that's gone  
 And their parents' hearts to cheer.

55) Before I will conclude those lines  
 That I have poorly penned  
 A word or two more will I say  
 Because I'm still their friend.

56) If I will live to see the spring  
 Their graves with flowers I'll strew.  
 In life I loved them very much  
 In death I'll still be true.

57) Near where the river rolls along  
 Their graves are newly made  
 In those lonely narrow beds  
 Those children dear are laid

58) To sleep near those of kindred dear  
 Long mingled with the dust  
 Whose souls long since have gone to Him  
 Who was their hope and trust.

59) The day may not be distant then  
 When I shall leave this place  
 To travel o'er the path of death  
 To meet their fond embrace,

60) To live with them in endless bliss  
 Crowned by our last reward  
 Our love and joy forevermore  
 There with almighty God.

In memory of Annie, Flora May and Agnes, died December 28, 1901,  
 January 13, 1902 and February 3rd, 1902.<sup>1</sup>

While it can be demonstrated that THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN meets  
 several of Mark Coffin's defining requirements of narrative  
 obituary verse, such definition alone entirely misses the

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. "History of the Settlements of Aspy Bay  
 region." Unpublished manuscript.

passionate presentation and pastoral literary settings that contribute to the expanding description of obituary verse in general. The final line ["In memory of...."] may have been the sub-title at one time. There is the naming of the dead and the dates of the deaths. The four-lined stanzas are typical, but again the ABCB rhyme-scheme is more common in traditional songs.

The verse contains considerable narrative and there are the awkward speeches such as, "Jesus do me love," which Mark Coffin sees as an "occasional insert" to further the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Such speech of course could easily owe as much to ballads as to the conventions of obituary verse. There is certainly "melodramatic stress on lamentation of friends and relatives."<sup>3</sup> While there is homily as well, it is not straight-forward and unquestioning. And, further countering what Coffin contends, the narrative is told in the first person.<sup>4</sup> From the otherwise formulaic opening stanza, we know we do not have an "omniscient observer" but rather the voice of one of the principal mourners. We recognize that this will be a personal (although not necessarily private) obituary verse.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Coffin, Mark Tristram. American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. Norwood: Norwood Editions. 1975. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Coffin, M. T. 13.

<sup>4</sup> "One of the few other characteristics that deserve mention is that these poems seem never to have been composed in the first person. Instead, the composers have invariably adopted the viewpoint of an omniscient observer." Coffin, M. 11-12. Again, the first person is common in ballads.

<sup>5</sup> As we will see later, the obituary verse THE SILENT RIVER is

We have no way of knowing just how much of THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN circulated in the community, or to what extent it was sung. The only copy I was able to obtain came from Bob Fitzgerald's typescript, and he got it from the MacPherson family Bible. Helen Curtis said her sister, Florence, was the only one she knew who sang it,<sup>6</sup> and George Rambeau said he'd heard it sung but clearly not often.<sup>7</sup> Neither had a copy nor knew the words.

Moreover, both Helen and George, when they discussed THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, told of only two deaths, not three. They were quite sure only two children had died. This indicates that they may not have known the entire poem.

Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald<sup>8</sup> said that there were people who memorized the obituary verse, implying recitation. He had heard it sung as well at house parties. He also spoke of there being just two deaths.

On the other hand, Winston's brother Bob Fitzgerald, who did have a copy, knew that three children had died. He had heard it

also in the first person, but with the significant difference again that it is not the person of the composer.

<sup>6</sup> Curtis, Helen. With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>7</sup> Rambeau, George. With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald, Winston "Scotty." With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

sung. And having obtained a copy later in life, Bob had some measure of its provenance when he told me he never heard anyone sing the entire song. He was quite certain of that. However, we do not know what portion was actually sung, and whether in every case it was the same portion.

It would seem, then, that we have here an obituary verse which served as both a poem and a song, and that those who knew of only two deaths had probably heard shortened versions.

There is one exception: not only did Winston Fitzgerald, George Rambeau and Helen Curtis independently tell about two deaths, they told also of the third child who also got diphtheria. This child was cured by Andrew Dunphy, grew up, and eventually married in the United States. Here is how Helen Curtis told it:

My sister Florence used to sing that song beautiful. It's a family that lived down in Dingwall. And diphtheria spread. And that was a death disease then. And this old Andrew Dunphy was staying with them, you know. And there were 3 girls. And 2 died. And that Andrew was sitting up with them at night. And this Christie was the last. And she was dying. And the father had to dig the grave and make the little caskets, because anyone was out stayed out and anyone was in stayed in because you weren't allowed--because it was a deadly disease. And there was no cure then. So they'd sit up and they watched that those children died. And Christie was the last. So he [Andrew Dunphy] told the mother and father, "Go and lay down"--Andrew Dunphy. He said, "Now you people lay down and I'll sit up with Christie."

So she was choking. She said, "For God's sake get me a drink, get me some water." He said, "I can't do that." They believed anyone would drink this cold water, they were dead. But they were burnt up with fever. So she said, "Oh, get me a drink." He said, "If I give you a drink now, what will happen?" She said, "I'm gone anyway." So he said, "You'll never tell that I ever gave you water." So he tells the story--Andrew, I heard him telling it. He said, "I went and I got her the dipper of cold water and she drank

it--and that one lived and went to the States and was married. Christie."<sup>9</sup>

Here is George Rambeau's account:

He stayed there day and night with them [the MacPherson family]. And that one that lived. They say that she was choking for water. And you weren't supposed to give them water--that would choke them. And she was burning up and begging for water. And they said he give her water. Choked her, but the choke broke. She lived--the only one. That's the story I heard.

Did Andrew Dunphy tell you that?

Yeah.

He told you that.

Yeah.<sup>10</sup>

Winston Fitzgerald told essentially the same story. The details are all there in every telling of the story. There are three children: two die and one survives who goes off to the United States and gets married there. Two claim to have the story from Dunphy himself. All three informants purported to know the song fairly well. And yet the song itself (that is, the complete version) is undoubtedly about the death of three children, and Andrew Dunphy portrays himself as helpless to prevent it.

Whether an intended function, this obituary verse (little sung and barely remembered), when mentioned, serves still to trigger the story about Dunphy's saving one child. It serves to preserve not only the memory of the children, but to preserve and reinforce

<sup>9</sup> Curtis. Tap

<sup>10</sup> Rambeau. Tap

the portrait of Andrew Dunphy as a nursing person, possibly a miracle worker. The water he gave the child was supposed to cause death. And (as we have seen regarding JOHNNY NICHOLSON) the obituary verse triggers other stories, such as Helen Curtis's reference to the lack of proper burial with normal community participation.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, concern about proper burial is a theme in JOHNNY NICHOLSON. It is one that recurs in several obituary verses in this study. Andrew Dunphy mentions that "Few friends there were around her bed." The community has been barred from performing normal neighbourly duties, because of the disease. Years later, this is not forgotten.

THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN (as well as his other obituary verse) can be considered an extension of Dunphy's journalistic role in his community. He travelled the region and brought the news. And in this case, he was one of the few people at the scene. He is telling the community a final version of events. It is a careful telling balanced between giving detail while contributing to the re-stabilization of the community. It is part of the struggle to set minds at ease. And it is a particularly difficult task in this case, since Dunphy is himself one of the mourners. What starts out as a controlled,

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<sup>11</sup> By normal community participation, I mean a series of activities including such things as washing the body, coffin-making, and the actual burial which neighbours in northern Cape Breton handled themselves in 1901. For details of appropriate community response to a local death in the study area, see Bob Fitzgerald in the chapter "How We Buried Our Dead," in Caplan, Ronald. Down North: The Book of Cape Breton's Magazine Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited. 1980. 238.

calm telling of an event in a family turns into a passionate expression of the contradictory events in the composer's own heart. While it may fail to meet the elements of the "usual" kind of obituary verse, it extends the limits of what obituary verse can be.

Dunphy tells the events of the three deaths with limited and careful specifics, just enough to give an acceptable version of the story without causing the community further disruption and without leaving the community in doubt regarding the final spiritual condition of the children. The details he gives are painful, but they are not gory. He describes the death scene and its impact through a veil of balladic conventions and biblical and hymnal references. As we will see more clearly in our discussion of *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN*, in which there is evidence that the obituary verse contradicts known fact, historical accuracy is probably not a primary concern.

Dunphy's other obituary verses tell us what consolation he offered others; in *THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN*, he is himself a principal mourner. The obituary poet's enormous task of offering effective homily is revealed as he professes his faith only to fall away to hopeless grief. Again and again. He is like a swimmer who has made shore but cannot quite get footing to mount the bank. He is wretched, dark and alone. And he asks [as others must have asked him], "Am I doomed to this?" In other obituary verses it might be dealt with via some convention such as "She

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tore her hair and rang her hands"--which admits to grief but in its conventionality preserves the community in its setting of limits. It does not work so simply for himself.

Dunphy goes through a "dark night" in this obituary verse. "Great God how wretched do I feel / Here in this loneliness / Is there no sunshine left for me / Or am I doomed to this?" He claims "Oh no Lord in thee I trust" but tries to bargain for a "companion dear / For those you took away." He places blame squarely on God. He knows the children are irreplaceable. This is more the case for him than for the parents, who have other children. Dunphy in the 53rd stanza finally pulls himself together and abruptly states: "They are not dead, they are only gone / beyond that misty veil." He thus finds the appropriate formulaic phrase.<sup>12</sup>

The poet/mourner also reaffirms his faith: "They are not dead, they are only gone." The final stanzas might be mistaken as homiletic instruction to the community, but they are not that. And Dunphy (who said these lines are "poorly penned") may recognize he has overstepped--or perhaps extended--the bounds of the obituary verse tradition. He is for just a moment the

<sup>12</sup> This leap may represent a motif as well: Milton makes a similar assertion in Lycidas: "Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, / For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead, / Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor: / ...sunk low, but mounted high, / Through the dear might of Him that walked the waves...." in Foggioni, Renato. The Oaten Flute. 97-8. On the other hand, both Milton and Dunphy may be alluding to Matthew ix, 24. The Holy Bible...Authorized King James Version. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons. 1953. 10-11.

classicist without the promise of Heaven. The stance is that of friendship and of living on in memory. The commitment is to flowers on their grave and abiding love. He ends with a picture of the gravesite.

Unlike in JOHNNY NICHOLSON, Dunphy is not recommending the children to be included in community's prayers. Instead, he announces their arrival in heaven: "Now they are in Heaven full well I know." While Dunphy turns to prayer, it is not the usual homily of narrative obituary. Instead, it is ironically a social prayer, for the children still living, that they may "take the place of those that's gone / And their parents' hearts to cheer." For himself, he promises small, personal earthly acts:

If I live to see the spring  
Their graves with flowers I'll strew.  
In life I loved them very much  
In death I'll still be true.

Friendship apparently has not failed; instead, it sustains Dunphy. The ending is neither one of homiletic preparation nor one of hope but rather one of certainty: that Dunphy will die, go to the children, and they will remain together with God. He is not asking for his neighbours' prayers. The last reward for Dunphy and the children is their own love and joy. That it is with God is almost an afterthought.

In some of the allusions and influences Dunphy used in making THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, we can see a further contribution to a description of the genre. For instance, Dunphy, a Catholic, is

drawing on the English Bible and the Methodist hymnal for some of his lines.<sup>13</sup> "We saw her slowly pine away / And wither like a flower" probably alludes to Isaiah xl, 6 and to Peter 1, 24.<sup>14</sup> The hymns of William Cowper undoubtedly contributed to THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN. Cowper's "Turn'd thy darkness into light"<sup>15</sup> corresponds with Dunphy's "Turn darkness into day" in Stanza 51. A more convincing example of Dunphy's knowledge of Methodist hymn, however, is in Stanza 42: "Now her poor little lisping tongue / Lies silent in the grave." Cowper's hymn "There is a fountain fill'd with blood" contains "When this poor lisping stammering tongue / Lies silent in the grave."<sup>16</sup>

It may be suggested that these borrowings throw light on the incongruous stories that Fitzgerald, Rambeau and Curtis told regarding the number of MacPherson children that died. For instance, this is the only poem in which Dunphy alludes to something specifically Protestant, and this is done only in the latter section about the third child, Agnes. These allusions are very similar to those in THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, an obituary verse

13 My thanks to Margaret Harry, Department of English, St. Mary's University, Halifax, for pointing out Methodist influences in this and other obituary verses in this study.

14 The Holy Bible... Authorized King James Version. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons. 1953. 637 and 228.

15 From a hymn beginning "Hark my soul! it is the Lord," in Cowper, William. The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper. Ed. H. S. Milford. London: Oxford University Press. 1907. 444.

16 Milford, ed. 442.

that has been attributed to the Methodist Thomas W. Gwinn, that we will discuss in detail below. Based on this, it could be argued that Thomas W. Gwinn, not Andrew Dunphy, is responsible for the portion of THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN that deals with the third child. Certainly, the opening stanza suggests that only two deaths had occurred ("It's of two little children dear"), when the composition was started. It is possible that some time in the last 90 years, Gwinn's portion was attached to Dunphy's poem about the first two deaths. Further, it is possible that only Dunphy's portion was known and sung, explaining the shortened versions and the confusing history.

These are possible but not necessary conclusions. Given the ethnic and religious co-mingling of the community as demonstrated in Chapter 3, such conclusions would be based on an exclusivity we do not find in the Aspy Bay region. Moreover, the people of the Aspy Bay region have no question regarding the authorship. Everyone who knows even just the title knows that Andrew Dunphy wrote THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN. Given Catholic Andrew Dunphy's easy access to the homes of both Catholics and non-Catholics, and given that Dunphy without doubt composed obituary verse for people of the Church of England (JOHNNY NICHOLSON), Presbyterians (THE SILENT RIVER and THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN), and Methodists (THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN), I would contend that it is likely Dunphy had access to a variety of specific influences beyond his own religion, and appropriated these influences in his compositions.

The classical theme of friendship pervades THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN--the open, warm environment of trusting tenderness. This is a passionate poem. The repeated touching of one another is extraordinary. The words "hand" and "arm" appear again and again. God's hand, "her head upon my hand," "feel her hand on me," "their hand in mine." The only "cruel hand" is that of "grim death...on her tender form." There are three mentions of children's arms around adult necks--one for the father, one for the mother and one when Dunphy describes sleeping with Flora May. It is a poem made up of hands and eyes, and of arms around one another. This is the epitome of daily intimate life with children.

Dunphy slept with the children, passed time with them in the fields. The community has made this verse function as memorial of Dunphy, and as a way of recalling the story about his actions toward the MacPherson children, regardless that the story contradicts the song. It not only preserves the memory of the three children, or even two, it also serves to preserve and reinforce the memory of Andrew Dunphy as a nursing person. It memorializes the risk he took for friendship and love.

Traditionally there would have been additional help in the house were it not such a dangerous disease. Dunphy gives, literally, the inside story--what happened in the house and in himself. It is meant to be a final version. Despite the story told today does not correspond with the obituary verse.

There may be any of several reasons why THE MACPHERSON

CHILDREN was never performed in its entirety. Length may have been a factor, but songs as long and longer were known and sung in the study area. It is possible that the public portion represented another "normalization" similar to the possible rejection of the homiletic stanzas in JOHNNY NICHOLSON. Performers may have omitted portions they did not find appropriate. For instance, fully one-third of the verse is devoted to Dunphy's private relationship with the children in idyllic pastoral settings. In terms of the present study, such non-ordinary information delivered in the first person may not only have extended the description of obituary verse. It may also have been what Dunphy's neighbours chose not to sing.

Further, the introduction of the pastoral quality may not have invited singing in the obvious way of the balladic conventions in, for example, JOHNNY NICHOLSON. It is particularly in those lines dealing with his private relationship and personal loss that Dunphy turns to pastoral literary conventions:

26) Their hand in mine we have roamed the shore  
 Close by the rippling sea  
 Or rambled o'er those flowery fields  
 Among the busy bees.

27) The songsters too in yonder grove  
 Full well they do their part  
 Sweet nature dressed in beauty's robes  
 Did cheer my lonely heart.

These conventions may simply not have encouraged song.

The abbreviated versions may also have reflected rejection of the obituary verse in its atypical psychological

vacillating, the poet's own struggle with doubt. Every singing would be a reminder of instability. It is not typical of the peace-making element in most obituary verse from the Aspy Bay region. The personal struggle, as well as the explicit affection, are part of the "new," the modern, in Dunphy. It may not have been retained in the community.

The personal voice and lack of balladic conventions may explain normalization. The verse may contain personal references the performer may not be certain he shares or wants to repeat. It may have been, simply, that this lengthy pastoral elegy is not the common prosody of typical local verse. On the other hand, we will see other atypical elements in obituary verse that did achieve wider degrees of acceptance. That variety, in fact, is very much the point in contributing toward a description of obituary verse. The stance of friendship, of untimely death, of living on in memory, and even the pastoral environment, all suggest classical literary funeral elegy and are found in most of the obituary verse composed in the Aspy Bay region. They are not indications a portion of the the verse would necessarily be rejected.

All this is conjecture. Even where we know that the verse was shortened in performance, we unfortunately don't exactly know what was included or left out. What we do know is that Dunphy knew his community. He knew, we might say, the rules. And he expected what he did to be acceptable. The fact that the MacPherson family saved it in the Bible indicates it met

certain standards, perhaps only theirs. The failure of the verse to retain the entire story may simply reflect lack of circulation. On the other hand, we have no hard evidence this verse was rejected. It has lasted to some extent for 90 years, and is held in high regard.

