

## John Campbell and the Cape Breton fiddle tradition

*George Ruckert*

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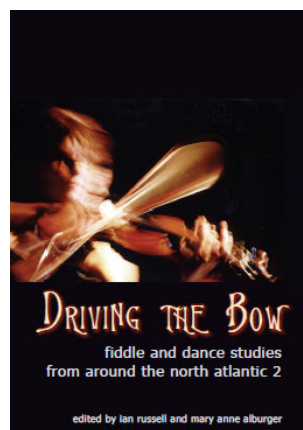
### Driving the Bow

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 2

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## John Campbell and the Cape Breton fiddle tradition

GEORGE RUCKERT

We are at a Saturday night dance in the Mabou region of Cape Breton Island in July, 2004. The fiddler, young Andrea Beaton, accompanied on piano by Mac Morin, plays a set of jigs for the noisy, sweaty, joyful dancers. The music is loud, the tempo quick, and the rushing stream of the music is a juggernaut of power: the unrelenting beats are very evenly played, the short and driving up-and-down bows are astonishing in their regularity, and their intense rhythmic vitality. Even the non-dancers tap and pound their feet on the sidelines. The L. R. Baggs pickup built into Andrea's fiddle bridge is commonly seen at dances today – perhaps necessary to keep pace with the rock 'n roll-like roar generated by Mac Morin's electric piano. The dance hall at Brook Village steams from the dancers' exertions, and, as Jerry Holland says, 'The floor joists go up and down with the feet of the synchronized dancers, pulling the walls in and out – the whole building is breathing with the music and the dance. It is just an incredible feeling.'<sup>1</sup>

I had travelled to the dance with my fiddle mentor, John Campbell, now in his mid-seventies, who regaled me with stories of the many dances he had played at this hall. ' "The Brook Village Hall" – you remember that tune? That was one of the first jigs I ever composed.<sup>2</sup> I bet she'll play that tune tonight. That's a good tune, George.' 'You bet it is', I agreed, driving ahead, desperately trying to remember how that jig went. 'You know that tune "Connor Quinn's Reel"?'<sup>3</sup> John went on, not really expecting a reply. 'Andrea Beaton played that tune for years. She came to me last summer and thanked me for it. I had composed it maybe forty years ago. I hadn't played it for years. It had no title, but I [recently] named it after my grandson Connor, [his daughter] Sharon's boy.' He paused to think about it and then said, 'You know, that tune's in the old style. You don't hear that music so much today.'

After the dance we drove home in relative silence, although John did ask me how I had liked the evening. I told him that it was fun and that I had a great time, and I was curious, too, to hear how he felt about it. He had spent his evening talking with his many old friends at the dance, for these events are often treated as big social gatherings for all ages in the community – only rarely does anyone dance every item, but instead spends the time in conversation and catching up with what's happening in the world.



**Figure 1** John Campbell with Doug Macphee

‘It wasn’t like that when I was young’, said John wistfully, referring to tonight’s programme. ‘You’ve got a lot of new faces here on Cape Breton, and they don’t know...’ he said, his voice trailing off. When he did not resume, I supplied, ‘...the dance? Yes, the dance *is* confusing.’ Since there is no dance caller at these affairs, I had to be led through the figures by my partners. By the end, I was getting better at predicting the next move. But I noticed I wasn’t the only one who was confused. John replied,

Well, yes, there’s always going to be some that are learning and some that know it [the set of dance figures known locally as ‘the Mabou set’], but it has gotten a bit out of hand. In the old days there were four couples in a set, and the dance figures could be patterned after the changes in the music. Now there’s ten-twelve couples in one set, seven in the next. How are you going to make order out of that? And the music is so loud, there’s so much whooping and hollering, some people are step dancing, and others are in some rhythmic world of their own. It has become too chaotic.

