

# The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler: The Role of a CBC Film in the Cape Breton Fiddle Revival

Marie Thompson

Volume 35, Number 2, Spring/Printemps 2006

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad35\\_2art01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad35_2art01)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thompson, M. (2006). The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler:: The Role of a CBC Film in the Cape Breton Fiddle Revival. *Acadiensis*, 35(2), 5–26.

Article abstract

*Un documentaire d'une demi-heure diffusé sur les ondes du réseau anglais de Radio-Canada en 1972 véhiculait le message selon lequel la musique traditionnelle écossaise des violoneux du Cap-Breton, en Nouvelle-Écosse, était en déclin et serait bientôt disparue. Le film Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler (Disparition du violoneux du Cap-Breton) alléguait que la musique moderne était davantage populaire chez les jeunes des années 1960 et 1970 et que, par conséquent, la tradition de transmettre le style et les pièces de musique des immigrants écossais du 19e siècle aux générations suivantes de Cap-Bretonnais serait rompue. Après la diffusion du documentaire, un mouvement a progressivement pris de l'ampleur afin de contrer le message exprimé par ce documentaire. Le premier festival de violoneux écossais s'est tenu en juillet 1973, une association de violoneux du Cap-Breton a été mise sur pied et les occasions d'apprendre la musique traditionnelle sont devenues plus accessibles aux personnes de tous âges, ce qui a permis à la musique traditionnelle du Cap-Breton non seulement de survivre, mais aussi d'évoluer vers des formes nouvelles et intéressantes.*

# The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler: The Role of a CBC Film in the Cape Breton Fiddle Revival

MARIE THOMPSON

Independent Scholar/CBC Television

*Un documentaire d'une demi-heure diffusé sur les ondes du réseau anglais de Radio-Canada en 1972 véhiculait le message selon lequel la musique traditionnelle écossaise des violoneux du Cap-Breton, en Nouvelle-Écosse, était en déclin et serait bientôt disparue. Le film Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler (Disparition du violoneux du Cap-Breton) alléguait que la musique moderne était davantage populaire chez les jeunes des années 1960 et 1970 et que, par conséquent, la tradition de transmettre le style et les pièces de musique des immigrants écossais du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle aux générations suivantes de Cap-Bretonnais serait rompue. Après la diffusion du documentaire, un mouvement a progressivement pris de l'ampleur afin de contrer le message exprimé par ce documentaire. Le premier festival de violoneux écossais s'est tenu en juillet 1973, une association de violoneux du Cap-Breton a été mise sur pied et les occasions d'apprendre la musique traditionnelle sont devenues plus accessibles aux personnes de tous âges, ce qui a permis à la musique traditionnelle du Cap-Breton non seulement de survivre, mais aussi d'évoluer vers des formes nouvelles et intéressantes.*

*In 1972 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired a half-hour documentary that conveyed the message that traditional Scottish-style fiddle music in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, was in decline and would soon die out. The film, Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler, argued that modern music was more popular with the young generation of the 1960s and 1970s and that, as a result, transmission of the style and tunes handed down from 19th-century Scottish immigrants to Cape Breton would be broken. Following the broadcast, momentum gradually developed to counter the message in the documentary. The first Festival of Scottish Fiddling was held in July 1973, a Cape Breton Fiddling Association was established and opportunities to learn traditional music became more widely accessible to people of all ages, thus allowing the Cape Breton music tradition not only to survive but also to evolve in new and exciting ways.*

ON 6 JANUARY 1972, THE CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION aired a 30-minute film, *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, on the network's affiliate in Cape Breton. There was little fanfare, but the broadcast made a lasting impression on the thousands who saw it. Researched and written by freelance journalist Ronald MacInnis, and produced and directed by Charles Reynolds, *Vanishing Cape Breton*

Marie Thompson, "The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler: The Role of a CBC Film in the Cape Breton Fiddle Revival", *Acadiensis*, XXXV, 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 5-26.

*Fiddler* was a gentle exploration of traditional Scottish Highland fiddle music in Cape Breton in the early 1970s. It was the first work in any medium to name the music as solely “Cape Breton” music. It was also the first work of any kind to suggest that this music was vanishing.<sup>1</sup>

The message of the film was inflammatory but, as this paper will show, the reaction was subtle. A careful search of newspaper archives reveals no letters-to-the-editors of newspapers and no public protests. Instead, there were discussions around kitchen tables, in church presbyteries and at country dances. What could be done to show the CBC and its reporter that they were wrong? Gradually, a movement arose to promote Cape Breton fiddle music in a new way. On 6-8 July 1973, the first of a series of biennial festivals devoted almost exclusively to the celebration of Cape Breton fiddle music was held at Glendale, Cape Breton. Organizers of the event began to realize that some aspects of the documentary’s message were accurate. Young people did not want to play the fiddle anymore. They were more interested in rock and roll. Furthermore, performance fiddling in Cape Breton featured a star system that discouraged other fiddlers from playing in public and contributed to the perception that there were fewer fiddlers than there actually were. Neither of these trends, it turned out, was irreversible.

In the years following the CBC broadcast, newspaper articles referred to the “myth of the vanishing Cape Breton fiddler”. The word “myth” in that context meant “a mistaken belief”. The people being cited were community leaders determined to discount a damaging message delivered by the powerful medium of television about the disappearance of a musical tradition. The references become more numerous with time, so that the phrase “myth of the vanishing Cape Breton fiddler” has taken on a wider meaning. It now refers to a story about culture and empowerment and a people’s response to a perceived threat.

More than three decades later, it is clear that the message of warning perceived in the documentary had a measurable (if unintended) impact: a fiddling association was formed, attempts were made to encourage young people to play and the fiddling tradition is now widely accepted as being on a firm footing. A core group of dedicated people, including older fiddlers, succeeded in giving the fiddle tradition a higher status than it had in the past. As this paper documents, the revival of Cape Breton fiddle music that began in the mid-1970s was, in large measure, a direct response to the CBC’s *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

### **Cape Breton Fiddling in Context**

For a variety of reasons, instrumental folk music in the Maritimes is a poorly developed field of academic study. The traditional Scottish-style fiddling found among Cape Bretoners is an aural art form, which makes it an especially difficult topic to research. Some of the reluctance to address the place of traditional fiddle music in Cape Breton and elsewhere can also be traced to a bias that George Proctor described in 1984: “The term ‘fiddle’”, he wrote, “is one which often brings a smile of derision

1 Marie Thompson, “The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler, 1955 -1982”, M.A. thesis, Saint Mary’s University, 2003. This paper is based on the research conducted for this M.A. thesis and was made possible with the co-operation of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

when mentioned in educated circles. Its association with unrefined music over the course of history has led to its less than respectable status”.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, this attitude has changed. There are now at least a dozen works on the history and character of traditional music in Cape Breton, most notably the academic studies by Elizabeth Doherty, Kate Dunlay, Virginia Garrison, Ian MacKinnon and John Gibson.<sup>3</sup> Seen through the lens of folklore studies, the culture of Gaelic Cape Breton, as with many other rural-based cultures with European roots, was considered endangered following the Second World War because of the incursions of “modern” ideas and technology. In his introduction to *Cape Breton Fiddler*, Allister MacGillivray described the conditions for Cape Breton fiddling after the massive out-migration of young people from rural communities in the 1950s and 1960s: “It appeared imminent that, like the Gaelic, the Cape Breton fiddler was to become but a memory of a by-gone age”.<sup>4</sup> MacGillivray, Doherty, Garrison and MacKinnon give specific credit to *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* for making people aware of this situation, but none of them examine the film in detail or the response to it. Fortunately, the relatively recent nature of the events described in this paper allowed the use of interviews with participants. In addition, Frank MacInnis, who played a major role in the movement to promote the Cape Breton fiddling tradition, generously permitted access to the copious letters, notes and other records that he holds from his involvement in the founding of the Cape Breton Fiddling Association.