### 3. THE SILENT RIVER

#### THE SILENT RIVER

- 1) Along the river's flowery banks  
Today alone I strayed  
And there upon a well-known spot  
Down on the bank I laid.
- 2) That silent river I viewed a while  
Small fishes 'neath me glide  
And thought of happy hours I spent  
With Jessie by my side.
- 3) That silent river still flows on  
Where we sat many a time  
Its winding course remains unchanged  
And mingles with the brine.
- 4) The shady groves along its banks  
Oft calmed the small birds' fears  
For on drooping boughs the dew-drops fall  
Like sorrow's silent tears.
- 5) Sweet scented flowers bloom everywhere  
And balmy breezes blow,  
With lofty mountains smiling down  
On pleasant vales below.
- 6) The fields were dressed in beauteous robes  
Small birds did sweetly sing  
To teach their feeble, tiny young  
Soar high on airy wing.
- 7) Her small white hand in mine enclosed  
How bright the future seemed  
Her smiling ruby lips apart  
Soft eyes with lovelight beamed.
- 8) These happy days I'd feign recall  
But it's beyond my power  
For death's cruel and untimely frost  
Has nipped my tender flower.
- 9) But soon my joy to sorrow changed  
And all the world grew dark,  
Cruel death unseen soon entered there  
And claimed that vital spark.
- 10) Her son all in his tender youth  
Was forced from her to part  
He sank beneath the troubled tide  
And grieved his mother's heart.

11) Unnerved her in her bloom of youth  
And caused her health to fail,  
From suffering which she did endure  
Her cheeks grew thin and pale.

12) But patiently her ills she bore  
Though fading day by day  
The final hour at length arrived  
And she was called away.

13) Around her bed stood weeping friends  
And loving kindred too  
So loath to part from a true friend  
And take their last adieu

14) Her gaze seemed far beyond this world  
Her eyes with age were dim  
The paling cheeks and marble brow  
Must soon return to Him.

15) I thought upon the happy past  
And pleasant hours we spent,  
These days that we have here below  
To us are only lent.

16) Oh happy are you husbands dear  
Whose wives with you are left  
But few who thank the blessed Lord  
Or seem to prize the gift.

17) Bowed down beneath my load of woe  
From which I can't emerge  
My troubled breast oft heaves a sigh  
That comes like surge on surge.

18) That seems to softly bear me on  
Towards that starry shore  
There to receive those promised joys  
And ne'er return no more.

19) Her pious pastor by her side  
With words of hope and cheer,  
To guide her from this lone exile  
On to a better sphere.

20) Cheered by these words of love and hope  
She sealed her final trust  
With prayer of faith on quivering lips  
She's gone to join the just.

21) Her children bowed by grief and woe  
They whispered, "Mother's dead"  
Unheard by her who slumbers now  
Beneath the coffin lid.

22) With grief so great none could console  
For that mother so well-beloved  
When from that lone grief-stricken home  
The sad procession moved.

23) To that last lonely resting place  
That ne'er shall be forgot  
Where tombstones stand like mourning friends  
To mark each sacred spot.

24) Lowered down in her dark narrow bed  
Which leaves me in despair,  
Wrapped in her cold damp clay robes  
And none her bed can share.

25) Those bridal vows I sacred hold  
I still can see her face,  
And while I live in this wide world  
There's none can take your place.

26) For I shall live a single life  
Until the day I die  
That sacred spot still holds my heart  
Where my sweet treasure lies

27) Rest undisturbed sweet Jessie dear  
In that sleep so sweet and calm  
May your jeweled crown shine bright upon  
The breast of Abraham.

28) The graveyard's lone retreat I walk  
Though silent is your voice  
Hosana's sweet I seem to hear  
And bells of Paradise.

29) Adieu my dear departed wife  
To you I bid good night,  
The path of death I'll soon cross o'er  
With you to reunite

30) And leave my home and friends behind  
This world of sin and woe  
To seek the joys that reign above  
And not the things below.

31) I close my eyes and lips in prayer  
Until the morrow morn  
To gain that land though yet unseen  
To which I'm hastening on.

32)And for that now I shall prepare  
 When God will call me forth  
 That we may then in glory shine  
 Before High Heaven's court.

The poem refers to the lamented death of Mrs. Francis MacKinnon, composed by the late Andrew Dunphy.<sup>1</sup>

THE SILENT RIVER contributes further to the variety of approaches and content to be found in narrative obituary verse. Dunphy employed a toolkit suitable for sophisticated literature, elements of which we have seen in THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN. It is different from but akin to the toolkit of conventional phrases, forms and subjects he internalized in order to produce a song acceptable in the folk tradition, such as JOHNNY NICHOLSON. In his use of unconventional idiom and metaphor, he runs counter to much that Roger Renwick considers essential to local song.<sup>2</sup> As part of this literary approach, Dunphy also employs a single, private voice that seems to exclude the community. As we have discussed regarding THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, a personal, first-person account runs

<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. "History of the Settlements of the Aspy Bay region." Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> "Local songs do not attempt to disguise their conventionality, and go to great efforts to familiarize and to legitimize their topics and messages by placing these within well-known frames of reference of both culturally normative content and culturally normative ethos." Renwick, Roger deV. English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press. 1980. 3. "...Only rarely and only for a particular class of topics will working-class poetry, like traditional and local song, use stylized tropes like irony or even metaphor that challenge normative perceptions." 5.

counter to Mark Coffin's description of narrative obituary verse.

While THE SILENT RIVER is a non-ordinary approach to obituary verse, it is made up of both conventional images and literary devices which we can assume at least Andrew Dunphy, Francis MacKinnon, and probably a good many others would respond to. Local clipping scrapbooks reveal the region had absorbed a wide range of verse and song. There is a local tradition of recitation. As we will see in our discussion of Thomas W. Gwinn's THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, considerable printed literary material was available in the region in (at the very least) the schoolbooks. Simply stated, Dunphy was writing for an informed audience that understood both literary and folkloric conventions. In the Aspy Bay region, they sang songs that were conventional ballads, they recited ballads as poetry and they treated as songs verse that owed a considerable debt to literary conventions.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, THE SILENT RIVER is a private poem. Although it could have been sung to the same air as THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, there is no evidence it was ever sung. It supports the insistence that Dunphy had to be asked to make a

<sup>3</sup> Renwick, p. 4. "...Local poetry making has never been strictly separated by the practitioners themselves from song-making and singing, for it has long been the case that the same verses were regarded as equally appropriate for both singing and reciting and that commonplace books freely intermixed 'song' poems with 'poem' poems."

verse.<sup>4</sup> He would be unlikely to choose to make one from the particular perspective of THE SILENT RIVER. The obituary verse contains considerable daring private information, including a hint of suicidal feelings not displayed in any other composition, that support the idea of "request." The literary approach may have been part of the request as well.

In THE SILENT RIVER, we have direct influence from Robert Burns's "Highland Mary" (a poem George Rambeau said was Andrew Dunphy's favourite) in the lines "For death's cruel and untimely frost / Has nipped my tender flower."<sup>5</sup> That poem, as well as others by Burns, may also have suggested the sympathetic pastoral imagery of the opening, the near parallelism of the wife with the river, the children with the birds--the "mountains smiling" and fields dressed "in beauteous robes." Dunphy uses the literary technique of alliteration: "For on drooping boughs the dew-drops fall / Like sorrow's silent tears. // Sweet scented flowers bloom everywhere / And balmy breezes blow...." It is also the only verse in which Dunphy does not name the dead person in the title--except, of course, reading the poem, she is (almost) equated with the silent river.

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<sup>4</sup> George Rambeau said about THE SILENT RIVER: "Them sad ones anyway--he wrote them at the request of the families. When he wrote about Francis MacKinnon's wife, Francis MacKinnon himself asked him to write that. He didn't want to write it." Capa Breton's Magazine Taps.

<sup>5</sup> "But O, fell Death's untimely frost, / That nipt my flower sae early." Burns, Robert. Poems and Songs. London: Dent, 1906. Rept. 1958. 374.

The assumption of a persona of the bereaved husband is as much a departure from Mark Coffin's description of narrative obituary verse as the use of the first person. It is also a further contribution to the variation possible within the genre. There is the very brief combination of religious and social sanction in stanzas 15 and 16. Although it warns that our time here is short, and that husbands do not prize their wives sufficiently, the direction quickly turns back inward and heavenward. It is the only narrative obituary verse I have found that actually addresses the dead person. And it is the only case where the death was not sudden, and seems to have been of natural causes.

THE SILENT SPRING shows further flexibility of the genre in its refusal to include the community. Much like THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, it is a poem of sustained despair with no comfort this side of the grave. The husband acknowledges his children's grief but would just as soon "leave my home and friends behind / This world of sin and woe..." There is even the suggestion he has considered bedding down in her grave-- though "none her bed can share." At which point he quickly reaffirms "Those bridal vows...For I shall live a single life." He walks the cemetery--further cut off from community--and hears the joyful calls to Heaven. Even the religious homily is private: a nightly prayer for death and constant preparation so that he will be with Jessie in heaven.

And yet Jessie has had what is lacking in the events that produced nearly every other obituary verse found in the Aspy Bay region: a proper burial, with the attendant rituals. Her death was not sudden, but rather was one that allowed for friends and family to gather at the bedside "and take their last adieu." "Her pious pastor by her side." A wake in the home is implied by the children beside the casket and the procession moving out from there. She has a grave among tombstones and can be expected to have a stone. And this proper burial is so important that it is detailed in the verse, although it is not underlined as something positive. The details of the death and funeral are as close as the verse comes to consolation. This piece is not typical of narrative obituary verse in general, nor of such verse in the Aspy Bay region.

In keeping with Coffin's description of narrative obituary verse, the events of the death are there. They are however not in the normal sequence nor stated with complete clarity. We are not told that Jessie died until stanzas 8 and 9. Rather than the conventional come-all-ye opening, with an announcement of tragedy and a naming of the dead, a seven stanza pastoral setting is first established, a lost Eden with nature assuming postures of sadness. Unlike typical narrative obituary, we are not told precisely of what Jessie died. There is the suggestion that she has recently lost a child "who went down beneath the troubled tide...", whatever that means, and that

her illness and eventual death was the result of grief. We can assume her husband had the inside information, and that Dunphy wrote out of collaboration.

There is no evidence of THE SILENT RIVER having ever been performed outside the MacKinnon home. Bob Fitzgerald got his copy from Sheridan Gwinn (deceased), and thought Sheridan had got it from the Francis MacKinnon family Bible. Dunphy may have intended it for the public, but the private nature, literary conventions, vague allusions, and persistent negativism probably would have worked against its finding a place in the local song repertoire. In any case, I have found no one who memorized it or heard it sung. And yet the poem is known of throughout the region as "the poem Andrew Dunphy made for Francis MacKinnon's wife." She is not described as "Jessie MacKinnon" and this possibly indicates more familiarity with the sub-title than with the poem itself.

With THE SILENT RIVER, Andrew Dunphy represents a kind of crossroads in literary and oral tradition. Not the crossroads but one of the countless instances of it that would have particular manifestation in each time and place. I am simply saying that his work demonstrates a locus of attention that draws on a complex of influences from both the printed world and the world of oral transmission. This in turn contributes further toward a description of narrative obituary verse.

#### 4. The Fate of Daniel Gwynn

THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN is the obituary verse by Andrew Dunphy that I have had least trouble finding. I collected seven versions, some on tape and some on paper. There are very few differences among the versions. Everyone who sang it sang from memory, but also owned a typed or written copy. And everyone knew that Andrew Dunphy had composed it.

THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN is considered only a poem by Daniel's sister, Bessie Gwynn Edwards. When asked whether she knew a tune, she said: "I don't. Because it was just poems then. We didn't sing them."<sup>1</sup> To her brother, Allan Gwynn, it was a poem as well as a song.<sup>2</sup> Allan collected items in verse form in a folder of printed clippings and manuscripts. He memorized "some to recite to friends." Allan was aware that THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN was sung in the Aspy Bay Region; he spoke of it as having "got out."<sup>3</sup> To John D. MacDonald, it was unquestionably a song. His mother sang

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Bessie Gwynn. With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>2</sup> "...Perhaps, indeed, local poetry making and performing has never been strictly separated by the practitioners themselves from song-making and singing, for it has long been the case that the same verses were regarded as equally appropriate for both singing and reciting and that commonplace books freely intermixed 'song' poems with 'poem' poems." Renwick, Roger deV. English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1980. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Gwynn, Allan. With Debra Meeks. Audiotape. Rec. Nov. 24-29, 1978. U College of Cape Breton, Sydney, Beaton Institute.

it. He learned it from her and from Jimmy Curtis, his father-in-law.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN<sup>5</sup>

1) Both young and old I pray draw near, with sorrow I begin,  
While I relate although in grief the fate of Daniel Gwinn,  
He and his comrades late last fall they left their native shore,  
All in the prime of youth and bloom with prospects bright before.

2) To part with home and friends is sad, for parting causes pain,  
But still these young men felt assured they'd see their homes again.  
To home and friends they bid adieu, they went aboard the train,  
The iron horse soon bore them on, they arrived at Bemis, Maine.

3) They were employed by Cummings to work into a mill,  
And were it not for what occurred they might have been there still,  
But death will come although unseen in some mysterious way,  
And nature gave no warning voice it been his dying day.

4) Those young men rose with cheerful hearts one winter's morning  
clear,  
To go as usual to their work not thinking death was near,  
The sun did rise in destiny sent forth a silver gleam<sup>6</sup>  
The boss asked Dan if he would choose to go and drive a team.

5) But Dan replied he'd rather not and Alfred he did go,  
To haul the logs from where they lay down to the mill below

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<sup>4</sup> MacDonald, John D. With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tape.

<sup>5</sup> "Collected in written form from Allen Gwinn by Debra Meeks, Nov. 1978." Notes accompanying Tape. Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton. MG15.

<sup>6</sup> John D. MacDonald sang: "The sun shone in the distant east."

Dan went to work upon the roof saying that he rather would,  
Not thinking that death lurked beneath the very spot he stood.

6) While working on that iron roof of<sup>7</sup> eighteen feet or more,  
A powerful engine with flywheels stood 'neath him on the floor,  
When lifting up an iron sheet close by his comrades side,  
He lost his balance and fell forth, down through the hole he made.

7) Those wheels flew round with lightning speed on which poor Dan  
did fall,  
It threw his body with great force against the solid wall,  
He calmly lay just where he fell beneath that monstrous stroke,  
Those mortal pains of death he felt but not one word he spoke.

8) His dearest friend stood by his side and sad lament his fate,  
The doctors too did soon arrive but Oh alas too late,  
No earthly skill could him avail the spark of life had fled,  
The damp of death is o'er him now, his marble brow o'erspread.

9) His dearest friend stood by his side and manfully did his part,  
Mid strangers in a foreign land with a sad and aching heart,  
To meet his friends and those he loved with all his grief  
What wretched troubled thoughts that passed through Alfred's troubled  
mind.

10) The Cummings that did him employ the whole expenses paid,  
They costly robed his lifeless form and in a casket laid,  
They sent his body home again, unto his native shore,  
To be laid at rest among his friends, and they could do no more.

11) Oh sad and awful was the day when his body home they brought,  
Cruel death will take our dearest friends whose heart and hand we  
sought

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<sup>7</sup> John D.: "up."

His mothers grief could scarce control, most bitterly she wept,  
For one who oft held in her arms and on her bosom slept.

12) His brothers and his sisters too likewise his parents dear,  
Gazed sadly on the cold cold corpse as fell each bitter tear,  
For him who fell in youth and bloom in sorrow deep they mourn.  
For he will sleep all in that sleep till dust to dust return.

13) Now in the cold cold grave he lies, so narrow long and deep,  
The mother earth closed o'er her son, let none disturb his sleep,  
And may he sleep in blissfulness that none can him disturb,  
The heavenly sun will dry the dew from off the tender herb.

14) Both day and night roll calmly on as they have done before,  
The birds have flown return again but Dan will come no more,  
And Alfred Gwinn his dearest friend will not forget him soon  
In memory of him Dan will live although beyond the tomb.

15) Now sisters do not weep for him and brothers too also,  
Fond parents both be reconciled for it's there we all must go,  
Though we are falling one by one still let us hope in Christ,  
That we shall meet them all again in the field of Paradise.

I have found four different obituary verses written about Daniel Gwinn's death. Two of them are narrative: THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN by Andrew Dunphy, and IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWINN by Daniel's brother, Charles A. Gwinn. There are two in the homiletic style: "Death has been here and borne away / A brother from our side...." and THE LOST ONE. Bessie Gwinn Edwards thought "Death has been here..." may have been composed by Grace or Bob, brother and sister to her and Daniel. THE LOST ONE may have been composed by Daniel's

father, John T. Gwinn. THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN and IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWINN are both dated 1902. It seems likely all the verses were written at about the same time--very soon after news of the death.<sup>8</sup>

Copies of all four obituary verses are kept in the Gwinn family Bible. Also kept there are a couple of homiletic obituary poems by other relatives, and printed copies of songs by the New Brunswick lumberman-songmaker Joe Scott: "HOWARD CARRICK" and "WILLIAM SULLIVAN."<sup>9</sup> The Joe Scott ballads were on the body of Daniel Gwinn when it arrived home from Bemis, Maine. Daniel very likely purchased them himself, since while WILLIAM SULLIVAN seems appropriate, HOWARD CARRICK would probably not be the sort of song friends would send home on the body. WILLIAM SULLIVAN and HOWARD CARRICK were both sung in the Aspy Bay region, but there is evidence that the printed copies in the Gwinn family Bible were not

<sup>8</sup> Tristram Coffin says narrative obituary verses were usually composed two or three days after the event. "On a Peak in Massachusetts: The Literary and Aesthetic Approach." A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune. Ed. M. C. Boatright. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press. 1964. 202.