Even if John had his reservations about the new dynamics of a Cape Breton dance, I knew that he would not be too critical of Andrea Beaton’s playing. She is a distant niece of John’s, and he is quite fond of her personally, as well as respectful of her fiddling accomplishments and her musical pedigree. She is Kinnon Beaton’s daughter, and Donald Angus Beaton’s granddaughter, two names from one of the most prestigious fiddling families of the Mabou region. John’s father, the well-known fiddler Dan J. Campbell (1895-1981), was the cousin of the highly-regarded Donald Angus Beaton (1912-1982), so John was nurtured in the womb of this locally rich

musical family. Andrea's music this night had been professionally delivered, and included a mixture of the old repertoire, quite a few of John's tunes, and a mixture of her own tunes and those by other contemporary Cape Breton composers. John felt good about the evening's music, I am sure, but it did relight some of the old criticisms he feels about 'how it was and where it is'.

For those unfamiliar with the tradition of fiddling on Cape Breton Island, although the history of the Island includes Mic Mac Indians and French and Irish settlers, the musical identity of the area is bound up in the events of the Scottish Highland Clearances, especially those from the first years of the nineteenth century. People from the Hebrides and the Western Highlands were herded off to the new world, and chain immigration was often a factor. That is, this movement of peoples followed the pattern where one member of the family would find a hospitable place in the new world, and then send back to the old home for others in the family. Often whole communities would seek some semblance of togetherness as they found new homes. Cape Breton Island, in the Canadian Maritime Provinces, was a favoured destination of some documented 22,000 Scottish immigrants, and some authorities estimate up to twice that number. Many people from Lochaber, in Argyll, came to the region around Mabou in Southwest Cape Breton; people from Loch Morar found themselves in the Cape Breton town of Margaree, while many from the island of Barra found new homes around the town of Iona, and so on. A 'game' developed: 'You tell me the person's town and religion (Presbyterian or Catholic), and I'll tell you his name'. With so many families sharing last names, and a limited number of first names in use, double first names became common, since they helped to distinguish one person from another, such as fiddlers Donald Angus Beaton, Angus Allan Gillis, Dan R. MacDonald, Dan J. Campbell, and Dan Hughie MacEachern, for example.

The first to arrive in Nova Scotia had the first choices of the land, and not all the land was fit for farming. One who got excellent farmland was John 'the Bear' Campbell, the current John Campbell's great grandfather, who came to Glenora Falls, near Mabou, from Lochaber in 1816 to claim the land-grant he had earned serving in the British army. He cleared the rolling fields and raised cattle and sheep and grew the hay to feed them. Not all the settlers were as fortunate, and many had to eke out an existence on small plots of hilly, rocky farmland which provided only subsistence living. By the middle of the nineteenth century the immigration pattern began to reverse itself, with Cape Bretoners heading to inland Canada, the United States, and Australia to earn better livings. Besides farming, fishing was a major Island industry, and the mining of coal and iron were important through the middle of the twentieth century, although all these industries have been in decline for some time.<sup>4</sup>

When Cape Bretoners moved from the island they often kept together as communities, and there were a few particular locales in which they gathered in numbers, primarily Boston and Detroit in the USA, and the towns of Windsor and Toronto in Ontario. From the early part of the twentieth century, there have

been more Cape Bretoners in the West Boston area than in any city or many towns combined back on the Island. A Boston Cape Breton dance is still likely to draw people by the hundreds, but not as it might have been thirty years ago – then you had to get to the dances early if you wanted to get in at all, and there were often seven or eight dances a month.<sup>5</sup>

In 1955, Canso Causeway was built to connect nearby Nova Scotia to Cape Breton Island. Once the island was no longer isolated, social trends were accelerated. The roads and transportation improved. Television moved in. There were Elvis sightings. The young people drifted towards guitars and longer hair, and by 1972 the CBC spoke of a musical culture in peril of survival in a documentary called *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.<sup>6</sup> Not everyone panicked, and in fact some scoffed at the alarm, but the result was that a Cape Breton Fiddler's Association was formed, with more attention paid towards training young people, and archiving and promoting the music. These programmes have paid off, and there is a lot of energy and activity in the fiddle world as well as worldwide respect for Cape Breton fiddling and step-dancing, at least partially as a result of the institutionalization of the tradition.<sup>7</sup>