Cape Breton culture traces its origins to the Scottish Highland immigrants who began arriving in Nova Scotia in the late 1700s.<sup>5</sup> After their defeat by the British at Culloden in 1745, clan chieftains lost their military power. Many became landlords and ordered villages to be cleared to facilitate livestock farming. Some of those evicted moved to crofting tenancies and worked in the kelp-gathering industry in order to pay their high rents. Before 1815 many left of their own accord to go to North America. After 1815 the kelp industries collapsed and more lands were cleared of people to make way for sheep. Thus began a major migration of Highlanders, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, westward across the Atlantic to North America and beyond. The Highlanders who left old Scotland to seek freedom of expression and opportunity in a New Scotland brought their bagpipes, fiddles and dance steps with them. Meanwhile, both political and religious persecution of Highland customs led to

2 George A. Proctor, “Fiddle Music as a Manifestation of Canadian Regionalism”, in Edith Fowke and Carole H. Carpenter, eds., *Explorations in Canadian Folklore* (Toronto, 1985), p. 227.

3 Elizabeth Doherty, “The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition, c1928-1995”, PhD diss., University of Limerick, 1996; Kate Dunlay, “The Playing of Traditional Scottish Dance Music: Old and New World Styles and Practices”, *Celtic Languages and Peoples: Proceedings of the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies held in Halifax, 16-19 August 1989* (Halifax, 1992); Virginia Garrison, “Traditional and Non-Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices in Folk Music: An Ethnographic Field Study of Cape Breton Fiddling”, PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1985; Ian MacKinnon, “Fiddling to Fortune: The Role of Commercial Recordings made by Cape Breton Fiddlers in the Fiddle Music Tradition of Cape Breton Island”, MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1989; John Gibson, *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping: 1745-1945* (Montreal, 1998).

4 Allister MacGillivray, *The Cape Breton Fiddler* (1981; Marion Bridge, NS, 1997), p. 4.

5 On the context of Scottish immigration and culture, see D. Campbell and R.A. MacLean, *Beyond the Atlantic Roar: A Study of the Nova Scotia Scots* (Toronto, 1974) and Margaret MacDonell, *The Emigrant Experience: Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America* (Toronto, 1982).

a discontinuance of many styles of music and dance in Scotland.<sup>6</sup>

In Cape Breton the “Gaelic” dance music survived more successfully than did the language. At first the featured musical instruments were bagpipes, but fiddles were cheaper to buy and easier to build.<sup>7</sup> Music was ubiquitous and associated with relaxation and revelry.<sup>8</sup> People gathered to dance, as they had in Scotland, in groups and occasionally as solo step-dancers. A complete description of Cape Breton Scottish dance has been left for another writer, but Dunlay and MacGillivray provide some basic points for the purpose of this paper. “Reels”, reports Dunlay, “are the only form of dance known to be truly indigenous to Scotland, a true Reel consisting of a traveling figure alternating with setting steps danced in one spot. . . . Reels can be danced in different tempos, to either strathspey or reel tunes or to a medley of strathspeys followed by reels. Strathspeys are generally slower than reels and uneven or dotted rhythms, while reels are relatively even”.<sup>9</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Music* describes a reel as being an ancient Scottish dance where “couples dance face-to-face to music in 2/2, 2/4 or 6/8 time divided into clear eight bar sections”.<sup>10</sup> Writing of the performance style in 1981, Alistair MacGillivray describes how each dance set features a medley of dance types that increase progressively in speed and tempo: “As a medley of tunes progresses through the sequence of march, slow strathspey, ‘dance’ strathspey and reel, there occurs a marked sensation of growing anticipation and excitement”.<sup>11</sup>

In the late-19th century, Father Kenneth MacDonald, a Catholic priest in Mabou, attempted to discourage fiddling because he thought it led to excessive alcohol consumption. A few fiddlers handed over their instruments to him to be tossed into the fire.<sup>12</sup> This practice, fortunately, did not prevail. Indeed, many priests themselves were proficient musicians and dancers. By the mid-20th century local Catholic priests encouraged fiddle music and dancing at summer picnics. At Broad Cove, the local Catholic priest initiated the first Broad Cove Scottish Concert in 1956, an afternoon of Gaelic singing, fiddling, bagpiping, step dancing and Highland dancing on the first Sunday in August. It continues to this day.

The Scottish style of fiddling found resonance in other Cape Breton communities. Irish and French settlement predated Scottish immigration and both of these groups brought violins with them. Some of the best performers of the Cape Breton Scottish style of fiddling descend from Irish (i.e., Winston Fitzgerald and Brenda Stubbett) and French backgrounds (i.e., Joe Cormier and Arthur Meuse). At least two members of

6 The evolution from “Scottish” to “Cape Breton Scottish” is discussed by Elizabeth Doherty, “The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition”, especially pp. 54-5.

7 MacKinnon, “Fiddling to Fortune”, p. 20.

8 Frank Rhodes, “Dancing in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia”, in J.F. and T.M. Flett, eds., *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London, 1964), pp. 269-70 (appendix).

9 Kathleen E. Dunlay, “The Playing of Traditional Scottish Dance Music: Old and New World Styles and Practices”, in Cyril J. Byrne, Margaret Harry and Padraid O’Siadhail, eds., *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples: Proceedings for the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies* (Halifax, 1992), p. 174.

10 Peter Gammond, contribution to Alison Latham, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford, 2002), p.1038.

11 MacGillivray, *Cape Breton Fiddler*, p. 6.

12 MacGillivray, *Cape Breton Fiddler*, p. 2.

the Mi'kmaw community, Lee Cremo and Wilfred Prosper, rank high on the list of respected performers.

In the 1940s and 1950s an informal star system for fiddlers arose as a result of their success in recording and broadcasting and the “word of mouth” buzz about who played the best music for community dances. Fiddle competitions, which in other areas of North America gave people with lesser abilities an opportunity to gain experience and improve their skills, were never part of the Cape Breton music scene. Frank MacInnis believes that competitions were discouraged because fiddlers were proud of their individual styles of playing and did not want to submit to what they felt were arbitrary measures of judgment.<sup>13</sup> The result was that the opportunity for public performance in Cape Breton was limited to those performers in demand for dances and broadcasts. Meanwhile, “kitchen fiddlers” kept to their place on the sidelines.

The expression “old time fiddle music” is common across North America to identify the playing of traditional instrumental dance music. Many Maritimers are familiar with the term “down-east music”. It is often associated with Don Messer, the highly popular New Brunswick-born fiddler and bandleader who had his own radio and television show on the CBC for many years. A few Cape Breton fiddlers performed on *Don Messer's Jubilee*, but Messer's style of fiddle music was not the same as the Cape Breton style. He featured ensemble performances combining an orchestra with dancing; in contrast, the majority of Cape Breton dances operate with a fiddler and a pianist. Cape Bretoners admired Messer's talent, but did not often see their identity reflected on his show. Musicians and fans of traditional Cape Breton fiddle music, with its Scottish roots, can distinguish their fiddle tunes from the other styles in the same way that they can distinguish the vocal accents and dialects of the American South from their own. Even if the tunes of the Carolinas or Saskatchewan start out with the same melody, the style of playing is not the same.

### **Ron MacInnis and CBC Television**

Ron MacInnis, who grew up with television and learned to communicate in that medium, played a central role in bringing the Cape Breton fiddling tradition to a wider audience. Born in 1944, he spent the first 14 years of his life in Sydney where his father Lloyd worked for CJCB radio and television. In 1958 the family moved to Halifax where Lloyd became a host for CBC's supper-hour television show *Gazette*. Immersed in the world of broadcasting, Ron MacInnis returned to Sydney in the late 1960s and began freelancing stories to CHER radio station and the CBC's CBI radio. He continued freelancing while completing two bachelor degrees in Science and Education at Dalhousie University in the 1970s.

MacInnis was influenced by David Neima, the general manager of CHER AM radio. According to MacInnis, Neima did a great deal to promote Cape Breton culture and introduced the young freelancer to “old people”, often commenting that their culture “wasn't going to be around long”.<sup>14</sup> MacInnis says that he began to explore the records of the Beaton Institute and he developed an interest in the music, language, humour and story-telling traditions that set the Cape Bretoners of Scottish Gaelic background apart from other Nova Scotians. By the late 1960s MacInnis was

13 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, tape recording, Creignish, NS, 16 August 2002.

14 Ron MacInnis, interview by author, tape recording, Indian Harbour, NS, 8 March 2000.



providing freelance stories to the CBC radio show *Maritime Magazine* on topics such as milling frolics and the Gaelic language. He traveled with a reel-to-reel tape recorder and did his own editing in Sydney. While not exposed to fiddle music by his own family, he began to develop a liking for it, especially once he met some of the older fiddlers in their homes. His observations led him to question whether the traditional music form could survive the onslaught of modern music. He decided to research the question more thoroughly.

