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Liz Doherty

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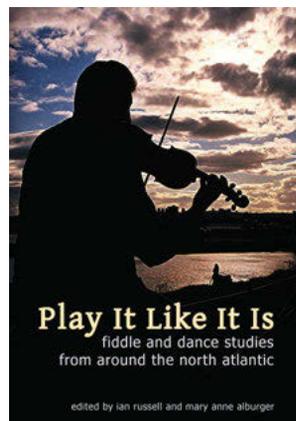
Play It Like It Is

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger

First published in 2006 by The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-3-0



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Bringing it all back home? Issues surrounding Cape Breton fiddle music in Scotland

LIZ DOHERTY

In his novel *Seven Rivers of Canada*, Hugh MacLennan suggests that there is 'something Judaic' in the Scotch of North America, 'in their always retaining, wherever they might find themselves and however strongly they might identify with their countries of adoption, a sense of belonging still to those faraway places whose names alone. . . possess, for folk of Highland origin, an almost talismanic power'.¹ In Canada, Scotland has, to a certain extent, been retained and promoted as 'an imaginary community, [where] a sense of belonging [is] sustained as much by fantasy and the imagination as by any geographical or physical reality'.² The myth of Scotch Canada allows one to be a Scot by choice, involved in what are mainly British Empire symbols of Scottishness.³ Cape Breton Island has not entirely escaped the invented traditions and emblems promoted as, in 'the quest of the folk' (to borrow Ian McKay's terminology), the province of Nova Scotia was deemed essentially Scottish, parading this since the 1930s and the premiership of Angus MacDonald. Tartanism has indeed reigned triumphant through institutions such as the Gaelic College at St Ann's. However, it is by virtue of its Gaelic roots that Cape Breton offers deeper connections with the old country.

The Gaelic language, songs, fiddle music, piping, and step dancing crossed the Atlantic with the immigrants who made Cape Breton their home in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The isolation afforded by the island location, the poor weather conditions, and the practice of entire communities relocating together allowed the old ways to be maintained in this new environment. In the documentary, *The Blood Is Strong* (Grampian/Channel 4, 1988), the people of Cape Breton were referred to as 'neither Canadians nor Scots, but people who have been dislocated, uprooted'. Certainly suspended between the old world and the new, Cape Bretoners have, over time, transferred the typical Highland attachment to place and locality to their new homeland. The Cape Breton anthem, 'We Are an Island, a Rock in the Stream' by Kenzie MacNeil,⁴ celebrates in song the island identity of Cape Breton, which was only joined to the mainland of Nova Scotia by the Canso Causeway in 1955. Cape Bretoners speak about 'over there in Canada'. A tale exists of an old woman leading her family in prayer the night the Causeway

was opened thanking God 'for having at last made Canada a part of Cape Breton'.⁵ Much migration from Cape Breton to urban centres in the west and to the south has underlined this necessity for Cape Bretoners to distinguish themselves in the ethnic mosaic that is Canada. Within Cape Breton itself the awareness of a local identity represents an increasing recognition of the various other ethnic groups (Mi'kmaq First Nations, French Acadians, Irish, Poles, Ukrainians, Italians, etc.), who call the island home. Connections with the Highlands are still in evidence, yet, 'our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain but no longer as origins or signs of authenticity capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters'.⁶ In his book *A Dance Called America*, James Hunter recalls a visit to the Big Pond Concert :

The summer sun possesses here a strength it never gains in Scotland. The nearby stretch of water is the Bras d'Or Lake and not the Minch. The cars and station wagons parked in long lines on the grass mostly carry Nova Scotia license plates. The shouting sellers of hotdogs, popsicles, cotton candy and Mickey Mouse balloons are as North American as the warm, forest-scented breeze which now and then comes swirling down from the surrounding hillsides. This Big Pond music festival is very much a Cape Breton Island event. While some songs sung on such occasions have implicit in them still a hankering for the Scottish Highlands, these are not the songs, you quickly sense, which tug most strongly at the audience's emotions. The sentiments which really matter here have more to do with this small part of modern Canada than the faraway country to which so many of today's Canadians can trace their family origins.⁷

Recently I heard someone speak of a visit to Cape Breton where they stayed with a MacAskill family in Englishtown. The man of the house was able to trace the family lineage through several generations back to the Highlands of Scotland, but expressed surprise when the visitors suggested that they take a trip there one day. For these people, there is an ongoing pride in their ancestry, in their Scottish roots, but now Cape Breton is their land.