<sup>9</sup> For the texts of these songs, see Appendix C.

the source.<sup>10</sup> In any case, Dunphy's THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN seems to be the only item found in the Bible to have circulated outside the Gwinn family.

Here is Charles A. Gwinn's poem taken from the typescript Allan Gwinn copied from the family Bible:<sup>11</sup>

IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWYNN

Come all my kind relations  
Where ever you may be.  
I hope you lend a listening ear  
And kind attention give to me.

I have a very mournful tale,  
I will relate to you.  
It's most too sad to talk about  
And hard to think it's true.

Concerning my brother Daniel Gwynn.  
While in his youth and prime.  
He lately left his happy home.  
And the friends he loved behind.

Poor Dan he went away from home.  
Both healthy strong and brave,  
And little he thought before the spring  
He would lay mouldering in the grave.

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<sup>10</sup> Jimmy Curtis "learned (HOWARD KERRICK and WILLIAM SULLIVAN) from his uncle Tom Brown, who had worked with Scott in the Maine woods." Ives, Edward D., Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1978. 137 and 190. "Carey" is the spelling Ives uses. When Jimmy Curtis's daughters gathered a typescript of his songs, they used "Currie." Currie is a common Cape Breton name. The title on the printed slip in the Gwinn family Bible is HOWARD CARRICK. Comparison of the printed version of WILLIAM SULLIVAN with the Curtis version as it appears in Ives's Joe Scott and in the typescript, shows changes and a rearrangement of stanzas that indicate oral transmission. In conversation, Helen Curtis said she learned HOWARD CURRIE from George Fitzgerald, who brought it back from the Maine lumberwoods.

<sup>11</sup> Gwinn, Allan. Meeks. Tape.

Little did his sisters think  
 Or his kind mother he loved so true.  
 As he kissed her so fondly saying good-bye  
 That he was bidding his last adieu.

Or did his kind father he cherished and loved  
 As he held his brave son by the hand  
 Think he never more would meet him again  
 Till across death's dark river they'd stand.

Tw'as in Beams, Maine, in the lumber woods  
 Where the woodman's axe sounds shrill  
 Poor Dan he met with his sad doom  
 By falling through the roof of a mill.

Far from his friends and happy home  
 No loved one by his side  
 In a hospital that lonely place  
 On Sunday night he died.

As I sit in the twilight and ponder  
 When the evening shadows draw nigh  
 And think of the happy days we squandered  
 The days that have passed and gone by.

But never again with my brother I'll roam  
 O'er those hills and valleys so fair  
 And hear his sweet cheerful voice  
 O'er gaze (sic) on his dark curly hair.

Mother I know you'll miss your kind boy  
 You will miss the kind smile that he wore  
 Never again will you hear his quick step  
 Upon the threshold of your door.

Kind father I know your boy he is gone  
 He has gone to return never more  
 I know you will miss his kind helping hand  
 As they helped you so often before.

And all of us brothers and kind sisters too  
 That mourn o'er our loss every day  
 For like the sweet flowers that bloom in the spring  
 Our brother was taken away.

And he sleeps in that cold silent grave  
 All his cares and troubles are o'er  
 Prepare for to meet him above  
 Where kind friends meet to part never more.

IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWYNN seems to be Charles's only obituary verse. As a Methodist, he undoubtedly had experience of New England-style homiletic obituary verse. His Aunt Lexa had written one on the death of her 7 year old daughter.<sup>12</sup> It was kept in the family Bible.

There is as well obvious internal evidence of Charles's general awareness of the conventions of traditional song. However, his immediate model for IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWINN was likely Joe Scott's WILLIAM SULLIVAN. The formulaic phrases of the first five stanzas are common ballad conventions, but use of such words as "relations" and "concerning" and "happy home" also seem in this case to be indicators of influence. There is no need for a parting scene that foreshadows death, such as the one in WILLIAM SULLIVAN, since Daniel would have been expected home by Spring.<sup>13</sup> But when Charles begins the narrative of the death itself with "Twas in Beams, Maine, in the lumber woods / Where the woodsman's axe sounds shrill," he clearly exhibits his debt to WILLIAM SULLIVAN's:

It was in the town of Bemis, Maine  
Where gently flow the rills  
Where the echo of a woodsman's axe  
Awakes the silent hills.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A for the text.

<sup>13</sup> I found in Allan Gwinn's papers a letter from Daniel dated 1901; it indicates Daniel died during at least his second winter in Bemis, Maine.

Charles describes the event in a single line: Daniel died "By falling through the roof of a mill." It is not to his purpose to describe it in further detail. While he is using obituary verse as a memorial (the title makes that clear), the function of the verse seems to be reconciliation and reintegration of the family. They are joined in the stanza that simply states what must have been on all their minds:

Far from his friends and happy home  
 No loved one by his side  
 In a hospital that lonely place  
 On Sunday night he died.

Then Charles enters a reverie, remembering Daniel. We see him, beginning with himself, figuratively going around the room, taking each relative by the hand, confirming their new and shared status. The knot is tied with a one-line focus on the fact "he sleeps in that cold silent grave." This reminder that the world's troubles are over leads us to the final brief homiletic message: "prepare" and we will all share eternity with him. The mention of the grave may also be taken as a comforting piece of information in keeping with the final stanza because it points to what we know was a proper burial.

In THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN Andrew Dunphy composed an obituary verse which, while it tells a different story, is also in line with this particular family's faith; but it is also an obituary verse that aims to reintegrate the wider community. While he may not have intended this to be sung, a precise meter maintained

throughout the poem indicates he had an air in mind, at least as an aid in composition.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Dunphy possibly wrote his obituary verse with the idea it would be a song, Charles probably had no intention of his verse ever leaving the house.

In comparison with Charles's obituary verse, Dunphy takes four long-lined stanzas<sup>15</sup> to get Daniel up on the roof and down through the hole. It was a clumsy death. And it is because of Dunphy's controlled telling of the rising for work, the opportunity to choose his task and then the fall, that it does not come off as inadvertently humorous. While not progressing quickly, everything in the verse moves steadily toward the death. There are no asides. By the third stanza, Dunphy has already, quietly, inserted a portion of his homiletic message: "Death will come although unseen in some mysterious way"--and it will come without warning. It is a beautiful day. The early sun is gleaming across the snow either "in the distant East" or "in destiny" as it was first in Allan Gwinn's copy (the Bible copy) and then changed to "distant east" by

<sup>14</sup> As pointed out earlier, "This composition process is most common to the Northeastern part of North America, and many parts of the world where the text and its story-telling qualities are dominant in the song performance." Szwed, John F. "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and Community of Song". Henry Glassie et al. Folksongs and Their Makers. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 1979. 155. Bob Fitzgerald said the tune of THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN was the same tune as that of THE WISCONSIN SOLDIER, which his parents sang. Actually, this tune would also fit THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN and THE SILENT RIVER. The air used for the former is apparently forgotten; and the latter seems never to have been sung.

<sup>15</sup> All the versions that I have seen are in this form.

a later hand. Daniel Gwinn chooses to work on the roof, and thus chooses his death. This is another way of saying that there is no one living who should feel responsible. "Destiny" would reinforce that, as does "FATE" in the title. The point is that there is no one left behind who can be blamed.

The death, which (as we will see below) was in reality very messy, is handled with great nobility. Here we clearly see the formulaic conventions doing work other than as an aid to memorization. Daniel is thrown by the machine against the solid wall, and "calmly lay just where he fell." Despite the "mortal pains of death," he does not speak. His friend, Alfred Gwinn, is at his side, and doctors are "soon" there. "The damp of death is on him now, his marble brow o'erspread." These details are very clean, very smooth, very noble. Sufficient information is provided for the community and I must assume it requires no further, gory details. In another place, another time (for instance, in the popular literature of the streets of eighteenth-century England or in the elegiac literature of Puritan New England) the physical details would have been thoroughly exploited for melodramatic effect.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Draper, John W. The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism. 1929. Rept. New York: Octagon Books, Inc. 1967.  
 Robert D. Bethke. "Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry." Journal of American Folklore. 33 (1970). William J. Scheick. "Tombless Virtue and Hidden Text: New England Puritan Funeral Elegies." Ed. Peter White. Puritan Poets and Poetics. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 1985.

It should be pointed out that people in the Aspy Bay region did sing songs with details of horrible death, such as "The Jam on Jerry's Rock," with "Meanwhile, their mangled bodies, down by the stream did flow, / While dead and bleeding near the bank, was that of young Munroe."<sup>17</sup> But with the notable exception of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY which we will discuss below, there is an absence of such detail in Aspy Bay region narrative obituary verse.

When we consider history as a possible function of IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWINN and THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, we not only find that the facts have been clothed in conventions, we see as well that the two stories are contradictory. While Dunphy has Daniel Gwinn die where he was struck, Charles A. Gwinn writes: "Far from his friends and happy home / No loved one was by his side / In a hospital that lonely place / On Sunday night he died."

As it happens, we have a newspaper account from the Rumford Falls Times :

A man by the name of Quinn [sic] was brought down from Bemis last Friday night, injured in a horrible manner. Mr. Quinn was at work on the roof of the engine house and in some way fell through striking on the big drive wheel which was running at full speed. He was thrown about about forty feet striking with a dull thud on a brick wall opposite. Mr. Quinn was picked up unconscious and brought down here where he was put in charge of a local physician until Saturday morning, when he was taken to a hospital in Lewiston. He seemed to be injured mostly about the head and internally. He had not regained consciousness when he left here Saturday morning.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Burton, Rose Curtis and Monika Curtis McNenly. "A Collection of Songs Sung by James Curtis, Our Daddy." Songbook typescript. March, 1972. Unpaged.

<sup>18</sup> Rumford Falls Times. February 8, 1902. 12. Thanks to Edward

So it was messy. He did not die in the workplace, peacefully, with his closest friend at his side. Charles was making a poem for his family. He had Daniel die in the hospital. It could, to his purpose, function as memorial, even history. But Dunphy's changes suggest his intentional function was that of stabilizing and maintaining community. It is a function that required and was worth the risk of eliminating and changing important facts. It is not simply Dunphy's recognition, for instance, of the artistic value of keeping everything in one place, of having Daniel die where he falls, with a friend at his side, who immediately begins to lament the death. Dunphy chooses among the known facts. He does not, for instance, describe the body. But he does maintain the tossing against the solid wall. And those choices are made in terms of what he thinks is acceptable, what will work, both in public obituary verse and the community's song tradition.<sup>19</sup>

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D. "Sandy" Ives, who located this news item.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that in a Cape Breton Gaelic publication, the description of Daniel Gwinn's death corresponds with the Rumford newspaper. The following is roughly translated from the Gaelic publication MacTalla: "People in this place were made very melancholy at the beginning of the past month with the information that came, that there was a young man at the time by the name of Daniel Gwinn--and he was only a short time gone from among us--had died in the States. He himself and another man were thatching the roof of a sawmill....He fell down through the first opening, striking the wheel that was running with great speed. The shell (rim?) broke his head; and although the doctors did all that was in their power for him, he died after two days. The company where he was working bought an excellent coffin to put him in, and to send his body home with care to his sad parents. He was the second son of John T. Gwinn. He was about twenty years old, and though he was only a short time earning, he appeared faithful to his parents, sending them money to help them a short time before his death. "Litir a Cesp Nor." ("Letter from Cape North.") MacTalla March 13, 1902. It should be added that Dunphy handling of the events suggests Poggioli's observation regarding the classical funeral elegy: "Moschus introduces for the first

Dunphy is again the peacemaker [as is Charles], easing troubled minds. He seems concerned to soothe Alfred's mind in particular, the family's and the entire questioning community. Dunphy both confirms and articulates the mix of emotions and responsibilities in the mind of Alfred, who "manfully did his part." In stanza 8 and stanza 9, Dunphy repeats: "His dearest friend stood by his side." He is called "his dearest friend" again in stanza 14.

Exactly where Daniel died is less important to him than the assurance that everyone did their part, and that no one is to blame. Daniel chose the work and this removed any responsibility from Alfred. And Daniel himself may not be not responsible, as the verse suggests this was destined to happen. Nature might have known, and in any case did not warn him. And Cummings, the lumber company, is held blameless as well.

Dunphy takes three stanzas to get Daniel home to Aspy Bay, and manages along the way to work in a little more homily. The Cummings organization--the company Dan worked for--paid to dress him, get him a casket, and send him home.

The mother's bitter weeping is a traditional motif, but in this case it might be also be reportage. John Gwinn (Allan's son) told

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time in the funeral elegy the 'dead ere his prime' motif, or the theme of the cruel, violent or untimely end. Yet the poet does not insist on this fact. He curses, without mentioning their names, the guilty ones, while glossing over, so to speak, the crime itself. The only evil that concerns him is death itself..." Poggioli, Renato. The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1975. 71.

of a forerunner of Daniel's death:

Artie Courtney was going by the house one night, that house, just before Dan was killed--not very long before. And he heard a woman crying. It was in the nighttime I think. A woman sobbing. And they all feel it was grandmother, when Dan's body came home. Courtney always told that story.

It hadn't happened yet--the death?

Oh, it hadn't happened, no. But he was passing the house and he heard a woman sobbing, crying, very bitterly. That had to be what it was. And if Artie Courtney told that it was the truth, because he'd stick to the truth, he heard it. That's one story attached to it.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding forerunners, Allan Gwinn told Debra Meeks:

Them days, there was forerunners, telling what was going to happen. And most everyone believed in it. The Scotch was full of them. And they believed in ghosts, the Scotch did. But my mother didn't. She believed in forerunners but she didn't believe in ghosts.

Meeks: Tell me more about forerunners. Why did your mother believe in those and not ghosts.

Well, she heard--seen things. She seen things that she couldn't help but believe in forerunners.

What things did she see?

Well, now, I don't remember. Oh, she seen different things when poor Dan was killed.

Really? What things?

Well now I can't just say. She--I guess, perhaps, that she was thinking so much that she didn't know what she was--actually, I just, I was young at that time, and I just didn't get to know. But she said that she'd seen things but she wouldn't never, never [make it] really too plain to us--'fraid we'd be scared, see? But Artie Courtney, he lived right across the harbour here, the first house you'd come to when you landed on the shore there.... And he said he and his uncle was passing there one day, or night--they'd been out Neil's Harbour, hauling. Took a load of potatoes and vegetables.

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<sup>20</sup> Gwinn, John. With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

He used to do that, sell to the fishermen out there. So they were coming home. They each had a horse, a horse and sleigh. And they passed right by the house that we were living in when Dan was killed. And they heard--he said they heard a woman, that night, oh crying--in the house just as though her heart was broken. In the house. Nobody living there then. Few years after, we went there in that house [to live]. And well, he said, the night that Dan's remains come home, he was over there and he said "It was just your mother," he said, "crying"--that they heard a few years before that. And he was a fellow that you could rely on. He wouldn't go tell you something he didn't....<sup>21</sup>

I asked Bessie Edwards whether there a forerunner of Daniel's death. She was an infant when Daniel died. She told me:

No. Never heard anything. We didn't believe in that. Oh, mother was bitter against that.... I don't remember a thing about him [Daniel]. All I know they used to tell me when mother cried I cried with her.

And she used to take you to the graveyard?

Oh, yes. After I got 8 years old I can remember going down here and putting flowers on the grave. Mother would cry here. I could see her yet...

In another conversation, I asked Bessie: I suppose that's one of the worst things ever happened to your family.

Yes. Yes, it was. Mother--I never remember mother [except with] grey hair. So I heard so many say she turned grey overnight from the shock of Dan's death.<sup>22</sup>

Dunphy's next stanza (13) contrasts the traditional cold narrow long deep grave with Mother Earth closing over her son. Nature (who possibly knew and did not warn) has done all it can do,

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<sup>21</sup> Gwinn, Allan. Meeks. Tap.

<sup>22</sup> Edwards, Bessie. Tap.

providing undisturbed sleep until "the heavenly sun will dry the dew from off each tender herb."

Joe Scott's "never return" is a recurring, classical motif and it is worthwhile comparing the exuberance of the motif in a stanza in GUY REED with Dunphy's handling of the motif in THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN. GUY REED was a popular song in the Aspy Bay region, and is said to have been known in the area at the time. Scott:

The robin and the swallow,  
 The sunshine and the rain,  
 The cuckoo and the sparrow  
 With the spring will come again.  
 The blackbird and the thrushes  
 From foreign lands will soar,  
 But loved ones that in death doeth sleep,  
 Will come again no more.<sup>23</sup>

Dunphy: "Though day and night roll calmly on as they have done before / The birds have flown, return again, but Dan will come no more." Or as John D. says it should be sung: "The flocks and flowers will come again but Dan will come no more".<sup>24</sup>

In that same stanza 14, Dunphy reaffirms Alfred Gwinn's friendship and adds the idea that Dan will live on in Alfred's

<sup>23</sup> Ives. Joe Scott. 146.

