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# Music from the Dead: The Tune Making of John MacDougall

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MUSIC FROM THE DEAD:  
THE TUNE-MAKING OF JOHN MACDOUGALL

by

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a report submitted in partial fulfillment  
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of

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in

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## Introduction

In the last week of July 2007, I landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, headed for Cape Breton. It was my first trip to the little maritime island. The plane had bumped through rain and fog in its descent, and the dark, pine-covered landscape was completely invisible beneath. My economy rental car turned out to be an oversized SUV, and as I drove through the storm for the city center I became lost and disoriented on the dark Interstate. I was to spend the night with a Glace Bay-born friend and piper who lives in Halifax, and who was expecting me around seven. It was well after one in the morning when he finally flagged me down in front of his house and, barefoot, backed me into the slim alleyway on its flank. Exhausted and dazed, I ate bagels and drank orange juice and then crawled into an upstairs bed and fell asleep to traffic swishing on the rainy street below.

By morning the storm had retreated and the hills and trees were wet and green. I drove the countryside through Antigonish and crossed the causeway to Port Hawkesbury. The instant my tires touched Cape Breton road the landscape was noticeably different. Wild rose bloomed magenta in thick brush lining the sides of the highway and the open farmland and sporadic woods of the mainland were replaced with continuous, thickly packed forest.

I had gone to Cape Breton to talk to pipers, but the name of fiddler and composer John MacDougall stuck in the back of my mind. I had heard his playing on the second of the four volume set of Mark Wilson recordings of old time Cape Breton fiddlers *Traditional Fiddle Music of Cape Breton*. Two of the album's tracks are performed by MacDougall. Though I cut my teeth on the island's fiddle music as performed by younger

contemporary fiddlers, it's been the old sound that's occupied my attention ever since I first heard the playing of Alex Francis MacKay. Of "rough" players, John is the roughest I've heard. The tunes on those two cuts are of the older, fierier breed of Scottish fiddle music. On the second of the two, he strings together an endless series of strathspeys and reels in A minor that, by the end, disintegrate into a rapturous tribal thumping. One could argue that John's rugged style pays homage to all the untrained, ear-learned fiddlers that have gone before him. Though some critics may complain that his playing is sloppy and his tempos slow, there is a harsh energy and sincerity in his playing that is inimitable. Cape Breton has no shortage of legendary fiddlers each with their own distinct styles. Ask anyone familiar with the music and they will tell you the list of master fiddlers is long. And while John's name may never be found among them, certainly his daily life, like those of the greats who have gone before him, has become entirely consumed by fiddle music.

This paper will examine the connection between MacDougall's tune composing and the supernatural as an extension and a Christianized revision of a traditional Scottish motif that connects music making with fairylore. It will suggest that MacDougall's modernized version of this motif serves to legitimize his large body of tunes to a community of fiddlers that, following in the footsteps of their forbearers, place enormous value on tune authenticity and correctness. Because MacDougall is hesitant about being recorded, I was unable to transcribe my interview with him. (What follows) The specifics from my interview found in the following two sections are reconstructed from field notes and from memory.

### **John and Old Style Fiddling**

John MacDougall was born and raised in Cape Breton. He doesn't like to travel, and he's only left his home once. He comes from a family of pipers, and though his first instrument was the practice chanter,<sup>1</sup> it was the fiddle that captured his heart. If you head north on Route Nineteen and turn right towards Lake Ainslee, when you come to the old church keep left, turn onto Mountain Road and you'll pass a trailer, a cottage, and a big house. The trailer after the big house belongs to John. These are the directions I was given by John one summer evening after watching his Friday night set at the Glenora Inn and Distillery. John plays there three times a week now with different pianists. The night I was there, he arrived promptly at eight and, without saying a word, proceeded to dole out two full hours of some of the most furious and rugged fiddle music I've ever heard. His strathspeys and reels wound up into a frenzy of scrapes and snarls, relentlessly pounding to the rhythm of his foot. To begin a set, he would scratch out the opening phrases of a tune as if conjuring it from the depths of his being before ringing it into melody.