'For the children of our people driven over the seas will come back again,' sings the Scottish Gaelic poet Mairi Mhor nan Oran (1821-1898). The re-visiting of Scotland by Cape Bretoners is not something that is borne of the recent past. The Second World War saw the great fiddler and composer Dan R. MacDonald based in the Loch Ailort area of the Scottish Highlands with the forestry service. Bill Lamey visited the Mod in Dundee in 1967 along with piano player Father John Angus Rankin, the parish priest in Glendale. Buddy MacMaster's first trip was in 1970 along with Father Rankin and Dr Malcolm MacLellan, then President of St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish. Buddy commented: 'I thought I'd never come to Scotland – it was kind of unheard of at that time'.⁸ Yet he has returned some fifteen times since. In 1977 the 'Calling of the Clans' saw a number of Cape Bretoners perform in the Great Hall of

Edinburgh Castle; the Cape Breton Symphony Orchestra has made several trips to Scotland; the 'Sons of Skye' visited in 1979 with an entourage that included Buddy MacMaster, Carl MacKenzie, Doug MacPhee, Father Allan MacMillan, and Joe Neil MacNeil. Cape Breton music and song was also promoted through the BBC, who collected and broadcast songs from the North Shore in the 1950s, and also broadcast a transatlantic ceilidh in 1978.

Cape Breton music had also been 'discovered' and presented in the old country through the Topic Record label. John Shaw, in the sleeve notes to the brilliant fiddle compilation, suggested that 'the regional style and repertoire in song, poetry, and instrumental music reflect the culture of 18th century Gaeldom, with subsequent influences from the 19th century being absent or negligible.'⁹ While expecting this to generate some reaction, he was pleased to note that 'almost everybody was quite accepting of that particular view of things. . . it meant that people here were quite open-minded and they're not so worried about who they are'.¹⁰

Conversely, the more recent promotion of Cape Breton music in Scotland has aroused intense feelings, both positive and negative, throughout the traditional music community. Perhaps it has been the active steps taken to promote Cape Breton music in Scotland over the last decade; perhaps it was the numbers of people embracing this; perhaps it was the very strong opinions voiced with regard to this tradition, but there has been a very palpable tension between the perceived dualisms of centre (Scotland) and periphery (Cape Breton) evident in Scotland over the last several years.

During times of conflict, when a group feels threatened, cultural production processes which are normally submerged from view and operate at a deep level, rise closer to the surface. At such times people highlight cultural assumptions in order to frame arguments against their 'adversaries' in a process of foregrounding.¹¹

This process of 'foregrounding' Cape Breton music in Scotland was undertaken by a small group of individuals, all Scottish, but from different backgrounds, who happened upon Cape Breton and its music around the same time, but in a variety of ways. Common to all was the experience that, in the words of Sorley MacLean, 'the dead have been seen alive.'¹² The fiddler Alasdair Fraser, piper Hamish Moore, and Mairi Campbell, who studied viola in London, all discovered Cape Breton music and in many ways became self-appointed 'Guardians of the Folk'.¹³ 'The Folk were incarnations of a Golden Age, exemplars of an older and better time, bearers of ancient ways. An entropic conservatism esteemed their culture above that of others and struggled to preserve it. Guardians of the Folk often saw themselves as conducting a last-minute salvage operation to garner their cultural treasures before the Folk disappeared forever'.¹⁴

Alasdair Fraser, in the sleeve notes to his 1988 album, *The Driven Bow*, has the following to say: 'Fortunately the fiddle and dance traditions on Cape Breton

Island in the Canadian Maritimes provide us with a window which sheds light on the way 18th and 19th century dance fiddlers such as Neil Gow used to play in the Highlands of Scotland. . . Let's hope that some of the great fiddle and dance tradition that has been absent from Scotland for so many years can be restored.¹⁵ In 1994 Hamish Moore wrote that 'Cape Breton held the Scottish music and dance culture in trust' while in Scotland it had become 'diluted and sanitized'.¹⁶ Mairi Campbell's reaction to her first experience of Cape Breton music was that 'the pieces have been put in place. . . they make sense'.¹⁷ Others have stated that the attraction to Cape Breton music was that it was 'recognisably Scottish but without that kind of ramrod through it'.¹⁸