<sup>24</sup> MacDonald, John D. Tapu. In the Allen Gwinn copy it was first written "birds have flown" and then changed in another pen, probably the same hand, to "birds and flowers return again." Poggioli: "Moschus contrasts our destiny with that of the herbs in a garden: they fade at the end of the year to reflower at the beginning of the next, but we, unlike them, never awaken from the sleep of death." 71.

memory. It brings together three important qualities of classical funeral elegy as recognized by Poggioli: despite the flowers' return to life the dead will not; the ethos of friendship; and the final hope for the classical elegist, to live on in memory.<sup>25</sup>

With the next stanza, quietly, Dunphy, who has been offering religious statements through the entire poem, makes a tender demand for reconciliation and Christian hope of meeting in Paradise.

THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN was both sung and--as we will see in our discussion of function in Chapter 6--taken as a poem. Built along balladic lines to a subject common to ballads--especially during a period when modern Joe Scott death-in-the-woods songs were entering the region's song repertoire--Dunphy's THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN was probably made to be sung, and made for a family that loved songs. Although Daniel's immediate family were not noted as singers, Daniel's cousins, Alfred Gwinn and William Gwinn, were both well known local singers. William Gwinn sang THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN in Bob Fitzgerald's father's house. Jimmy Curtis sang it and John Nellie Brown learned it from him. Charlotte Curtis McNenly (another of Helen's daughters) said Jimmy Curtis sang it in the house, but that it was never sung at a concert. She thought also the Gwinns did not like to hear it. Helen confirmed this. This may explain Allan Gwinn's comment to Meeks that it "got out."

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<sup>25</sup> Poggioli. 68-71.

George Rambeau's mother and father used to sing it. John D. MacDonald heard his mother singing it and learned it; and while John D. said she had to be coaxed to sing at all, "she'd be as likely to sing that as any other."<sup>26</sup>

Allan Gwinn's son John (now about 65) continues to sing THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN very occasionally. He has quickened the pace and altered the tune. He said, "If I didn't sing it that fast I think I'd lose the rhythm."<sup>27</sup> While still respectful, John Gwinn's version does not retain the long, low, funereal presentation of older singers, nor the significant pause in the third line that emphasizes particular phrases. He sang from a handwritten scrapbook but says he has it memorized. Asked whether he sings it for other people, he said, "Not very much. I might have a few occasions. 'Cause no one ever asked me to."

John Gwinn also made some word changes. Dunphy had Daniel Gwinn fall "down through the hole he made." John changed that to "down through the hole so wide," because it rhymes. While John finds the song more singable, the change hides Dunphy's emphasis on Dan's death being his own responsibility and no one else's.

In 1987, the Gwinn family held a reunion at Aspy Bay. THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN was sung there by George MacNeil--85 years after Dunphy made the verse.

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<sup>26</sup> MacDonald, John D. Tape.

<sup>27</sup> Gwinn, John. Tape.

### 5. The Lost MacKinnon Boy

We have emphasized reconciliation and reintegration of the community as a function in the obituary verse discussed so far. And we have demonstrated the use of conventions and the omission and even change of facts to mediate painful realities that might be disruptive. With these points in mind, a special problem is presented by the tough-minded presentation of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY. While there are tender phrases inviting us to look on--"Oh children see him now in death"--the things seen are intentionally disturbing. As discussed below, there is some question regarding authorship, and the difference may simply be one of style, the approach of a different author. However, I will seek the explanation within the text. And as I will show, regardless who composed it, I do not find a conflict between this and the other verses in this study. That is, this obituary verse also has as its primary function the maintenance of the culture of which it is a part.

THE LOST MACKINNON BOY was performed in the community. John D. MacDonald said he heard the lost boy's brother Johnny Joe MacKinnon sing it.<sup>1</sup> Rose Curtis Burton said that Johnny Joe would only say it for her; he did not sing it. She said he was a little reluctant and he did not want her to write it down, but he did say it all.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MacDonald, John D. Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, Rose Curtis. Personal conversation.

THE LOST MACKINNON BOY has little of the conventional balladic phrasing typical of narrative obituary verse. It does, however, meet several of Coffin's defining elements for narrative obituary verse. But it is influenced primarily by printed literary and biblical sources.

The Lost MacKinnon Boy<sup>3</sup>

There is a man lives in this place  
MacKinnon is is name,  
He lives on Bay St. Lawrence Road  
Perhaps you know the same,

He had a child of tender years  
and Angus called the same,  
His father held him very dear  
It was his brother's name.

One day he left his father's house  
Oh never to return  
And may the readers of those facts  
A serious lesson learn.

Dark grew the night at the close of day  
The rain fell fast around  
This poor boy left his lonely cot  
He was lost and never found.

"Oh, won't my father come to me,"  
He repeated o'er and o'er,  
"Oh must I die within these woods  
and mother see no more?"

Oh friends think on with me awhile  
what feelings crowd the breast,  
A lonely child of six years old  
Lost in the wilderness.

So long and piteously he wept  
As lonely he sat down,  
His body weak, his mind impaired,  
His bosom swelled with pain.

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<sup>3</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. "History of the Settlements of the Aspy Bay region." Unpublished manuscript.

As David King of Israel wept  
O'er Absalom his son,  
So did the father of this child  
For grief had him o'ercome.

The sun rose with the morning breeze,  
The darkls (sic) of night were fled,  
Small birds were singing cheerful notes  
On branches o'er his head.

Then onward wandering o'er the plain  
The craggy mountains round,  
In search of what he held so dear  
His home he never found.

Weary of wandering round and round,  
He weak and fainter grew;  
He fell at last beneath the stroke,  
Keen hunger pierced him through.

Oh no one dug his narrow grave  
Nor wept beside his bed,  
And no one raised a hallowed cross  
Above his dying head.

No useless coffin enclosed his breast  
Nor winding sheet prepared,  
The tall trees above his head  
And breezes stirred the air.

Oh children see him now in death  
His few faint struggles o'er,  
Bright angels on their starry wings  
To heaven his spirit bore.

So lonely was his bed of death  
No earthly friend was nigh,  
The Saviour dear who died for him  
Received his soul on high.

It's true the mother may forget  
The infant that she bore;  
Kind Providence will ne'er forget,  
That promise is quite sure.

So now he sleeps in silent death  
Within the forest glade  
And no one knows the lonely spot  
Where his small corpse is laid.

Till land and sea give up their dead  
At heaven's great command,

Then with the nations of the earth  
He shall in judgement stand.

There may be wrong within those lines  
I'm willing to retrace;  
This is the way my fancy leads,  
My mind his footsteps trace.

This is concerning a MacKinnon Boy lost in woods on Bay Rd  
Valley abt 1890, date unsure.

This obituary verse tells the story of a small child who leaves his home one day and is never seen again. That is almost all we know. As with other obituary verses in this study, there are a number of stories called up by mention of the poem. Allan Gwinn told a story of two men coming to the house, and the child following them when they left. John D. MacDonald said that people were building a house out closer to the main road. He had heard that the child came and looked in it at them through an unfinished window--just that. And he was never seen again. John D. added that there was a time when men were out doing roadwork in the area. One of them went to the woods and when he came back he said he had seen the bones of an infant. Others went back in with him, but nothing was found.

And then there is the story John D. told about the field in front of the MacKinnon's home. No one lives there anymore. It is a place called Rear Bay Road Valley. There were other farms around them. All those other abandoned farms have grown up in

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pasture spruce and disappeared in woods. But nothing has grown up on MacKinnon's field.<sup>4</sup>

As with other obituary verse, these are some of the stories THE LOST MACKINNON BOY continues to trigger.

There is some debate over who composed THE LOST MACKINNON BOY. The note affixed to it at the North Highlands Community Museum says that it was made by Thomas Wilson Gwinn.<sup>5</sup> The poem is however in Bob Fitzgerald's manuscript as "Willy Dunphy"'s, though Bob told me he meant to write "Andrew." Theresa MacDonald (Helen Curtis's daughter) did not know of this Thomas Wilson Gwinn, but she felt certain that Andrew had not made THE LOST MACKINNON BOY. She comes from a song family and she felt that she had heard enough songs, and enough Andrew Dunphy songs, to know that it did not sound like something Dunphy would compose. On the other hand, Bob Fitzgerald argued forcefully for Andrew Dunphy. He said his mother sang THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, and his father and William Gwinn sang it, and they all told him it was Dunphy's. As we have seen in our discussion of THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, the different tone and approach from Dunphy's other obituary verses does not qualify as proof that he was not the author. We have seen

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<sup>4</sup> MacDonald, John D. Personal conversation and Tape.

<sup>5</sup> Poems. Album of local poetry. Cape North: North Highlands Community Museum. Unpaginated .

considerable variety among the verses that are unquestionably Dunphy's. The question of authorship will have to remain unanswered for now.

This obituary verse will not function as history. The poet knows he is unable to tell the truth--no one knows the truth--about the death in THE LOST MACKINNON BOY. The verse will serve as a kind of memorial in that it will keep alive the event--a known child of the community was lost in the woods--but there is nothing in the text to indicate this was the poet's purpose.

The verse does not begin with a conventional come-all-ye of ballads or a promise to describe the event. Instead, the title tells the story and the poet starts out almost as one would a narrative: "There is a man lives in this place...." He locates and names the child, and by the end of the second stanza he has told nearly all that is known: "One day he left his father's house / Oh never to return." All he can add is that it was evening and it was raining.

The poet will go on to imagine what occurred in the wilderness. But first he turns to the function of this obituary verse: "And may the readers of those facts / A serious lesson learn." From there on the artistic and social functions run parallel: the poet reworks images from secular and religious literature, to conjure up possible events and invest those events with sufficient reality they will work as warning to children and parents of what can happen when lost in the woods. It doesn't matter that the

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obituary verse is a fabric of imaginings. What matters is that his use of particular images and the overall tone drive home his warning regarding the woods. He must as well give his warning in a way that will not undermine his point--as fiction might.

To further his goal, the author gives no relief. He tells the story in hard, believable terms. The child does not find food or animal help or even a drink. And while the poet piles on the suffering, he calls to us to look! look! "Think...what feelings crowd the breast / A lonely child of six years old / Lost in the wilderness." Painful as the images are to look on, he keeps calling the audience back into the poem: "Perhaps you know the same," "Oh friends think on with me a while," and "Oh children see him now in death." It is more than an invitation. It is a deliberate warning.

The child weeps. Now he is lonely and weak. His mind is impaired. He weeps and so did his father weep, like King David for his son, Absalom<sup>6</sup>--the son who rebelled against his father -- as, technically, did this MacKinnon child, wandering away. The audience would know this allusion, and of King David's cry: "Would God that I had died for thee." It reflects on the father's grief.

The child wanders on through a world that takes no notice of

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<sup>6</sup> "The Second Book of Samuel, 19/33." The Holy Bible...Authorized King James Version. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons. 1953.

him. He falls and dies of hunger. No grave, no funeral, no coffin and no cross.

And once dead, angels take his spirit up and Jesus receives his soul. But his corpse will remain in the woods until we all meet on Judgement Day. And, except for the caveat, that "there may be wrong within these lines," to make allowance for a concern that no one would mistake this composition for evidence, the obituary verse is complete.

I will look first at some possible sources revealed by the text, and then at what the author is trying to do. My purpose is to define the intended function of the obituary verse.

Either the Bible or The Royal Reader, or both, may have been the influence for the poet's use of the story of David and Absalom. The Royal Reader<sup>7</sup> is one of the publications I have been able to identify as in the Aspy Bay region at the time THE LOST MACKINNON BOY was made. It was part of the Nova Scotia school curriculum by at least 1875. It was an item the children would take home, making it available to virtually the entire community, whether or not all individuals could themselves read. "David's Lament for Absalom," a poem, appears in Volume 5 of The Royal

<sup>7</sup> The Royal Readers: Prescribed by the Council of Public Instruction for use in the Public Schools in Nova Scotia. Halifax: A & W MacKinlay. These books were graduated from "The Infant Reader" through numbers 1 to 6. A few random issues have been contributed to the North Highlands Community Museum, which draw from homes in the Aspy Bay region. The Legislative Library of Nova Scotia has editions indicating publication from 1875 to 1938.

Reader.<sup>8</sup> The Bible had a central place in the Methodist and Presbyterian homes.

In The Royal Reader Volume 4 is the poem, "The Burial of Sir John Moore."<sup>9</sup> It begins:

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,  
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;  
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot  
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.

It is the burial of Sir John Moore under cover of night. I have been told this particular poem was a common recitation piece in the school system, and have met people who know every word.

It is possible that "We thought as we hollowed his narrow bed / And smoothed down his lonely pillow" may have suggested to the author of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY: "Oh no one dug his narrow grave / Nor wept beside his bed." While the lines are close, it would only be guessing. But the hunch is reinforced by: "No useless coffin enclosed his breast / Nor winding sheet prepared." These lines seem indebted to: "No useless coffin enclosed his breast, / Nor in sheet nor in shroud we wound him" of the Sir John Moore poem.

It is not a simple borrowing. I would suggest that "The Burial of Sir John Moore" came to the poet not simply because it gave him

<sup>8</sup> The Royal Readers. 5 (1903). 79-81. Collection of North Highlands Community Museum.

<sup>9</sup> The Royal Readers. 4 (1889). 185. and 6 (1877). 22. The 1889 edition was seen in the North Highlands Community Museum.

a few good lines, but rather because both poems are concerned with similar social norms in both the obituary poet's world and in that of the author of "The Burial of Sir John Moore." These poems deal with social norms regarding appropriate burial. In that sense, they are both poems about the same subject, even though Moore gets buried and the lost child does not.

Moore's is not a proper burial, carried out as it is in darkness, the shallow grave dug with bayonets, everything hurried, and no bugle sounding. A look back at much of the obituary verse in this study reveals that same concern for proper burial. In JOHNNY NICHOLSON for instance: "It would ease his mother's aching heart / If he were in the ground." In THE SILENT RIVER we are given details of proper death and burial: her pastor at her side, friends around the bed, the dead waked at home, carried to the graveyard and left with the promise of a tombstone. There are all the earthly concerns. THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN praises the Cummings company for paying for casket, clothes, and shipment home, "to be laid at rest with those he loved and they could do no more." Even when proper burial is not mentioned in the verse, as with THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, it brought up the story Helen Curtis told of the father having to make the coffins and bury the children himself, because of the threat of disease. And I would suggest that that same concern for proper burial brought "The Burial of Sir John Moore" to the author of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY.

Another influence on this obituary verse may have come from The

Royal Reader, a poem called "A Mother's Love"<sup>10</sup>, stanza 5:

"And can a Mother's Love grow cold--  
 Can she forget her boy?  
 His pleading innocence behold,  
 Nor weep for grief--for joy?  
 A mother may forget her child,  
 While wolves devour it on the wild;--  
 Is this a mother's love?"

"Ten thousand voices answer, 'No'..."

If this verse did influence the author of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, then it is with remarkable irony that he converts it to:

"It's true the mother may forget / The infant that she bore, /  
 Kind Providence will ne'er forget / That promise is quite sure."

However, there is also the possibility that the poet was aware of Robert Burns's "The Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn," which contains the lines

The mother may forget the child  
 That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;  
 But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,  
 A a' that thou has done for me,<sup>11</sup>

A more likely source is a Methodist hymn by William Cowper,  
 "Hark, my soul! it is the Lord."<sup>12</sup> The third stanza reads:

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<sup>10</sup> The Royal Readers. Volume 5. 47-49.

<sup>11</sup> Burns, Robert. Poems and Songs. London: Dent, 1906. Rept. 1958. 216.

<sup>12</sup> Cowper, William. The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper. Ed H.S. Milford. London: Oxford University Press. 1907. 444.

Can a woman's tender care  
 Cease, toward the child she bare?  
 Yes, she may forgetful be,  
 Yet will I remember thee.

This is much more clearly a "promise" and fits the Methodist context.<sup>13</sup> It should be pointed out that while Thomas W. Gwinn was a Methodist, all our evidence shows that Andrew Dunphy was welcome in all kinds of religious contexts, and he would have had access to Methodist as well as other influences. Also, we have noted that he composed with the particular family in mind, even to the extent of assuming a persona. Therefore, fitting the Methodist context does not, unfortunately, determine with certainty the authorship of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY.

Obituary verse in the Aspy Bay region rarely pursues such explicit social sanction as in THE LOST MACKINNON CHILD.<sup>14</sup> Dunphy does not tell us to take care of our health, learn to swim or to stay off the roof--all perils that resulted in deaths and

<sup>13</sup> Such influences and allusions are examples of what Pauline Greenhill has called "intensive appropriation. That is, when they do not compose a wholly original poem for the occasion, poets and presenters of others' compositions rework existing verse to restructure its worldview and ethos in keeping with their own time and place." "Folk Dynamics in Popular Poetry: 'Somebody's Mother' and What Happened to Her in Ontario." Western Folklore. Vol XLVI, No. 2 (April 1987). 79.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Coffin mentions "warning" as a defining element of narrative obituary verse, but he clearly means religious warning. He does not include social sanction as an element of narrative obituary verse. American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. Norwood: Norwood Editions. 1975. 13.

therefore in his compositions. While the tone of the poem at first appears contrary to what we have come to expect of narrative obituary verse, I will argue that the hard tone throughout contributes both to the functioning of the verse and to our further description of the genre.