An anthropological axiom states that when people travel, they tend to retain more traditional cultural aspects than those who remained at home, where the anxieties of losing the culture might not be as evident to those living in its midst. Two points arise from this. The Cape Breton musical tradition is often held up as retaining aspects of the original West Highland Scottish style for some years only vaguely recollected in the homeland; and the travelling Cape Bretoners may themselves have unconsciously preserved a strain of the more conservative style of Cape Breton fiddling. The musical production and repertoire of John Campbell can be seen to illustrate these cultural phenomena.

One of the difficulties in generalizing about any musical culture is that there are so many varieties and anomalies to be found. Fiddler Carl MacKenzie once said in a workshop that,

There are no two Cape Breton fiddlers alike. But the existence of an identifiable style that we all call Cape Breton, points to the fact that our forefathers brought something with them of an original style from the Highlands that can be found all over the Island – and this was evident long before the automobile and phonograph made it easier for Islanders to get together to share their music.<sup>8</sup>

Fiddling priest Father John Angus Rankin was of the opinion that the new freedom that the Scottish fiddlers felt in their adopted homeland imparted a fresh new spirit in their music that characterizes Cape Breton style.<sup>9</sup>

'But they're not playing that old style, and a lot of those old tunes are not being played', laments John Campbell. John had left the island in the mid 1960s to find work in Boston, where he has been a regular musical fixture in Boston, as well as on the Island, for more than forty years, organizing dances, bringing in fiddlers, and playing himself sometimes several nights a week. He said,

I always wanted to be a dance fiddler. A dance fiddler is different, you know; there have always been a lot of good fiddlers down on the Island, but you could've counted the real dance fiddlers on one hand. In our area around Mabou, there was my father (Dan J. Campbell), A. A. Gillis, Gordon MacQuarrie, Donald Angus Beaton, and maybe a few others. Then Buddy MacMaster and I came up in the fifties. But to play a dance you have to have a lot of stamina. You have to play loud, and you have to have good timing. A great fiddler like Angus Chisholm could play music for dance, but he was not really a dance fiddler, and there were a lot like him.

Listening to recordings of Angus Chisholm today,<sup>10</sup> I can hear something of what John was talking about. Chisholm played with great tone, precise bowing, and virtuosic control. He shaped his phrases dynamically with expressive bowing, and he played difficult tunes. One might refer to this as 'parlour style', as opposed to dance fiddling, but even to dance fiddlers it is not a derogatory term, as Jerry Holland has so eloquently demonstrated on his recent brilliant CD called *Parlor Music*.<sup>11</sup> In truth, Cape Breton and other fiddlers play most often in a relaxed domestic environment for their own enjoyment and practice, or with a few friends and students. When one plays with John Campbell in his home, one learns and goes over the tunes with a more subtle approach which experiments with bowing and ornamentation. But playing the same tunes with John on stage at a dance is an entirely different experience: the tempo increases, the tunes change from one to another in rapid succession, the ornaments decrease, and the incessant driving beat is all important. 'You've got to drive 'er, George, that's what fiddlin' for a dance is all about. You've got to drive 'er.'

John is quite economical with ornamentation, playing only mordents and grace notes, not with regularity in the tune and not in much profusion. 'You do that all the time, and it sounds Irish to me', he will say, to assert the separateness in the two styles. The bow cuts, the fast triplets that are quite common to Cape Breton bowing ornamentation, must also be used with some economy, according to John. 'You get fiddlers who want to put all this fussiness in the music, and to me that takes away from the tune. Sounds like they're trying to win a contest all the time. Trying to impress you.'