The audience at this venue was small and distracted: mostly tourists coming to Cape Breton to vacation and unaware of its unique and incomparable music. This is, of course, dance music of the kind that refuses to be ignored. John's style of fiddling especially, and those of fiddlers like him, evolved to accommodate the dance conditions of his time. Cape Bretoners square dance Scottish style. Dancers are packed into various community halls. On a mid-summer evening you'll have dozens of sweaty, occasionally inebriated, bodies moving in circles and lines across the creaky wooden floors. There are three figures to a set, each of which builds upon the last in intensity, energy and complexity.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Glossary of Terms

The final figure, or reel,<sup>2</sup> can seem endless. Though stepdancing has become the norm throughout each of these figures, it is in the reel that it becomes the most prominent and intricate. Experienced dancers with a variety of steps will accent the music in different ways. There is a point in the reel where dancers join hands and form two lines: men on one side and women on the other. If you watch, as the dancers' feet come more fully into unity, you can see the floor of the hall sink and rise, and the walls pull in and out to accommodate the weight, all in rhythm to the music. At these dances there is always the din of conversation, as well as the excited yelps of the dancers and the pounding of their feet. Today you'll find sound systems of varying quality blaring the amplified fiddle music, which then can easily carry over the noise of the hall. Old-style fiddling like John's however, developed before amplification, when fiddlers would try and coax sounds out of their instruments that could be heard over all the bustling noise and confusion.

Though there's usually no dancing, John likes playing the distillery even if he occasionally gets complaints that his fiddle is drowning out the audience's conversations. It is unlikely though, that even if he wished to perform elsewhere, that his brand of fiddling would be in great demand. The Cape Breton scene is swarming with talented young fiddlers who play fast, clean, Irish-influenced fiddle music; people like Ashley MacIssac who push the music beyond its functional folk heritage, making it mainstream and more palatable to popular music fans. My first evening in Cape Breton, Ashley along with several other well-known names in Cape Breton fiddling, played to a sold out crowd in the Inverness Art Centre. The hip, contemporary looking venue was packed with all sorts of concertgoers from young American tourists to elderly locals. Like nearly

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<sup>2</sup> See Glossary of Terms

all concerts in Cape Breton, the show ran long, but for all three hours audience members clapped their hands or pounded their feet or drummed their fingers on the chair in front of them.

This is a far cry from the humble shows given three times a week by John MacDougall. But there are few to none of John's generation, the older generation with the older sound, playing as actively as Ashley MacIssac, Glenn Graham, Andrea Beaton, or any number of other young fiddlers. The one exception is perhaps Buddy MacMaster who has become an icon in Cape Breton fiddling, and whose style is, arguably, not of the same breed as that of John or other "rough" players. You can find them on occasion, if you keep your eye out for the listings of smaller concerts at more obscure venues. Like John told me though, fiddlers like him have had their day -- better to let the young ones have a chance. Yet many of these fiddlers continue to impact the music scene through teaching. And they still keep tabs on each other. It was old-style fiddler Sandy MacIntyre, a well-known instructor who has taught countless young fiddlers at Cape Breton's Gaelic College just outside Baddeck, that told me I might be able to find MacDougall at the Distillery. He said he'd heard of some tunes composed by John, apparently a large number of them, but that he'd never heard any of them played, nor seen them published.

