

## **In Tune with the Earth** **Musical Protest and Nova Scotian Environmentalism**

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## In Tune with the Earth: Musical Protest and Nova Scotian Environmentalism

THE HISTORY OF NOVA SCOTIA'S MUSICAL CULTURE has long been a popular field of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> From the era of the early-20th-century folklorists to the post-1989 era of the government-sponsored East Coast Music Awards, the association of the provincial state with musical promotion has made music a ready point of access to the historical meeting of popular and political cultures. There are, however, areas of the province's musical history not directly associated with state support but rather with opposition to the state and its projects. Protest music written and performed in Nova Scotia in response to the controversies of late-20th-century modern industrial development has only occasionally found its way into histories of provincial culture, but it was a common tool of protestors no less than in an earlier era of industrial labour protest. The presence of such music in the historical record raises questions about the supposedly conservative, antimodern, and politically quietist influence of state-supported folk culture, a characterization popularized by cultural historian Ian McKay.<sup>2</sup>

McKay's thesis, presented most forcefully in his book *The Quest of the Folk*, is that the "rural 'Folk' came to play the role of attraction, . . . [and that] the ideological thrust of this representation seems to be one of a liberal antimodernism: an intensely individualistic thirst for an existence released from the iron cage of modernity into a world re-enchanted by history, nature, and the mysterious."<sup>3</sup> His characterization of folk culture as a theater of authenticity serving to contain the working class within an internalized image of itself as simple and conservative received vigorous support from Keith Hollinshead in a 2009 critique from a tourism studies perspective, though Matthew Hayday cast some doubt on its universal applicability the following year in a study of pro-modern folk elements in federal Canada Day celebrations. Hayday concluded that McKay's view of folk performances "does not appear to hold true for the federal government's use of them in the 1960s."<sup>4</sup>

1 See, in addition to the works cited in other footnotes, Ronald Caplan, *Talking Cape Breton Music* (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 2006); Jonathan Dembling, "Play It As You Would Sing It," in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Ray (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 180-97; Dan Alex MacDonald, *Songs From Framboise: Collected by his Daughter Eunice Lively* (Framboise, NS: privately published, 1986); Thomas Pease, "Gaelic Music of Cape Breton Island," *Notes* 63, no. 2 (2006): 401-17; and Heather Sparling, "Categorically Speaking: Towards a Theory of (Musical) Genre in Cape Breton Gaelic Culture," *Ethnomusicology* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 401-25. The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and to offer thanks to the three anonymous reviewers of this research note.

2 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994).

3 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, xv.

4 Keith Hollinshead, "'Tourism State' Cultural Production: The Re-Making of Nova Scotia," *Tourism Geographies* 11, no. 4 (November 2009): 526-45; Matthew Hayday, "Fireworks, Folk-dancing, and Fostering a National Identity: The Politics of Canada Day," *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (June 2010): 297.

As Hayday's essay suggests, questions about the political impact of popular folk culture should be addressed through an examination of the lived experience thereof and not only through the application of political theory. This is no less true of Nova Scotia, whence McKay's thesis originated, than of the federal state. How did protestors in the province make political use of the folk style? And how did they respond when the state put concerted effort into dividing and discrediting their protest movements and organizations? Audio records and documentary evidence from the 20th century age of the tourism state, when the provincial government took the initiative to develop a tourist industry and a tourists' destination identity for Nova Scotia, indicate that environmental protestors facing such attacks at the end of the 1970s responded by seizing the discursive high ground of "traditional" folk culture as a tool to organize the public against high modernist industrial development.<sup>5</sup> Folk musical culture is never entirely "authentic," rarely wholly contrived, and always socially constructed, and in the hands of a radical protest movement it illustrates the complexity and variety within non-modern social movements while defying their easy characterization as one half of a binary duo of conservative anti-modernism and progressive modernism.

### **Promoting the folk**

"Folk" music as an analytical term is disputed, owing to debates about the possibility of both authenticity and appropriation, but for the purposes of this article it is defined as vernacular music – primarily that which can be, and most often is, performed with the possible participation of a non-professional audience in mind. In the words of A.L. Lloyd, it is "created and sung by men [and women] who are identical with their audience in standing, in occupation, in attitude of life, and in daily experience."<sup>6</sup> This, of course, says little about who may be admitted to that audience, and less about what may be made of these songs by the wider society. And much is made of them.

The promotion of a Nova Scotian musical culture dates back to at least the 1920s and the worldwide efflorescence of "folk" music that first established the genre's commercial viability in North America. The work of folk music collectors was never a strictly academic exercise; famous folklorists like Francis Child and the Lomaxes in the USA may have been inspired by a desire to preserve fading traditions in vernacular music, but the popularity of their work owed at least as much to the desire of the era's record company executives to earn a profit on the sale of an "authentic" musical culture. Both, in practice, promoted a construction of authenticity that elevated the self-consciously "old-timey" sound and marketably rustic back stories

5 High modernism is described as a set of ideas favouring scientific planning and the maximum control of both human society and non-human nature in the pursuit of economic growth on the largest scale possible. See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

6 A.L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (New York, 1970), quoted in David Frank, "Industrial Folksong in Cape Breton," *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 8, no. 1-2 (1986): 23. For more on the debates over terminology, see especially John Greenway, *American Songs of Protest* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 1-19.

of selected musicians into packaged nostalgia – the “real America,” or England, or Nova Scotia.<sup>7</sup>