To make the obituary verse work as a warning, the author had to give it veracity. It did not have to be true but it had to ring true. His audience knew the reality beyond the edge of the woods. They knew a child lost in the woods died a hard, remorseless death. If the warning was to be effective, there could be no relief this side of death. And the author gave none. He told a shockingly unsentimental story of wandering lonely and lost and hungry, where rain fell while "birds were singing cheerful note"--but even they did nothing for the child. And then the child died, unburied, the spot unmarked. Given the terms of veracity, this is tenderness, this is friendship. The poet does not hold up the parents as at fault. It is not the purpose of his poem. Nor would it be productive in re-establishing community around a terrible event.

Only in death is there anything bright or happy in THE LOST MACKINNON CHILD. It is through elements they know to be true that the parents and community get relief and consolation. The child is found, remembered and received in Heaven. And the powerful image the author uses to drive the point home is that, while the mother "may forget the infant that she bore"--and she knows, the

community knows, she will never forget--it is even more certain that "Kind Providence will ne'er forget." This is the genuine, acceptable consolation.

Still, the author ends with a caveat. He wants no misunderstanding. While he is willing to "imagine" for the family and the community, he wants it understood that he knows--as his audience must know--"There may be wrong within those lines." This puts one last mark of veracity on an extremely careful and skillful performance.

As a textbook already within his community, especially among children, the literary influences of The Royal Readers can be seen to have served the author of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY very much as the formulaic phrases and other conventions of song, narrative obituary and homiletic obituary verse in the examples we have already considered. In each case, they help the composer communicate with the community through familiar codes and recognizable examples. In the case of THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, it might appear that the images taken from or influenced by the Bible and Methodist hymns would be commonly known to only a portion of the community. But given the intermingling within this community that has been demonstrated in Chapter 3, "History and Geography," that particular assessment of limitation would be an assumption.

We can conjecture that the MacKinnon family asked for a poem

that memorialized their child (who would have no grave, no other memorial) while at the same time warning others of the danger of the woods--thus giving some purpose to the death. It may all, of course, have been the author's idea. In any case, he felt it acceptable to write about this death. And he found it acceptable to write about it in a tough-minded manner. And some of his audience found it acceptable enough to include it in the song repertoire, to save it as a poem and to display it in the local museum nearly 100 years later.

## CHAPTER VI

## Function and Use

I will use the words function and use as Merriam distinguishes them, recognizing areas of coincidence between the two: "'Use' then, refers to the situation in which music is employed in human action; 'function' concerns the reasons for its employment and particularly the broader purpose which it serves."<sup>1</sup>

Very little has been published regarding the function and use of English language obituary verse, and what we have is usually an aside derived from the texts themselves.<sup>2</sup> Draper questions the extent verses were actually used, suggesting that by the time of Charles II references to specific uses are more a "poetic convention rather than an actual continuance of the custom."<sup>3</sup> Still, the same few specific examples of uses show up in Tristram

<sup>1</sup> Merriam, Alan P. The Anthropology of Music. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1954. 210.

<sup>2</sup> "The coffin and hearse were often further bedecked with pinned-in bits of privately composed funeral verse, a custom that in time became so popular that Cotton Mather once referred to them, at the funeral of Nathaniel Collins, as 'a Paper winderling sheet to lay him out.'" Stannard, David E. Puritan Way of Death. New York: Oxford University Press. 1977. 113. Ola Elizabeth Winslow reprinted Nichols Noyes' "Poem on James Bayley, May 28th, 1706," including the lines "Forgive me, though I write in verse, / It's usual on a Dead man's hearse." American Broadside Verse. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1930. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Draper, John W. The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism. New York: Octagon Books, Inc. 101-2. However, Draper adds, "the custom...of throwing verses into the grave seems somewhat to have persisted down into the middle of the eighteenth century, several generations after the aristocracy had abandoned it." 106.

Coffin,<sup>4</sup> Mark Coffin,<sup>5</sup> and Robert Bethke.<sup>6</sup> The most frequently cited are that they were sometimes affixed to the hearse, tossed into the open grave, and/or given to the family after the funeral.

The uses that are mentioned are limited and rarely connected with any specific author or event, and no attempt is made to demonstrate how these verses functioned in a context, except in an undifferentiated sense as broadside or book publication functioning as literature.<sup>7</sup> As literature, obituary verse includes extremely individual performances by practitioners such as Milton and Donne, whose difference from the folk creation is principally one of sophistication. How this elegiac literature functioned is the same unanswered question as, how did obituary verse function?

Mark Coffin, of course, sees use of narrative obituary verse in the creation of native American ballads, but this is more as influence than function. He recognizes the question as to the

<sup>4</sup> Coffin, Tristram P. "On a Peak in Massachusetts: The Literary and Aesthetic Approach." A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune. Ed. M. C. Boatright. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press. 1964.

<sup>5</sup> Coffin, Mark Tristram. American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry. Norwood: Norwood Editions. 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Bethke, Robert D. "Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry." Journal of American Folklore. 33 (1970).

<sup>7</sup> "Booksellers supplied stock broadsides for stock occasions, such as the death of a husband or a child...They seem to aim to console the survivors rather than to celebrate the dead; and, although written to be sung to common ballad tunes, they, or may not, have been used at the funerals." Draper. 98. Mark Coffin points out that W.W.Newell noticed that "Isaac Orcutt" was "sung at his burial by six young men...dressed in white, who stood around his grave." M. Coffin. 21.

purpose of narrative obituary verse. "The tradition must have fulfilled some definite need. This need was probably the result of the precarious nature of rural life in colonial times."<sup>8</sup> He does not speak to how the verse functioned in terms of that "precarious nature." He speculates that "the narrative obituary verse tradition...probably served to supply many mourners with missing details and information about the death."<sup>9</sup> He tells us nothing about how it actually functioned in a context or anything about the performers.

Draper indicates political and religious influences on the obituary verse but gives no specific evidence of their functioning in political and religious terms.

But obituary verse does have functions. They are identifiable not only via their texts, they can also be established in terms of the contexts of performance and by continued and changing individual behaviour regarding the verses.

The use of poetry itself functions as memorial. Poetry is a particular status of speech. That alone sets the death apart as

<sup>8</sup> Coffin, M. 24-5.

<sup>9</sup> Coffin, M. 24.

having special status.<sup>10</sup> In addition, as examples of local culture, the obituary verses in this study function to educate the culture about itself, and thus help retain it. They focus on death, but they also participate in other contexts such as song performance. The act of performance is the very opposite of death. It functions as evidence that the culture has survived the loss of one of its number. The form and content of the verse exhibit social and religious norms that helped them to survive.

Whether obituary verse in this study functions as history is questionable. Local creations that remained local suggest the possibility of veracity not ordinarily available from traditional song. But we have seen Andrew Dunphy change the facts in *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN*, his most widely accepted obituary verse. There is no reason, finally, to suspect the local will be absolutely truthful about itself, perhaps especially in its obituary verse. The function as history may be relatively unimportant. Still, while they may sing traditional songs about subjects remotely related to their lives, and often about activities otherwise

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<sup>10</sup> "Poetry has been said to italicize or put in inverted commas, and this is indeed one of its functions here. Just as special forms of dress or ritual in other contexts set set some act or occasion apart....It helps give meaning and weight to the event." Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Poetry: Its nature, significance and social context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1977. 222.

unacceptable,<sup>11</sup> the character of local obituary poetry can be expected to reflect the community in which it is made.

Obituary verse in the Aspy Bay region is local. The impetus is a local death, usually untimely. But the aim is toward the audience--the family, the local community or even an individual. The verse is rarely directed to the dead. It asks nothing of the dead, nor does it try to appease the dead. And while it might question the death, its goal is usually one of final acceptance. The verse is a kind of settling up, putting things in order, a final version of events. It purports to help the individual, family or community find peace and re-bond in the wake of this social, religious and psychological crisis. Emphasis is on what the poet deems the mourners' needs and not the poet's self-expression. We see this particularly in the case of Andrew Dunphy's obituary verse, which we are told was made on request. Suggestions of form, tone, content and even persona seem to have been determined by needs of the principal mourners.

Aspy Bay narrative obituary verse is usually a controlled expression, sympathetic with but usually not itself joining in the grief. It sometimes has a social agenda, some practical warning. It often has a religious agenda as well. The maker is somewhat in the role of both pastor and civil servant.

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<sup>11</sup> "It is striking how often themes which are foreign to the mode of life and experience of a group are found in their traditional song." Elbourne, Roger. "A Mirror of Man? Traditional Music as a Reflection of Society." Journal of American Folklore. 89 (1976). 465.

THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN offers evidence of an extraordinary use of the obituary verse genre. As mentioned earlier, the family of Daniel Gwinn saved both ballad- and homiletic-style obituary verses made for Daniel, two Joe Scott ballads (WILLIAM SULLIVAN and HOWARD KERRICK<sup>12</sup>), plus other religious verses made within the family for dead members of the family. They were kept in the family Bible, now in possession of Daniel's youngest sister, Bessie Gwinn Edwards. This in itself is not unusual. THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN and THE SILENT RIVER were also kept in the family Bible. The Gwinns, however, established a Sabbath Day practise Bessie Gwinn Edwards described while we went through the items in the Bible:

I know we used to read them a lot when we were kids. That used to be our Sunday work when--you know, you'd go to church, and then you'd have most of the day. And you weren't allowed to do anything. If you had any toys, that was put away on Saturday. And like knitting or anything--all that stuff was put away. And Sunday was the Lord's Day. And you weren't supposed to do anything. We even washed the potatoes and got everything ready Saturday...The Bible tells us, "Six days shalt thou labour"--so they kept all those things, those times.

Were there other things that you could read on that day?

You could read the Bible. And, yes, we had a book that we used to read a lot--I forget what it was.

How would the poems come into it then? How would the poems come into the day of rest? [Bessie seemed to think I meant, When did they write them?]

Well, I suppose, they had more time to do them like that, I don't know.

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<sup>12</sup> These Joe Scott ballads were on Daniel Gwinn's body when it came back to Aspy Bay. See Appendix C for the texts.

So, on the day of rest, as children, would you read these poems?

Yes. Lots of times we did. We used to read them. I remember reading that "Howard Kerrick" one and "[WILLIAM] SULLIVAN"--we used to read those.

That would be allowed on the Sabbath.

Yes.

I suppose that's why it's kept in the Bible.

I imagine so. That's why.

That's very interesting. It gives me some purpose for these poems, in later years... But you mean more than once, as children, you would read over...

Oh, yes. Indeed we would.

And your parents too?

[Bessie, less certain:] Yes...

Would you read them aloud or just to yourself?

More aloud, I think. Than to yourselves. Because those times they did read out more I think, than they did to themselves.

And would they read out THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN?--that's in the Bible here.

Oh yes. I can remember reading that all right.

Among your brothers and sisters?

Yes. Those that were home. See I was the youngest of the family. There wouldn't be too many. From my sister Grace, there'd be only then Allan and Ernest and myself.

Did your mother, on Sunday, ever read THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN to you children?

Not that I can remember.

Did your father?

Not that I can remember.

So who among you would read that aloud for the others?

Grace would be more apt to be the one that knew it.

And this was common.

Um-hum. Yes, in our family.<sup>13</sup>

Looking through the poetry in the family Bible, we came across a handwritten version of THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN. It was in a bit more elegant script. Bessie told me it was re-copied by a minister. Referring to the poems in general, she told me that she re-copied them as they showed wear. This is clearly a kind of performance and certainly important evidence of their status.

The Gwinns had raised these obituary verses and two Joe Scott ballads to the level of sacred literature.<sup>14</sup> These items were significantly attached to Daniel. That would be enough to get them saved in the Bible. But they were also seen as appropriate Sabbath Day reading. This use is a shift from the ritual of a song tradition to the ritual of a religious tradition. The poetry was read aloud. It was used as a kind of icon in a periodical religious ceremony. It also functioned as entertainment for young people during the otherwise long Sabbath Day. Finally, that these items were made sacred is indicated particularly by the inclusion of HOWARD KERRICK, Joe Scott's song of a young man who

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, Bessie Gwinn. With Ronald Caplan. Cape Breton's Magazine Taps.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding such flexibility, see Hawes, Bessie Lomax. "Folksongs and Function: Some Thoughts on the American Lullaby." Journal of American Folklore. 87 (1974). 140-48.

does not heed his mother's warning and eventually hangs himself in a syphilitic delirium--hardly the usual Sabbath fare.

It should be added that while Dunphy's verses invariably contained religious elements, I am not at all suggesting that he was considering this kind of religious ceremonial status for his verse. I do not want to attribute any motive apart from what can be observed via texts and testimony. The Sabbath Day status for obituary verse is clearly the Gwinn family's choice. It may at first have been quite accidental. The Bible typically was considered the best place to keep vital information. The Gwinn Bible has listings of births and deaths, and a copy of the parents' marriage certificate. It would be as likely for people to keep there the deed to the house. The children, faced with Bible reading, may have chosen to focus on the inserts. The texts of most of the verses would not be objectionable to the parents. Travelling on the body of Daniel Gwinn would have given the Joe Scott songs special meaning. And thus a family practise was established. This is the only occasion I have found of the obituary poetry being an active part of family religious ritual, especially for considerable time after the death.

Akin to the "peacemaking" function, that of preservation of family and community, is the lack of social anger. There is no hint, for instance, that lack of medical care was responsible for the MacPherson children's deaths, or that some possible failure in

the Cummings organization resulted in the death of Daniel Gwinn at their lumber mill. Instead, we are told the company "costly robed" the body, provided a coffin and sent him home--"and they could do no more." In JOHNNY NICHOLSON, the measure of anger directed toward nature can be read in the "cruel sea" and the gentle winds that trick sailors out before "the treacherous wind" rose up and overturned the vessel. They are of course formulaic phrases and cannot be taken as any more than an acceptable explanation for the disaster, an explanation that carefully leaves no person blamed. Only THE LOST MACKINNON CHILD contains any shadow of parental failure. That poem is one of warning, a curious mixture of homiletic and balladic approach. It deals with a subject that could hardly eliminate all trace of blame. In the image of King David and Absalom, however, it suggests the dead child was at fault.

There is one notable exception. This is the complex of emotions that include anger in Dunphy's personal moment of doubt and reaffirmation in THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN. The verse is a long struggle for personal rather than communal stability.

This general lack of expressed anger in obituary verse may be place- and person-specific. For instance, that there is virtually nothing in the Aspy Bay region verse depicting anything akin to "chapel-house and decay" of the Puritan funeral elegy of both

England and New England,<sup>15</sup> is an indication that obituary verse is an expression of the character of the local culture. Draper<sup>16</sup> and Scheick<sup>17</sup> make it clear that in the Puritan world, these elements have a positive, community-preserving function. This is apparently not the case in the Aspy Bay world view. We get no close-up, detailed descriptions of the damaged body beyond the formulaic "marbled brow." Details of Daniel Gwinn's appearance after falling on the machinery and having been pitched against a solid wall will not empower this community. And it is not included.

The obituary verse is thus a complex social tool functioning in the preservation of community, in personal and communal reintegration. It is akin to other social tools occasioned by death such as coffin-making, preparation of body, digging the grave, waking and burial, related stories, forerunners, and prayers. These were all local responsibilities, particularly in communities where there were no funeral parlours or permanent clergy. The community is re-organized by such processes.

15 "...The Puritans accentuated the element of mortuary description;...the last illness, the dying moments, the funeral, the grave, and the bodily corruption, of the departed; and to all this he could append appropriate moral truisms to adorn the gruesome tale." Draper. 119.

16 Draper. "Chapter III: The Funeral Elegy and the Puritans." 61-92.

17 Scheick, William J. "Tombless Virtue and Hidden Text: New England Puritan Funeral Elegies." Ed. Peter White. Puritan Poets and Poetics. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 286-302.

Unstabilizing versions of the event are set aside. What is told is offered in conventional (communal, acceptable) terms. Mild guidance is usually offered.

Obituary verse can have, in Bascom's terms, on-going "pedagogic" and "amusement" functions. It can function as a "validation" of the culture in which it is performed; and it can help in "maintaining conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour." Bascom suggested that while these functions can be further subdivided, "they can be considered grouped together under the single function of maintaining the stability of culture."<sup>18</sup> I find this to be the over-riding function of the Aspy Bay region's obituary verse.

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<sup>18</sup> Bascom, W.R. "Four Functions of Folklore." Journal of American Folklore. LXVII (1954). 333-349. Rept. in The Study of Folklore. Ed. Allan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1965. 297.

## CHAPTER VII

## The Obituary Poet

Obituary verse is one category of work performed by the folk poet, the latter term itself not adequately defined.