### **Tune Making**

Tune composition in Cape Breton has been a by-product of the island's active fiddle scene for the entirety of the land's Scottish history. Though there have been many talented tune writers, it is composer-legend Dan R. MacDonald who, for years, has been considered Cape Breton's finest and most prolific composer. It's said that the tunes that

appear in published collections are only a fraction of his total output. Stories go that Dan R., determined bachelor and wanderer much like the itinerant musicians of old, would show up at your house on a whim, stay a couple of weeks (during which time there would always be a lot of music and gatherings of fiddlers) and then move on. Possibly he would leave a tune he'd written behind as payment. Many of these, of course, were lost. But guesses at Dan R.'s total output range in the area of two thousand tunes (McGann 2003, 157). His tunes were innovative. While still deeply rooted in the Scottish tradition, it is in Dan R.'s tunes that one begins to hear a clear evolution toward the contemporary Cape Breton sound, a sound perhaps most distinguishable today in the compositions of fiddlers such as Jerry Holland, Brenda Stubberts, Kinnon Beaton, Paul Cranford, Howie MacDonald, or Dougie MacDonald.

The August morning I visited John MacDougall in his home, he had just finished notating the last of three jigs<sup>3</sup> he'd written in the half-hour before I arrived. I could hear him playing it through the open window as I approached his house. As I talked to him over the next two hours I discovered that such barrages of new tunes are not unusual except that three is definitely on the low end. During John's most prolific times he'll "make" (the preferred verb for composing amongst Cape Breton fiddlers) sixty-five tunes a day. Though this is hard to believe, even more amazing is that as of August 2007, he had written right around forty two thousand tunes. It's enough tunes, he tells me, to publish one hundred and sixty five standard length tune books at once: a feat unheard of for any tune composer of the Celtic isles. Among these are a collection written specifically in the range of the highland bagpipes and two collections of tunes written for the sympathetic high-bass tuning once common in Cape Breton. All are kept in staff

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<sup>3</sup> See Glossary of Terms

paper notebooks, handwritten, and locked in a safe inside his house. These are standard length notebooks with the exception of one which he calls his “Bible of Scottish Music.” It was the first book he showed me, hard-backed and about four times as thick as his others, but contained only three thousand of his forty thousand plus tunes.

John says that when he was thirteen years old he could just lie on his bed, stare at the ceiling and he would hear the most beautiful orchestra music you could imagine coming from above him. Though at that time he didn’t know what an orchestra was, the music persisted on and off throughout his life. In 1975, John was playing at the annual Broadcove Scottish concert. He was about two bars into his set when the orchestra became so overpowering he couldn’t continue. In her article Karen Mazurkewich says there was nothing for him to do but pack up his fiddle and return home, but the music followed him (2006). That night, as the music persisted, he decided he would try to write it down. He figured to himself since it probably wasn’t Satan bringing this music to his head, he would try and do what it seemed to want of him. According to Mazurkewich, he composed tune after tune to the point of exhaustion (2006). This was the beginning of the onslaught of tunes he would write continually over the next three decades. He tells me that this staggering rate of composition is not humanly possible. He says there is no way the tunes are coming from his own mind. I can see his point, but his alternative explanation for the origins of his tunes can seem a bit far-fetched.

John says that he has talked to “Christians, Jews . . . everyone,” and that they all agree: if it isn’t possible for one man to compose so many tunes, then they must be coming from elsewhere. More exactly, John will say that he isn’t composing at all, but that the tunes he’s writing down are those of the generations of dead Cape Breton fiddlers

who passed away musically illiterate, and therefore were unable to impart a large number of the tunes in their repertoires to the younger generation. The music, as he says, is literally brought to his mind by spirits. "These are the lost tunes," he says. "The dead want to get the music back" (Mazurkewich 2006). John firmly believes that he is being given tunes from dead fiddlers. "It's my life's work," he says, to collect these tunes and preserve them for the next generation of Cape Breton fiddlers. "No one else is doing it, so it's up to me."