The piano became the chosen instrument for accompaniment in the mid 1950s, although it had been around for years before. Pump organs were also found in some dance halls, but the bellows on these old organs were often leaky, and the poor accompanist had to pump his or her feet twice as hard to maintain the sound. After a few dance figures, the exhausted accompanist had to be replaced, or, sometimes, a few teen-aged boys were brought in to pump while the organist played. But the piano could articulate rhythm more emphatically, too, so the power of the music increased. John narrates,

When I started out in the forties, 'you played solo fiddle. The dancers were much quieter – you just heard the sh-sh-sh-sh of the feet moving. There was not so much step-dancing in the sets as today. If they needed a louder sound for the bigger dances, they hired two fiddlers. We never had amplification. I first heard amplification in 1948 or 9, when Winston Fitzgerald and his Radio Entertainers came to town. Boy, that was something. Winston played a jig called 'The Canty Old Man' – you know, he was one fiddler who would play the same tune over and over if he liked' (it is more common for a fiddler to play a tune twice and then move on); 'I just left my partner in the middle of the dance floor and went to the stage and stared. Four hundred people were sent to the next level that night!

Piano accompaniment and amplification have brought about the biggest changes in the music. Older recordings of the accompanists show that originally their roles were quite reduced, both in volume and harmony. Whole tunes would be played with two chords, and the bass lines were spare and simple, in I-V or I-VII chordal patterns, while today a moving bass line with syncopated chords in the right hand is standard. An eight-count pattern in 4/4 time is often 1-/1-3/1-3/. 'How do you wish me to play?' asked an accompanist preparing to join Winston Fitzgerald. 'Play so I don't even know you are there', said Winston.<sup>12</sup> If Winston had heard Mac Morin play at tonight's dance I cannot imagine what he would have thought; there were times when it seemed that the piano was the leading instrument, playing strident bass lines that dominated the fiddle. But I hope Winston at least would have admired Mac's musicianship even if he lamented the changes in the old Cape Breton sound.

The piano is a tempered instrument that plays rhythmic and harmonic accompaniments largely from the perspective of the major-minor system. But up until the mid-nineteenth century, the traditional Scottish repertoire was characterized by tunes that are modally conceived, with Dorian, Mixolydian, and Ionian modes dominating. Piping-derived tunes, with their typical I-VII and I-II harmonic implications are also common in Cape Bretoners' playing, and as models for composition. There were very few *purely* 'minor' tunes, that is, with the IV-chord minor, in circulation until the piano came to be more at the forefront of the texture. Offhand I can think of only one example of music in a minor key, 'The Swallowtail Jig', that John regularly plays, although there are probably a few more. And this tune is nineteenth-century Irish in origin, and shows only limited use of the flat-sixth degree, which determines its 'minor-ness' (as opposed to its 'Dorian-ness'). Often John plays tunes which leave out the sixth degree altogether, producing gapped-scale tunes that are somewhat ambiguous in the major-minor system. Sometimes the tunes will be gapped at the third degree, as is the aforementioned 'Connor Quinn's Reel' that John composed, with the suggested accompaniment pattern being neither really major nor minor, a factor in 'that old-time sound' to which John often refers.

These gapped modal scales that precede the training and repertoire of a fiddler reared in piano-accompaniment styles seem also to suggest a different feeling in the tuning of the individual pitches, and sometimes it is difficult to hear whether the

major third or the minor third is intended. I've listened to John's playing of the 'Cross of Inverness' over and over, and I cannot tell whether John indeed intends a C-sharp in the second part, which is what most fiddlers play. 'That's the thing, George', John smiles when I try to nail him down; 'you can't tell, and that's the magic!' And again he goes to his idol for a precedent:

Winston would play the note C sharp the first time, and the second time through it'd be C natural. The third time it would be somewhere in between, but the thing is, it would always sound right, never out of tune. [He pauses in reverie.] He was a gifted man. A nice man. A wicked good fiddler.

