

# INTERVIEW: JOHN SHAW

photo courtesy of John Shaw



John Shaw with Gaelic singer and storyteller Lauchie MacLellan

*Last summer I spent ten days travelling through Cape Breton Island. There was little music to be heard at the time as almost all the music-makers are also fishermen and the lobster season brings long hours of work and calloused, brine-swollen fingers—as well as an unusually large catch that year.*

*Fortunately the folk grapevine led me to John Shaw who is not only a fine young fiddler but is employed by St. Francis Xavier University as a collector of Gaelic folklore on the island. John's family came originally from Cape Breton but emigrated to*

*the States earlier in the century. He now lives a semi-self-sufficient existence with his wife Jill on a farm at Glendale, where I stayed for a couple of days, played music, weeded the garden, went fishing, and recorded the following interview.*

*Tony Montague*



**CFB:** How did you come to be employed as a collector of Gaelic folklore on Cape Breton Island?

**JS:** I started recording Gaelic folklore in 1963 when I first came to Cape

Breton. During that summer and the following summer I lived here in Glendale supporting myself doing farm work during the day and left the evenings for collecting. As it turned out, the area around Glendale happened to be particularly rich both in music and in Gaelic songs. However, I did have the chance during those summers to spend a few days in other parts of the island, including the north shore area, which is well-known for its milling songs, the area around Inverness, the Mira area, and the Iona area, where there were at the time some very good singers and bards.

In 1975, I worked for a year for the College in Sydney and collected what I could in the time I had available and met some very good Gaelic traditional storytellers, who are still working with us. As I became better acquainted with Gaelic folklore in Cape Breton I became more and more aware of the large amount of material that had not yet been collected. Various efforts, some of them successful, to record Gaelic tradition here had been made in the past, and some very good recordings had been done of the descendants of Barra people in the Iona area in the late 'thirties by John Lorne Campbell and his wife. However, I became convinced that a systematic effort to record what remains of Gaelic folklore all over the island should be made, along the lines of the work carried out for Gaelic by the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh and by the Irish Folklore Commission in Dublin.

The following summer, I talked to people at St. Francis Xavier University at Antigonish, expressing my feeling that we had only scratched

the surface in the area of Gaelic folklore, and together with Sr. Margaret MacDonell, Head of the Department of Celtic Studies, we mapped out a proposal that we felt would do justice to the island's Gaelic culture. The project is administered jointly by Sr. MacDonell and myself and is sponsored by the University. Funding for cultural activities of this kind, connected with Gaelic, no matter how well based, has always been notoriously scarce. However, we were very fortunate in having the constant support and encouragement of a number of Gaelic-speaking Cape Bretoners including Hon. Allan J. MacEachen. Our proposal, which went to the Multiculturalism Directorate under the Department of State, was well received and in 1977 we received funds sufficient to begin our project. All of the material that is tape recorded is in Gaelic and goes into a tape archive at the University. We see this both as a resource open to the Gaelic community and as a source for material of eventual use in university and high school courses in Gaelic languages and folklore.

**CFB:** What does your work as a collector involve specifically?

**JS:** The main part of my work is going into all the little communities in Cape Breton and tape recording various kinds of Gaelic folklore. For this I keep a daily journal of my field work which gives the names of the informants visited and the items in their order as recorded. I also keep a complete record in this journal of any items mentioned by an informant which could be of interest, or are to be recorded later; these listed items are then transferred to another book, which is arranged according to the probable informants who may have

these items and their location on the island.

When I'm doing my field work, I rarely record at the first session; I prefer to go in and become acquainted with the informant. I find that in the course of conversation more interesting points generally come out this way that can lead to later recordings, than come out in the context of a formal initial recording session. When I first talk with an informant, I compile a list of items which he may know which I am looking for, and I find that it helps to relax an informant if you ask for some specific items that he may remember. I also find it helpful before I visit a person for the first time, to find out as much as I can about his particular forte, where his people came from in Scotland, as well as facts about his other interests.