The practical steps taken by these Scots to promote Cape Breton music in Scotland have been many and varied. Alasdair Fraser is responsible for introducing the teaching of fiddle and step dancing by Cape Bretoners at a number of locations, most notably at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in Skye; Hamish Moore has organized the summer school, *Ceòlas*, in South Uist for the past six years with Cape Bretoners included as tutors and participants, 'forging links in the homeland of their forebears and providing an opportunity for these two cultures which have survived in parallel to once again come together and celebrate'.¹⁹ Here 'the integration of music, Gaelic song and the old step dance rhythms is the philosophy – inspired by Hamish himself'.²⁰ Hamish Moore, Mairi Campbell, and Dave Francis, along with Cape Bretoners Jean and Ryan MacNeil, also carried out two Scottish tours of 'Welcome Home Nova Scotia', a show 'which tells how traditional Scottish music left our shores at the time of the Clearances and is now returning home'.²¹

The impact of this 'foregrounding' among the Scottish music community has been both positive and negative. Huge numbers have attended classes in fiddle, yet – apart from a small number of players such as Karen Steven and Kenny Fraser – most have embraced the repertoire rather than the style. Accompaniment, a central part of the Cape Breton sound, has not really been taken on board – a matter of choice, perhaps, since many here find it too busy and intrusive. Yet it is an integral part of the Cape Breton sound, and to promote the fiddling in isolation from this is surely a misrepresentation of the style.

A number of individual pipers have become interested in Hamish Moore's 'discovery', the old dance piper, Alex Currie. Interestingly, Hamish's passion on the subject seems to have aroused as much or more activity among the piping community in Cape Breton than in Scotland.

Step dancing has arguably been the most successful and widely-embraced aspect of the Cape Breton tradition in contemporary Scotland. Perhaps this is where the biggest gap was, in that there was no similar or related tradition to compete with. It does seem that step dancing did exist in the Highlands and Islands until well into the twentieth century. The late Faraquhar MacCraith used to speak of two brothers by the name of Gillis who would be invited up to step dance during the intervals at dances. This continued until the 1960s when the brothers would have been over seventy years of age.²² Yet the younger players from the area with whom I spoke had

never seen this type of dancing until they came in contact with Cape Bretoners. For all the popularity of step dancing in Scotland, I find it interesting that many of those ardent supporters and promoters of the dance are managing to present it without so much as acknowledging the Cape Breton connection. Recently at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig I heard a short description of the step dance tradition prior to a concert performance. The dancer speaking mentioned the Highland roots, the obvious connections with the Irish tradition, but didn't mention Cape Breton at all. When I asked her after the show where she had learned her steps she replied 'Harvey Beaton' – the brilliant step dancer from Nova Scotia.

Given the passions surrounding the whole Cape Breton issue in Scotland, those who have been involved in bringing this music back have gained considerable reputations within the music community. The group Fiddle Force, which grew out of the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig courses was described to me by one of the members as being 'more [Alasdair] Fraserites than Cape Bretonites'.²³ At the same time, those who have been continuing the old Highland tradition for years – people such as Angus Grant and the MacCraiths – have in fact gained more recognition than ever before, perhaps proving that individuals 'who do not so much trumpet their ethnicity as quietly assume it are probably more important than the manifestations of the self-consciously Scottish'.²⁴ Perhaps this is what Alasdair Fraser, Hamish Moore, and others intended all along; or perhaps this highlights how unfamiliar they were with the totality of Scottish music before getting excited by the prospect of Cape Breton. Mairi Campbell, visiting Cape Breton in 1990 for the first time, told me very honestly: 'Cape Breton was my very first contact with Scots music. . . I had a strong feeling for Cape Breton and felt, quite innocently somehow, that it was truly Scots music, without there being any sense of problem, because I didn't know the Scots music anyway'.²⁵