Even John's own tunes display this ambiguity. In his E-minor 'Harborview Jig'<sup>13</sup> he ends each section with what seems at times to be a descending E-major chord – but when he plays, he tinkers with it, and one is hard pressed to determine whether the defining note is G sharp or G natural. It sounds good either way, or somewhere in between, but played against a piano, it sounds out of tune if not coordinated with the chord the accompanist chooses.

'Wild notes', where the player will deliberately slap his fourth finger of the left hand to play the high A or D, where the third finger would be normally used, lend a particular tonal quality to the tune: even repeated listenings to the recordings make it difficult to determine whether the fiddler wanted an A or B on the E-string, or D or E on the A-string. If you listen to the recordings of the old-timers, you come across these types of tuning anomalies regularly.<sup>14</sup> 'The Cape Breton style is rough – hillbilly', remarked one very good Scottish fiddler to me, I gathered partly in disgust, partly in admiration, and possibly partly in regret that that particular vitality of the style seemed dated to him.<sup>15</sup> The primary fiddlers of the current generation – including Buddy MacMaster, Jerry Holland, Carl MacKenzie, Natalie MacMaster, Ashley MacIsaac, Howie MacDonald, Brenda Stubbert, and others – seem to be much more in tune with their piano accompanists.

John Campbell shares one important quality with most modern Cape Breton fiddlers – the ability to take music from books. 'My father was into the books wicked', says John. 'He'd be up until four in the morning pouring over the tunes in his books. And this was on a farm, where you'd have to be up and doing the chores at the crack of dawn. My mother would have to yell, 'Danny, you come to bed!' Dan J. taught John to get the tunes correctly as they were in the books, and if one note was wrong, he would send his son to look up the correct version and play it that way. The books John grew up with, and heard his father playing from, were the *Gow Collections*, the *William Marshall Collection*, the *Robert MacIntosh Collection*, to be later joined by the *Kerr's Merry Melodies*, the *Skye Collection*, *Skinner's Scottish Violinist*, and the *Athole Collection*. The bulk of John's repertoire can be traced to these books. Later on came the *Cole's 1000 Fiddle Tunes (Ryan's Mammoth Collection)*, with its profusion of hornpipes and jigs. This latter volume was widely collected on the Island. It was compiled in Boston in 1887,<sup>16</sup> and has a lot of Irish tunes in it as well as tunes from minstrel and



other American sources. It was a beginning to the changes in repertoire still going on today, although the tunes therein, whatever their origin, were and are usually played in the Cape Breton style. Thus, at a dance a hornpipe might get jumbled into a set of reels, and lose the slower, dotted-note lilt of its original style.

Buddy MacMaster, Jerry Holland, and Andrea Beaton have played and recorded a repertoire heavily mixed with music by the old and the contemporary Cape Breton composers. The tunes of Dan R. MacDonald are well represented in their repertoires, and John Campbell plays a number of Dan R.'s tunes as well, noting that often they are difficult to play. Jerry Holland is one of John's favourite composers, and Andrea Beaton plays a lot of the younger composers in her recorded selections. And John's tunes are well represented by his contemporaries, too. 'The Panelmine Jig', 'The Golden Anniversary', 'Salute to the Clans', 'Paulette Bissonette's Strathspey', 'Father Francis Cameron's Reel', and 'The Highway Reel'<sup>17</sup> are played by many Cape Breton fiddlers, and several have recently turned up in a printed collection from Portland, Oregon. The lively 'Sandy MacIntyre's Trip to Boston' 'may well be the most famous Cape Breton tune ever written', according to Natalie MacMaster.<sup>18</sup>

The context of playing tunes at a dance sometimes necessitates a printed version as a backup. In the Mabou style of dancing, three sets are played before a dancer sits down. The first two sets are jigs, and the third a group of reels. Organized together by key, each tune is played twice and then is usually not played again in the evening. So a player has to have ten or so jigs in each key for each set, and, over the course of the evening, could play through as many as two hundred tunes. Remembering each tune after a short exposure would be difficult without a printed version, even though it was and is done all the time. More common is a listener's question to a player, 'What was that third jig you played in D, after "The Lads of Dunsie"?' And then, hopefully getting the title, he could go to a book for details. Winter sessions at each other's home were a good time to trade tunes and learn new ones, but playing by the book was a part of getting it right, toeing the line, learning and keeping the tradition.