In compiling lists of items to give to an informant, I have had quite a bit of help from the Scottish collections of folklore, most of them made at the end of the last century, and the current literature coming out in such publications as *Tocher*, from the School of Scottish Studies. I find in general that this technique also helps to get the informant interested and involved, in a way that leads him to think about the material during the next few weeks before I come back.

All of the items on tape are then taken in to the office at the University, where they are catalogued on file cards. The main catalogue is consecutive: made as the items are collected. There are also catalogues arranged according to the type of item—say, whether it's a folk tale or a song or a proverb or an anecdote—and according to the informants and the location on the island where the

material has been collected. The more important items that we record we then transcribe in Gaelic and file to be used later. Some of these transcriptions, particularly those of traditional tales, are being compiled into a book with Gaelic text and English translation, which we hope to see published eventually.

**CFB:** How do you locate your informants?

**JS:** I locate most of my informants through information given by other informants. Failing this, if I visit an area with which I am not familiar, I'll go around and ask at random—who speaks Gaelic well? What people are known locally as Gaelic singers? What songs have you heard them sing?—and then I go visit the people mentioned. I've found that it's good to bear in mind at this point that information given about prospective informants should be cross-checked if possible because there are always surprises and it's very easy to overlook a person who may turn out to be the best informant in the area.

I keep a list of every new informant mentioned according to the county and, within the county, the town, and beside the name I put the probable type of material that the informant may have. In addition, we have two hired informants with the project. One, a storyteller by the name of Joe Neil McNeil from Middle Cape, Cape Breton County, has given us a remarkable number of traditional tales, along with a large store of proverbs, anecdotes and folk beliefs. Our other hired informant, Lauchie MacLellan of Dunvegin, Inverness County, devoted much of his life to learning and singing the Gaelic songs of his area, and has

given us over a hundred and fifty of these songs, as well as a wealth of expressions, local anecdotes and some very well-told traditional tales.

With the occasional exception, most of my recording work is done entirely through Gaelic, since I find that it helps an informant to remember not only the material at hand but also the circumstances in which he learned it, which invariably leads to more material.

**CFB:** What types of material do you find?

**JS:** Gaelic songs are the most frequent type of items collected. Then there are mouth music tunes, which provide the words for fiddle tunes in Cape Breton—we've collected well over a hundred of these. Nobody is sure of the origin of mouth music but it is thought that the practice developed when musical

instruments were scarce or forbidden. One area which has yielded an unexpectedly large number of items has been that of the old traditional tales, which have been passed on both in Scotland and here over a large number of generations with amazing accuracy. A good many of the tales that we have collected here can be found in the Scottish collections. Some of these belong to the Fenian cycle which goes back to the middle ages and which was the great epic of Gaeldom, and one story in particular which was collected from Joe Neil McNeil goes as far back as the seventh century.

I have also recorded some historical legends, and a large number of tales of second sight and other psychic phenomena. Second sight, or as in Gaelic it's called "two sightedness", is a psychic gift which was supposed to have been quite common, where people could see events that were going to take place, as if they were superimposed over the everyday reality that they were seeing at the same time—hence the name. Cape Breton is also rich in proverbs which are referred to constantly in the language of good Gaelic speakers, in weather lore, in religious lore, in many hundreds of humorous stories and, as a part of this, in repartee, at which Cape Breton Gaels have always excelled.

**CFB:** How and why is it that the fiddle has become the 'supreme' instrument on Cape Breton Island?

**JS:** It seems that the Gaelic speaking settlers in Cape Breton arrived with both the fiddle and the pipes. Although there were some very good pipers in Inverness County, the fiddle established itself as the main

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instrument. Originally the style of playing came from the western highlands of Scotland, and it has been rather less in evidence in other parts of the island until recently. There has been some evidence that both fiddles and pipes were made here, and also that the small pipes, which I believe are known elsewhere as the chamber pipes, were played here in Cape Breton until fairly recently. In the other parts of the island, such as Victoria County, where the fiddle was not so common, the pipes were heard more frequently.


