

REVIEWS



SONGS & STORIES FROM DEEP COVE, CAPE BRETON

as remembered by Amby Thomas:
edited by Ron MacEachern, illustrated by Ellison Robertson. Sydney: The College of Cape Breton Press, 1979; 49 pp., \$4.95

This is a unique time in the history of human development, a time when the proliferation of mass media allows us to record the common lives of men and women who have in all other times perished beyond the memory of the family group into anonymity.

Such a life is that of Ambrose (Amby) Thomas, a fine traditional singer and cultural informant whose

first book of songs and stories has just been published. Of course, no one will suggest that Amby Thomas' record will last forever—perhaps it will, in some stray corner, outlive the ability of men and women to comprehend it. For now it is a special portrayal of a kind of living that is just about gone from us, a life lived in the tiny and archaic fishing port of Deep Cove, Cape Breton, which Amby—at least spiritually—has never left.

His stories portray a time when work meant *earning* one's living, when a night's entertainment—before radio ruined the fabric—was an evening with the community, yarnning and singing. He specifically recalls major events that played a part in his life, although some, particularly the Halifax explosion of 1917 are treated incompletely, leaving questions in anyone's mind who is unfamiliar with Nova Scotian history. Still, you understand that Amby is speaking as a Nova Scotian speaks to his peer. Knowledge of the tragedy is assumed as part of the common experience, and if you wish to communicate with Amby on his own terms you are responsible for understanding how it fits the patchwork quilt of existence in the Maritimes. Common experience, in the sense of community, is the core that makes Amby Thomas' life and times so special and, in so many ways, so different to our own.

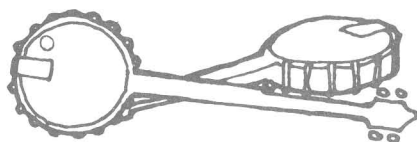
The songs are many—traditional works whose composers are unknown, one curious song from Amby's own hand, and a group composed by a locally respected Gaelic songwriter named Lauchie MacNeil, who travelled around the

Cape Breton communities during the period of Amby's youth. There are ballads of fishing and of shipwreck, mother songs, songs about love, travel, and workers' strikes; songs of lumbering, mining, and life at sea. "The Jam on Gary's Rocks" is represented, also "The Darby Ram" and "The Woodsman's Alphabet" and Lillian Crewe Walsh's heroic ballad "The Wreck of the *John Harvey*" (previously published in CFB, Volume 1, No. 4). There are others that may be unfamiliar outside Amby's home ground.

All in all, one gets the feeling that Amby Thomas' life is not too different from every life that ever set anchor in Deep Cove, Cape Breton. It is the disparity between what Amby perceives and our own more urban, at least more highly technological, society that makes his record a valuable addition to Canadian history.

Robert L. Webb

Drawing of Giant MacAskill by Ellison Robertson (from Ron MacEachern's book).



Logdrivers at work.