Nova Scotians were prompt in filling both roles as preservers and promoters of authenticity. The province’s archetypical folklorist and collector, journalist Helen Creighton, travelled the coast from her home in Dartmouth from 1927 to 1960, recording songs that satisfied her own notion of the essential and unchanging character of the folk: nautical songs ranked high in terms of perceived authenticity, for example, while sexual or excessively vulgar recordings were swiftly destroyed. In her 30-plus years of collecting Creighton amassed hundreds of songs, including the famous sea ballad “Farewell to Nova Scotia.”<sup>8</sup> But if Creighton’s authentic folk were defined primarily by their location and employment along the coast, commercial popularizers sought a more specific ethnic character. “Traditional” Scottish music from Britain sold well enough, but cheaply enough, in the United States for record companies to pursue nearer and less costly sources, and, by the time Creighton began her labours, the American record labels active in the province had been joined by Canadian firms (Berliner Victor, Columbia, and Brunswick) in making recordings of Cape Breton fiddle music for the North American market. A few years later small Nova Scotian labels like Bernie MacIssac’s Celtic Records (in Antigonish) began producing records for a local market as well, as the Gaelic sound came to be perceived as uniquely Nova Scotian.<sup>9</sup>

As MacIssac’s own name suggests, Nova Scotia’s folklorists and record producers were not imposing an entirely supposititious musical culture on the province. Scottish immigrants and their descendants did in fact already possess a lively and thriving vernacular musical culture, including such elements of genuine Scottish tradition as the hereditary status of musical families, and they willingly participated in its popularization. So too were the English and Acadian “folk” cultures of Creighton’s repertoire genuine in their origins and in their desire for recognition. It is important to note as well that folk-style music was not appropriated from an authentic folk, but rather was constructed as a genre and the product of an equally constructed social class. As Crutchfield suggests, it is “extraordinarily naive to suggest that one group are the builders of this ‘fabricated authenticity’ and another group are the consumers: all of the people involved . . . as creators or receivers, are complicit in the fabrication of a concept of ‘authenticity’.”<sup>10</sup> The elevation, however,

7 Rory Crutchfield, “Discovering Authenticity? Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music,” *Popular Music History* 4, no. 1 (2009): 5-21; Greg Marquis, “Commentary: The Quest of the Folk,” *Acadiensis* XXXV, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 144-7.

8 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 43-151; Helen Creighton, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia Collected by Helen Creighton* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1932). Others were at work in the province as well: William Roy Mackenzie, *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1963); Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1970); Ian Francis 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 in folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1989).

9 Kelly Kathleen Miller, “The Images of Atlantic Canada in Recent Roots/Traditional Music: What Is It Like ‘Down There’?” (MA thesis in Atlantic Canada Studies, Saint Mary’s University, 2004), 60-3.

10 Crutchfield, “Discovering Authenticity,” 19-20.

of Scottish, Gaelic, or “Celtic” music produced by that quarter of the provincial population claiming Scottish descent to the status of authentically, particularly, and representatively Nova Scotian music was more a product of the commercialization of the “Celtic” sound and the associated cultural politics than of any spontaneous cultural eruption.<sup>11</sup>

Like any number of Scottish cultural markers in the era of Nova Scotia’s “clan chief,” Premier Angus L. MacDonald (1933-1954), the elevation of “Celtic” music to the status of a provincial symbol was as much a political as commercial project. Similar to the way in which popular folk culture “essentialized and commodified” the Appalachian region as an authentic America in the same era, MacDonald’s invented tradition established a Scottish identity for the province in the 1930s and 1940s as a means of attracting tourists to the newly christened “Canada’s Ocean Playground.” Visitors to Cape Breton and the eastern mainland hill country were ever more often enticed to visit “the highlands,” where “traditional” handcrafts could be purchased (often from artisans trained at the government-sponsored handcrafts centres in Halifax and Saint Ann’s), and where native speakers of Gaelic might yet be heard (elevated in esteem but scarcely increased in number by the establishment of a Gaelic College on the island in 1938). To get to the island, moreover, tourists would first have to pass the provincial border, where stood a solitary bagpiper, draped in the new provincial tartan (first in the world registered to represent a political unit, at the insistence of the MacDonald government), and often also trained at the Gaelic College.<sup>12</sup> Scottish traditions certainly existed prior to the tourist era, especially in the northeast of the province, but not with any pretensions to provincial significance. It was MacDonald and his collaborators in the tourism, craft, and music industries that made Nova Scotia Scottish. The premier even travelled to Edinburgh Castle in 1953 to sprinkle Nova Scotian soil on the grounds in a ceremony recapitulating the supposed union of the two territories in the 17th century.<sup>13</sup>

The historian of Nova Scotia’s “tartanism,” Ian McKay, has argued that with the passage of a few decades – by the 1970s, at latest – the folk cultural ideal, Scottish and otherwise, became more conspicuously contrived as well as more variable, more anarchistic and hedonistic, and even at times negative. These changes he ascribed to the arrival of thousands of back-to-the-land immigrants from the United States and Canada. They came, he wrote, in search of the innocent, antimodern folk – even hoping to become them – and ended up disillusioned with the concept but eager to commercialize and capitalize on it. The folk concept survived for two reasons: folk culture, art, and music remained a profitable industry at the end of the 20th century despite its reduced hold on the popular imagination, and the state continued to find it a useful rhetoric. “State planners found the idea of the folk a congenial one,” wrote

11 Miller, “Images of Atlantic Canada,” 12. The very notion of a “Celtic” music genre was entirely fabricated for the commercial market according to Shannon Thorton; see Thorton, “Reading the Record Bins: The Commercial Construction of Celtic Music,” in *New Directions in Celtic Studies*, ed. Amy Hale and Philip Payton (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 22-3.