The home of Donald and Margaret Gillis in North Sydney was located on Ron MacInnis's research path.<sup>15</sup> Donald was a fish buyer and a fiddling enthusiast; Margaret was a step dancer and encouraged their ten children to learn a variety of musical forms, including violin and guitar as well as Scottish Highland dancing. Their son Sandy worked at CHER radio with Ron and introduced him to his parents in 1971. Donald recalls: "Sandy brought him over one evening. And he started talking about there was no fiddlers. I told him I could take him places where there were lots of fiddlers and drop him there and he'd never find his way home. . . . I just thought he was trying to pull the chips off me".<sup>16</sup> Despite the claims of Donald and Margaret, Ron MacInnis remained convinced that there were only two young fiddlers playing with any proficiency in Cape Breton. They were John Morris Rankin and Kinnon Beaton, both living in Inverness County. He was not swayed by the protests that there were lots of fiddlers out in the countryside.<sup>17</sup>

MacInnis's research into the Cape Breton fiddling tradition led to a half-hour documentary on CBC radio's *Maritime Magazine* early in 1971. On the strength of this work, CBC Television decided to produce a half-hour film to run in a series called "30" from Halifax, one of a number of segments prepared in Halifax for the national afternoon program *Take 30*. *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* was financed by CBC Halifax and *Take 30*, and was directed by a CBC staff producer with staff crew. The executive producer of *Take 30*, Glenn Sarty, originally estimated it would cost \$2000 to produce, although if they chose to shoot it in colour, he warned, "we will consider revising upwards".<sup>18</sup>

The timing was right to gain the attention of a Cape Breton audience for the documentary. While the few people who owned television sets and receiving antennae could pick up American broadcasts by the early 1950s, residents of Cape Breton began watching programs from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in October 1954, when Nate Nathanson created CJCB Television in Sydney. Less than a year later, he built rebroadcast towers in Inverness and Antigonish counties. In addition to the basic CBC network programming, CJCB Television in Sydney provided local live and recorded entertainment.<sup>19</sup> In many parts of rural Canada, including remote areas of Cape Breton, electricity was still not available in the 1950s, and when it was, the

15 Donald and Margaret Gillis have passed away since this interview was tape-recorded.

16 Donald Gillis, interview by author, tape recording, North Sydney, NS, 18 June 2002.

17 Ron MacInnis, interviews by author, tape recordings, Indian Harbour, NS, 8 March 2000, 8 May 2002 and 15 August 2002. An additional interview was recorded at the same place on videotape for CBC Television, 27 October 2000.

18 Glenn Sarty to Sandy Lumsden, 7 May 1971, telex in program files "Take 30", RG 41, vol. 839, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa. The show was shot in colour, but there is apparently no surviving record of the final cost.

19 CJCB switched to the CTV network in 1972 when the CBC established its own public station (CBIT).

cost of television sets was prohibitive for many people. William Harper, the author of *A Picture By Christmas: Early CBC Television in Nova Scotia*, recalls that a 21-inch Admiral with phonograph cost \$689 in 1954; a 21-inch Sylvania cost \$399.<sup>20</sup> A decade later conditions had changed considerably. Most homes had electricity and a television set. People quickly accepted the routine of the television schedule, which was printed in daily and weekly newspapers. They depended on the local and national newscasts and loved entertainment programs such as *Don Messer's Jubilee*, *Juliette*, *Hockey Night in Canada* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

The CBC's production center in Halifax, which began broadcasting on 20 December 1954, spent a great deal of time, effort and money producing documentaries and live broadcasts reflecting the society and culture of Maritimers. CBC producers interviewed elderly people in Meat Cove, broadcast from the bottom of salt mines in Pugwash and produced dramatized recreations of life among the Mi'kmaq. Many of their efforts were aired on national network shows such as *Take 30* and *Telescope*.<sup>21</sup> It was for *Take 30* that CBC Halifax decided to produce *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* as a "one-off" effort.

### **The Documentary**

There are no production records left to detail the dates of the shooting or the total budget, but the events filmed for the documentary indicate that the crew was on location in Cape Breton at the time of the 1971 Broad Cove Scottish Concert held in August. Ron MacInnis's memory of the shoot is vague. He does not recall any discussion about why the CBC would be interested in the subject other than the fact that it was controversial and bound to attract an audience, at least in Cape Breton: "But I don't remember any discussions. It was just something that one just did. It sounded like an interesting time and back in those days when CBC was a little wilder. Perhaps it was a good excuse for a party, to go to Cape Breton, file in some trucks and have a toot. That's what happened, as well, it always went with the territory".<sup>22</sup>

There is no doubt that such a trip would have been an opportunity to get away from the CBC plant and have a good time. While mixing alcohol with work was against CBC policy, employees frequently drank together after hours when they were on the road.<sup>23</sup> The producer in charge of the five-person shoot, Charlie Reynolds, was notorious among the CBC staff for his prickly personality. He had a bad temper and would often scold or yell at guests as well as his fellow staff. A native of Ireland, he relished his job as a television producer at the CBC. One former colleague and friend, Peter MacNeil, recalls: "If we come up with an idea and we'd be talking about doing some type of show, well if Charlie thought that might be good he'd jump on it full tilt. He would go with it".<sup>24</sup>

The dominant journalistic tradition is to seek balance. Because documentary television is so expensive to produce, it is generally considered necessary to decide in

20 William Harper, retired CBC television producer, e-mail to author, 22 August 2002. See also William Harper, *A Picture By Christmas: Early CBC Television in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 2002).

21 Harper, e-mail to author.

22 Ron MacInnis, interview by author, 8 March 2000.

23 Author's personal observation and understanding after almost three decades of working for the CBC.

24 Peter MacNeil, interview by author, tape recording, Halifax, NS, 27 June 2002.



advance who will be the interview subjects based on what they are likely to say. Although a television crew may not be capable of doing scientific surveys or polls, they try to present opinions that are representative of opposing views. MacInnis knew who he could interview, what they were likely to say and what reaction these comments would provoke because of his research for the radio program. Balance was sought, but the finished piece maintained a strong editorial point of view reflected in the unambiguous statement in the title – *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

The film featured two well-known characters in the Cape Breton traditional music world who took opposing views on the central theme. One was Father John Angus Rankin, the parish priest at Glendale, Cape Breton. Father Rankin encouraged and directed many traditional music concerts throughout Cape Breton. He was deeply interested in Gaelic language, history and storytelling. In the documentary, Father Rankin explained how he perceived that the music had changed in Cape Breton: “They left for oppression, you could say, and once they arrived in this country they got the spirit of freedom and that spirit of freedom is expressed in the music, which is not found in the music in Scotland. You have a kind of sadness or sorrowful feeling in the music as played by the violin players over there. There’s more gaiety and more joy and more freedom in the music here”. His most important point was stated twice in the program: “The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler. What is that? As long as we have Scotchmen, Irishmen, Frenchmen and Mi’kmaq Indians who love Scotch music we’re going to have this Gaelic Cape Breton fiddler with us”.<sup>25</sup>

His position was contradicted by another memorable character in the film, Dan R. MacDonald. It was the presence of “Dan R.” in the documentary that gave the piece its power. One of the most highly respected of the Cape Breton fiddlers because of the large volume of music he had composed, Dan Rory MacDonald lived simply, was generous with his music, drank a lot and was a born performer. The crew spent considerable time in Dan R’s home interviewing him about his music. He speculated that the future of fiddling was shaky: “Oh I don’t know in the world. But sometimes I think that Scotch music is dying in Cape Breton. Sometimes I think”.<sup>26</sup>

Father John Angus Rankin later described his exposure to the TV crew when they arrived around the time of the Broad Cove Concert in August of 1971: “So they got me so mad, eh – I’ll get like Coady at times – I’ll hold on, see, but then, if I blow, I’m going to blow. So I told the CBC I didn’t give a darn whether every Scotch fiddler would die, or every Irish fiddler. I said, ‘The French have picked it up, the Mi’kmaqs have picked it up’. I said, ‘It’s going to go on’”. Father Rankin’s outburst had been provoked by comments made to him by “the CBC fellow”. Asked at the last minute to direct ten or twelve fiddlers together on stage, Father Rankin had put a line-up of tunes together, checked to see if they were acceptable to the musicians and proceeded to lead them through a set while the CBC camera rolled. “This fellow from the CBC came along”, Father Rankin stated. “He said, ‘How long were you practicing that?’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘How many weeks did you have the group together?’ I said, ‘I had no weeks’. He said, ‘Who are you trying to kid?’ I said, ‘You can believe it or

25 *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, CBC Television, 6 January 1972.