The other side of John's training is represented by his admiration of Winston Fitzgerald's playing. Winston was famous for his practising of a tune so thoroughly that it became second nature for him to experiment with it. 'He was always tinkering with the tune', says John. 'Each time through, something different, a note here or there, an ornament, a different bowing – and never a break in the flow. The hardest man to learn a tune from!' John's own renderings of the old tunes often vary from printed versions, some even to the degree of adding extra measures to the sections, as he does in 'Judy's Reel' or 'Cutty Sark'.<sup>19</sup> He might comment, 'That's the way my father played it'. So much for the rigor of getting it right from the printed version!

Like so many Cape Bretoners, John Campbell loves the old tunes. This may be the bottom line, as it were: a sea of faces listening in joy to a fondly remembered ocean of tunes comes to John's mind when he plays for a dance. In expressing his regret for the passing of certain of the old ways in the tradition, John voices what

many feel – that the onslaught of the pop styles and electronic innovations of the modern world tends to make the fiddler of traditional music feel passé. It was John's wish that his repertoire of older tunes, as well as those he composed, be preserved in writing, and hence, *The Music of John Campbell: A Cape Breton Legacy*, will soon be published by MelBay Books in St Louis. The six LPs and a CD recording that John has made are now out of print, but Rounder Records have recently released (CD 2003) a compilation of John's recorded music on CD to coordinate with the book – a rich time for John to look back on a lifetime filled with music.

## Notes

The many citations from John Campbell in this paper were acquired over repeated associations with him at music sessions held in his home from 1999-2006. In taping a tune from John for later transcription, I would often let the tape run and get his commentary.

<sup>1</sup> Jerry Holland in a fiddle workshop, Randolph, VT, September 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *The Music of John Campbell: A Cape Breton Legacy* (St Louis: MelBay Publications, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> *The Music of John Campbell*.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller picture of Cape Breton immigration, see Stephen Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> John Campbell describes these dances as the ideal places for young people to socialize with people of their own background. At the time of writing, there are very few young people at the dances.

<sup>6</sup> See Charles Reynolds (dir.), *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler: 30 from Halifax*, narrated by Ronald MacInnis, broadcast 1 January 1972, Halifax, NS: CBC.

<sup>7</sup> See Marie Thompson, 'The Fall and Rise of the Cape Breton Fiddler, 1955-1982' (MA Thesis, St Mary's University, Halifax, NS, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Carl MacKenzie in a fiddle workshop in Cambridge, MA, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*.

<sup>10</sup> *The Early Recordings of Angus Chisolm: Legendary Performances of Traditional Scottish Fiddling*, Shanachie Records, 14001, 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Holland, *Parlor Music*, Rounder Records, CD 7057, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Anecdote related by John Campbell.

<sup>13</sup> *The Music of John Campbell*.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion of 'wild notes' in the Cape Breton style, see Kate Dunlay and David Greenberg (eds), *The Violin Music of Cape Breton* (Toronto: DunGreen Music, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Remarks in confidence, July 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Sky (ed.), *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn Boston 1887 (Pacific, MO: MelBay Publications, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> These compositions are included in *The Music of John Campbell*.

<sup>18</sup> Natalie MacMaster, liner notes to *My Roots Are Showing*, WEA CD 22715, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> These compositions are included in *The Music of John Campbell*.