

## Gaelic Song in Eastem Canada: Twentieth-Century Reflections

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

More than two centuries have passed since Canada became home to boatloads of Gaelic-speaking immigrants from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Though materially impoverished, they brought with them a wealth of oral tradition and a lifestyle characterised by the «taigh ceilidh» [visiting house] which promoted the continuation of their songs and stories. In the closing decade of the twentieth century thousands of Gaelic songs remain as a testimony to generations of tradition, reflecting the ancient bardic pattern of the Gaels, recording their joys, sorrows, hopes, glories, and their unwritten history. This paper looks at the range of material which survives in the Maritimes, Newfoundland and Quebec, and comments upon the significance of it to Canadians today.

# GAELIC SONG IN EASTERN CANADA: TWENTIETH-CENTURY REFLECTIONS<sup>1</sup>

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More than two-and-a-half centuries have passed since the first great exodus of emigrants from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland landed on the shores of North America. The earliest settlers went to New York in 1732; two years later vast numbers of emigrants sailed for North Carolina, by far the best known of the American settlements. To this day, their descendants have kept alive the name of their most famous immigrant, Flora MacDonald, through every generation since she sailed from Skye with her husband a few years after the terrible losses of Culloden (1746). While there is no doubt that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Gaelic was the mother tongue to a great many settlers in that part of North America (there are even reports of slaves speaking it), all that remains today is a strong tradition about the language and its culture; there are few surviving native speakers to sing the songs or tell the stories in the language that was once in common usage.<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, immigration of Scottish Highlanders into the South was actively discouraged. During that same period, however, there were boatloads of impoverished Highlanders about to set sail for the New World, clinging to the hope that they might settle in a land which would offer them not only better living conditions but freedom to live without the notorious hardships imposed by greedy landlords. Emigration officers painted a bright and optimistic picture of Canada, and the emigrants were on their way.

The landing of the "Hector" at Pictou, Nova Scotia in 1773 is an oft-quoted date in Canadian history, although that is not the earliest date of arrival of a ship from Scotland, nor did Pictou become the centre of Gaelic settlement in Canada. Documenting the complex and intriguing history of immigration to Canada is an on-going process, researched piece by piece by several generations of writers, who over a span of two centuries are still

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1. For the purposes of this paper I am defining Eastern Canada as Newfoundland, the Maritimes and Quebec.
  2. Several North Carolinians know "the odd phrase or two" but I know of only one native speaker of Gaelic, a very elderly minister, whose grandson told me about him when I visited North Carolina this summer (1992).

endeavouring to complete the vast mosaic.<sup>3</sup>

Gaelic songs from this era have contributed valuable information to this endeavour. Aside from their function as entertainment, many of these songs have recorded individual experiences, emotions, and impressions which were certainly not set down by the "official" historians of earlier days; they, after all, were not concerned with such matters, nor was it in their best interests to record expressions of anger, grief, sorrow or even joy, freedom or elation. The trauma of enforced emigration has always been a subject of poetic expression, even a century after the event, when songs of this nature were still being composed. One such song is "Fuadach nan Gaidheal" [The Eviction of the Highlanders], composed in Scotland by Henry Whyte (known as Fionn), who published it in *The Celtic Garland*. It caught on like wildfire on both sides of the Atlantic and can still be heard today in many parts of Canada, either sung or now more often played on the pipes or the fiddle as "Lord Lovat's Lament".<sup>4</sup> The following is the first of four verses from a version collected in Nova Scotia by folklorist Helen Creighton from the Rev. J.D. MacDonald in 1947:

Gur a mise tha tùrsach  
A' caoidh còr na dùthcha,  
'S nan seann daoine cùiseil  
Bha cliùteach is treun.  
Rinn uachdarain am fuadach,  
Gu fada null thar chuantan,  
Am fearann chaidh thoirt uapa,  
'S thoirt suas do na féidh.

[How sad I am/ Lamenting the state of the homeland, / And the old honest people / Who were worthy and courageous. / Landlords evicted them / Far over the seas, / Their lands were taken from them / And given up to the deer.]