12 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 192, 207, 210; Marquis, “Commentary,” 144.

13 Ian McKay, “Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954,” *Acadiensis* XXI, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 5-47, esp. 27.

McKay, "because it allowed them to design their schemes for modernization without the inconvenience of consulting the people most affected."<sup>14</sup>

McKay's neo-Gramscian analysis of Nova Scotian folk culture remains an influential one, partly because of the convincing symmetry between the peak eras of his subject (folk culture) and the thing it is supposed to have buttressed: secretive and top-down state planning. Nova Scotia in the 1960s and 1970s acquired a reputation as Canada's "most secretive jurisdiction" in matters of industrial economic development, and the supposed innocence and unsophistication of rural residents surely served for some members of government as a counterweight to public demands for consultation and participation.<sup>15</sup> But along with explanatory power comes a certain conceptual rigidity. McKay's theory is starkly categorical in its separation of the politically conservative, antimodern, folk-seeking stratum of Nova Scotian society from the politically leftist and modernist stratum that denies the very existence of an essential folk culture. Folk rhetoric and culture is for him invariably "an applied social analysis that blocks any radical democratic alternative," and a language with "no progressive items . . . [that] subaltern groups could requisition" as weapons in their own political battles.<sup>16</sup>

This idea of a solely conservative folk culture runs counter to the experience of other parts of the world, especially the folk music of the United States. There, the music of the mid-20th century folk revival was both politically conservative and radical. A perennial "purist" sector of folk music production did pursue a politically conservative voice, but it was neither alone nor even dominant in the industry. In the 1960s the Seeger-Guthrie tradition of topical song writing drew on the music of the old political left and on civil rights protest music, forging a durable connection between folk music and protest culture.<sup>17</sup> The fact that both sides pursued commercial success, or that the affectation of authenticity was entirely a fabrication of the popular music industry, did nothing to reduce the political utility of "authentic" folk music to radical movements. The political radicals of the folk revival era happily endorsed the affected traditionalism of folk music but were nothing like the atavistic and quietist anti-modernists of McKay's account. Rather, they sought a different, more democratic alternative to the conventional modernity of expert-led and state-planned industrial development.

The supposed antimodernity of the folk also runs starkly counter to the radicalism of its antecedent Nova Scotian musical culture. Much of the politically and economically aware music of the working class prior to and during the tourism era centred upon the struggle of industrial workers against the capitalist state and economic oppressors. Those "labour song-poems," as both Richard MacKinnon and

14 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 294.

15 Ralph Surette, "What is Public, What is Secret?" *The 4th Estate* (Halifax) 15 October 1975.

16 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 295-6.

17 Jens Lund and Serge Denisoff, "The Folk Music Revival and the Counter Culture: Contributions and Contradictions," *Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 334 (October-December 1971): 397, 404. See also Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*; Clark Halker, *For Democracy, Workers and God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protest, 1865-95* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Archie Green, *Songs About Work* (Bloomington, IN: Folklore Institute, Indiana University, 1972).



Lachlan MacKinnon call them, following Clark Halker, were produced in abundance in Nova Scotia. This was especially true in Cape Breton, even into the late 20th century era of supposedly contrived and inauthentic folk culture.<sup>18</sup> If these songs centre on class distinction and industrial struggle, which clearly support a definition of folk protest music as “struggle songs of the people . . . outbursts of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressors, of determination to endure hardships together and fight for a better life,” they also provide space for a much less politically conservative characterization of the folk style in the entire province.<sup>19</sup>

How, then, did those who participated in Nova Scotia’s more state-directed folk music revival make political use of the rhetoric and image of folk authenticity? Were they effectively “tartanist” and politically conservative antimodernists, or were they radically alter-modern and seeking to correct the perceived mistakes of modernity without wholesale retreat into an idealized past?

### **Environmental protest**

Environmental politics occasioned a burst of folk protest music production in Nova Scotia in the 1970s and 1980s, especially around nuclear energy issues. Anti-nuclear organizations formed the backbone of the provincial environmental movement after 1972, when the government of Premier Gerald Regan inadvertently created the first province-wide environmentalist alliance by pursuing secret negotiations with US investors eager to build a large nuclear generating station on tiny Stoddard Island off the province’s southwest shore. Political pressure orchestrated by the South Shore Environmental Protection Association led to the abandonment of the plan in short order, but a succession of nuclear controversies kept the oppositional spirit alive until the mid-1980s.<sup>20</sup>

Activist tactics quickly diverged in the context of a sustained anti-nuclear campaign. On one hand, a large segment of the movement, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds and those based in the city of Halifax, pursued direct consultation with bureaucrats and agencies of government more than protest, pressure, and public organization. The same activists increasingly tended toward a rhetoric of scientific risk assessment. On the other hand, their more radical peers

18 Richard MacKinnon and Lachlan MacKinnon, “Residual Radicalism: Labour Song-Poems of Industrial Decline,” *Ethnologies* 34, no. 1-2 (2012): 273-89; Halker, *For Democracy, Workers and God*.