26 *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

not”<sup>27</sup> Ron MacInnis was not a witness to the altercation but suggests that it would not have been out of character for Charlie Reynolds to challenge the fierce Catholic priest.<sup>28</sup>

For the most part, people in Cape Breton accepted the crew with open arms, happy to argue or agree with Ron MacInnis’s proposals. One such person was Eddie Rodgers, who had been present during another shoot at a kitchen ceilidh. It featured well-known Cape Breton fiddlers Winnie Chafe and Dan Hughie MacEachern. Rodgers, too, was a fiddler, but not one of the “stars”. He was excited to be invited to the filming of the session. It did not take him long to figure out what was going on: “During the course of the evening, we realized that this was perhaps for real and that people across the country would see it and it was in fact touching on the possibilities of the fiddle being no longer, the fiddle actually vanishing. . . . I wasn’t surprised because at that time, remember this was the early 70s, and at that time, there weren’t very many violin players of note playing. There were square dances, but you know I could have counted the number of fiddlers that were playing for these dances on my hands, so I wasn’t surprised”.<sup>29</sup>

The shoot ended and the crew rolled home with cans of films and some good stories. As was the practice at the time, Charlie Reynolds, the producer/director, sat with the film editor to put the show together. Meanwhile, Ron MacInnis wrote the script. They recorded an introduction with host Jim Bennett in Studio One on Bell Road in Halifax on 17 November 1971. The piece was shipped to Toronto and went to air. There is no CBC published material on the film and no advance promotional information. It ran on CJCB – Channel 4, the CBC affiliate in Sydney, on 6 January 1972.<sup>30</sup> Ron MacInnis says it was rebroadcast in the *Take 30* slot, nationally, later that year, but no reference to the later broadcast can be found either at the CBC or at Library and Archives Canada. There is no way of knowing how many people watched it because no ratings of the CJCB broadcast are available. It inspired no editorials, letters-to-the-editor or other published comments until it became part of the mythology of the Cape Breton Fiddlers’ Association. At the time it was aired, Ron MacInnis had no idea that it would have such an impact: “I don’t pretend that it was a scheme – that I set out to change the world. We did the program in the same way one would play a lament on a sad occasion. The program was a lament for the passing of the fiddler. . . . It was gone, dead gone, and then it was very sad, and . . . I was pleasantly surprised when it began to bubble and somebody picked up the challenge [to] encourage the fiddlers. I had no idea where it would go, but it caught fire and the rest is history”.<sup>31</sup>

27 Father John Angus Rankin, “With Father John Angus Rankin, Glendale”, *Cape Breton’s Magazine* 45 (1987), p. 69.

28 Ron MacInnis, interview by author, 20 August 2002.

29 Eddie Rodgers, interview by author, videotaped for the CBC, Guysborough, NS, 21 April 2001.

30 The only record is a hand-written notation on a cassette audio tape prepared by Frank MacInnis when he recorded the sound of the broadcast on 6 January 1972. There is no other CBC record available.

31 Ron MacInnis, interview by author, 8 March 2000.

### Decoding the Documentary

There is very little in *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* to support the title. A network audience, unfamiliar with Cape Breton, would have come away with the general impression that some people in Cape Breton were concerned about the survival of the fiddle tradition while others seemed to think there was no cause for worry. This latter belief was reinforced by the visual impact of seeing and hearing examples of the very music that was supposed to be vanishing. However, for a few in the viewing audience, the piece was full of cues (or codes) that had particular meaning. Those cues were aimed at the people who were interviewed in the show and at their friends in Cape Breton. The script contains twelve references to change and loss and only six references to hope of continuity. Visual cues added to the message that there are only aging people playing the fiddle music. A well-known fiddler is heard to say several times that he knows very few young fiddlers and the provocative title predominates, both at the beginning and the end of the programme.

The opening of the documentary establishes that Ron MacInnis is on a journey through rural Cape Breton. As he drives a convertible along the picturesque highway of the Highlands, a score features the jaunty notes of Angus Chisholm playing *Glengarry's Dirk* strathspey. In one imaginative shot, the viewer sees a reflection in the rear-view mirror, a metaphor for a journey into the past. With the mirror crossing the frame on the diagonal, it signals that the story is slightly quirky and off-side and that what we will be seeing is different from our normal reality.

As the fiddle music fades out, the film cuts to a carefully lit interior of a wood-frame house. The camera pans past a pair of snowshoes and stops at a fiddle leaning in the corner. It has no strings. There is an unusual emptiness in the film because the music has fallen silent. It is as if the fiddle has become an artifact on display in a museum. The sequence comes to life again with five unidentified clips, or extracts of interviews, making short declarative statements. While an opening clip introduces the viewer to the words "Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler", the speaker, a priest, asks: "What is that?" The next three clips introduce the notion that there are few young fiddlers. One man says, "I'll tell you there's a lot of them that pulled out and left Cape Breton when they're young and watching too much television, I'd say".<sup>32</sup> The last clip comes from the priest who declares his conviction that Cape Breton fiddling will survive. Thus the tension, or controversy, is established. The camera rests on the ruins of a rickety barn roof as a new fiddle tune is heard and the title of the documentary appears: *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*. Ron MacInnis then walks into the shot carrying the fiddle with no strings and addresses the camera (and the viewer) in what is known in television language as the "on camera standup". There is nothing ambiguous in what he says next: the barn and the fiddle in his hand are symbolic of a way of life that is disappearing as a result of change brought on by urbanization and time. He calls the violin "a time-worn old veteran" as if it has a past but no future. At this point in the show, MacInnis takes the viewer back in time. We meet the Catholic priest again and learn his name: Father John Angus Rankin. Square-jawed, straight-backed, dressed in black with a roman collar and face topped by a shock of white hair, he provides useful information about the way the music from Scotland was brought

32 Unidentified speaker, *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

over after the rebellion of 1745 and transmitted through the generations in Cape Breton.

The next scene is a kitchen ceilidh with five fiddlers, a piano player and two female step dancers. Ron MacInnis's narration explains how these kitchen parties are part of the culture and that the fiddlers here share their tunes and try out new ones. The next five-minute sequence features the Broad Cove Scottish Concert where there seem to be many opportunities for fiddlers to play for a large appreciative audience. In one set, a dozen fiddlers are directed on a stage during an evening concert while several step dancers move on and off the stage. The narrator says step dancing may have originated in Scotland but is "frowned upon" there now.

In the next scene, MacInnis is standing in front of a hillside highway, and reintroduces the concept that most of the people who are really interested in the music are middle-aged or older. Up to this point in the film, there had been about ten minutes of history and background interspersed with the kitchen ceilidh and the Broad Cove musical events. The program is half over. One might expect, given its title and the statement at the beginning of the documentary, that the reporter would begin to present the evidence to support his thesis. Instead, Ron MacInnis spends the next five minutes with one of his heroes. This scene becomes a tribute to fiddler Dan R. MacDonald and a number of other well-known Cape Breton fiddlers, but it derives its impact from the originality of "Dan R." as well as the tight confines of his house in Mabou in which he is filmed. Dan Rory is a very large man, with a wide face. The thick lenses in his glasses obscure his eyes. He is a large man in a small room, in the same way that he is a well-known "star" in the small world of Cape Breton fiddling. The crew amplifies this notion by employing extreme close-ups during the course of the shooting. At times, this leaves the viewer feeling very uncomfortable. Dan R. says on camera that he has written more than 2,000 tunes and there are more coming: "Well, it comes to you like a dream. You can think up anything in the middle of the night or whatever time of day it is by whistling, and you go and you put that together. And you make sure it's an original. That it don't look like anything that was composed in Neil Gow's time, or William Marshall or Skinner. You got to keep away from all that stuff".<sup>33</sup>

Next, MacInnis appears on camera in front of an old water pump, another cue connecting Cape Breton with the past. And for the first time since the opening standup, he states clearly that "our concern is with the future". He says that if fiddling is going to live on, it has to be carried on by young people. But rather than tell us there are very few of those, he introduces us to a young John Morris Rankin.<sup>34</sup> If anything, this next section should be re-assuring to the viewer. We see the 12-year-old boy playing with energy and skill, accompanied by his sisters and brother. From the Rankin home, the scene moves next to a dance hall identified as the Ashby Legion in Sydney. There is little narration in this segment. No comments are made about age or youth other than to focus on 82-year-old dancer, Jimmy Dixon. The hall is full; the dance caller is hot and sweating. The fiddle music of Theresa MacLellan is strong and smooth.