Descendants of these emigrants, even five generations later, may

3. See bibliographic references cited in J.L. Campbell's *Songs Remembered in Exile*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1990, and in Charles Dunn's *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1953.
4. The complete song is published in Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, Ottawa, National Museums of Canada, 1964, p. 58. I recorded a bagpipe version of the melody played by 84 year-old Allan MacArthur of the Codroy Valley, Newfoundland, which can be heard on the audio cassette, "A Ceilidh with the MacArthurs, Codroy Valley, Newfoundland: Songs and Music from *The Last Stronghold*", produced by Fred Kent, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 1990 (hereafter cited as "A Ceilidh with the MacArthurs").

well take some comfort in the knowledge that those who remained in the Old Country were constantly reminded of their loss by the ruined crofts, nettles overtaking gardens, and silence where once there was mirth — all themes expressed in songs such as this. Thus the spirit that prevailed during the time of the mass emigrations to North America was kept alive long after the pain of parting had vanished. Calum MacLeod, who collaborated with Helen Creighton in publishing her collection (1964), notes that this “air...is played frequently on the pipes in Nova Scotia, on appropriate occasions, in preference to ‘The Flowers of the Forest’”.

The writer of “Where Gaelic Lives”, an article about Cape Breton, in *Folklife Times: Canada's Living Traditions*,<sup>5</sup> states:

The best available records of the experience and history of the region's large Gaelic population are contained in the songs, which describe every aspect of life over the four or five generations since the time of settlement. From the beginning, local bards exercised their art vigorously....These [songs] are sung in the old manner, unaccompanied, or with those present joining in the refrain.

One of the best-known songs composed in Canada (though also well-known in Scotland) is “A' Choille Ghruamach” [The Gloomy Forest]<sup>6</sup> by John MacLean from the Island of Tiree, who emigrated to Nova Scotia in 1819. He describes in pessimistic detail the many disadvantages of emigration to this lonely land of gloomy forests where even the poet's inspiration deserts him — though apparently not so completely as to prevent him from composing these eighteen verses, and a good many other songs besides. Opinions such as MacLean's, however, give only one side of the picture; there are as many songs which express relief at leaving the harsh conditions of post-Jacobite Scotland, hope of improving the miserable lifestyle of a suppressed people, or joy at finding a piece of land they could call their own:

Tha còrr 'us fichead bliadhna thim  
Bho'n dh'fhàg mi glinn mo dhùthchais...  
...'S a Chanada a nall gu'n d'thàinig,  
Aite b'fheàrr dhomh dùbailt...

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5. Vol. 1, no. 10, 1986. The writer of the article is not named.

6. While many versions are in print, the most accessible to Canadians was the version in John MacKenzie's very popular *Sar-Obair nam Bard Gaelach: the Beauties of Gaelic Poetry and Lives of the Highland Bards*, Halifax, 1863, p. 324-26..

...Tha cùrsa dhaoine math gu leòir  
 Le dachaidh bhòidheach, fhaoilidh  
 Nì nach fhaiceadh iad ri 'm beò,  
 Le comhnachadh an taobh sin...<sup>7</sup>

[It is more than twenty years / Since I left my native glen.../ ...It was over to Canada I came / A place twice as good for me.../ ...The progress of people is good enough / With beautiful, prosperous homes, / Such as they would never see in their lifetime / By remaining on that other side.]

In her book *The Emigrant Experience: Songs of Highland Emigrants in North America*, Sister Margaret MacDonell brings together many compositions of Gaelic bards, some well-known and others scarcely remembered, who emigrated to the Carolinas, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Manitoba and the North West Territories.<sup>8</sup> The range of experience and expression contained in this very moving and illuminating book clearly illustrates that opinions varied according to circumstances, and thus the collection presents a more balanced picture than any individual song might portray. Many of the songs have lasted through several generations, reflecting the strength of oral tradition that exists among the Gaels overseas as well as in the homeland.

The setting in which songs were sung was generally the *taigh céilidh* [visiting house] where, during the long winter nights, people would gather together to sing songs and tell stories, as their forebears in Scotland had done for centuries.<sup>9</sup> On occasions when there was a length of hand-woven cloth to be fulled, the owner would invite the neighbours into his home to take part in a “milling”, the term used for *luadh* [waulking the tweed] in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. While the purpose of the gathering was identical to the *laudh* in the Scottish Hebrides, there was one major difference — in the New World men participated in this work which had

7. Excerpted from “Oran le Seann Ileach” [Song of an old Islayman], composed by Hugh MacCorkindale in Ontario and published in *An Gaidheal* 6, 1987, p. 42-3.

8. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982. Sister MacDonell does not, however, include any songs from New Brunswick or Newfoundland in this collection.

9. For a detailed description of a typical ceilidh in the old style see Margaret Bennett, *The Last Stronghold: Scottish Gaelic Traditions of Newfoundland*, St. John's, Breakwater Books, and Edinburgh, Canongate Press, 1989, p. 55-83, and Joe Neil McNeil's accounts in John Shaw, ed., and Joe Neil McNeil, *Sgeul gu: Latha Tales Until Dawn: The World of a Cape Breton Storyteller*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, and Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1989.

been traditionally performed by women, joining not only in the hard work but in all the songs that were sung throughout.<sup>10</sup>

From 1790 onwards, the main concentration of Gaelic-speaking immigrants in Canada was in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where the old language, though rapidly declining, can still be heard in the 1990s. It is impossible, however, to give any accurate estimate of the number of native speakers in any part of Canada before the Second World War, as the Canadian Government did not include Gaelic in the official census. Gaelic speaker Lloyd Leland, born and raised in the Province of New Brunswick (now scarcely acknowledged to have been inhabited by Gaels), recalls that during his boyhood over sixty years ago his family had numerous neighbours whose everyday language was Gaelic. Dismayed at the distortion of historical statistics, he draws attention to the peculiar fact that monoglot Gaelic-speakers were listed as "English-speakers" in Canada's 1921 Official Census.<sup>11</sup>

In 1932, however, when folklorists John Lorne Campbell of Canna and his wife Margaret Fay Shaw visited Cape Breton with the intention of collecting Gaelic songs, Campbell conducted an unofficial census, originally summarised in an article in *The Scotsman*, Jan. 30, 1933, and now re-published in his recent book, *Songs Remembered in Exile*. Only 49 of the 86 questionnaires he sent out were returned, enumerating over 15 000 Gaelic speakers and suggesting, therefore, a total of nearly twice that number. On a return visit in 1937, Campbell raised the question again and interviewed the late Jonathan G. MacKinnon, founder and editor of the Gaelic publication *Mac Talla*, who said that "there could not be less than 40 000 or 50 000 in the Maritime Provinces... and that most were in Cape Breton". Struck by the vigour of the language and its range of accompanying traditions in the 1930s, J.L. Campbell observed:

Cape Breton appears to a Highland visitor as a land of strange incongruities; a country where one can hear the Gaelic of Lewis, Skye or Barra against a seemingly most inappropriate background of dense spruce forest; a Highland community where there are no

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10. A typical milling is described in Margaret Bennett, "A Codroy Valley Milling Frolic", in *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert*, ed. Kenneth S. Goldstein and Neil V. Rosenberg, St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980, p. 99-110.
  11. From personal correspondence, letter of Jan. 1991. Leland suggests that the prevalent attitude of both Canadian and British Census officials to the Gaelic language was consistently reflected in the educational strategies of both countries, e.g., the deliberate policy of sending monoglot English-speaking teachers to Gaelic-speaking areas. Only months after Lloyd's letter arrived, I received through my door in Edinburgh an Official Government Census form to be filled out by every householder in Britain. Incredibly, Scotland's 80,000 Gaelic speakers, along with the rest of the nation, are now offered the option of filling out an alternative form in any one of a dozen *recognized languages*, including Chinese, Hindi, and Urdu—but not Gaelic.

lairds; where the descendants of settlers from. Skye live beside Micmac Indians, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Maritime Provinces; where the people still refer to themselves as 'Lewismen', 'Skyemen', 'Uistmen', 'Barramen', and so on, although none of them have ever seen these places; where many can describe perfectly, from their grandparents' reminiscing, places in the 'Old Country' which they have never seen. Where, in fact, an inherited nostalgia and old habits and customs have survived in a most astonishing way.<sup>12</sup>

Each point in this statement is echoed time and time again in the themes of songs which were popular among Gaels overseas, not only in Cape Breton, but wherever they settled from British Columbia to Newfoundland.<sup>13</sup>

With such a wealth of song tradition inherited from their ancestors, the emigrants naturally brought with them innumerable songs which continued to live on in the new homeland, some surviving more completely than corresponding versions which remained in Scotland. *Songs Remembered in Exile* is a marvellous testimony to the strength of that tradition, as many songs have survived from the sixteenth century having already been in oral tradition two hundred years before their singers emigrated.