19 Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, 10. For more on the Nova Scotian history, see David Frank, “Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island’s Bicentennial, 1785-1985*, ed. Ken Donovan (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1985), 203-18; David Frank, “Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton”; Dawn Fraser, *Echoes From Labor’s Wars, The Expanded Edition* (Wreck Cove, NS: Breton Books, 1992); Richard MacKinnon, “Protest Song and Verse in Cape Breton Island,” *Ethnologies* 30, no. 2 (2008): 33-71; MacKinnon and MacKinnon, “Residual Radicalism”; and John O’Donnell, *And Now the Fields are Green: A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada* (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1992).

20 These included new construction proposals, two heavy water plants in Cape Breton, and the possibility of buying into New Brunswick’s reactor project. See Mark Leeming, “In Defence of Home Places: Environmental Activism in Nova Scotia, 1970-1985” (PhD diss. in history, Dalhousie University, 2013).

continued to attack the injustice of environmental risk imposed on rural communities by distant administrators in Halifax and Ottawa. They also critiqued the modern Panglossian attitude toward technological expertise as one of the factors contributing to new environmental hazards. Real solutions, they argued, invariably required social action and lifestyle change (or resistance to certain changes) rather than technological fixes alone.<sup>21</sup>

The two segments of the anti-nuclear movement existed from its earliest days and collaborated (and debated) throughout the 1970s, with the technologically optimistic eco-modernists eventually ascending to the status of a movement mainstream and the radicals forming a corresponding fringe – that is until the sudden resurgence of political pressure tactics in 1979. In the aftermath of the Three Mile Island disaster in Pennsylvania, with the three Maritime governments pursuing a nuclear-powered regional electrical utility (the Maritime Energy Corporation), activists across the region rediscovered the power of personal vulnerability as a motivator for mass political mobilization. As the title of one popular pamphlet put it at the time, “It Can Happen Here.”<sup>22</sup>

Part of the resurgence of popular mobilization in 1979 was the use of protest music in the folk style, and one of the anthems of anti-nuclear action was a song called “The CANDU Can.” Written by Judith Allaby of Lunenburg, and sung by her with a strong Gaelic lilt, the song was offered to the well-established mainstream Ecology Action Centre (EAC) of Halifax with Allaby’s encouragement to use it for publicity. The EAC did use “The CANDU Can” at many small anti-nuclear gatherings and events that year, and the song hit on several of the resolutely unscientific themes that enjoyed renewed popularity in 1979. The first was an attack on the authority and expertise of governments and of the nuclear scientists who developed and sold the Canadian Deuterium-Uranium (CANDU) reactor:

Children, oh children, while you’re at your play,  
Your daddy’s out building a CANDU today.  
Well he’ll tell you it’s safe and he’ll tell you it’s well  
and he’ll tell you what all the governments tell.

Children, oh children, what can you believe,  
when those you think love you, themselves do deceive?  
Well they’ll tell you it’s not a crime against man  
To threaten each other as the CANDU can.<sup>23</sup>

21 Mark Leeming, “The Creation of Radicalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism in Nova Scotia, c1972-1979,” *Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (June 2014): 217-41.

22 “It Can Happen Here” (leaflet), May 1979, Ecology Action Center fonds, vol. 3421, file 16, Nova Scotia Archives (NSA). The meltdown of a reactor at Three Mile Island on 28 March 1979 inspired a burst of widespread antinuclear activism. See Edward Walsh, “Resource Mobilization and Citizen Protest in Communities Around Three Mile Island,” *Social Problems* 29, no. 1 (October 1981): 1-21.

23 “The CANDU Can” (audio recording), Ecology Action Center fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 1, file 5, Dalhousie University Archives and Special Collections (DAL).



Allaby's choice of rhetorical audience, the "children" of her refrain, was echoed by other singers, male and female, who frequently used the themes of protecting children and obligation to future generations as rhetorically powerful appeals to emotion.<sup>24</sup> Allaby's lines, however, also served to hint at her outrage at the condescension with which the nuclear experts in government frequently dismissed activist concerns, something she cited as an inspiration in her correspondence with the EAC.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the "parental" government authority figures have no redeeming coda in "The CANDU Can": rather than agitate for their enlightenment, Allaby goes on to assert the consequences of human arrogance in the face of natural forces:

Children, oh children, they made a mistake.  
They've lost their control. Oh, feel the earth shake.  
Well they found that a man is only a man,  
and he's slaughtered his brothers, as the CANDU can.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, "The CANDU Can" revived a morally charged rhetoric of ecological limits, presented by Allaby's lyrics as an admonishment direct from the mouth of God. While mainstream activists continued to delight in their alliance with religious groups whenever the connection of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons was discussed, there was less enthusiasm by the end of the 1970s for the religious moralists' advocacy of limits to economic growth and reduced material consumption. In 1972 the largely Quaker anti-nuclear group Voice of Women for Peace (Halifax branch) argued at a major public and government forum for a policy of "zero economic growth and zero industrial growth . . . [because] a rise in living standards for the rich nations . . . means a consequent depletion of the resources necessary for the survival of the poor nations."<sup>27</sup> By 1979, however, their peers at the EAC were keen to minimize any discussion of lifestyle changes and described the necessary changes in energy policy (to a mostly bureaucratic audience) as no more than a transition to a "more efficient system . . . [with] less material throughput," rather than one that eschewed expansion and growth.<sup>28</sup> Politically unpalatable talk of limits to growth became a marker of "fringe" activism. But in the efflorescence of local, rural, and personal activism after Three Mile Island, directed entirely at public and political targets and not at experts and administrators, space opened up for a return to explicitly moral arguments against rising production and consumption:

24 See, for example, Toni Brown's "Children's House," Pictou hearing, 15 June 1982, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 197, file 6, NSA.