<sup>33</sup> *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

<sup>34</sup> The scenes involving John Morris Rankin acquire greater significance in the 21st century. He died tragically in a highway accident in 1999 after rising to fame with his family music group The Rankins.

In the conclusion to the documentary, the message of loss, first heard in the opening standup, is repeated. MacInnis appears again on camera and articulates for the first time his concern that the Cape Breton fiddler will be drowned out by rock and roll and “other synthetic music”. He couches the statement as a question answered with a common phrase, “Only time will tell”. If the film had ended with this comment, it might not have had as much power; but the film finishes the way it began, with a series of disembodied declarative statements. The first is from Father John Angus Rankin, who challenges the viewer to define the vanishing Cape Breton fiddler. He links the “Gaelic Cape Breton fiddler” to the Scottish, Irish, Acadian and Mi’kmaw populations, stating that as long as they are around the music will survive. This is immediately contradicted by Dan R. MacDonald, who maintains that traditional music is dying out in Cape Breton. A third speaker says fiddles are no longer for sale in Sydney.<sup>35</sup> A fourth speaker reports that the custom of Saturday night dances has died out, except out in the country.<sup>36</sup> The last speaker ends with a more general lament: “We’re very fortunate to have a good abundance of good Scottish players in Cape Breton, but I’m sorry to notice young fellas are not taking the interest in the violin music”. The program ends to the sound of a determined violin march, the “Balkan Hills”, and the sight of the lumbering Dan R. walking up a road away from the camera in the company of the young John Morris Rankin. This image by itself would have suggested hope and continuity, but the credit roll ends with the title *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*. While this is a standard practice in television production, it has the effect of labeling the two characters walking away from the camera. They have now been identified as the vanishing Cape Breton fiddlers. For the fans of fiddle music watching closely in Cape Breton, this coincidence would have had a powerful impact. Of the entire program’s content, it is the title, the expressed “concern” for the future and the staccato series of clips at the beginning and the end of the documentary that resonated in living rooms and kitchens across Cape Breton.

### **The Medium and the Message**

Roland Lorimer and Jean MacNully, drawing upon Harold Innis’s concept of “center-hinterland”, argue that Canada “is the cultural hinterland of the United States” and that public television was developed to “help hinterland Canada survive the onslaught of the entertainment centres in New York and Los Angeles”.<sup>37</sup> To a considerable degree Cape Breton is also the hinterland of a public television system centred elsewhere in Canada but, in its early years, CBC programming was less centralized than it is today. Not only were programmes regularly produced in the Maritimes, they also had an impact. Nevertheless, few communication theorists would have predicted the response of the Cape Breton community to the message in *Vanishing Cape Breton*

35 This was apparently not true. The owner of McKnight’s music store, Mac Skinner, recalls that violins were still sold there, but there were not as many of them and they were not as prominently displayed as were the guitars. See Mac Skinner, interview by author, telephone, Sydney, NS, 4 September 2002.

36 Ashby Legion in Sydney was still holding Scottish dances on Wednesdays, but the big Saturday dances were not the Scottish kind. The Sydney-area newspapers carried advertisements every week announcing the performers; they tended to be “big band” orchestras.

37 Roland Lorimer and Jean MacNully, *Mass Communication in Canada* (Toronto, 1991), p. 306, 309.

*Fiddler*. It struck a spark that lit a fire among those who valued the older musical traditions and who knew that these traditions need not die out. By the 1970s the viewing public was more sophisticated about the role of the media than it was in the 1950s. This was certainly true for some university-educated Cape Bretoners who watched the show. Radio and television were also an important part of the lives of the fiddlers, some of whom had become recording artists in their own right. They may have been living in the hinterland, but they had the knowledge, skills and infrastructure to resist the representation of themselves as members of a quaint and vanishing community.

This is not to imply that the traditional culture was on firm ground by the 1960s. John MacDougall, a fiddler from the Lake Ainslie area of Cape Breton, concedes that “rock and roll made a big mess of everything for a few years”. He recalls that the music of Elvis Presley and the Beatles swept the continent like a storm, reaching into the farthest corners of Cape Breton. It drew young people away from the boredom and isolation of their lives and the traditional culture they had come to take for granted. As a result, according to MacDougall, older people began to lose faith in their music: “There was nothing going on to give them a boost or anything. Everything was dead. There was nothing. Nobody gave them courage to go out to play. It was hard for them”.<sup>38</sup>

Rock and roll dominated the radio and television airwaves in the 1950s and 1960s and brought with it the sense that “old-time” traditional music was conservative and hide-bound. In an interview in *Cape Breton’s Magazine*, well-known blues man Matt Minglewood revealed that he had learned to play the fiddle when he was six or seven years old: “I quit playing fiddle and started playing hockey because of peer pressure. Saturday, everyone’s going skating, going to play hockey – I’m going to take my fiddle lessons, you know. So I got teased a lot about it”. Later he got hooked on rock music when he saw Elvis Presley on the *Ed Sullivan Show*: “It was like – I suppose it was wild abandon. And I loved the energy that he was giving off, the energy that was coming from the man and the music”.<sup>39</sup>

Ed Sullivan temporarily took another Cape Breton son away from fiddling. Dave MacIsaac grew up in Halifax, but his father was from St. Rose, Cape Breton. Dave learned to play the fiddle when he was just a small boy. He and his father often drove to the top of Citadel Hill in Halifax in the evenings because it was the only place in the city where they could capture the signal from CJFX in Antigonish, which broadcast Scottish-style fiddling. But the night he saw the Beatles on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964 everything changed: “The fiddle went in the closet and I had to have a guitar. My older brothers and sisters were bringing home a lot of rock’n roll and country and I was hearing guitar players, Chuck Berry and people like that, so I was getting into that stuff too”.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no census of the number of young people learning to play traditional fiddle music in the 1950s and 1960s. There were definitely more than the

38 John MacDougall, interview by author, tape recording, Kenloch, NS, 6 June 2002.

39 Matt Minglewood, “From Talks with Matt Minglewood”, *Cape Breton’s Magazine*, 49 (1988), back page, p. 98.

40 David MacIsaac, interview by author, tape-recording, Halifax, NS, 6 August 2002. Dave eventually took up fiddling again and is a master.



two young developing talents, John Morris Rankin and Kinnon Beaton, mentioned by Ron MacInnis years later in an interview. Virginia Hope Garrison, who examined fiddle teaching in Cape Breton, surveyed 78 fiddlers ranging in age from 11 to 79 years in May and June of 1979. While the survey questions were designed to elicit information about where the fiddlers came from, what kind of teaching they received and who gave that help, it is possible to glean another significant fact from her research. Her work suggests there was a much smaller group of fiddlers who learned to play between 1960 and 1970. Half of the 78 surveyed were 50 years of age or older, only 21 were under the age of 40 and only one of her informants had taught a son or daughter at home. The reasons Garrison listed for the decline include lack of time or interest, competition with radio and/or television, and the fiddler's desire not to force it on the child, which was often compounded by the older fiddler's lack of confidence in his or her teaching ability.<sup>41</sup>

Modernization had an impact on Cape Breton in other ways as well. The coal and steel industry drew people from their rural surroundings and its decline in the post-war period prompted massive out-migration. While the loss of jobs was most visible in the so-called industrial areas of Cape Breton, the downturn in the economy hit hard in rural areas as well. Between 1961 and 1971, the number of farms in Cape Breton dropped from 1,975 to 640.<sup>42</sup> The reduction of the violin culture's farm-base by two-thirds in a single decade was bound to have a considerable impact on the social and cultural psychology of rural Cape Bretoners.