The fiddle, more than the pipes, was very well suited to the circumstances of the first settlers, and as a matter of fact for most of the people in rural Cape Breton today. The fiddle sounded good in the kitchen, people could dance to it and it was also ideally suited to school house dances, and those were in the beginning the occasions in which the fiddle was most often heard. Speaking very generally, fiddle playing tends to run in families, and there are still families around the island which are noted for their fiddle music.

Traditionally, the fiddle was played more openly in Catholic communities than in Protestant communities, and this again reflects the circumstances that are well-known in Scotland. Very often the custom would be to have people over on a visit or *ceilidh* on a Sunday afternoon and to have various musicians play fiddle all afternoon. Sometimes people would pass the fiddle around the room and each person would play a tune. Both men and women have, as far as I know, always played fiddle here in Cape Breton. Recently, developments such as records, radio and the

outdoor concerts have spread fiddle music far beyond the former boundaries of Inverness County all over the island and even to places in Prince Edward Island. Perhaps the best thing that has happened recently for Scottish culture and certainly the only legitimate revival has come through the Fiddlers' Festival in Glendale, where as many as two hundred players have been present, and this has encouraged quite a resurgence of interest among the younger people on the island, as well as among people who have played rarely, if at all, during their adulthood.

**CFB:** Where does the characteristic Cape Breton fiddle style originate?


**JS:** Well, it can be maintained with near certainty that the Cape Breton fiddle style is a direct continuation of



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a Gaelic style of playing which flourished in the highlands until some time in the early nineteenth century. This style was closely related in its sound to pipe music, which accounts for the embellishments that you find now in Cape Breton music. It also fits well with the descriptions left of that famous eighteenth century Gaelic fiddle player, Neil Gow, particularly in terms of the use of the bow and the importance of a powerful upbow stroke in strathspeys, jigs and reels. Various people in Cape Breton who have done some pioneering research in this area, notably Father Rankin of Glendale and John Gibson of Kingsville, have stated, and I think rightly, that since the migration to Cape Breton, fiddle playing in Scotland has absorbed a large classical influence, which was already present in the lowlands in the late eighteenth century, which accounts for the differences between the two styles that we hear now.

Interestingly enough, during a short trip to the highlands in 1977, I met a fiddler in Locailort in the western highlands by the name of McRae, who played me some of the old dance music of the area, and I was very surprised to notice a feature in his playing called "cutting", which as far as I knew till then characterized only the Cape Breton style. This to me is proof that our style here derives from the western highlands and that some of these features have survived among a few fiddlers in the western highlands down to this day.

**CFB:** How did the piano develop as the chief instrument for accompaniment?

**JS:** Until the turn of the century, the main instrument for accompani-

ment, if there was any accompaniment at all, was the pedal organ, and there are still a fair number of these in people's living rooms throughout the island. As the piano became available, it was very easily adapted to Scottish music. Inverness County in particular has evolved its own unique piano style, which can be heard on recordings of such people as Joey Beaton, Doug McPhee and Mary Jessie Macdonald.

**CFB:** What other aspects of Gaelic folk culture survive on Cape Breton Island?

**JS:** Dancing, for a start, and in particular, step dancing. It's been shown quite convincingly that step dancing, along with fiddle music (and the two go very closely together) has survived in Cape Breton while it has been largely lost in Scotland. There were, however, much more complicated dances, Gaelic dances, in Cape Breton, which are not now generally known, but which have been recorded by collectors both here and in Scotland. One such dance I saw demonstrated by a man in the extreme north of the island, Bay St. Lawrence, was called the "Duck's Reel", and it involved two people hunching down with a broomstick going behind the knees and in front of the elbows, and step dancing across from one another, trying to upset each other at the same time by working a small stick under the shoe of the rival dancer; whoever kept his balance would win.