25 Judith Allaby to EAC, 2 May 1979, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 43, file 1, DAL.  
26 "CANDU Can."

27 VOW national newsletter, vol. 9, no. 3, November 1972, Ecology Action Centre fonds, vol. 3434, file 28, NSA; "MOVE bulletin," 13 December 1972, Movement for Citizens Voice and Action fonds, MS-11-1, vol. 6, file 23, DAL.

28 "Interview with Susan Mayo and Susan Holtz," *Dartmouth Free Press*, 31 January 1979, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 39, file 7, DAL.

Well he gave us the sun, the wind, and the sea,  
and he gave us our minds so that we might be free,  
and he gave us such beauty not known before,  
and he said, "love each other, you will not need more."<sup>29</sup>

The musical revival of politically radical environmentalism came often from the same rural enclaves where more radical protest politics had remained the main mode of operation for activists. Those at a greater remove from the city often regarded the bureaucracy there with more suspicion and hostility than urbanites, and therefore felt less inclined to abandon politically difficult arguments. Judy Davis on the north shore, for example, was a prolific rural protest musician.<sup>30</sup> So was Sam Turton on the Fundy shore. Turton's 1970s anti-nuclear oeuvre struck many of the same notes as Allaby's song and was played at many of the same events, though Turton recalls performing his activist songs as far afield as Ottawa during anti-nuclear rallies.<sup>31</sup> With New Brunswick's Point Lepreau nuclear construction site a short 80 kilometres upwind from his home near Digby, the theme of personal vulnerability in 1979 was familiar territory; but Turton did not hesitate to go further and heap cutting criticism on those hubristic experts and government nuclear salesmen whom Allaby chided more gently:

You men of science and soothing quotes,  
safety and figures, statistical notes.  
I know who pays for your research,  
but numbers won't help me when our children hurt.

...

You told us it's safe, now we know you lie.  
We'll never believe you, no matter how you try.<sup>32</sup>

Others, like Michael Fuller in Parrsboro, questioned why expert risk analysis should be afforded such popular esteem when it had failed so often:

We are the planners.  
Please let us plan with care.  
We planned Three Mile Island.  
We planned Hiroshima too.  
We planned DDT and dioxin,  
and the acid in the air.  
Trust us, we are the planners,

29 "CANDU Can."

30 David Orton, "Judy Davis – Portrait of an Activist," 2010, *GreenWeb*, [http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/Judy\\_Davis.pdf](http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/Judy_Davis.pdf). Davis, in addition to being a song writer and guitarist, was a member of the Caledonian Scottish Fiddle Orchestra, surely a boost to her "tartanist" authenticity.

31 Sam Turton, interview with author, 15 March 2016, telephone, notes in possession of author.

32 "Antinuclear Songs," audio recording, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 1, file 7, DAL.

and we'll plan your future well.  
For a master plan we'd sell our souls  
and lead you all in hell.<sup>33</sup>

Turton also used his lyrics to respond to criticisms levelled at anti-nuclear radicals that they were applying emotion to scientific issues. But rather than retreat into a scientific rhetoric of nuclear risk to justify his more subjective statements, as his mainstream activist peers so often did, he defended the validity of emotion:

And you can tell me that I'm just emotional,  
that I'm uninformed,  
but I'm not ashamed if I feel afraid,  
when I'm sure danger's at my door.

Similarly, Turton's defence of limits to growth thinking and biocentric ethics came through in his music as they rarely did in the anthropocentric literature of the mainstream movement, which focused closely on the technical fallibility of reactors and the risks posed by nuclear technology to human life and well-being. In his song "I Wanna Live," the lyrics give voice to a long list of creatures, from amoebae to spiders, birds, and eventually humans, while "The Balance" admonished those who would "take without giving":

If you have a dream to conquer nature,  
You will see that you never win.  
In the end you will lose everything that you had  
and more.<sup>34</sup>

Similar ideas appear in Judy Davis's songwriting, especially in her 1988 "Blockade Song" where she sang about the rights of nature itself:

They say this land is private land  
For owners to decide  
Whether or not they'll poison it  
And spray it with herbicide  
  
But what about the life that shares this land  
Don't they have a say?  
And isn't it time to make a stand  
And find a better way?<sup>35</sup>

The union of scientifically informed and politically radical environmentalisms that brought songs like "The CANDU Can" and "The Balance" to a wider activist audience proved a powerful weapon. Anti-nuclear activism in its populist resurgence

33 "The Planners," Parrsboro hearing, 7 October 1982, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 199, file 23, NSA.

34 "Antinuclear Songs," audio recording, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 1, file 7, DAL.