By the late 1960s the people still living in many rural areas of Cape Breton were also being influenced by a major economic shift that was taking place in Inverness County. It was centered on a new industrial complex at Port Hawkesbury, near the Canso Causeway. Three mega-projects had come to the area: a heavy-water plant, a Gulf Canada refinery and the Stora Forest Products pulp mill. Although the population of the county had been steadily declining following the Second World War, it grew from 18,152 in 1961 to 20,375 in 1971.<sup>43</sup> In the same period, incomes in Inverness and Richmond counties nearly doubled – the highest rate of change for any county in Nova Scotia.<sup>44</sup> Many fiddling fans may have left their rural homesteads, but they were living close by – ready to respond to the warning in Ron MacInnis's documentary.

### **The Flourishing Cape Breton Fiddler**

The people who responded to the challenge in *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* came from a wide range of interests and from many parts of Cape Breton Island and Antigonish County on the eastern mainland of Nova Scotia. They were men and women, Catholics and Protestants, fiddlers and non-fiddlers. Ray MacDonald, now retired from a long career at radio station CJFX, calls these people "activists": "I'm not sure Ron [MacInnis] would have known about the 'activists' who existed in all of the small communities. They were there then as they are now; they are the shakers and

41 Garrison, "Traditional and Non-Traditional Teaching and Learning Practices in Folk Music", pp. 197-8.

42 Jim and Pat Lotz, *Cape Breton Island* (Vancouver, 1974), p. 94.

43 Nova Scotia, Department of Development, "Table 1, Population Growth, Inverness County and Nova Scotia", in *Inverness County Profile* (Halifax, 1978), p. 7.

44 Nova Scotia, Department of Development, *Perspective Nova Scotia* (Halifax, c.1974), p. 114.

movers for whatever there is: fiddle, highland dancing, bagpipes, step dancing. There are 'pockets' where they're big on one thing and less on another, but collectively they make a major contribution to the Scottish culture".<sup>45</sup> The two main "shakers and movers" in this movement were Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris. Born in Port Hawkesbury in 1943, MacInnis graduated from St. Francis Xavier University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1967 and an education degree in 1968. After a year of teaching in Grand Prairie, Alberta, he returned in 1971 to Port Hawkesbury to teach mathematics at the Canso Regional Vocational School. In 1973 he married Mary Ross and they built their home in Creignish, raised five children and became involved in community activities. Frank's childhood was full of music. His parents taught him traditional Scottish step dances. His friends were the children of people who had moved from all over Inverness County to work at the pulp mill at Port Hawkesbury, people who spoke Gaelic and loved Scottish-style music. He notes: "To me there were a lot of fiddlers. There were dances every summer and through the rest of the year, Friday and Saturday nights; there was always Cape Breton square dances. Even in Port Hawkesbury where I lived, they had two or three local fiddlers playing. We were probably aware that it was a Cape Breton tradition. The local radio station, CJFX in Antigonish, they played it so you grew up hearing it every day as well. So it was just part of life growing up in this part of Cape Breton". Having advance notice of the broadcast of *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, Frank MacInnis made sure his friends and family knew about it. He was astonished by the message in the show: "Our initial reaction, I guess, was this guy is wrong, it's not vanishing; he's telling a story here that's really not true".<sup>46</sup>

Frank's circle included Father Eugene Morris, another native of Inverness County. The assistant parish priest in Port Hawkesbury, he also served as an extension worker for the Coady Institute at St. Francis Xavier University. He encouraged dancing and fiddling and was a respected step dancer himself. He says the television show sent a chill through him: "I think a very big part of our lives were at stake. . . . It's something very deep in our soul, our music . . . and with our fiddle especially. I think it can express every feeling of the human heart".<sup>47</sup>

Within two weeks of the broadcast both men met Father John Angus Rankin to discuss a course of action. Morris passed on a suggestion from another fiddler, Hugh John Gillis; as Morris and Gillis drove home across the Canso Causeway one day, Hugh John recalled the spectacle of 100 pipers marching across the span in 1955 during its opening celebration. Morris remembers they agreed that it would be a wonderful thing to hear 100 fiddlers playing all at one time at a concert "just for themselves".<sup>48</sup> It would be different from the Broad Cove Scottish Concert and any of the other summer ceilidhs in that it would focus on and feature the fiddlers and their music. MacInnis, Morris and Rankin began collecting names of fiddlers. MacInnis, who had his own weekly show on radio station CJFX in Antigonish, used the airwaves to ask what his listeners thought of the idea of a festival just for fiddlers. The response

45 Ray MacDonald, letter to author, 26 August 2002.

46 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, tape recording, Creignish, NS, 23 October 2000.

47 Father Eugene Morris, interview by author, videotaped for CBC, Creignish, NS, 24 October 2000.

48 Morris, interview by author.

was overwhelmingly positive. The next step was to enlist the support of community leaders in Cape Breton and eastern mainland Nova Scotia. The group they formed was made up of people with experience organizing community events and who, in some cases, had positions of authority and influence: judges, teachers, publishers and clergy (both Catholic and Protestant). Included in the group were Sandy Campbell, the publisher of *The Cape Breton Highlander* in Sydney; Ray Macdonald and Gus MacKenzie, who worked at CJFX radio station in Antigonish; Rod Chisholm, a well-known “Scottish concert” organizer; Hugh J. MacPherson, a provincial court judge in Antigonish; Joey Beaton, a respected young piano accompanist from Mabou; and Archie Neil Chisholm, a popular fiddler, school teacher and radio broadcaster from Margaree Forks.<sup>49</sup>

On 4 June 1972 they met and agreed on a 12-point statement of intention. They originally called themselves the “Committee for 100 Fiddlers”, but for all intents and purposes this was the founding meeting of the Cape Breton Fiddlers’ Association. The statement identifies the committee’s goal – to promote the Cape Breton fiddler – as well as the means of accomplishing this goal: the organizers would seek public reaction to the idea and lobby politicians for government assistance. They would aim for a three-day, non-competitive festival in July or August following the Antigonish Highland Games, and it would be a non-profit event with no remuneration except for fiddlers invited from Scotland. The “multi-cultured aspect of the project could be a point of interest. /Scotch/, French/, Indian”.<sup>50</sup>

In the summer of 1972, while the organizational committee was putting out feelers for government and community support for a festival, Frank MacInnis and Father Eugene Morris spent the summer traveling around Cape Breton looking for fiddlers to participate in the festival. Frank MacInnis recalls what he thought at the time: “The biggest doubt were all these kitchen fiddlers that never played in public before, 90 per cent of them didn’t read music. Would they be willing to get up on a stage and perform? . . . I don’t think we ever had any doubt the fiddlers were there, it was just to determine whether or not they were willing to. And it’s not easy for an older fiddler who never played on a public stage, all of a sudden to be out in front of a couple thousand people. And probably didn’t have a whole lot of confidence in his own playing”.<sup>51</sup>

Frank MacInnis says he always had *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* in the back of his mind: “I think there was an awareness of Ron’s program out there, because when we’d say we’re thinking of maybe getting a concert or festival together, that ‘vanishing fiddler’ wasn’t right, they’d say, ‘You’re damn right it wasn’t right, let’s do something about it’ – that sort of thing”. By the end of the summer they had a list of almost 200 fiddlers. They began to plan for the practice sessions with Father John Angus Rankin. These would be aimed at familiarizing fiddlers with the notion of

49 All of these people received a letter from Frank MacInnis inviting them, as people “interested in the culture and music of Cape Breton”, to attend a meeting to discuss future action. See Frank MacInnis, to invitees, 20 April 1972, Frank MacInnis Papers (private archive of Frank MacInnis), Creignish, NS.

50 Frank MacInnis to attendees, summary of meeting, 6 June 1972, Frank MacInnis Papers. The name “Cape Breton Fiddlers’ Association” would not be adopted until 1979 when they registered it with the Nova Scotia Registry of Joint Stocks.