Credit where credit is due, and so it should be said that, thanks to the efforts of all the individuals mentioned, Cape Breton and its music is now well-established in Scotland and indeed throughout the whole commercial Celtic world. However, when any individual or group undertakes a mission of this nature, it is essential that the reality is not reinvented to create a more sentimental myth. The reality is that what we have in Cape Breton is not eighteenth-century Highland music which has been caught in a time warp in a remote location. What we have instead is a tradition that certainly has its roots in that tradition, but which has become over time a new voice in Scottish music. As the fiddler Alan Henderson told me: 'I've always thought of Cape Breton as being another of the Hebrides, just a wee bit further away'.²⁶ Buddy MacMaster speaks for all Cape Bretoners when he says, 'We don't want to come over here [to Scotland] and spoil the good music that's here, but I think there's room for all the styles'.²⁷

The younger Cape Breton players today recognize their Scottish heritage, yet they do not necessarily allow it to shape what they do. Their contexts are different and thus their musical language has adapted because of the challenges of these new experiences. These younger players have embraced the music of their past –

Scotland of the eighteenth century may inform much of their repertoire and aspects of their style – but now the older music of Cape Breton itself is also their heritage. Album titles and lists of tunes no longer pay homage only to a distant land and time, but to a Cape Breton past and present as well. What Scotland means to the young Cape Breton players today, who are quite likely to have toured here on more than one occasion, is quite different to the precious memory it was in the minds of their ancestors.

One of the obvious differences between the Cape Breton fiddlers of today and of over a century ago concerns a general change in perceptions of culture. For the older people, all aspects of culture were entwined – the music, dance, song, stories – and the language was Gaelic. Fiddler Mike MacLean, speaking with John Shaw, commented: ‘Cape Bretoners love their piping and fiddle music, but there’ll be none of it as we know it unless there’s more Gaelic being learned. The language and the music are one. All this fine Gaelic music we enjoy came out of Gaelic heads. If the language goes the music will never, never be the same’.²⁸ The Gaelic storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil continues this idea: ‘Some of the younger generation, they’re following the style that they acquired from the older people, but they miss part of it, and when it comes to new tunes, they don’t achieve the flavour at all. . . when the older generation of fiddlers will be gone and the younger ones will have entered into their own new style, it will be just about as difficult for you to hear any more of the old style as it would to get copies of the tunes played by the Pied piper!’.²⁹ Today, fiddlers such as Alec Francis MacKay in Glendale represent this older Cape Breton idiom; but the language has so declined since the 1940s that even the older fiddlers, such as Buddy MacMaster, are not native speakers. Clearly, in this instance, we can see how the links with eighteenth-century Scotland have been undermined. Furthermore, the transmission of the tradition has become a different thing over the years. While the early players learned at the knee of their elders and picked up the style by imitation, the establishment of classes in fiddle, accompaniment, and dance since the 1970s, in response to the suggestion that the Cape Breton fiddler was vanishing, have transformed the transmission process. Contexts and audiences have also changed and expanded; the formula now is international, and this is the new directive. All these factors have ensured that, while the Cape Breton fiddler may have escaped extinction, he/she has certainly become a different creature.

The repertoire of the Cape Breton fiddler has also changed and expanded over the course of the last century. The older repertoire, learned often from *puirt-a-beul* and from the Highland pipes, has been supplemented by tunes from more recent Scottish sources, generally learned from printed sources. Individuals such as Dan R. MacDonald, Bill Lamey, and Dan Joe MacInnis were in contact with enthusiast and collector J. Murdoch Henderson in Scotland and acquired many printed collections from him, which they shared among the fiddling community. While the Gow, the Atholl, and the Simon Fraser collections all legitimized for them the repertoire they already played, the acquisition of other collections such as those by James Scott Skinner were perceived as extensions of this, rather than a different tradition. The

integration of these new sources resulted in a massive increase in the repertoire in the 1950s. In more recent times, the availability of commercial recordings has seen a further expansion, this time on a more eclectic level, as Irish, American, Shetland, and Canadian old-time tunes are all played.