John is not at all abashed about sharing such an eccentric claim. I've heard retellings of John's story from individuals that will characterize these spirits as visible ghosts, though this is not how I came to understand John's experience from our conversations. While he seemed to be certain of the general source of his tunes he was not at all specific about individuals and did not allude to visitations from ghosts. At one point in our conversation he asked me directly whether or not I believed him. I told him I didn't know and he seemed satisfied with that answer. Yet it's hard, even for the most hardened skeptic, to make a conclusive argument against him. Truly, the process of making a tune for John seems more like the process of recording it than composing it. He says the "tunes come whole, not in pieces" and he never gets stuck. This flies in the face of the accounts of numerous tune composers, Dan R. included, who will tell you that it is nearly an established pattern in composing tunes for the first turn to come fairly easily and the second with much more difficulty. It is common for composers to get stuck on a tune missing its second turn<sup>4</sup> for weeks, even months at a time. Often a tune will undergo numerous revisions. This is, of course, unnecessary for John. He doesn't tinker with a phrase until he gets it just right. There's no need.

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<sup>4</sup> See Glossary of Terms

John's tunes seem to be of an older breed. According to young fiddler, Ian MacDougall, relative, and former student of John's, the tunes are unlike any being composed today (Maurkewich 2006). They are said to more closely resemble the Scottish tunes, now common in the repertoire, that were brought to the New World by immigrants. While I was with John, I heard several marches, a hornpipe,<sup>5</sup> a reel and a jig, and all sounded, to my ear, as if he could have just opened up the *Skye Collection*<sup>6</sup> and played directly off the page. Though with such a large number of new tunes, it is difficult to believe that they could all be of a very high quality. John told me though, that Buddy MacMaster sat down with him one evening and played over a large stack of tunes and, afterward, said there wasn't a bad one in the lot.

As is the case with many native Cape Bretoners, John's surroundings are humble. His trailer in Kenloch is in the backwoods. He lives with his cat amidst disarray and clutter. Next to his stained, dish-filled sink, he keeps a pile of tunebooks. His north wall is plastered with cheap pastel prints of the Virgin Mary. As we talked his cat nuzzled my leg and my recording equipment alternatively, and then jumped onto the kitchen table mid-conversation. While for many Cape Bretoners it is music that is really significant in these isolated surroundings -- crucial piece Cape Breton identity -- there remains a remarkable humility surrounding it. Compared to commercial musicians who, so often, adopt a kind of celebrity status, Cape Breton fiddlers can seem practically egoless. In Cape Breton tunes are "made" not composed or written, as if this art were a normal, essential function of everyday life such as chopping firewood, or gutting fish. This is especially true in John's case where composing has become part of his daily routine.

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<sup>5</sup> See Glossary of Terms

<sup>6</sup> See Glossary of Terms

Tune titles too, suggest a kind of ordinariness in relation to the music. “The River Bend,” “Alpin Road,” “Heather Hill,” “Doctor’s Road,” are just a few examples of titles of tunes composed by Dan R.

Cape Breton music, like many forms of folk art, is the meeting of two seemingly disparate worlds. Humble surroundings and very ordinary routine collides, on a regular basis, with the highly aesthetic. This rich, highly cultivated, stylistically complicated music is made by very ordinary, hardworking, blue-collar men and women. The apparent juxtaposition is perhaps ideally exemplified by the figure of John MacDougall, a piano tuner by profession, for whom tune making has become a kind of necessary ritual; for whom the otherworldly and even, one might say, the divine, has become tangible and almost ever-present. With music being such a potent aesthetic force and universal artistic outlet under these ordinary and humble circumstances, and under similar circumstances at large in the Celtic world, it is no wonder that there is a history of this music being tied to the extraordinary or supernatural.

### **The Fairy Faith and Music**

Fairylore has often been used to explain extraordinary musical gifts in the Celtic Isles. In Scotland the great MacCrimmon pipers of Dunvegan Castle were said to have received their incomparable abilities on the bagpipes from the fairies. In one story titled “The Black Lad MacCrimmon and the Banshee” (which interestingly closely resembles the Cinderella tale type) the youngest son in a family of pipers is ignored by his father and, unlike his brothers, is never given the opportunity to play his father’s great bagpipes.