35 Orton, "Judy Davis."

proved enough to scuttle the proposed Maritime Energy Corporation for 30 years. The last serious consultation among the three provinces toward a unified utility was at Brudenell, Prince Edward Island, in the summer of 1979. Upset with the premiers for refusing public consultations, activist leaders called for a protest rally on short notice and drew 600-800 Maritimers to the small resort town. Pressured by the protestors and alarmed by New Brunswick's ballooning nuclear debt, the premiers of PEI and Nova Scotia shied away from tying themselves to their neighbour's liability. Even in New Brunswick, where the Hatfield government pressed stubbornly on with construction of the Point Lepreau reactor, plans for a second reactor at the site fell through.<sup>36</sup>

Though the newly elected Nova Scotian government of Premier John Buchanan did accede to the demands of the protestors at Brudenell, its attitude towards environmental activism generally was notably more hostile than the previous government's. Three times in the years before the change of government, activists in the province had pressured the cabinet in Halifax into rejecting the request (and eventually forceful demand) by pulp and paper multinational Stora Kopparberg to permit aerial insecticide spraying on Cape Breton Island. By the time Buchanan took office the spruce budworm irruption on the island had expired naturally, but the new premier was eager to avoid ever being pinched between his desire to accommodate the province's industrial partners and the contrary demands of an organized electorate. Beginning soon after the 1978 election, and accelerating after the activist show of strength at Brudenell, the Buchanan government's senior administrators and MLAs moved to limit the environmental movement's access to information and reduce its credibility with the public. New restrictive rules on public notification of forest spray permits were drafted by former industry representatives taken into the public service, like the then-new Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests Don Aldridge, who also created "public education" programs to combat environmentalist "distortions."<sup>37</sup> As forest chemicals quickly became an issue again with new moves to spray herbicides, senior public servants struck out against protestors of "particular political persuasions," who were prone to "violence and civil disobedience" and, according to the attorney general, "mostly Americans anyway."<sup>38</sup>

In the early 1980s, in the context of this new hostility from government, the nuclear issue rebounded to unexpected life in the form of a proposal to begin uranium mining in the province's central mainland. The uranium discovery was the hoped-for result of the provincial government's encouragement and investment in mineral exploration since the mid-1970s, and opposition brought activists into the

36 EAC Board of Directors Meeting minutes, 13 June 1979, Ecology Action Centre fonds, vol. 3420, file 23, NSA; Adrian Egbers, "Going Nuclear: The Origins of New Brunswick's Nuclear Industry, 1950-1983" (MA thesis in history, Dalhousie University, 2008).

37 "Forest Industry 'Needs' Informed Public," *Forest Times* 3, no. 2 (March 1981): 1; George Moody, Minister of Environment, to Ryan Googoo, 6 November 1985, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 43, file 7, DAL.

38 Elizabeth May to the Editor, *Chronicle Herald* (Halifax), 25 February 1983, clipping file, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 39, file 7, DAL; *Q/L SSEPA NEWS* 1, no. 12 (May 1983); Fred McMahon, "Environmental activists' motives questioned," *Chronicle Herald*, 23 February 1983, with brief by Elizabeth May, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 198, file 21, NSA.

most direct conflict to date with the developmentalist state. There was no question that environmentalists would resist: given a hypothetical accident-free nuclear power system, uranium mining would represent the largest source of radio-isotope releases into the environment, and activists from rural agricultural communities near the proposed mine site led the counter-effort. But despite their reasons for fighting, the extended public debate that followed attracted increased efforts to paint environmental activists as troublemakers from outside of the province. Even the judge eventually appointed to lead the provincial Royal Commission on Uranium Mining bemoaned the presence of an “American” activist movement in Nova Scotia and wished that “their cars had broken down in New England.”<sup>39</sup>

Activists in the province were well aware of the attempts to de-legitimize their voices, even before the new government took office. Having used the rhetoric of outsider-exploiter against the Swedish multinational Stora, forestry activists were initially careful to keep Nova Scotian-born members of their coalition front and centre – men and women like the president of the Victoria County Woodlot Owners Association Frank Reid. Those with out-of-province origins tried to remain in the background, according to an account by Elizabeth May, herself a young American immigrant only three years into the country at the time of her first “budworm battle.”<sup>40</sup> Even when May and her come-from-away peers took a more public role, as they did in the later forestry campaign and the anti-uranium campaign, they reached often for the language of Nova Scotian authenticity to counter their critics, which frequently meant the music of authenticity.

The organizers of the protest march at Brudenell, for example, managed in their week of fevered preparation to secure for themselves one of the highest markers of Nova Scotian musical authenticity: a bagpiper to lead their column.<sup>41</sup> Yet that was not their first or only conscription of the symbols of provincial folk culture. Since the 1930s, when it was “discovered” and popularized by the pioneering musical folklorist Helen Creighton, the folk ballad “Farewell to Nova Scotia” has served as an unofficial provincial anthem. As a marker of authenticity, few compositions can compare to its instant recognition and broad appeal. In both the early forestry campaigns and the uranium battle, versions of the song written to purpose by activists signalled their Nova Scotian-ness and hit some of the same radical notes already discussed. In 1977, Cape Breton folk singer Kenzie MacNeil sang a version penned by Elizabeth May on CBC radio:

Farewell to Cape Breton’s birds and bees,  
The forest dead and silent be.  
For the planes flew overhead  
And the poison they spread.  
Ah, whatever’s to become of you and me.<sup>42</sup>

39 Robert McCleave to Robert Tulloch, 3 May 1983, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 203, file 7, NSA.

40 Elizabeth May, *Budworm Battles* (Halifax: Four East, 1982), 12. May has gone on to become an elected MP and is the current leader of the Green Party of Canada.