51 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, 16 August 2002.

playing together as well as helping those who needed to polish their tunes.<sup>52</sup>

Donald Gillis of North Sydney helped Father Eugene Morris to search for fiddlers in the North Sydney area of industrial Cape Breton. Gillis says some of the people who were approached wanted to be paid, but he never understood the logic. The cost would have been prohibitive. He recalls that one fiddler, who was respected as a good musician, was reluctant to play with others who were not as capable as he was. He “said it should be graduated, classified. Number-one fiddlers, number-two fiddlers, number-three and, after all that, he said ‘I won’t bother with it Father, and furthermore, I won’t play with the riffraff’”.<sup>53</sup> He was the exception. Most fiddlers were willing to participate in the project.

By the 1970s Nova Scotia had had more than a generation of experience with “tartanization” – the provincial Scottish identity promoted by Angus L. Macdonald, premier of Nova Scotia from 1945 to 1954.<sup>54</sup> Macdonald promoted, both financially and politically, the acceptance of the Gaelic College at St. Anne’s, the hiring of a bagpiper to welcome tourists at the Nova Scotia-New Brunswick border and the creation of a provincial tartan.<sup>55</sup> Curiously, the Gaelic College, which marketed the so-called Scottish arts to summer tourists, offered lessons in Highland sword dancing and piping as well as classes in the Gaelic language but not lessons in Cape Breton Scottish step dancing or fiddling. This neglect would eventually be rectified.

In 1972 festival organizers had a political champion in powerful federal cabinet minister Allan J. MacEachen, who encouraged them to apply for funding to the Secretary of State and the Cape Breton Development Corporation.<sup>56</sup> One of his representatives later told the group that the minister was “agreeable to attempts to raise \$15,000 from government sources”.<sup>57</sup> The group also applied for support from the federal Local Initiatives Project (LIP). Finally, they confidently approached the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism for access to the provincial park at Whycocomagh as the site of their fiddle festival. None of these efforts bore fruit. They were especially disappointed at being turned down for Whycocomagh. The civil servants told the group “the festival would mean that the Park would be closed for at least a week, allowing for preparations and post-festival activities. At the height of the Tourist season this is more than the government is prepared to endure”.<sup>58</sup>

They then approached the parish council at Saint Mary’s in Glendale, just a few miles north of Port Hawkesbury, where Father John Angus Rankin was the parish priest. The parish’s outdoor stage had been destroyed the year before in a storm. The council agreed to let the “Committee for 100 Fiddlers” hold their festival there if the organizers agreed to build a new stage. This goal was accomplished with help in cash

52 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, tape recording, Creignish, NS, 9 March 2000.

53 Gillis, interview by author.

54 Ian McKay, “Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954”, *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 5-47.

55 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston, 1994), p. 206.

56 Allan J. MacEachen to Archie Neil Chisholm, 29 September 1972, Frank MacInnis Papers.

57 John G. Gibson to Frank MacInnis, undated (including minutes of meetings on 12-13 November 1972), Frank MacInnis Papers.

58 Frank MacInnis to attendees, undated, addendum to minutes in summary of meeting, 6 June 1972, Frank MacInnis Papers.

and in kind from a variety of sources. Some people loaned the festival money. Frank MacInnis remembers that they borrowed a few hundred dollars from the local credit union. A sawmill operator cut lumber for them to build the stage, willing to wait to be paid. MacInnis maintains that he was not worried about the attendance: "Sort of like *Field of Dreams*: build it and they will come".<sup>59</sup> Several men, including MacInnis, Father Eugene and Burton MacIntyre, had to move manure piles off the land, mow the grounds and bale the hay (which they donated to the nearby Mi'kmaw reserve at Whycocomagh). On the publicity side, Port Hawkesbury's *Scotia Sun* published a biography of a different Cape Breton fiddler every week from September of 1972 to June of 1973. These articles carried no overt headlines promoting the festival, but they served to make the reading public more aware of the fiddlers in their midst. The articles were written by John Gibson, Joey Beaton and Frank MacInnis, all personally familiar with the musicians. By early July, posters were printed and distributed. As the time for the festival approached, organizers discovered that they had serious competition: the town of Port Hawkesbury had organized the Strait Festival for the same weekend, 6-8 July.

On the Wednesday before the festival weekend, both the *Scotia Sun* and *The Cape Breton Highlander* carried articles about the coming event. One headline proclaimed: "Flourishing Cape Breton fiddlers festival Friday".<sup>60</sup> This adjective evokes the unspoken and opposing adjective – "vanishing". The unidentified writer offered the hope that the festival would become an annual event. In hindsight, Frank MacInnis and Father Morris admit they had no idea how many fiddlers would show up.<sup>61</sup>

*The Scotia Sun* called the festival at Glendale an outstanding success. More than 130 fiddlers participated over the weekend, and it was reported that 10,000 people came to hear the music. They were treated to different groups of fiddlers, pianists, step dancers and pipers but, unlike the other Scottish festivals around Cape Breton Island, the fiddlers were always the most prominent of the musicians. The most anticipated event of the festival was the performance of the massed fiddlers at the Sunday finale, and the organizers had arranged for a professional recording to be made of the event so that vinyl records could be pressed. From the newspaper coverage it is clear that *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler's* message was never far from their minds. The first line of the article in *The Scotia Sun* trumpeted "The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler was forever laid to rest this past weekend".<sup>62</sup> On the back of the album cover the text was even more direct: "This festival evolved to disprove the myth of the vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler".<sup>63</sup>

The spectacle of 102 fiddlers squeezed onto the small stage as Father John Angus Rankin took them through a wide range of marches, jigs, strathspeys and reels was a memorable one. From "a participant's point of view", *The Scotia Sun* reported, the highlight "was the feeling of universal friendliness and co-operation that ran among the fiddlers themselves. There were no 'stars' among the ranks as each fiddler was

59 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, 16 August 2002.

60 "Flourishing Cape Breton Fiddlers Festival Friday", *The Cape Breton Highlander*, 4 July 1973, p. 6.

61 Morris, interview by author and Frank MacInnis, interview by author, 16 August 2002.

62 "Festival of Scottish Fiddlers", *The Scotia Sun* (Port Hawkesbury), 11 July 1973, p. 5.

63 *Festival of Scottish Fiddling: Live Performance* (n.p., 1973), Festival Records, 33 rpm.

recognized for his own ability and accepted as an equal by all. It was a common sight to see fiddlers helping each other with patience, loan violins, older violinists assist the younger members and general good feeling toward each other".<sup>64</sup>

The festival had a big impact on the musicians. Eddie Rodgers, who was on stage that night, recalled: "What was special to me was the proudness. I was just proud to be a part and I guess I had played the violin like many of the others and it really was never recognized, but at that time there were guys and gals who we got together, we were on the stage, we were powerful and we played well and we knew it".<sup>65</sup> For Frank MacInnis, that evening was a high point in his life: "It was just a feeling of euphoria. I felt I was floating up in the clouds, watching this thing because we had worked really hard to pull everything together. You know it was a lot of work, tons and tons of work. I don't expect I'll ever experience anything like it again".<sup>66</sup>

Even before the first Glendale festival, the parish priest of Dunvegan, Inverness County, Father Colonel MacLeod, had hired John MacDougall to teach a class of young people. MacDougall recalls that Father MacLeod was prompted to do this after seeing the *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.<sup>67</sup> MacDougall's first class included John Morris Rankin who had been featured in the documentary and who later became one of the tradition's most admired players. The class performed at the first Glendale festival. If it had not been for that class of 18 students, formed in 1972, there would have been very few young people on the stage in 1973. Frank MacInnis recalls: "Looking back there probably weren't that many young ones, and probably not a whole lot of opportunity for them to play because the fiddlers I mentioned, they were in their fiddling prime at that time, so they were the ones in demand at dances. So there probably wasn't the opportunity like the young people have today to get out there. So I guess there weren't a lot of young people playing at the time".<sup>68</sup>

In January 1974 the provincial Department of Education sent the committee a cheque for \$2,925 to pay for a teacher to provide free fiddle lessons. The covering letter suggested that this might be the beginning of a new approach to supporting music education in Nova Scotia: "We consider this to be a radically different project and might have a bearing on the financing of other projects".<sup>69</sup> On 10 May Frank MacInnis reported to the Department of Education that 240 people had begun classes in January.<sup>70</sup> In November the committee received another cheque, this time for \$4000, but it would be the last.<sup>71</sup> Government cutbacks meant that "cultural projects will not be considered".<sup>72</sup> This was a setback, but after the 1975 festival at Glendale, the committee had an operating budget of more than \$5000 and the fiddlers' committee continued to raise money to make the lessons either free or available at a

64 "Festival of Scottish Fiddlers", *The Scotia Sun*, 11 July 1973, p. 5.