There were also numerous songs that are still referred to on both sides of the Atlantic as "old favourites" — songs such as "Chì Mi na Mòrbheanna" to the tune "The Mist Covered Mountains", composed in Scotland by John Cameron in 1856, and which, incidentally, was played at the funeral of the late President John F. Kennedy; or "Ho Ro Mo Nighean Donn Bhòidheach" with its English version by Prof. John Stuart Blackie, "Ho Ro My Nut-Brown Maiden", a standard favourite on concert platforms and in Victorian drawing-rooms — there are dozens of them, not usually "ancient" by Gaelic standards, but all popularised by the widespread distribution of printed versions in the nineteenth century. Of great importance in this respect was John MacKenzie's well-loved collection *Sàr-Obair nam Bàrd Gaelach: The Beauties of Gaelic Poetry and Lives of the Highland Bards*, first published in 1841 and re-published in a special edition printed in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1863. In a society where books were valued, it was, apart from the Bible, the most treasured possession of many households. Local newspaper columns and Gaelic magazines such as *The Casket* and *Mac Talla* (1892-1904) also afforded an opportunity for Gaels to see reprints

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12. *Songs Remembered in Exile*, p. 38.

13. The songs in Campbell's *Songs Remembered in Exile* are exclusively those which survived the emigration and do not, therefore, deal with New World themes, while many of the songs included in Sister Margaret MacDonell's *The Emigrant Experience* were composed in North America and reflect attitudes and traditions there. *The Last Stronghold*, chapter 7, has a collection of more than twenty Gaelic songs from Newfoundland which cover both themes. *Tocher*, no. 42, contains a song about Vancouver, p. 408-411.

of their favourite Gaelic songs or enjoy the latest composition from a local bard.

The ancient tradition of song-making which characterized the bards of Gaelic Scotland continued through each generation in the New World. Many of the early compositions reflected the pan-Celtic tradition of elegizing and eulogizing outstanding members of the community, from clan chief of early history to priest or minister of more recent times. The widespread evangelical revivals of the Protestant church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries inspired innumerable compositions of this kind throughout the Gaelic world. Many examples survive in Canada as they were generally hand-written or circulated in print via small, privately published songsheets and/or booklets (usually prefaced by "*Air fonn...*"[To the tune of...]), or in magazines such as the *Presbyterian Record*. Though rarely, if ever, heard in oral tradition today, many are preserved in family collections. The following verse and chorus are from a 26-verse tribute to the Rev. Roderick MacLean, minister of St. Luke's Church in Hampden, Quebec who died in 1908 at the age of 53:

Tha Hampden bho chd an duigh fo gruaim,  
'S an teachdair àluinn air thoirt uath;  
'Se bhi 'ga chàradh anns an uaigh,  
Thug sgeula cruaidh r'a h-aithris dhuinn.

*Fonn.*

Far och, is och, is mo leòn;  
Tha fear mo rùin an duigh fo'n fhòid!  
Tha fear mo rùin an duigh fo'n fhòid!  
'S chan éirich ceòl, no aighear leam!

[Poor Hampden is desolate today, / The gentle, bright teacher is taken from them; / It is he who will be laid out in the grave / That brought the firm truth to us in his oration.

*Chorus.*

Woe is me, woeful is my affliction / My beloved one is today beneath the clay! / My beloved one is today beneath the clay! / No music or mirth will rise for me!]<sup>14</sup>  
The chosen themes and topics of Canada's Gaelic songs covered an

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14. The song was composed by Iain Morrison, of Dell, Quebec. I am grateful to Duncan McLeod of Milan, Quebec, for giving me this song and several others when I visited the province in 1991.



enormous range: some compositions portrayed the lives of the settlers; some dealt with amusing or even embarrassing situations; and still others were scathing satires on aspects of life which inevitably crop up in every community. Descriptions of the age-old customs of New Year and Hallowe'en are preserved in songs such as "A' Challuinn" [New Year's Day], with its reference to house-visiting and to the game of shinty (now virtually unknown in Nova Scotia), and "Creach na Samhna" [The Hallowe'en Raid], which describes the mischief of raiding cabbages on the one night of the year when such mischief was "normal" among Gaels (their descendants now expect only the Americanized activity of "Trick-or-Treat" on that same night<sup>15</sup>).