Based on New Mexico writer Prospero S. Baca's "Book of Personal Versos", T. M. Pearce offered a suggested definition of the folk poet:

He writes often of community events and personalities associated with them and of manifestations of natural forces with effects upon society. He writes of the experiences of individuals when such happenings offer occasion for joy or sorrow to groups of relatives and friends or acquaintances. His poetic forms (metrical and stanzaic) are traditional, sometimes irregular or modified in the direction of informal and freer communication. His poetic idiom is stamped with expressions describing group feeling and thought. His identity as an author is not suppressed, but his individuality as a poet is submerged in the stream of group or community feeling which animates all his compositions...The rewards of a folk poet are likely to be found as he shares in the joys or sorrows, the pride or frustration of the people he addresses. His own prestige is secondary to the common welfare. Yet it is not inconsiderable, measured in terms of the audience.<sup>1</sup>

This is a description of a very nice folk poet. Baca lived within the bosom of his own family and filled established normative community roles. Satirical poet Larry Gorman, on the other hand, would seem counter to a good deal of this description. According to Edward Ives, Gorman worked on his own prestige to the detriment of his audience. Gorman was a bachelor. He was loner, a gossip; unskilled as a workman, his main talent satire was a

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, T. M. "What Is a Folk Poet?" Western Folklore. 12 (1953). 248.

danger to all.<sup>2</sup> Joe Scott was another wanderer, although he was married a short time. Much of his work is akin to obituary verse and comes across in Ives's portrait as considerably more reverent.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is in the nature of the genre: obituary versus satirical. But Lawrence Doyle wrote satire, and Ives sees him as conservative: "So far as I can determine, Lawrence Doyle never attacked or ridiculed anything that his neighbours would not have felt warranted attack or ridicule."<sup>4</sup> And Doyle "seems to have lived a very normal life."<sup>5</sup>

Glassie sees the folk poet as an outsider:

...Often his behavior is out of alignment with the strictest delineation of the traditional role of his sex in his society. This is evident in his relations with the opposite sex (he is often a bachelor when it is the norm to be parent or spouse), or his economic situation (he is often a failure at his chosen occupation, changing jobs frequently when it is the norm to be a steady provider.)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ives, Edward D., Larry Gorman: The Man who Made the Songs. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1964. 180-87.

<sup>3</sup> Ives, Edward D., Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker. Chicago: U of Illinois Press. 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Ives, Edward D., Lawrence Doyle. The Farmer Poet of Prince Edward Island: A Study in Local Songmaking. Orono: U of Maine Press. 1971. 247.

<sup>5</sup> Ives, Lawrence Doyle. 244.

<sup>6</sup> Glassie, Henry, Edward Ives and John F. Szwed. Folksongs and Their Makers. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press. 1979. 43. In this same book, Szwed says, "From what little we know of song-makers elsewhere, Paulie Hall is typical in being seen as an eccentric and in being held somewhat apart from the community around him. He is 'a character...a case...a strange one.'" "Paulie E. Hall: A Newfoundland Songmaker and Community of Song." 157.

Ives adds that "it was never [Glassie's] intention to account for all creativity with one rather simplistic socio-economic equation; he never expected every folk poet to show this "out of alignment" pattern, but it is remarkable how many of them do."<sup>7</sup>

Pearce pushes toward a picture of the folk poet as non-individual, "almost anonymous." This would hardly hold for a Gorman or a Scott. As Ives puts it:

Everything in the tradition worked for homogeneity and anonymity, and elements that were unusual, personal or idiosyncratic were generally rejected.... Nevertheless, I find it a matter of considerable wonderment how often at close range the differences are there and the folk poet...speaks with his own voice.<sup>8</sup>

Still, writing about Dorrance Weir and his racist creation "Take that Night Train to Selma," Glassie says such "creative people...are uncommon in European-American communities...The commonplace folk performer, his audience and fellow performers do not strive for change...."<sup>9</sup>

Pearce contends that, "Even in the narrative accounts of the deaths of or accidents to particular individuals, it is never the personal sorrow of the author which is voiced, but the loss and sorrow of the whole community." Although he says, "The poet is one of them: his words are their words and their thoughts are

<sup>7</sup> Ives, Lawrence Doyle. 246.

<sup>8</sup> Ives, Lawrence Doyle. 248-49.

<sup>9</sup> Glassie. Folksongs and Their Makers. 30-31.

his,"<sup>10</sup> Pearce is also aware of the elevated status both given by the audience and sought by the poet.

Perhaps genre, the satirical as opposed to the obituary, is an important clue toward definition of the folk poet. Martin Lovelace in conversation with Clarence Blois, mentioned Clarence's forebear, Daniel Galveston Blois (as) 'quite a character' (meaning that like many satirists Daniel Blois enjoyed an ambivalent reputation), but this struck the wrong note with Clarence: "Well they claimed he was. But when he sat down to write 'The Lost Children' ('Meagher's Children,'<sup>11</sup> a lament for two children lost in the woods) he was just as much Christian, I guess, as any of them." Lovelace goes on: "Once again I find here a sense that songs are civilizing and that to be a 'poet' like D.G. Blois or Joe Scott was to be elevated above the common rank of men."<sup>12</sup>

What is clear is that there will be no simple definition of the folk poet. Ruth Finnegan notes that "Variety is the main point to emerge when one tries to compare the positions and activities of oral poets throughout the world."<sup>13</sup> And Merriam makes the point

<sup>10</sup> Pearce. 246.

<sup>11</sup> See for example the version collected by Helen Creighton in Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia. 1932. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1966. 292-96.

<sup>12</sup> Lovelace, Martin. "'Down By This Laney Side': Clarence Bloise, Farmer and Singer." Canadian Folk Music Journal. 13 (1985). 8.

<sup>13</sup> Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Poetry: Its nature, significance and social context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977. 188.

that "...The ethnomusicological literature seems to contain relatively few careful studies of this question, but what is available indicates that the status of the musician can best be placed upon a continuum running from high to low status."<sup>14</sup>

The obituary poet in the Aspy Bay region is a person who makes verses on the occasion of local deaths. He exhibits special skills in a relatively homogeneous world of fishermen and farmers, a subsistence economy. It is an activity akin to midwifery and coffin-making, each usually an unpaid speciality, called up by crisis. It is similar to the more seasonal donation of time by both men and women in the community, in the form of chopping frolics (male), spinning frolics (female) and milling frolics (both men and women). It is part of other cultural activities, such as story-telling, recitation and singing of songs. None of these are activities for which any or any great amount of money would be exchanged. And yet all would be considered necessities of turn-of-the-century rural life.

Most of the Aspy Bay region obituary poets identified to date performed only once or twice in their lives. In any case, only one or two examples have been found with their name attached. I have to surmise that Thomas W. Gwynn, said to be the composer of

<sup>14</sup> Merriam, Alan P. The Anthropology of Music. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1954. 133.

THE LOST MACKINNON BOY, was a farmer and fisherman. Duncan MacDonald (IN LOVING MEMORY OF THOMAS MCEVOY<sup>15</sup>) was a blacksmith, miller and lay Methodist preacher. John T. Gwinn, farmer, sometime cook on vessels out of Gloucester, was known for local occasional satirical verse, wrote a small amount of local history, and probably composed one of the several obituary verses written when his son, Daniel, died in the lumberwoods in 1902. Charles A. Gwinn, John T.'s son, wrote some humorous verse for his family, and wrote one obituary verse in memory of his brother, Daniel. Lexa Gwinn wrote an obituary verse on the death of her daughter.

For Andrew Dunphy, however, there is a way in which obituary poetry was part of his livelihood, part of the complex of things he shared or did for others in the Aspy Bay region. He gave stories, the world and local news, nanny services, scribal services, nursing care, humorous verse, obituary verse and, in general, friendship. In return, he got friendship and the freedom of several homes in the Aspy Bay region and high esteem throughout the region. Exchange or payment would not be a precise description of what he received.

He never married. He was not physically capable of ordinary work. He was an unusual looking man with a hare lip and a deformed hand. But there is no sense that what he received from his neighbours was considered charity. There was exchange. And

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<sup>15</sup> For the text of IN MEMORY OF THOMAS MCEVOY see Appendix A.

the obituary verse, a few stanzas of humorous song and memories about Dunphy are the only artifacts of that exchange to come down to us.

Dunphy wrote at least four obituary verses: THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, JOHNNY NICHOLSON, THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, and THE SILENT RIVER. He is the only person of the community to be remembered for that work in particular, and the only one who is called "The Poet." By way of the texts, the way they were used, and the regard the oral testimony demonstrates for the man, I would argue for a complex high status role, which filled empty niches in community organization similar to that of clergy. The obituary verse was an extension of his work in that community as nurse, nanny, entertainer, and bearer of information. His influence was vital in his own time, in living memory, and to a very small extent in the continued functioning of his verse today. It is used as song, poem, memorial, and as an example of the local culture in the North Highlands Community Museum.

Andrew Dunphy was born in 1865 at White Point, one of nine children of pioneer Thomas Dunphy [born 1829] and Christina Wilkie [born in Cape Breton, 1830]. In the account of Bob Fitzgerald, the parents were "married about 1848."

[Thomas] came to the Aspy Bay region from Newfoundland in the 1840s. They made their home at White Point and remained there during their lifetime. Like most of the other citizens in that area, he was a fisherman and followed the sea for a living....both [Thomas and Christina] died at White Point and are buried there.... Andrew...(The Poet). Never married. Composed many fine

old ballads concerning events of the times. Died with his brother John at South Harbour.<sup>16</sup>

Helen Dunphy Curtis, now living at Bay St. Lawrence, was born at White Point and was related to Andrew Dunphy. She said:

...Each of those brothers were born with a bit of deformity ....Andrew, he often came to my father's [Patrick's], to our house--because he was a relative to our father. And he had one arm, there was no feeling in it--little small hand on the arm. And Dad, when he'd be taking his coat off for him, when he'd come to the house, when he'd be going to bed--he (Dad) had to take the hand out and put it in the pocket of his pants. That's where he would keep it. And they were boat builders--those two men used to build small boats, you know--like what we'd call a "punt." And Bill was the other fellow. And he had a small hand and a cleft lip.<sup>17</sup>

Andrew had a cleft lip as well. He is described here by George Rambeau<sup>18</sup> of Smelt Brook in the Aspy Bay region:

He was disfigured quite a bit. In more ways than one. He had an awful hare lip. And his eyes were a little different than mine and yours.

How would you describe his eyes?

I wouldn't like to describe them the way I knowed them.

Asked again, Mr. Rambeau again refused to reply, indicating the tape recorder. Later, without the recorder, he would still not describe the eyes. No one else I talked to had spent

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<sup>16</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. "History of the Settlements of the Aspy Bay Region. Unpublished manuscript; unpagged genealogy section. Actually, Andrew died in John's house in 1925. John had died in April, 1924.

<sup>17</sup> "Searching for Cape Breton Folk Songs." Cape Breton's Magazine. 41 (1986). 17.

<sup>18</sup> Rambeau, George. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

sufficient time around Dunphy when they were old enough to remember such detail.

George Rambeau continues:

He was a man that was taken among everybody, loved among everybody. He was a good man. Nothing he wouldn't do for you. He never got too much schooling but he educated himself pretty well. He was pretty well educated. He could write a letter to anybody. Good statesman.

When asked whether Dunphy would write letters for other people, Mr. Rambeau replied that he wrote "lots of them.... Because there was many around that didn't have any education at all and couldn't write and he'd write for them."

Rambeau was also asked whether there were a number of individuals who lived from home to home:

Yeah. At that time people wasn't too plentiful here, there wasn't too many houses here.

Did he have a home of his own?

At one time he had. And his mother and father died, and they kind of scattered about, work whenever you could get work. He used to work whenever he could get work--one arm. I seen him working on the highway with pick and shovel. With the one arm.

Carpentry work?

Yes, he could do some work. Help his brother build boats. Him and his brother [Bill] built a lot of boats. Good at that too.

Did Bill have a deformity?

Yes. He had one hand that was deformed. It was better than Andrew's. He could use it some...

Rambeau was also queried about whether people were at all frightened of Andrew Dunphy:

Frightened of him? No one that ever I knew.

The eyes or the hare lip or the little hand--none of this frightened people?

No. Nor he never made any different with anybody. Some people would be a little backward on that account, on his deformities. But he didn't. He met you on same, as you'd meet him. I think that's why people thought so much of him. He was never embarrassed....

When asked whether in going from home to home he would have a job to do, the reply was:

No. Most people wouldn't expect him to do anything. Wouldn't want him to do anything. He was willing enough to do it. If you wanted him to help you out he was right ready. And he could work, too....<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Degh (in Folktales and Society: Storytelling in a Hungarian Peasant Community. Trans. by Emily M. Schossberger. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1969. 78.) points to the itinerant traveller in several countries as storyteller, and the storytelling as a part of their subsistence. In Tales Until Dawn: A Cape Breton Gaelic Storyteller, Joe Neil MacNeil tells about Anna MacNeil who lived from home to home at Middle Cape, Cape Breton County, about 100 miles from the Aspy Bay region. "...She was a woman who never married. It was the poor woman's habit to circulate throughout the district, where she would spend time at various houses and do a good amount of work such as the washing and scrubbing and the like. She could tell short stories but she wouldn't tell them at all when company came to visit; but if she was at home with children--the younger ones--she would tell little stories. But most often she preferred to sing songs. There wasn't a single song made locally throughout the whole country that she didn't know if she heard it once, and there were a good number of songs made at that time in those parts. She would learn them and sing them in the homes, and many years after the poor woman's death when people were singing songs they would say that they heard them from Anna and that she had a marvelous repertoire. And that was the way with the wonderful women who used to wander through the countryside giving entertainment and pleasure to people. People didn't find it a burden at all to feed them." Tales Until Dawn. Trans. and ed. John Shaw. Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 13-14. It should be added that Joe Neil himself has lived a life wherein he gathered and shared stories, proverbs and local history. I have never heard him sing but he can recite songs. And he has lived long periods of time in other people's households. He never married. He is a welcomed entertainer and educator--and he is a carpenter who will dig into any work.

Further questions to George Rambeau, and his replies, follow:

What were they getting from Andrew Dunphy that would make him someone they wanted in the house?

Well, he had something about him that people took to.

What was it?

Would be pretty hard for me to describe...

Well, there was one thing about him. If there was anyone sick in the neighbourhood, he stayed with them till the end. He would never want to leave them.

Anyone at all?

Anyone at all. No particular friend. Anyone was his friend.

Was there anyone in your family he stayed with?

Yes. My father a lot. He stayed with us when we growed up, young men--he was with us a lot.

Did he nurse anyone in your family?

No, never happened to be anyone in my family in his time I don't think that needed any care. But there were a lot of people around that he nursed. There was that Neil MacPherson over there. He had 3 daughters with diphtheria. He stayed there and nursed them--two of them died. And one of them recovered. Yes, two of them died. He never left them.<sup>20</sup>

He had books of all kinds. He got them from everywhere. People used to send him books....There was a schoolteacher from Margaree

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This description of Dunphy is akin, also, to that of Louis "The Blind," who brought songs and stories and who was welcomed anywhere by the people of Charlevoix and Chicoutimi counties. C. Marius Barbeau tells that he traveled "not as an ordinary beggar--the term would have been an insult--but as a nomad in his birthright.... [The people] were far from grudging him a subsistence.... The night of his arrival, the folk gathered around him, wherever he stayed, for a viellée. There he brought fresh news; he was an ambulant newspaper." "The Blind Singer." Ed. Edith Fowke. Folklore of Canada. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 1976. 46-7.

<sup>20</sup> Out of this event Dunphy composed the obituary verse, THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN, discussed in Chapter 5.

there--Steve Shaw--I worked in the woods. I met Shaw there in the woods. Shaw asked me if I ever knew a man by that name. I said yes. I knowed him well. He said he got letters from him. He said he must be well-educated. Well, I said I think the most education he got he give it to himself...He didn't get that much in school. He said, "I had a letter from him and it was the best stated letter I ever read."

George Rambeau was the only person to definitely mention Dunphy performing his verse. He said Dunphy was working on the road [statute labour] and he took a paper from his pocket and read THE SILENT RIVER to George. If the testimony that he wrote at the family's request is accurate, Dunphy probably gave the obituary verse to the family involved. After that, he may or may not have used it as part of his home-to-home repertoire.<sup>21</sup> We have no record of that. Dunphy was a "performer" in the homes he visited, though not in such obvious ways as as a "storyteller" or "singer" would imply. He brought the news from the other villages in the region, and from the world. He was thus formally and informally

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<sup>21</sup> It is useful to consider the case of John D. Theriault, who not only wrote obituary verse similar to Andrew Dunphy's as recently as 1966 (see Theriault's "In Memory of Thomas Fitzgerald" in Appendix A), but whose poetry seems to have functioned much the same as Dunphy's. His obituary verse was always narrative and always written on the occasion of an untimely death of someone in the community. He wrote only on request of the family, gave copies to the family and did not keep copies for himself. He said he would not make a verse without that request. But his obituary verses were often sung. Neighbours came to the house and learned the words. It is not clear whether or not Mr. Theriault chose the air. But his narrative obituary verses were occasionally sung in homes and at community concerts. As a young man, Mr. Theriault knew Andrew Dunphy, took his poetry to him, and apparently learned not only form and content but something of the role of the obituary poet. Theriault's approach may help us understand why we have no Dunphy manuscripts. Theriault, John J. Cape Breton's Magazine Taps. 1988. and "With John J. and Sadie Theriault." Cape Breton's Magazine. 50 (1989). 99-116.

reading for his neighbours. At the same time, he was clearly not a gossip. The welcome Dunphy enjoyed in several homes, despite deformity and sometimes differences of religion,<sup>22</sup> indicates trust. George Rambeau on Dunphy: "There's one thing I will tell you: he wouldn't talk about any of his neighbours. If he would it'd be something good...."

Bob Fitzgerald said (and Rambeau confirmed) that Dunphy was a witty, humorous man. He composed THE WILLIE CRAIG,<sup>23</sup> a light-hearted telling about people from the region going aboard a vessel that had grounded in shoal water, and was refloated. George Rambeau didn't remember the song until it was mentioned. Then he laughed and said everyone knew it at one time, and he was sure he had heard it over 50 times. But no informant volunteered THE WILLIE CRAIG. It was Dunphy's, but it was not the way Dunphy is remembered. When I brought it up, most people did not know it as Dunphy's composition, if they knew of it at all. I found it in Bob Fitzgerald's manuscript history and nowhere else.