41 Linden MacIntyre, “Nuclear Power: Grim Dilemma for the Maritimes,” *Atlantic Insight* 1, no. 6 (September 1979): 52.

42 May, *Budworm Battles*, 64.

Five years later, at a hearing of the Uranium Commission in Pictou, another version by a local activist responded to increased attacks on the legitimacy of environmentalist voices with a more strident denouncement of “politicians’ lies” and of the validity of expert testimony, working in references to nuclear weapons proliferation and India’s use of a CANDU reactor to build its first atomic bomb:

Farewell to Nova Scotia, the sea-bound coast  
And farewell to our tourist industry  
And our agriculture, of which we boast  
If uranium is mined in our fair country.

We’ve heard all the experts and we’re not impressed,  
though with silver voices they are blessed.  
For when they’ve taken their money and they’ve gone, you will see  
that the mess they leave behind will fall to you and me.

Oh the tailings piles will spread all around  
And contaminate our native ground  
Giving deadly emissions for decades to come  
Should we really put our future in a rusty steel drum?

Uranium is in great demand  
We can sell it off to many a land  
Such as Argentina, Iran, Kuwait,  
And we’ll think about the problems when it’s far too late.

Oh the CANDU reactor is safe, we are told  
And a protocol is signed whenever one is sold  
But surely after India we should be wise  
And never place our faith in politicians’ lies.

Uranium is required for just one major use  
Nuclear reactors are only an excuse  
Should we threaten our environment to build a bomb?  
Is the simple, final question to which we come.<sup>43</sup>

Activists with out-of-province origins were indeed well-represented in the leadership of the environmental movement in Nova Scotia, though far from a majority of its members and supporters. And the industries they opposed – nuclear energy, pulpwood forestry, and uranium mining – were certainly primarily run by outside investors. The appeal to authenticity was therefore both a defensive and an offensive tactic, and folk protest music fit the needs of the movement precisely by turning the state’s own rhetoric of traditionalism against its modernist industrial development schemes. With a dose of humour and a guitar accompanying, and by

43 “Farewell to Nova Scotia” (anti-uranium version), Pictou hearing, 15 June 1982, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 197, file 6, NSA.



affecting a rustic accent, a performer like Turton, himself an immigrant to the province, could make a serious point about reactor safety and nuclear waste in his musical interrogation of New Brunswick's premier in "Mr. Hatfield" without exposing himself to criticism based on the stereotype of the didactic outsider come to preach at the ignorant locals. In fact, he turned the stereotype back onto the nuclear experts and politicians:

Dear Mister Hatfield, I don't understand  
How politicians come up with their plans.  
There's a reactor being slapped up nearby.  
I'm a down-home taxpayer, and I wanna know why.

Dear Mister Hatfield, I work with machines.  
I hear your reactor runs like a dream.  
It never makes errors or breaks down inside.  
I sure wish my chainsaw was built by those guys.

Dear Mister Hatfield, I heard something new.  
Low radiation ain't too good for you.  
Our kids could get cancer, which could be quite sore.  
But shucks this ain't something you ever ignore.

Dear Mister Hatfield, I read something weird.  
The junk that's left over is deadly for years.  
The great brains can't find one safe place it can go.  
Jeez, you don't build an outhouse before you *dig out the hole!*

Dear Mister Hatfield, I heard a complaint.  
That you don't care what the commonfolk say.  
Big business phone calls are the ones you return.  
A form-letter answer is fine with me, *sir*.<sup>44</sup>

If the state's own rhetoric of the "folk" in Nova Scotia was antimodern, if it supported the idea of a rural culture unchanged from the 19th century and uninterested in change, the use to which activists put that rhetoric turned antimodernism into something quite different, a recognition that industrial modernity need not be normative nor a traditional economy atavistic. The environmental movement in Nova Scotia divided in the early 1980s into two streams, more and more aware of their differences. Debate over whether and how to participate in official decision-making exercises like the Royal Commission on Uranium Mining drew the mainstream of the movement closer to government and farther from its radical allies.<sup>45</sup> The radical activists – those who persisted in questioning the value and sustainability of industrial modernity, economic growth,

44 "Antinuclear Songs," audio recording, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 1, file 7, DAL.

45 Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, "The Ecology Action Center in the Seventies," February 1979, Ecology Action Centre fonds, v. 3420, file 23, NSA.

and capitalism – tended to be based in rural areas and, consequent to their preference for populist organization, tended as well to favour the anti-government, anti-expert arguments for local autonomy that appeared so often in the lyrics of folk protest music. Moreover, the regions of stronger radical presence on Cape Breton Island and the mainland's north shore represented the same heartland of Scottish descendants that the provincial government had for several decades presented as the “real Nova Scotia.” Folk musicians such as Ronald J. (Ronnie) MacEachern from Cape Breton came into environmental debates carrying an image of authenticity endorsed by the government whose development schemes they opposed. The village of Big Pond, which MacEachern represented at one hearing of the province's Royal Commission on Uranium Mining, was at the front line of the renewed battle over herbicide spraying in 1980, and since the provincial government was so determined to ignore their appeals, its residents eventually were forced to resort to a court injunction to stop the spray.<sup>46</sup> MacEachern had been active during the earlier controversy, offering his “Ode to the Budworm” as a “traditional Gaelic melody” and including in it warnings against “businessmen . . . on a new campaign / to deceive the public with their lies, that they might try again” to spray herbicide on the island's forests.<sup>47</sup> Mineral prospectors arrived soon thereafter, and MacEachern began playing an anti-uranium song to audiences wherever he sang – asking them to consider whether all forms of economic development were equivalent and whether some might not be more harmful than good for the community:

What they gonna pay you for diggin' the uranium?  
 Enough for a new car, a computer, or a tv?  
 What price will you pay for diggin' the uranium?  
 Open your eyes up and see.<sup>48</sup>

For the residents of Cape Breton towns, who were not only used to the imposition of risk on coal miners by mining companies not keen on the expense of new safety equipment but often well-informed about the increased lung cancer rates among uranium miners in Ontario, the message came through with even more force than in parts of the province where audiences might read into it a simple warning about the possible health risks.