There are a few other customs and beliefs, such as experiences of second sight, or the serving of *fuarag*, which is a kind of cream dish on Hallowe'en, which have survived the language change in the island. Most aspects of

Gaelic folk culture here, however, including the music, are intimately bound up with the Gaelic language and have lost ground as the language has begun to go out of use.

**CFB:** To what degree and in what contexts is Gaelic still used on the island?

**JS:** Gaelic is still spoken to some degree in just about all of the Scottish communities on the island, but the language is now restricted to people who are generally over fifty years of age. This is because, since around the time of Depression, for reasons which are not entirely clear, people stopped speaking Gaelic to their children in the homes. Gaelic is not a public language in Cape Breton. It is spoken mostly in the houses, among family groups, between relatives, or between people who have known each other for a long time. The effect of the language shift particularly with respect to younger people has been devastating. As far as I know, there is no person born in Cape Breton under the age of twenty who can converse in Gaelic. This means that none of the young people are able to learn the songs as they were transmitted to their parents or any of the other lore.

There is a tendency among Gaels still to be very reticent about using their language, although on a deeper level there is a strongly felt pride in their Gaelicness, which surfaces very often during recording sessions. There is a feeling among Gaelic speakers that something extremely precious to them and to their families and communities is being lost. However, no one seems to know exactly how to deal with it. The language has lost prestige not only because it has virtually been ignored by schools and by

the media but also because with time it has become the language of the aged population.

**CFB:** What hope is there then for the future of Gaelic culture on Cape Breton Island?

**JS:** Looking at it as optimistically as possible, it may be that mainstream culture has now reached a stage where some substantial sympathy and consideration can be extended to ensure the survival of spoken Gaelic here. There have been some steps to that effect which, although important in themselves, have so far fallen short of ensuring the use of spoken Gaelic here. The fact that the government has been willing to support a project such as this one for Gaelic folklore is an extremely encouraging sign and, through the efforts of such Gaelic speaking people as Allen McEachern, we can be fairly hopeful that additional support for Gaelic will continue.

As far as a general approach is concerned, there will have to be a marked and active change in the attitudes towards the importance of the Gaelic language or the right of people to use Gaelic in their daily life, in such institutions as the media and schools. Hopefully, these changes will come about in time for there to be a continuation of the Gaelic traditions here in Cape Breton, and what we would like to see is the material collected in the folklore project being drawn on as a source for this tradition.

My own personal view is that the greatest hope for Gaelic lies in the use of electronic devices such as cassette recorders, videotapes and records, which are capable of transmitting a

culture which has always been contained in an oral form, and where written aids have always been secondary. It's been interesting to notice that the recent popularity of Irish music in North America has given rise to a large number of Irish language classes. Perhaps things will happen the same way here; perhaps the fiddle music, which is becoming rapidly re-established, will prove to be a very strong support for the re-establishment of the language. But although the language question is the central one for Gaelic culture in Cape Breton, whether or not the language is in use in the future, other aspects of Gaelic culture, such as fiddle music or dancing, will undoubtedly continue on the island.

Some Cape Breton fiddlers have raised the point, however, that the

loss of Gaelic will have its effect on the fiddle style, and the real *blas* or taste of Gaelic music will be lost. The same may also apply to step dancing. This view is supported by what has happened in neighbouring regions—say, on the Nova Scotia mainland—where Gaelic has gone out of use entirely and where the music and dancing has changed accordingly and drifted in its style somewhat closer to its counterpart found in mainland Scotland. The goal, I think, for those interested in the continuity of Scottish culture here is to try to maintain the entire culture all the way from long folk tales through fiddle music to step dancing, and to show that this is just as relevant in its twentieth century context here as it has always been to Scottish communities everywhere.