THE WILLIE CRAIG is a satiric song that relies on special information known in the community but not included in the song. Time has devoured the special information. I told Bob the song seemed out of character with all I knew about Dunphy. Bob

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<sup>22</sup> Dunphy was a Catholic. Oral testimony, the texts of his obituary verse and the families for whom they were made, all indicate intimate contact with Presbyterian and Methodist as well as Catholic families.

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix B for the text of THE WILLIE CRAIG.

countered that it was definitely Dunphy's; and as proof of Dunphy's wit, he told two stories of Dunphy's responding to a situation with comic verse.<sup>24</sup> The detail is convincing. Dunphy was not the sombre man obituary verse might imply. George Rambeau said, "The first thing when he'd come in, he'd come in laughing and he'd tell you a joke or something. Then talk about the weather. [Then he would] Go to the checkers." He claimed Dunphy was probably the best checker player in the world.<sup>25</sup>

George Rambeau spoke about Dunphy's love of singing and Robert Burns's poetry:

I don't know if you ever heard that song Bobby Burns made about his sweetheart. "Highland Mary." Andrew thought that was the best poem that he ever heard. Didn't think that could be beat. That's the only one I know he was interested. I know there were others Burns made but I can't remember them.

Would Andrew recite them?

He generally had the ballads of them, you know? Printed. And he'd cut them out, save them. Then a lot of them, he learned them by heart, he knowed them.

Where would he go to hear songs?

At that time there was a lot of good singers around here. He'd go. There was a Dunphy woman down there was an excellent singer.

Helen Curtis' mother?

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<sup>24</sup> Fitzgerald, Bob. Cape Breton's Magazine Tapes.

<sup>25</sup> One local resident, too young to have known Dunphy, told me that Dunphy used to play checkers for money in the United States. It was the only time anyone suggested Dunphy had left Cape Breton. It is another example of the community's persistent high regard for Dunphy.

He used to listen to her quite a lot. And a lot of them Gwinns were good singers.

There was one newspaper used to come here--North Sydney Herald--once a week. He'd have that. But those songs--I think he used to get papers from the States...

Did he ever travel?

No. I think he was up to Halifax...

When he died [in 1925] I was in my 30's. He'd be that much older than me. I believe he went to school in North Sydney. I think he and his people spent a year in North Sydney. And I'm not sure but there was a school down at White Point at that time. There was a lot going on down there that didn't go on after. They had a telegraph office down there. Emergency hospital and all that down there. They took the telegraph out of that and everything moved away. The people left.<sup>26</sup>

George Rambeau said that Dunphy's ability "was a gift from God." Rambeau could not praise him high enough. He settled for the description that "He was a real Christian...and the best checker player..."

In sum, this description of one obituary poet contributes toward the definition of both the obituary poet and the more general folk poet, and indicates that out of context no very useful definition is possible.

For instance, it is not so simple a matter as either speaking or not speaking for the community. We recall Pearce's point that "The poet is one of them....His voice is their

<sup>26</sup> Mr. Rambeau is speaking of the Old Settlement at White Point. All that is left there now is the cemetery. The settlement today is in the protected cove. It was here they had dances on the wharf described in Chapter 3.

voice."<sup>27</sup> As we saw on examination of his verse, Dunphy's voice was the community's voice, if by that we mean that he gave the mourners expression, that he expressed difficult information in the conventional (and thus approachable) forms and phrases known in that community--as in JOHNNY NICHOLSON and THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN. His voice is his voice, in the sense that they recognize that he is capable of the acceptable conventions. His voice is the voice of only one other person in THE SILENT SPRING, wherein Dunphy assumes the grieving husband's persona. And his voice is only his voice where he speaks for himself to the exclusion of the community, as in the case of a portion of THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN. And all of these are voices of an obituary poet.

Dunphy also exhibits the specialist's distance. He is able in the midst of crisis to produce appropriate obituary verse. For a person already potentially estranged by physical appearance and apparent incapacity to live our normal work and marital roles, he risks personal public presentation on an extremely delicate, intimate subject--death, a blow to the individual, family and community. In this emotional arena, among the confusions of stories, he dares to tell the story, to suggest proper actions toward the bereaved, to console and suggest terms of reconciliation. I would want to consider carefully Renwick's assumption regarding the folk poet, as

27 Pearce. 246.

making the verse "seldom...primarily for personal material gain or for individual aggrandizement, whether it be the raising unilaterally of one's social status vis-a-vis one's peers, or attaining of personal and subjective insight, or even...achieving psychological release."<sup>28</sup> The reality is much more subtle and complex.

Obituary verse would be risky work in a small community. While Dunphy worked within conventional limitations and all descriptions point to his inoffensiveness, his few obituary poems cut a bold swath in the typical cultural portrait of areas such as Aspy Bay. While akin to songs in the local repertoire, they introduce important new facets, not the least of which is the actual dealing specifically with local people. Dunphy's personal passion (especially in THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN) strikes me as unconventional. And I see this work as especially risky for a person I tend to think of at the fringe. He does not, or is unable to, carry out the normal roles for a male in his society. He never married, but rather spent his life moving through the community, staying in various homes. He served as a nurse wherever he was needed. His verse for the MacPherson children indicates close relationship with those children, serving as a kind of nanny. Kate Dixon Fitzgerald (Bob's wife) said Dunphy would take her as a child on his lap

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<sup>28</sup> Renwick, Roger deV. English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 1980. p. 3.

and she loved his little hand. He was a large man, big boned, with a mustache to cover a hare lip. Between the ages of 30 and 40 he made a few obituary verses. And I am suggesting that that is a bold move for anyone marginal.

The community supported and encouraged him; sheltered him; not only trusted him in their homes but wanted him there for extended stays. Neither his appearance, religion, nor non-ordinary work role or marital status set him apart. This treatment was part of the cultural pattern of the community. It was part of the same cultural complex that instructed him in composition of appropriate obituary verse and encouraged him at middle age to risk taking on the difficult role of memorializing some of the local dead.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, obituary verse can be seen as an extension of his nursing and informing roles; it can even be seen as an extension of writing letters for others. As we have noted,

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<sup>29</sup> "The involvement of the poet in society can also be seen in the whole range of factors affecting his life and livelihood qua poet. The mode by which a poet receives his initial training in his craft is socially organized and in a sense comes to him from outside, whether in the form of official and continuous instruction and schooling or through the informal socialization into poetic conventions common in relatively non-specialized contexts. Again, the occasions on which he can practise his art do not depend only on the poet, but on the ways in which special ceremonies, entertainments or specialist associations are organized in his society...The oral poet is not merely the voice of communal pressures, neither is every poet an individual and untrammelled genius; poetry is the creation of both a particular community and of a particular individual." Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Poetry: Its nature, significance and social context. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1977. 212-13.

verse-making seems akin to certain other non-ordinary, specialized jobs which, while often carried off without pay, may bestow elevated status and may play as important a part in community maintenance as jobs such as mid-wife, storyteller, catechist, coffinmaker.

In regard to the folk poet, it is not so simple a statement as Renwick's regarding local songs, that they "are seldom made for personal material gain or for individual aggrandizement."<sup>30</sup> Whether it was his goal or not, Dunphy, by means of his poems, established himself in a complex, high-status non-ordinary role in the Aspy Bay region. His extraordinary impact on his community continues long after his death.

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30 Renwick. 3.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

Narrative obituary verse has proved to be a complex genre, one which simplistic definition does not encompass. As we have seen, Coffin's elemental definition of narrative obituary verse runs up against considerable exceptions, even in the small amount of verse in this study. The variety in the verse suggests that the folk poet in the Aspy Bay region was free to draw into the tradition new influences and a variety of approaches. This evidence supports Bethke's contention regarding a wide variety of influences on the making of native American ballads. While several of the narrative obituary verses have been taken into the local song repertoire, we have also demonstrated song's influence on the making of narrative obituary verse. And further, we have noted texts from sophisticated literature, religious hymns, and biblical texts as influences on the making of both narrative obituary verse and of song.

In this thesis, I have discussed in some detail five obituary verses, at least four of which were part of the local song tradition. Four of these verses are by Andrew Dunphy, and the fifth, while ascribed to Dunphy, is possibly the work of Thomas W. Winn.

Taken in the order they seem to have been written, JOHNNY NICHOLSON stands as a kind of deliberate test for admission to

tradition. It draws heavily on the conventional form and phrases of traditional song. In that way, it reveals the cyclical work of culture as suggested by Merriam: that is, that a culture establishes arenas for learning the elements of that culture, exposing the appropriateness of those elements and allowing for the slight personal variation that not only recreates the culture but keeps that culture dynamic. The heavy emphasis on homily in JOHNNY NICHOLSON suggests that Dunphy merged two local obituary verse traditions (the balladic and the homiletic). The abbreviated form in which some versions of JOHNNY NICHOLSON have survived indicates that in some cases those who learned the verse chose to normalize it toward the balladic.

THE SILENT RIVER, composed in memory of Mrs. Jessie MacKinnon, is an example of obituary verse which draws heavily on literary elements. It may have been so individualized a verse that it never left the home for which it was composed. The assumption of the persona of a single mourner, as well as particular information in the poem reinforces the idea that Dunphy composed obituary verse on request. It is a verse of private sorrow and the personal reintegration of the individual.

THE MACPHERSON CHILDREN is also an obituary verse of private sorrow, but in this case the central mourner is the poet himself. It is also the single obituary verse in which control is even apparently lost, where the mourner expresses doubt and anguish, in his battle for his own reconciliation. Again, this verse functions toward the reintegration of the individual. While

homily plays a very small part in this obituary verse, this poem was apparently normalized when performed. Verses may have been omitted because of the length or the unconventional information or possibly the unsettled persona the singer was not prepared to assume.

THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, apparently Dunphy's last obituary verse, is also his most widely remembered. It is the single obituary verse we can to some extent measure against a newspaper description of the event, and against other people's verse. We observed decision-making as to what facts to include and which facts to alter. It calls into question history as even an apparent function of obituary verse. THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN also exhibits the artistry of homily delicately laced through the composition rather than confined to the end of the poem.

THE LOST MACKINNON BOY further reveals the flexibility of obituary verse, in this case meeting a more explicit social use (that of warning) by incorporating a series of both religious and literary images from the community's cultural repertoire.

The verse in the study was put to several uses, some of which kept it alive long after the initial event. These uses include entertainment and memorial, as well as extremely private ones such as the Gwinn family's Sabbath Day readings.

History is not a major concern in these verses. Although Dunphy's description of Daniel Gwinn's death is well told, it probably would have been generally known that it was not accurate. The acceptance of that verse within the Gwinn family,

and as a part of the community's song repertoire indicates that that kind of accuracy was not what the community required.

While the narrative obituary verse may not have functioned as history, it undoubtedly does serve to call up related stories in the community's lore--stories reflective of the culture and preserved in this living, responsive way. Even in cases where the obituary verse itself was only barely recalled, a query about a particular verse was often sufficient impetus to call up related information. So that while it may not transmit history in an ordinary manner, it is an activator and maintainer of local memories and thus of the culture.

While the obituary verse in this study probably cannot be trusted as history, it is a limited mirror of the character of the culture. Persistent concerns, such as the motif of proper burials, the elimination of blame or unsettled matters, and the lack of detailed description of the dead reveal a general desire to mend and protect the community unit. The narrative is calculated to promote peace, give a final story, settle (or simply not consider) outstanding unstabilizing issues, and reassure as to the final spiritual condition of the dead. This maintenance and preservation of the culture of which it is a part is the over-riding function of the obituary verse in the Aspy Bay region.

As I have shown, all of these verses meet many of the requirements of Coffin's definition of narrative obituary verse.

And as I have made clear, I consider those defining elements too simplistic. Coffin's crucial limitation is that he treats obituary verse as a literary item only, and not as a portion of a social crisis in a particular community. As presented, Coffin's examples can be compared only to one another and are in no way linked to the actual situation in which they were composed. They tell us very little beyond the texts, virtually nothing about the function of individual verses or the uses to which they have been put. It is perhaps an additional criticism of Coffin's elements that while five so varied obituary verses as those in this study do meet most of his criteria, his criteria do not begin to suggest the complexity which these obituary verses demonstrate. This complexity is particularly important in that it demonstrates not the sameness but the vigour of tradition. And this variety not only counters the value of any simplistic definition of this verse, but of the people who compose it.

The definition of the folk poet is a sub-text of this thesis. As we have seen, the portrait of the folk poet gets more contradictory as we include more poets in the description. This is because the folk poet is an individual and not a type of individual. Dunphy, based on the verses we have and stories told about him, emerges as a particular folk poet, supporting some of the generalizations other writers have made about folk poets and contradicting others. He is neither anonymous, nor incapable of taking on personae. He does not live out the ordinary roles of a male in his community, but in his case that does not make him

either a threat or an outcast. He has a non-ordinary appearance and a non-ordinary life-style compared to other males in his society, and yet he is trusted with small children and welcomed into most homes. Everything told about him, including the manner of the telling, indicates continuing high regard. He is a Catholic who moved with ease among Protestants, writing verse for people of various religious denominations. Our focus on him makes clear the need for many further detailed studies of folk poets, before generalizations can be made--or before we agree that the desire for such generalization is somehow misplaced.

Careful descriptions of the composer, the composition, and the context illuminates singularity and the capacity to encompass variety, which helps put the lie to all generalizations regarding the folk and their lore. The local obituary poet takes on the toughest subjects imaginable surrounded by the people most deeply touched by terrible events: a child irretrievably lost in the woods, death of three children in one family to diphtheria, death of a loved wife, the drowning of a young man from a tiny fishing village, and a young man's accidental death working far from home. It is a dangerous, exposed social role to assume in a small, relatively homogeneous community. Where the verse was accepted by members of the community--where it was memorized and sung, or kept in family bibles and personal song collections, displayed in the local museum, remembered by some people 85 years later and sung not only for a collector but for themselves at one family's reunion in 1987--these are measures of acceptance and

continued viability. Moreover, it is an indication these verses can be trusted to provide us considerable information about the ideas and the emotions of the poet and the community. The cultural ethos of the community is not only expressed via the poetry, but in its embracing the maker of the poem.

## APPENDIX A

## OTHER OBITUARY VERSE FROM THE ASPY BAY REGION

Death has been here and borne away...

Death has been here and borne away  
A brother from our side  
Just in the morning of his day  
As young as we he died.

We cannot tell who next may fall  
Beneath God's chastening rod  
One must be first but let us all  
Prepare to meet our God.

Farewell, dear friend, a long farewell  
You we shall meet no more  
Till we are raised above  
On Zion's happy shore.

Our friend and brother lo is dead  
The cold and lifeless clay  
Has made in dust his silent bed  
And there it must decay.

Farewell dear friend again farewell  
Soon we shall raise to thee  
And when we meet no tongue can tell  
How great our joys shall be.

No more will mourn their parted friend  
But lift our ardent prayer  
And every thought and effort bend  
To raise and join thee there.

God our father watch above us  
Keep us all from danger free  
Do thou guard and guide and love us  
Till like him we go to thee.

**In Loving Memory of the Late Thomas McEvoy**

My friends this poetry I compose  
Will bring you grief and joy,  
My motive is sweet memory  
Of Thomas McEvoy.

He was my neighbour many years  
Who cheered me on my way,  
When care and toils and sinful years  
Would seem to hold the sway.

His path of late was strewn with thorns  
His cheeks made way for tears,  
Deploring he was separate  
From those he loved so dear.

My thoughts how swiftly they turn back  
To think of years gone by,  
When mother daughters' (sic) around him sat  
As comforts by his side.

Soon two of these sweet tiny flowers  
The Saviour wished to take,  
And as they left their home below  
Their parents' heart did ache.

How beautiful those angels now  
As by the throne they stand  
Pure crowns of gold adorn their brows  
And harps employ their hand.

Soon then the eldest daughter too  
Considered all things well,  
Resolved by faith and grace divine  
To shun the pangs of hell.

In few short years she too was laid  
Beside those tiny flowers,  
Until the sleeping dead shall raise  
In Christ the Heavenly power.

Two years ago the mother too  
Was suddenly called away,  
To join her little band above  
Where all is bright as day.

So then that gloomy home was left  
To father and one son,

To muse each day with memory  
Of joys that now are gone.

This gentleman who passed away  
November the eight day,  
The year of 1896  
Now moulders in the clay.

This father now is laid away  
To head that churchyard band  
His soul now shares their glories too  
In that bright happy land.

His mother moulders in the grave  
His soul now rests on high  
(line missing)  
And gain the immortal prize.

And while we mourn their absence here  
We savour it with hope  
Of meeting those departed friends  
Amidst the blessed group.

His loved ones, some have gone before  
And some here yet remain  
That shared such solid sympathy  
To home and at his grave.

This sympathy was sure and true  
To state this I will dare  
Appealing to the assemblage  
That filled the house of prayer.

His son whose sorrow in his store  
Is left alone at home,  
Oh, may he meekly say to God  
Oh Lord thy will be done.

Did not this poetry as said at first  
Bring to you grief and joy?  
To part with such good friends is grief  
But hope to meet is joy.

Composed by Duncan MacDonald, a lay preacher and blacksmith,  
for his neighbour in Grey's Hollow, Cape North, Aspy Bay  
region--Nov 14, 1896. The text is taken from Bob  
Fitzgerald's unpublished history of the Aspy Bay region.