Some of the compositions were intended as playful teasing of local characters, such as a courting couple who scarcely wanted to have their private affair broadcast from one end of the community to the other; others were made to poke fun at an unsuccessful venture, such as "Oran nam Mogaisean" [The Song of the Moccasins], composed around 1930 by Murdoch MacArthur of the Codroy Valley, Newfoundland, who was laughing at his own lack of success in that particular craft. His brother, Allan, a very fine tradition-bearer who was interested in every aspect of his Gaelic ancestry recalled with amusement:

He made a pair of moccasins and it took him quite a while to make them, you know. Of course the moccasins they're out of style since years around here...

Tha fonn, fonn, fonn, air  
Tha fonn air na mogaisean  
Tha fonn gun bhith trom  
Hog i o air na mogaisean.

.../ .../ .../ .../

Théid mi sìos do'n aifhrionn  
An coibhneas nan caileagan  
Cha ghabh iad facail ùrnuigh  
Ach sùil air mo mhogaisean

[Let's sing, sing, sing / Let's sing about the moccasins /  
A song that is not sad / Let's sing about the moccasins.

.../ .../ .../ .../

I went down to Mass / In the cheerful company of the girls / They

15. See Creighton and MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, "A' Challuinn", p. 204-207, and "Creach na Samhna", p. 76-81.

won't say a word of prayer / For looking at my moccasins.]"<sup>16</sup>

Any local individual (usually unsuspecting) could be chosen as the subject of a satirical composition. One song-maker, known as Bard MacDearmid, took a pretty dim view of a Cape Breton woman from his home community who, having travelled to the United States, appeared to assume such a haughty air that she pretended not to know any Gaelic when they met again. His song, "An Té a Chaill a' Ghàidhlig" [The Woman Who Lost the Gaelic] satirizes the situation at length — twelve eight-line verses, one of which is in English, thus adding emphasis to the point. He berates her arrogance and at the same time sings a cautionary note to others.<sup>17</sup>

Composed around 1880, this song with its one verse in English is probably one of the earliest Gaelic-English macaronic songs from Canada. Predictably others followed, though not necessarily composed in the pattern set by a particular song. Macaronic songs tend to reflect population and language distribution. In the Codroy Valley, and more especially in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, the Gaelic settlers had many French neighbours and a good number of English-speaking ones as well. Unless the individual ethnic groups were to remain apart (as they did in the very earliest days of settlement) it was inevitable that languages should adjust to facilitate communication among all the groups. It was of utmost importance that settlers should work together to create a harmonious atmosphere in each new community, whether the task was one of building new roads or a school for the children, or spinning, dyeing, and weaving a carpet for the church that had already been built. There are many heart-warming accounts of co-operative efforts in small communities, and the results, when viewed in these modern days, stand as a fine example of the hard work and sheer perseverance of the old settlers.

Undoubtedly song had its own place in such co-operative ventures, nowhere more frequently encountered than at the milling boards. Many of the French were fine weavers, often contracting to weave a length of cloth for a Gaelic neighbour. When the cloth was ready the owner "sent word around", inviting not only the Gaels whose forebears established the practice of milling, but also the French and English-speaking neighbours. The songs they sang included a number of macaronic compositions,<sup>18</sup> which allowed the entire group to join in choruses such as:

16. For complete text and music see Bennett, *The Last Stronghold*, p. 166-68, and the cassette "A Ceilidh with the MacArthurs". The song was also known in Nova Scotia, and a version of it is published in D.A. Ferguson's *Fad air Falbh as Innse Gall: Beyond the Hebrides*, Vol. 2, Halifax, 1977.

17. Creighton and MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, p. 28.

18. The subject is discussed at greater length in Margaret Bennett, "Scottish Gaelic, English, and French: Some Aspects of the Macaronic Traditions of the Codroy Valley, Newfoundland", in *Regional Languages Studies...Newfoundland*, St. John's, May 1972, p. 25-30.

Will you marry me my bonnie fair lassie?  
 Will you marry me my damsel?  
 Answer me my bonnie fair lassie,  
 'S fhad a bha mi fhìn is mi'n geall ort.