The apparently antimodern sentiment of much protest music could never be separated from the hostility toward experts and development planners who so stubbornly refused to heed local requests for a slower pace and smaller scale of industrial development focussed more on existing traditional industries. When Gordon Campbell admonished the nuclear experts at the royal commission hearing in Parrsboro, singing “We don't believe a single word you say / we know we can find a better way,” he was not endorsing a static society – only one that would go on building on the traditional resource and manufacturing industries of the area.<sup>49</sup>

46 Sheila Jones, “Big Pond Goes After a Big Fish,” *Atlantic Insight* 2, no. 11 (November 1980): 26-7.

47 May, *Budworm Battles*, 101.

48 Ronald MacEachern testimony, audio recording, Sydney hearing, 7 September 1982, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, Ac681, NSA.

49 “Our Ways Never Failed Us,” Parrsboro hearing, 7 October 1982, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 199, file 23, NSA.

## Conclusion

The full extent and popularity of environmental folk protest music in Nova Scotia at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s cannot be known with great certainty. Protest music is often ephemeral. There was certainly much more of it than survives in the records used to write this research note, and topical song writing was a feature of a great many protest events.<sup>50</sup> Fortunately, what survives is enough to support some conclusions about the political uses of “folk” culture.

Authenticity – the status of “true” Nova Scotians – was clearly a rhetorically powerful claim for both the promoters and opponents of large industrial development schemes. After several decades of promoting a rural, rustic, and “antimodern” image of the authentic Nova Scotian, the provincial government did perhaps hope to assume the role of traditional autocratic decision-maker. But the idealization of the folk gave just as much rhetorical power to opponents who claimed that the government’s plans represented a betrayal of the same ideal. In reality, neither the promoters of state-sponsored folk culture, nor their radical opponents among the folk musicians, were any more or less “authentic” than any singer in a rural hamlet. And the reality of a modern or antimodern future for the province is as irrelevant as the degree of authenticity; most environmental protestors, after all, sought an alternative to the modernity of large scale, centralized industrial capitalism without seeking a retreat into some idealized version of the age of sail. What is relevant is the equivocal significance of the social construction of a rural folk; the widespread use of folk-style protest music attests to the quest for authenticity by environmental campaigners at least as much as their opponents in the bureaucracy.

What radical protesters wished to do with what power they could muster through the affectation of authenticity is suggestive of a wider conclusion about political history: that the politically conservative antimoderns and the politically progressive modernists fail to constitute anything like the full spectrum of political economic positions possible in 20th-century Nova Scotia or elsewhere. As environmental protest generally reveals, there have always been progressive antimodern, or “non-modern,” positions and activists at work or, put differently, economically conservative thinkers and activists with radically democratic political philosophies or other radically heterodox ethical positions such as the eco-centric ethics previously mentioned.<sup>51</sup> Ideological binaries simply do a disservice to the reality of the lived experience of 20th-century environmental politics.

Folk rhetoric, however, was not an equal opportunity idiom. If the folk were politically ambiguous, so was environmentalism. As environmental activist

50 Orton, “Judy Davis”; “The ‘Say NO’ to Uranium Show,” notice, 30 May 1982, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 33, file 4, DAL. Although this research note deals only with music produced here, there was also environmental protest music from the USA used in Nova Scotia; see, for instance, Orangedale hearing, 8 September 1982, Royal Commission on Uranium Mining fonds, RG44, vol. 199, file 1, NSA; “Protest Music,” audio recording, Ecology Action Centre fonds, MS-11-13, vol. 1, file 4, DAL.

51 This is, of course, not a new idea. For deeper studies of its implications see, for example, Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1990; 3rd ed. 2000) and Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991; English trans. 1993).

organizations in the province discovered the internal differences that caused such friction within the movement around the time of the Royal Commission on Uranium Mining, it became clearer that folk-style protest music and the associated quest for rural authenticity were more common to the radical side of the movement and to those areas of the province where it predominated (mostly away from Halifax). Those who relied on arguments against environmental injustice propagated by political metropolitanism, who defended the legitimacy of topophilic emotional arguments, who decried the elevation of scientific expertise to the status of sole arbiter of truth, and who resisted the incentive to earn a place at the policy table by abandoning politically unpopular ideas about the unsustainability of industrial capitalist civilization – those were the activists who appear in recorded evidence of audio tapes and transcripts continuing to reach for the music and image of folk authenticity in their appeals to the public. Quite contrary to the dictum that folk rhetoric “blocks any radical democratic alternative” and precludes any radical or progressive politics, the reality of its application was much more politically ambiguous and much more radical than the image of folk conservatism would allow.<sup>52</sup>

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52 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 295.