**OUR LOST ONE**

From earth and its hard dark places  
 To the beautiful morning land,  
 God called my darling home to himself  
 To peace at his own right hand.

The soul insoiled (unsoiled) by earth's sin stains,  
 The love with youth's pure light,  
 Shall feel never more in our darkness.  
 In the soul land there is no night.

He walks in God's own sunshine.  
 He feels no care nor strife.  
 Oh, our hearts are lonely without him.  
 He hath but entered into light.

We join hearts in that upper country.  
 Love outlasts death and time.  
 Our hearts are bound to his heart  
 And to God in that fairer clime.

Taken from the Gwinn family Bible, this obituary verse was probably written by Bessie Edward Gwinn's aunt, Lexa Gwinn, on the death of Lexa's daughter.

**ORAN BROIN**

Gur e mise tha fo mhulad  
 O na bhuinig an t-eug thu.

Fonn:--Tha mi trom 's tu gam dhith,  
 Mo bhean fhin, m'eudail.  
 Tha mi trom 's tu gam dhith.

Tha mo chridhe ro bhronach,  
 'S air bheag solais as d'enghmais.

'S beag an t-ioghnadh sin dhomhsa,  
 'N deigh m'eolais mu d' bheusan.

'S mi nach faca riamh gruaim ort  
 O na fhuair mi thu 'n ceud la.

Bha thu suairce na d' nadur,  
 'S cha robh namhaid fo'n ghrein duit.

An diugh 's falamh tha t-aite  
Far 'm bu ghnath leat bhi feumail,

Ann a riaghladh san fhardaich,  
Is do phaisean toirt geill dhuit.

Iad a nis dheth bronach,  
Is cha neonach leum fhein sin.

'S goirt na buillean a thuair sinn  
Ann an cuairt-ghaoth na deuchainn.

Dh'fhairich thusa ro chruaidh iad--  
Fath mo thruaighe gun gheill thu:

Dh'fhag thu mise gu buileach,  
'S tha mo thuireadh gun fheum dhomh.

Cha chuir tuireadh ort gluasad--  
As an uaigh cha dean eirigh.

Cha till thu ruinn tuilleadh,  
Ged' tha do lurainn ort feumach.

Se Fear-riaghlaidh an t-saoghail,  
A thug gaol dhuinn 's nach treig sinn,

A thug uam thu bhean ghradhach--  
Ga ar faigail fo eislean.

Ach se m' dhochas gur fearr dhuit  
Ann am Paras le'r Deibhidh:

Ann an comunn an t-slan' ghear  
Thug gu brath as gach pein thu:

Ann an urram cho gloirmhor  
'S gur beag eolas fo'n ghrein air.

'S mithich dhomhsa dha strìochdadh--  
'Se mo mhiann a bhi reidh ris.

Bidhidh Esan gam' threorach'  
'S bidh mo dhochas gu leir ann.

'S nuair a theid mi thar Iordan  
Bidh sinn comhla ri cheile.

Far an coinnich na cairdean  
A thuair gras 'sa rinn feum dheth.

(The printed text continues in English:) The foregoing  
verses refer to the lamented death of Mrs. Archibald

McDonald, Big Intervale, Cape North, C. B. daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Angus McLeod, Middle Harbour. The sad event occurred April 29th, 1905, in the 41st year of her age, a few weeks after the death of their dear little boy, David, who received fatal injuries by going over a high bank while coasting. She left a large family and a large circle of friends to mourn an irreparable loss.

#### AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF ORAN BROIN

I am sorrowful  
Since death took you away.

Chorus: I am heartbroken and I need you  
My sweet girl, my darling  
I am heartbroken and I need you

My heart is mournful  
Deprived of the light of your presence.

That is no surprise to me  
After knowing your virtues.

I never saw you frown  
Since the first day I saw you.

You were gentle in nature  
You had no enemy under the sun.

Today the place is empty  
Where you were needed,

In managing the household,  
And caring for your children.

They are sad without you  
That is not strange to me.

Sore is the blow we received  
In the whirlwind of hardship.

You felt them too hard--  
It caused me misery until you yielded.

You left me completely,  
My weeping is useless.

Tears will not move you--  
You will not rise from the grave.



How little did they ever dream  
That death would use them so.

It's when they reached that fatal place  
Down by the Petrie's farm  
They thought if they would separate  
It would surely do no harm.

And as they entered in the bush  
Each one was on their own  
And for awhile they hunted  
They hunted all alone.

As Andrew now was in the lead  
He came unto a turn  
And here he saw the bushes move  
And aimed that fatal gun.

But oh, too late! Oh, cruel fate  
The awful deed was done  
And Tom FitzGerald fell to the ground  
Caught by his comrade's gun.

When Andrew saw what he had done  
His senses soon were gone  
He wrung his hands and called his friends  
And threw away his gun.

As Freeman now not far from there  
Did hear his comrade scream  
And racing to that fatal place  
Oh, what a desperate scene.

Poor Tommy lay upon the ground  
His life-blood ebbing past  
And Freeman was the only one  
That could get help now fast.

As Freeman left for the nearest home  
About a mile away  
A message to the doctor  
Who came without delay.

Was taken to the wounded man  
But shook his head in woe;  
Poor Tommy's life was nearly gone  
There was nothing he could do.

A message then was sent ahead  
To warn his family dear  
And in that little cottage  
All eyes were wet with tears.

So, hunters, now a warning take  
From this sad tragedy  
And never aim that fatal gun  
At what you cannot see.

For it could be a brother,  
A father, or a son  
And when that shot is fired  
The awful deed is done.

Lovingly remembered and sadly  
missed by his aunt and uncle,  
John and Sadie Theriault.

Written by John Theriault of Smelt Brook, Aspy Bay region.  
Andrew Dunphy was his mentor.

**APPENDIX B****THE WILLIE CRAIG**

It was on the eighteenth night of June  
The big round moon shone bright,  
I saw a man on board the Craig  
With hair and whiskers white.

When I inquired I soon found out  
Tom Dixon was his name  
And for to superintend the job  
On board the Craig he came.

The Willie Craig was a noble ship  
Two hundred tons or more  
But on a dark and foggy night  
The Craig she ran ashore.

And now Tom Dixon came on board  
No boaster or no brag,  
He gathered up his sons and friends  
To float the Willie Craig.

An anchor seven hundred  
And a cable long and stout  
There let'n lie Tom come bim-bye  
He'll damn soon bust'n out.

Now all Tom's boys were husky,  
All rugged tall and slim,  
And down they came all in a group  
Was Tom and Jim and them.

Our decks they soon were crowded  
When forward I did peep,  
And there I saw true to his post  
Was Mickey fast asleep.

But Dixon quickly reached his side  
And on him laid his hand,  
Here on the deep's no place to sleep  
Wake up, wake up young man.

We pulled and hauled on all our lines  
Till everything came taut,  
With more than superhuman strength  
The anchor home Tom brought.

And everything went off so smooth  
Without a hitch or snag,  
The tide is up I feel her move  
Off floats the Willie Craig.

"My gratitude," said Captain John,  
"I grant to one and all."  
"Your gratitude," said one and all,  
"Thank Dixon for it all.

"You may well sing his praises  
From morning until dark,  
There's not one inch of Aspy Bay  
But bears Tom's grappling mark."

Now Tom stands on the quarterdeck  
And speaks to all his sons,  
"I think I will go home my lads.  
Our work here is all done.

"And since success has crowned our work  
We'll leave her boys like rats.  
Now the Willie Craig to anchor lies  
And I'll turn in with Pats'."

## APPENDIX C

Two Songs by Joe Scott  
found in the Gwinn family Bible.  
They came to Aspy Bay on the body of Daniel Gwinn.

## WILLIAM SULLIVAN

I would have you pay attention  
To a story I'll relate,  
Concerning William Sullivan  
Who met a dreadful fate,  
Who in eighteen and ninety-five  
Did leave his native home,  
And left his friends and kindred  
Far in foreign lands to roam.

On the day he left his happy home  
Nearby the river's strand,  
His poor old feeble father  
He took him by the hand,  
Saying "When you're far from home  
In distant lands you roam,  
I would have you to remember, son,  
The old folks here at home.

"We are growing old and feeble now,  
Our hair is turning grey,  
And our frames will soon be mouldering  
In the cold and silent clay.  
And to have you go and leave us now  
Would hasten on," he said,  
"Those grey hair (sic) you see gathering  
In your poor old parent's head."

Now his poor old feeble mother,  
As she stood there by his side,  
The tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks,  
Quite bitterly she cried,  
Saying, "Willie, dearest Willie,"  
Why do you from us stray," (sic)  
It will almost break my poor old heart  
To see you go away.

"Oh, how well do I remember,  
It seems but yesterday,  
That it's been three long dreary years  
Since Douglas went away,  
But he ne'er returned in life again,"  
With quivering lips, she said,  
"They brought your brother back to me,  
My son, but he was dead.

"And there was Bob another,  
 Who but just one year ago,  
 Went away to seek his fortune  
 Far in foreign lands, you know;  
 But ah, alas, poor Robert,  
 For fortune that he found  
 Was a grave beside his brother  
 In that yonder church yard ground.

"And yet there is another,  
 For you're going to leave us now,  
 Ah, no wonder there are traces  
 Of sorrow on my brow.  
 No wonder that my eyes are dim  
 My hair is turning grey  
 Remember, son, you may have children  
 Of your own some day."

"Oh, I know dear mother, you are old  
 Your head is bending low,  
 And I \_\_\_\_\_ your hair is turning grey  
 Your step is growing \_\_\_\_\_ and drear,  
 But my \_\_\_\_\_  
 Last night my \_\_\_\_\_,  
 Oh I fain would stay with you here,  
 But, mother dear, I must go.

"In the town of Rechibucto here,  
 A maiden fair doth dwell,  
 And I love that comely creature more  
 More than mortal tongue can tell.  
 She loves me, dearest mother,  
 And my words are not in vain,  
 But she slights me, for my poverty  
 She looks upon with disdain."

Then up spoke his aged mother,  
 And her words were very true,  
 "The girl that loves you for your gold  
 Is not the girl for you;  
 The one that loves you for yourself,  
 Is true, will always last,  
 While water flows and crickets sing  
 Through those fields of waving grass."

They were standing by a cottage  
 On a pleasant summer morn,  
 And the glorious sun was rising,  
 For the day so fair had dawned,  
 \_\_\_\_\_ perfume of roses

\_\_\_\_\_ . . . .

(Portion missing, torn away.)

But if you're bound to leave us now,  
 To try you to detain  
 If your mind is bent on roving, son,  
 My words would be in vain."  
 And she raised her eyes toward heaven  
 With fervent heart did pray,  
 That God wold (would?) guard her wandering son  
 In lands so far away.

He kissed his mother tenderly  
 And pressed his father's hand,  
 He kissed his sisters o'er and o'er  
 As they stood on the strand,  
 And in turning round he waved his hand  
 Unto his brothers' calls  
 "Farewell dear brothers, I'm away  
 For the town of Berlin Falls."

Since then two years have passed  
 And he in many lands did roam,  
 But he never did forget  
 Those loved ones left at home.  
 He intended to return again,  
 I think this very fall,  
 But oh, comes death's untimely hand  
 That puts an end to all.

It was in the town of Bemis, Maine,  
 Where gently flows the rills,  
 Where the echo of the woodman's ax  
 Awakes the silent hills,  
 On the 19th day of October,  
 On Tuesday afternoon,  
 That William Sullivan was killed  
 All in his youth and bloom.

He was butting off a spruce, the winds  
 Had blown across the way,  
 The winds had blown up by the roots  
 So I was told one day;  
 And when this spruce was chopped off,  
 The roots so large they say  
 Instead of falling back to place  
 It tipped the other way.

Oh \_\_\_ killed him in an instant,  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stone  
 Completely covered him from sight,  
 And he was all alone.  
 His companions loudly did call his name,  
 But there was nothing heard  
 But the echo of their voices,  
 Or the scream of some wild bird.

But at last they found the spot  
 Where his cold lifeless body lay,  
 They quickly dug him from the mass  
 Of \_\_\_\_\_ and earth and clay;  
 Tenderly they bore his form  
 In blankets to the train,  
 And a little pallet was prepared  
 And in it he was lain.

He was taken by John Norman  
 To the town of Rumford Falls,  
 Who laid him in his little house  
 With small narrow walls;  
 He took him then from Rumford Falls  
 As far as Bryants Pond,  
 And his brother-in-law then took him  
 To his distant home beyond.

On the bonny, bonny banks of Bass,  
 \_\_\_\_\_ leafy green....

(This is where the printed sheet ends.)

#### HOWARD CARRICK

My name is Howard Carrick,  
 In Grand Falls I was born  
 In a pleasant little cottage  
 On the banks of the Saint John  
 Where small birds chant their notes so true,  
 Where the tumbling waters roar  
 The ivy vine doeth thickly twine  
 Round that cottage on the shore.

My aging parents being poor  
 Could not maintain us all,  
 I had to leave my native home  
 For our little farm was small;  
 I lived there quite contentedly  
 Till the year of eighty-four,  
 When I left my aged parents dear,  
 For the Bay of Fundy's Shore.

The day I left my happy home  
 They took me by the hand,  
 Saying, "Oh, don't forget your parents lad,  
 When in a foreign land."  
 My mother led me to a seat,  
 Beneath the willow tree,  
 With quivering lips bade me sit down,  
 For she wished to talk with me.

"You see on yonder hillside,  
 Where the grass is growing green,  
 Where the lilies and the violets  
 And the wild rose can be seen,  
 Fragrant flowers numberless  
 Of every shade or hue,  
 They are beautiful for to behold,  
 All wet with early dew.

"The dewdrops sparkle in the sun  
 Like diamonds bright and rare,  
 While odors lovely and sweet  
 Perfume the summer air;  
 Those flowers are magnificent  
 And attractive to the eye,  
 Still remember that the snake  
 Beneath their colors lie.

"And when in strange and foreign lands  
 I would have you to beware,  
 Each pleasure has its poison too,  
 And every sweet its snare;  
 Shun bad company my boy,  
 And from strong drink refrain,  
 Don't patronize those gambling hells,  
 Look on them with disdain.

"When you are tempted to do wrong  
 Have courage to say no,  
 Each victory will strengthen you  
 The tempter to o'erthrow,  
 And don't forget that old proverb,  
 One that's true and old:  
 All are not gems that sparkle,  
 All that glitters is not gold."

I rose up from my rustic seat,  
 Where the dewdrops bright and fair  
 Had bid the rose a fond adieu,  
 We watched them disappear,  
 One by one did fade away  
 Beneath the sun's bright ray,  
 The time had come when I must leave,  
 I could no longer stay.

I kissed my mother's tear-stained face,  
 Bid her a long farewell,  
 My feelings at that moment,  
 Ah, no mortal tongue can tell!  
 My brothers and my sisters  
 In a group stood by the door,  
 I waved my hand and left them  
 By that cottage on the shore.

My parents moved to Haverhill, Mass.,  
 And sold their little farm,  
 Four years ago a letter came  
 Which filled me with alarm,  
 "Your mother dear is dying,  
 Her heart for you doth yearn  
 And constantly repeats your name,  
 'Has my wandering son returned?'"

I hastened home, but, ah, too late,  
 For everything was o'er,  
 The curtains they were closely drawn,  
 Black crepe hung on the door;  
 And now she sleeps that long long sleep  
 Beneath the churchyard sod,  
 Four long years have passed and gone  
 Since her spirit went to God.

Since then I've travelled in the East,  
 And in the South also,  
 I've travelled in the western lands  
 Where the lofty redwoods grow;  
 But my mother's warning did not heed,  
 And like the silly fly,  
 Got tangled in a silken web  
 And now I'm doomed to die.

I rue the day I left my home  
 And caused my parents pain,  
 I curse the hour that I arrived  
 All in the State of Maine,  
 For it's bad whiskey and bad women,  
 They to me have gave  
 A blighted life, disgrace and shame,  
 Soon a dark dishonoured grave.

Today I'm lying in a room  
 In the town of Rumford Falls,  
 My feverish eyes are roving round  
 Upon its whitewashed walls;  
 The agony I undergo,  
 I cannot long endure,  
 My limbs are weak and painful,  
 I am dying slow but sure.

My money it has long since fled,  
 My friends they are but few,  
 I will snap the tender thread of life  
 And bid this world adieu  
 I will tie this cord unto the hinge  
 Upon my chamber door  
 There is room enough for me to hang  
 Beneath it and the floor.

Farewell to earth and all things gay  
 And home and friends adieu,  
 Farewell unto that girl I love  
 May God watch over you;  
 No more we'll roam in groves so green  
 To hear the thrushes sing,  
 She is purer than the lily fair  
 That blooms all in the spring.

And when I'm dead this world will roll  
 Just the same as e'er  
 The fawn will play and birds will sing  
 In shady woodlands fair,  
 The grass will grow and just as green  
 The flowers will bloom as gay,  
 What signifies a mortal man  
 When slumbering in the clay.

At twelve o'clock John Derken came  
 To see his charge once more,  
 He found his body hanging  
 To a hinge up on the door,  
 He cut him down and spread the news,  
 And many a cheek grew pale,  
 And thrilled with wonder many a heart  
 To hear the mournful tale.

\* \* \* \*

His remains now lie mouldering  
 By his loving mother's side,  
 Poor thing she never lived to know  
 The cruel death he died.  
 And now young men a warning take  
 By this sad tale of woe,  
 Shun bad company or they  
 Will prove your overthrow

By Joe Scott

Price: 10¢

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