[... / It's a long time since we were pledged to each other.]<sup>19</sup>

Times have changed since the old days of the *taigh céilidh*, as Allan MacArthur of Newfoundland commented to me in 1971, less than ten years after the coming of electricity: "When the television came in the front door", he said, "the songs and stories were pushed out the back". And with regret at the decline of his beloved language and its accompanying traditions he reiterated his oft-repeated saying "Bho'n chaill mi a' Ghàidhlig na b'fheàrr cha d'fhuair mi" [Since I've lost the Gaelic language nothing better have I found.] The generation that followed his nearly all intermarried with French and English and raised families who speak only English, thus offering fewer and fewer opportunities to sing the old songs — "just the odd *céilidh* or house-party", as his Gaelic-speaking son, Frank, remarked in 1990, while singing over some of his favourite Gaelic songs.<sup>20</sup>

In Quebec's Eastern Townships, however, once home to thousands of Gaelic-speaking emigrants from the Outer Hebrides, the singing of Gaelic songs is all but a memory. In 1991, at the ages of ninety-nine and ninety-four, Johnnie and Christie MacKenzie of Scotstown sang a few Gaelic verses together and Johnnie reflected on the *céilidhs* of their youth: "There were some very good singers, women and men... Years ago I guess it was, but it turned around to be mostly English".<sup>21</sup>

Retired merchant and local historian Duncan McLeod summed up the situation:

We used to have Gaelic concerts and those that could sing'd be up on the stage... The hall'd be full...oh, a hundred and fifty, probably two hundred, that was in the 1920s, that's when I remember it. The building was built in 1915, [it]'s gone now, but

19. The complete text and music of three Gaelic verses is in Bennett, *The Last Stronghold*, p. 182-83.

20. In the Codroy Valley today there are a few families left who can converse but their opportunities are so infrequent that the language is obviously in its last stage of life. It was, however, still possible to record a number of songs there in June 1990 for "A Ceilidh with the MacArthurs".

21. The MacKenzies were recorded in 1991 in a predominantly French nursing home in Sherbrooke, Quebec. (Tape deposited in the School of Scottish Studies archives.) This recording, along with several others from the region, is part of my work in progress for a forthcoming book about the folklore of the Hebridean settlers in Quebec.

it was just beside our church — the Oddfellows' Hall — in 1959 it was gone... Prior to that they used to hold them in people's houses, but not on a large scale... Today in Scotstown about ninety percent are French and only ten percent now of Scottish descent. People moved to Connecticut, Massachusetts...<sup>22</sup>

Even before McLeod was born, a popular local bard, Angus MacKay, usually known as "Oscar Dhu" published a poem which expressed his concern (in English) about the loss of the language of his forebears:

Lads and Lasses in their teens  
Wearing airs of kings and queens,  
Just the taste of Boston beans  
Makes them lose their Gaelic.  
They come back with finer clothes  
Speaking Yankee through their nose  
That's the way the Gaelic goes.  
Pop! goes the Gaelic!<sup>23</sup>

Cape Breton is now the only place left in North America where both the language and the songs can be heard at gatherings where there are more than a handful of people. For more than a century there has been a keen awareness in Cape Breton of the dangers of losing the vibrant traditions of the Gaels. As a result, many individuals have made tireless and stalwart efforts to keep them alive, despite discouraging obstacles, such as the absence of a policy for education, or the general lack of federal government support for a minority language such as Gaelic. There has been an impressive group of clergymen (mostly Catholic) and scholars (many from St. Francis Xavier University) who have encouraged Gaelic speakers to take pride in their language, thus nurturing the traditions we can still appreciate today.