One day, upon being left home alone, he picks up his father's chanter<sup>7</sup> and begins moving his fingers over it. While he is attempting to play the instrument, a banshee from the castle comes upon him. She asks which he'd prefer "skill without success, or success without skill," to which the lad replies unhesitatingly, "skill without success." After giving him a hair from her head to tie around the chanter reed, the Banshee proceeds to teach the lad how to play the pipes by placing her fingers on top of his, and instructing him to follow their movements (MacDougall 1977, 177). There are numerous accounts such as this in folktale of musicians and non-musicians alike, encountering these gift-giving fairies. In each case, it appears implicit that, without the help of fairies, the recipient of the gift is incapable of coming by it on their own. In an account published by Walter Evans-Wentz as the "Testimony of John Campbell, Ninety-Four Years Old," Mr. Campbell tells of a stepson that was the neighbor of his grandfather, and was pitied by the fairies. Campbell says that "One morning when the man and his second wife were returning from mass they passed the pasture...and heard the enjoyable *skirrels* of the bagpipes." Upon investigating the man found it was his son "playing the bagpipes to his heart's pleasure." When asked where the son had learned to play the pipes he responded that an old man had come to him and, because his step-mother treated him so poorly, supplied him with a set of bagpipes that, "for as long as he [sic] had them he'd [sic] never want for the most delightful tunes" (Evans-Wentz 1966, 103-104).

When in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries large numbers of Scots began immigrating to Cape Breton, the fairies and stories such as these followed them. In *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, there is an account given by a Murdoch MacLean about an acquaintance of his grandmother's. He said, "My grandmother, Catherine MacInnis,

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<sup>7</sup> See Glossary of Terms

used to tell about a man named Lachlann [who was] in love with a fairy woman.” After a period of seeing the fairy woman every night Lachlann grew tired of her and began to fear her. Apparently it became so unbearable that Lachlann decided to escape by emigrating to Cape Breton. But “in his first letter home to his friends he stated that the same fairy woman was haunting him there in America” (Evans-Wentz 1966, 112-113).

Fairies in the new world continued to influence musicians. Marie MacLellan, well known Cape Breton pianist and sister of fiddler Theresa MacLellan, recalled for Ronald Caplan the story of her father’s violin bow. “As a boy [my father] had a homemade bow. He was eight or nine or ten years old...brought up in Broad Cove ...with his aunts. They were out taking the cows home one evening...when there was an arrow [that] went by [his aunt] right on the hill in front of her...And she said ‘I’m taking this in the house’ ...and she just threw it in a basket and put it up in the back to dry.” (Caplan 2006, 116) When MacLellan’s father, known as Big Ronald, started to learn the violin, his aunt gave him the arrow and he strung it with hair from one of their horses. “It was a sort of fairy bow he got,” says MacLellan, “The gift came through them...and they were coming I guess, and they bothered us all our life” (Caplan 2006, 116). It was said that this bow is what lent Big Ronald such skill on the fiddle. “That’s the only thing I could ever figure that my father got the music from,” says MacLellan, “because he had no learning, he had no training...And the people he was brought with – they didn’t even know what music was...He just sprung up, and that was it. It had to be it.” (Caplan 2006, 117)

MacLellan’s account of Big Ronald’s bow is very similar to John Campbell’s story of the bagpiping stepson. Both the stepson and Ronald have lost parents and appear to have been favored by the fairies. However the story of Big Ronald’s bow has been attuned to

Cape Breton where the fiddle eventually ousted the pipes as the dance instrument of choice. While there doesn't seem to be any account of fairy bows in Scottish folklore, there are several stories of fairy arrows. It's clear that many of the motifs of Scottish fairylore were transported directly to Cape Breton. Yet the lore evolves in significant ways in order to accommodate the new landscape. One fairly common sign left by fairies in Cape Breton is finely crafted, intricately woven braids. Fairies are said to have braided horses' manes, laundry hanging on lines, even tall grass. In the same interview noted above, Marie MacLellan mentions this fairy sign: "I'd go to the barn and milk the cows or whatever. And I'd say, 'How come everything's beautiful with braids?' And [my mother] would say, 'Oh the fairies are back again . . . they're after your father for that bow'" (Caplan 2006, 117). In Cape Breton where the landscape is less charged with Celtic history, where centuries-old fairy wells are non-existent, where castles (the haunt of many fairies) have never been built, the *Sidhe* leave a different kind of trail in the landscape. They make use of what is there and, in typical Cape Breton fashion, lend beauty and otherworldliness to the most ordinary of things.