65 Eddie Rodgers, interview by author.

66 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, tape recording, Creignish, NS, 9 March 2000.

67 John MacDougall, interview by author.

68 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, 23 October 2000.

69 A.G. Scott-Savage to Frank MacInnis, January, 1974, Frank MacInnis Papers.

70 Frank MacInnis to A.G. Scott-Savage, 10 May 1974, Frank MacInnis Papers.

71 Committee for 100 Fiddlers, Financial Statement (1974), hand-written note, Frank MacInnis Papers.

72 A.G. Scott-Savage to Frank MacInnis, September 1975, Frank MacInnis Papers.



minimum fee.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the regular rehearsals for the Glendale festival provided more opportunities for learning and sharing tunes.

These rehearsals became an innovative way to encourage young fiddlers as well as for older, less-accomplished fiddlers to acquire new skills. To perform as a large group, the fiddlers had to have a minimum repertory of tunes. They also had to know the tempo required for the performance and at what point they would switch from one tune to the next. Father John Angus Rankin was responsible throughout the 1970s for choosing the line-up of melodies that would be played at each big concert. The sheet music was distributed through a monthly newsletter prepared by the group. For those who could not read music, tapes were provided so they could learn by ear. Several times a year they got together at a central point to rehearse.<sup>74</sup> This practice has continued. In 2005, the Cape Breton Fiddlers' Association treasurer, Betty Matheson, reported that there is a steady membership of between 450 to 500 people in the organization.<sup>75</sup>

### Conclusion

Historian Ian McKay has challenged the authenticity of the "folk" tradition in 20th-century Nova Scotia as defined by music collector Helen Creighton and others. He argues: "The Folk as evoked by Creighton represented a quaint survival. They spoke to an intrinsically conservative sense of identity. They were sturdy and self-reliant, defending in their dwindling enclaves of cultural authenticity the old oral and spontaneous cultures that everywhere else were succumbing to the sad plagues of the newspaper, the radio, and all the mindless bustle of modernity".<sup>76</sup>

McKay argues that Creighton's folk world erases the complexity and realities of societies, whether rural or urban, old or transplanted, literate or oral. Could it be that Ron MacInnis and the CBC were also painting Cape Breton fiddling communities as "quaint survivals" of a declining oral culture? Elements of MacInnis's script do hint at such representations; at one point, for instance, he states: "For it's characteristic of the older residents of small villages in Cape Breton that they seldom stray more than five or six miles from their homes, except of course in the event of a Scottish concert, for here they get a chance once again to speak their beloved Gaelic, tell a few tales and exchange a few jokes and maybe even have a little nip of something or other".<sup>77</sup> MacInnis has always maintained that while it was sad to imagine the loss of Cape Breton fiddling, he had simply accepted that there was nothing to stop the impact of modern electronic influences. He admired the work of Helen Creighton, but did not perceive his journalism as an effort to "collect" the culture and record it before it

73 Stan Chapman of Antigonish eventually took over the teaching responsibilities from John MacDougall. See Frank MacInnis Papers. For reference to the \$5000 see Committee for 100 Fiddlers, Financial Statement (1975), Frank MacInnis Papers, and in terms of the free/low cost lessons see Frank MacInnis interview by author, 16 August 2002.

74 Frank MacInnis, interviews by author, tape recording, Creignish, NS, 9 March 2000, 3 May 2002 and 16 August 2002.

75 Betty Matheson, telephone interview by author, August 2005 and Betty Matheson, interview by author, tape recording, Dominion, NS, 18 June 2002.

76 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, p. 137.

77 Ron MacInnis, *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

disappeared. As events unfolded, MacInnis's production served another purpose – that of unleashing the energies of traditional Cape Breton culture so that it could strike a new balance with modern trends.

Following the initial success of the 1973 Glendale festival, the “Committee for 100 Fiddlers” published newsletters, organized fiddle lessons and staged concerts. Its organizers also continued to point to the broadcast of the documentary as the spark for their movement. Despite such claims, the revival of fiddling in Cape Breton was not only a result of the airing of *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*. In his introduction to *The Island: 1713-1990*, Kenneth Donovan states that over the past 40 years Cape Breton has experienced a cultural revival. This includes as many as 34 events, among them the reconstruction of Fortress Louisbourg, the founding of the Men of the Deeps Choir and the beginning of the Mi'kmaw studies programme at UCCB.<sup>78</sup> Often government support for these milestones came as a result of pressure and lobbying. Historian John Reid argues that “the 1970s saw the growth of a new tendency towards self-direction, in the form of united action by those who faced disparities along the lines of geographical location, ethnicity, gender and social class”.<sup>79</sup> The organization of the Cape Breton Fiddlers' Association was part of this process. Although there was no government funding for the first one, indicating initially that Cape Breton fiddling was not seen as part of tartanized Nova Scotia, the provincial and federal governments eventually managed to climb on the bandwagon. In 1982 fiddle lessons became part of the programme for the first time at the Gaelic College of Cape Breton. While it is likely that some kind of fiddling revival would have occurred eventually in Cape Breton because of the increasing popularity of “old-time” music throughout North America, it happened earlier in Nova Scotia because of the reaction to *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

It is tempting to romanticize the Cape Breton fiddling movement. The idea of gathering 100 fiddlers on one stage, which emulated the gathering of 100 pipers at the opening of the Canso Causeway in 1955, is what scholars would call an “invented tradition”.<sup>80</sup> The 1973 Glendale Festival of Scottish Fiddling carried the trappings of the tartanizing process, but it was more than a shallow burst of invention. The revival that was created rested on homegrown foundations of intellectual resources and talent. It sparked a new cultural industry that Cape Bretoners are taking care to cultivate.

The support for this cultural industry at home and abroad is a defining feature of the movement. To avoid another episode of “vanishing”, attention has been paid to teaching children both in the home and through workshops. The fiddlers also know who they are as a result of the registry provided by the fiddlers' association. Other organizations throughout the world have been able to communicate with them, leading to invitations for Cape Bretoners to perform and teach their style to others. Some of the older members of the fiddlers' association wonder if there is a need for the association anymore. Frank MacInnis acknowledges that there are those who question its purpose, but every time the subject comes up it is set aside.<sup>81</sup>

78 Kenneth Donovan, “Reflections on Cape Breton Culture: An Introduction”, in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island, New Perspectives: 1713-1990* (Sydney, 1990), pp. 1-2.

79 John Reid, “The 1970s: Sharpening the Sceptical Edge”, in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1993), p. 504.

80 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

81 Frank MacInnis, interview by author, videotaped for CBC, Creignish, NS, 24 October 2000.

To be sure, the fiddling tradition has been transformed to appeal to modern audiences. Where once it was found only in kitchens and dance halls, it is now open to influences from the wider world and other styles of Celtic music. This transformation provides ammunition for those who question whether the tradition can sustain itself. The Gaelic language, which many believe to be one of the sources of Scottish-style fiddling, is no longer widely spoken or understood. Yet for all the questioning, the new fiddle tradition seems to be built on solid ground. Although the massing of fiddlers is an infrequent event, it provides tremendous camaraderie and satisfaction to those who participate. Kitchen parties and dances are just as informal and common as they ever were. If anything, the popularity of “all-ages” dances, where alcohol is banned, has increased the place that fiddling and step dancing hold in the community. The advent of the recording industry, the sharing of tunes, the demand for fiddle classes, the loss of the Gaelic language and the popularization of the music will lead to more change in the Cape Breton fiddling style. In 1972 Ron MacInnis asked on the CBC, “What’s to become of the Cape Breton fiddler? Will he live on? Or will he be drowned out by the hard beat of modern rock and other synthetic music?” The answer to this question is simple yet complicated. Put simply, the Cape Breton fiddler lives on, along with the hard beat of modern rock. But the older fiddlers, with their experience of poverty, war and isolation, are vanishing. Their sons and daughters play with joy and vigour, blending occasionally with other forms of country and Celtic folk music. They will play the old tunes and write new ones, filled with their own sensibilities. They will have a new story to tell.