Possibly one of the greatest efforts of all has been that of Jonathan MacKinnon (b. 1870), founder and editor of *Mac Talla*, who has earned the respect and gratitude of all who appreciate the language and culture of the Gaels overseas. Prof. Charles W. Dunn noted that

At a time when the Gaelic-speaking people were becoming  
ashamed of their own language, the paper elevated it in their eyes

22. Duncan McLeod was also recorded in August 1991.

23. The bard "Oscar Dhu" died in 1923. This is part of a much longer poem which, I am told, was circulated in print among the local people of the area. This fragment is from a much longer rendition which I recorded at a house *céilidh* from the recitation of Donald Morrison of Scotstown, Quebec in 1976. (National Museum, Archives of the Centre for Folk Culture, Ottawa.)

to a position of prestige... Few men could have done more for the language and literature in the New World than he did, and only one — the Reverend A. MacLean Sinclair — did as much... When [MacKinnon] died on January 13, 1944, at the age of seventy-four, Gaels throughout the world lost a talented exponent of their culture.<sup>24</sup>

And in the opinion of folklorist John L. Campbell, who had the privilege of knowing him and recording him (songs and all), MacKinnon deserved to be paid the very highest respect due to any Celtic scholar.<sup>25</sup>

From 1963 to the present day, folklore collector John Shaw has been conducting research in Cape Breton in an effort to collect all the Gaelic songs that still exist — an admirable project which, to date, has produced recordings of well over a thousand songs. While Shaw is pessimistic about the future of Gaelic in Cape Breton, he recognizes the enormous significance of the study of repertoire and style of the many outstanding tradition-bearers he has recorded:

The significance of Nova Scotia, particularly Cape Breton, for Gaelic song specialists lies in the fact that the island's singing traditions have been virtually unaffected by non-Gaelic cultural influences that spread through the Highlands during the nineteenth century as a result of the Clearances, Lowland industrialization and educational policy. Our fieldwork with scores of Cape Breton singers demonstrates that the singing style from the eighteenth century pre-emigration Gaeldom, along with many of the older settings, has been retained among Gaels here to the extent that regional differences reflecting localities of origin in the Highlands still survive.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars and tradition-bearers alike regret that the spontaneous occasions for the singing of Gaelic songs have virtually died out. When milling songs are sung they are now virtually devoid of original context unless a rare occasion arises when a weaver presents a bale of cloth — and even that is in a “revival” situation. There are, however, many occasions when organized groups present public performances of Gaelic singing and traditional music, such as those in Cape Breton and mainland Nova Scotia by

24. Dunn discusses MacKinnon's remarkable contribution to Gaelic in *Highland Settler*, p. 80-89.

25. J.L. Campbell, *Songs Remembered in Exile*, numerous references, especially p. 39-41 and 77-81.

26. From John Shaw's letter to me, 25/11/90, in which he outlined his current project which will lead to the publication of a book on the oral tradition of Lauchie MacLellan, “an outstanding tradition-bearer from the Gaelic-speaking community of Dunvegan, Broad Cove Parish, Cape Breton Island”.

the lively singers and musicians of the "North Shore Singers" and the "Cape Gael Associates", or in New Brunswick by "Oran", an enthusiastic group of singers led by one of the few remaining native speakers, Helen Morag MacKinnon, who is also one of Canada's even fewer native speakers born after the Second World War. Her father, Lloyd Leland, who has been a life-long and ardent supporter of the Gaelic language and culture, notes with great regret that the traditions upheld by his forebears are evaporating before his very eyes; with just cause, he cautions Scottish Gaels to waken up to the fact that the Old Country will follow the same path unless there is a national awakening to the perils of extinction.

In the closing years of the twentieth century there has been something of a turn-around for the North American descendants of Scottish emigrants. In these days of quick and easy travel it is now increasingly common for many to visit Scotland, the land of their people, the subject of many songs of nostalgia. For several it is the fulfillment of a lifetime ambition, the realization of what was only a dream for their ancestors. As Allan MacArthur said, "My grandmother died heart-broken for Scotland".<sup>27</sup> The heartbreak has finally disappeared, and there is more than a note of celebration in the song which can be heard in any situation, from small house-parties in Cape Breton to large gatherings in Hebridean hotels accommodating tourist busloads of Canadians, lustily singing the chorus of the song which has now become Cape Breton's anthem:

'S e Ceap Breatainn tìr mo ghràidh  
Tìr nan craobh 's nam beanntan àrd';  
'S e Ceap Breatainn tìr mo ghràidh,  
Tìr is àilidh leinn air thalamh.

[Cape Breton is the land of my love / Land of the trees and the high mountains; / Cape Breton is the land of my love, / To us the most beautiful land on earth.]<sup>28</sup>

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27. All quotations from Allan MacArthur are from field recordings now deposited in Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archives.

28. The complete text is in Creighton and MacLeod, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, p. 48.