The Cape Breton sound has firmly established itself as solo fiddle with a very distinctive piano accompaniment. 'To me the violin is a beautiful instrument but without the piano it's like a bell without a tongue'.³⁰ Taking over from the pump organ, which provided a drone behind the fiddle playing, the piano playing developed from a very simple rhythmic accompaniment into a very sophisticated partner to the fiddle. Inspired by traditions such as jazz big bands, the piano style has become increasingly busy, involving much syncopation and chromaticism. This has certainly called for compromise as far as the fiddlers' style is concerned – the older, fuller sound of the early players, full of drones, double stops, grace notes, and cuttings has been honed into a much thinner, cleaner sound, with different intonation.

Tempo, ornamentation, differing attitudes to 'correctness' and the 'flavour',³¹ the loss of high bass, bowing styles, expanding technical prowess, all of these are aspects of the fiddle tradition which have been subjected to change certainly since the 1920s, if not before. When Alasdair Fraser, Hamish Moore, Mairi Campbell, and others saw in Cape Breton something of Scotland past they were not wrong. When Hector MacAndrew told Winston 'Scotty' Fitzgerald that his fiddle playing was 'very close to the truth' neither was he wrong.³² However, the typical Cape Breton fiddler at the beginning of the twenty-first century cannot be held up as simply an uncontaminated replica of the eighteenth-century Scottish fiddler. Rather the Cape Breton contribution to that tradition should be recognized and celebrated for what it is.

Notes

- ¹ Hugh MacLennan, *Seven Rivers of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), quoted in James Hunter, *A Dance Called America: The Scottish Highlands, the United States, and Canada* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1994), p. 251.
- ² Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 25.
- ³ Marjory Harper and Michael E. Vance, *Myth, Migration and the Making of Memory: Scotia and Nova Scotia c.1700-1990* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood for Gorsewood Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies; Edinburgh: John Donald, 1999), p. 97.
- ⁴ Written by Kenzie MacNeil and published under the title, 'The Island', 1977.
- ⁵ Mary Anne Ducharme, *Archie Neil: From the Life and Stories of Archie Neil Chisholm of Margaree Forks, Cape Breton*, ed. Ronald Caplan (Wreck Cove, Nova Scotia: Breton Books, 1992), p. 24.
- ⁶ Chambers (1994), p. 19.
- ⁷ Hunter (1994), p. 135.
- ⁸ Personal interview with Buddy MacMaster, Glasgow, January 2001.
- ⁹ John Shaw, ed., *The Music of Cape Breton*, 2 vols, LPs, Topic, 12TS353-4, 1978.
- ¹⁰ Personal interview with John Shaw conducted in Edinburgh, January 2001.

- ¹¹ Kay Anderson and Fay Gale, *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire; [New York]: Wiley/Halstead, 1992), p. 38.
- ¹² Sorley MacLean, 'Time, the Deer, is in the Wood of Hallaig', in *Collected Poems: From Wood to Ridge* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989).
- ¹³ Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal; London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 275.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Alasdair Fraser and Jody Stecher, *The Driven Bow*, Culburnie CD CUL102, 1988.
- ¹⁶ Hamish Moore, *Danmsa' Air an Drochaid/Stepping on the Bridge*, Greentrax CDTRAX073, 1994.
- ¹⁷ Personal interview with Mairi Campbell conducted in Edinburgh, January 2001.
- ¹⁸ Personal interview with Dave Francis conducted in Edinburgh, January 2001.
- ¹⁹ *Ceòlas*, information materials, see <http://www.ceolas.co.uk/>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ G. W. Lockhart, *Fiddles and Folk: A Celebration of Scotland's Musical Heritage* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 1998), p. 63.
- ²² Personal interview with Alan Henderson, Glasgow, January 2001.
- ²³ Personal interview with Dave Francis, Edinburgh, January 2001.
- ²⁴ Source of quotation not known.
- ²⁵ Personal interview with Mairi Campbell, Edinburgh, January 2001.
- ²⁶ Personal interview with Alan Henderson, Glasgow, January 2001.
- ²⁷ Personal interview with Buddy MacMaster, Glasgow, January 2001.
- ²⁸ Shaw (1978), p. 41.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Marie MacLellan, quoted in Allister MacGillivray, *A Cape Breton Ceilidh* (Sydney, Nova Scotia: Sea-Cape Music, 1988), p. 191.
- ³¹ Liz Doherty, 'The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition c. 1928-1995' (PhD Dissertation, University of Limerick, 1996).
- ³² Personal interview with Allister MacGillivray, Cape Breton, 1991.