

COLLECTING IN CAPE BRETON

A report by Debbie Meeks

In the summer of 1978, CFMS member Debbie Meeks received a grant from Parks Canada to collect and perform folk songs on Cape Breton Island. Following is her report -

My collecting began in the summer of 1978. Parks Canada funded a summer project which employed three Cape Bretoners and myself (I'm originally from Ontario) to collect and perform folk songs on Cape Breton Island. Songs in the English language were collected in the Ingonish Beach and Sydney areas and sung at folk festivals on the Island.

That project ended last fall and I've since worked on three other projects. These projects differed from the Parks Canada grant in that they involved only myself and concentrated solely on collecting (although I've continued to perform on the side). I lived in three communities (Cape North, Sydney and Mabou), three to four months at a time, and collected songs from each of their immediate areas. The tapes were then edited, transcribed, documented and submitted to the Beaton (Archives) Institute in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Over the year and a half, a substantial amount of material has been collected. A study of each collection offers some interesting details. However, I'll not get into detail here. Instead I'll give you broad overviews of the type of material collected in each area - which in itself offers some interesting points.

The material collected from the North of Cape Smokey area illustrates a diversity of song that is not readily expected on an island so deeply rooted in a Scottish tradition. In Ingonish Beach, an area first settled by pre-famine Irish, there are Irish songs. Further north, in Neil's Harbour, a strong Newfoundland song tradition once thrived and is now dying. And in Cape North, there are a number of American songs - songs that were first introduced to the area by young men and women who travelled back and forth from the New England States with temporary work. In each of the communities, Scottish music was also collected. However, in my collecting it did not predominate.

The collecting in Mabou and Sydney centered on locally-composed material. There is a diversity of influences in this material, also; more specifically, in the writing style of the local composer.

One composer set some of his lyrics to old Gaelic tunes and in other songs, used phrases from the traditional songs he once sang. Another composer adopted, quite unconsciously, the style of songs sung by his favourite radio star, Wilf Carter. And the list could go on - but don't worry, it won't. Suffice it to say, the songs have provided some very entertaining and interesting material to sing and study.

There ends my brief description of my collecting and findings to date. If there are any questions concerning my work, please write. I'll try to be more prompt with a reply than I have been in sending this report to the Newsletter.



Ronnie MacEachern's REPORT FROM CAPE BRETON

An Addenda

A Report from Cape Breton by Ronnie MacEachern was featured in the Spring 1979 issue of this Newsletter. The following correspondence from John Shaw, Kay MacDonald and Ronnie himself, is intended to clarify some inaccuracies in that report.

Dear Sirs:

I noticed in Ron MacEachern's Report from Cape Breton (Spring, 1979 Newsletter-Bulletin) that I have been credited with introducing Gaelic to the grade schools in some parts of Cape Breton. In fact, I have never been directly involved with these particular programs: proper credit should go to Hon. Allan J. MacEachern, The Gaelic Society of Cape Breton, the Gaelic teachers and, recently, The Mabou Gaelic and Historical Society for their timely efforts to introduce and promote Gaelic instruction in Inverness County at the grade school and high school levels. Along with many others on the island, I hope that the programs will expand to a point where Gaelic in the schools will be made available to children in many more Gaelic-speaking areas, including the Glendale-Kingsville area where I live.

It may interest your readers to hear that a major effort is at last being made to collect the large amount of Gaelic folklore that remains in Cape Breton. The Gaelic Folklore Project, federally funded and sponsored by St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, is concerned with making field-recordings of Gaelic songs, tales, mouth-music (puirt-a-beul), and other items from this extensive oral tradition so that these may be more readily accessible to people with an interest in the region's Gaelic culture. Any queries should be addressed to: Gaelic Folklore Project, Box 168, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, B2G 1C0.

Yours,
(signed) John Shaw

Dear Sirs:

Having read your Newsletter for Spring 1979, I am writing to correct one of the statements in Ronnie MacEachern's "Report from Cape Breton". While Ronnie is a very versatile and talented young man, he is not knowledgeable in the area of Gaelic or of the work being done on our Island to promote and revive the language. With all due respect to John Shaw, who is doing good work in teaching the language in sections of Inverness County, he was not responsible for Gaelic being introduced as a subject in the grade schools in that county. This became possible through the efforts of the Cape Breton Gaelic Society, Sydney Chapter, and Professor John A. MacDonald of Jordanhill College in Glasgow, Scotland, whom the Society had brought to Sydney in the summer of 1972 to conduct a Summer Course in Gaelic teaching methods. The result was that two teachers of Gaelic, Effie MacCorquadale and Murdena Stewart, came to Cape Breton to teach the language in the schools of Inverness County and the program has been very successful.

Because your Newsletter reaches many people who are interested in the revival of the Gaelic language, I wish to correct this misconception in the above-mentioned article.

Yours sincerely,

(signed) (Mrs.) Kay MacDonald
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Dear Readers:

Thanks are extended to Kay MacDonald of the Beaton Institute of the College of Cape Breton for her correction of an error in my "Report from Cape Breton" in the spring 1979 issue of the Newsletter. I would like to extend my thanks and congratulations to those persons mentioned in Mrs. MacDonald's note for their work, and add my sincere apologies to all concerned for any inconvenience caused by my misinformed statement concerning the teaching of Gaelic in the Inverness school system.

Yours,
(signed) Ronald J. MacEachern