### **Christianization**

A significant alteration that occurs in the fairylore of Cape Breton is its Christianization. Over time Christianity, as it existed in Scotland and later Cape Breton, became enmeshed with preexisting fairy beliefs. There is a story that was told in Scotland about the construction of Stirling Castle. In James MacDougall's collection of *Folktales and Fairy Lore in Gaelic and English* it is titled "How the First Castle Was Built on Stirling Rock." The tale is told of an old gentleman who "took it in his head to build a

castle.” After the plans were drawn the man realized that he wouldn’t have enough money to finish its construction. Day after day the gentleman could be heard as he walked about the grounds at Stirling Rock lamenting that he “had not the means to carry out his idea.” At long last he is visited by a stranger who offers to complete the castle as long as he, if unable to guess the stranger’s name, agrees to leave with the stranger after the castle’s completion. The gentleman agrees, and the castle is built. As the castle is nearly finished however, the gentleman “becomes very anxious; for he had not yet discovered the stranger’s name.” He decides to visit an old wise man in the neighborhood who reveals that the stranger is in fact a fairy. Together they devise a plan by which the gentleman comes to discover the fairy’s name. The tale ends with the fairy flying “through the castle wall in a flame of fire, leaving behind him a hole which neither stone, nor wood, nor anything under the sun but horse dung can close” (MacDougall 1977, 173). This same story has been told in Cape Breton and is recounted by storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil in *Tales Until Dawn*. The only major difference in the two tales is in the nature of the stranger. In the Cape Breton version he is not Thomas Jock the fairy but rather Thomas Jock the devil. All other details remain almost exactly the same. This tale, then, represents a kind of re-conceptualization of fairy nature through the lens of Christianity. Because fairies do not have a proper place within the Christian religions, they are transformed into, or replaced entirely by acceptable classes of supernatural beings. In *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* a Scottish minister recounts personally the way he has seen fairies undergo this transformation. “When I was a boy I was a firm believer in fairies; and now as a Christian minister I believe in the possibility and . . . reality of these spiritual orders . . . I believe in the actuality of evil spirits; but people in

the Highlands having put aside paganism, evil spirits are not seen now” (Evans-Wentz 1966, 91) Interestingly, this quote also illustrates clearly how fairylore can be reconceived and Christianized within an individual who then has influence over the beliefs of a group of people.

Like the devil in “How the First Castle was Built on Stirling Rock” John MacDougall’s spirit muses can be seen as the Christianized re-conceptualization of the gift-giving fairies of Celtic tradition. They seem to be different from the piping MacCrimmons’ banshee muse and Big Ronald MacLellan’s fairy muses in name only, and this difference is superficial. Though the Christianized name does suggest shifts, perhaps large ones, in religious thought, the nature and function of these various supernatural beings appear in this case to be almost identical. Accounts of the origins of fairies have varied greatly from region to region, and even from person to person. Likewise descriptions of fairy nature vary also. Yet there have been a large number of similar recorded accounts that describe fairies as, in some way, related to spirits of the dead. Evans-Wentz says that “as I have found to be the case in all Celtic countries equally, fairy stories nearly always . . . give place to or are blended with legends of the dead.” His research backs this up. Nearly all his informants in Ireland identify fairies as the spirits of the dead: “Fairies are the spirits of the dead; and they say that if you have many friends deceased you have many friendly fairies, or if you have many enemies deceased you have many fairies looking out to do you harm.” (Evans-Wentz 1966, 75) “These *good people* were the spirits of our dead friends, but I could not recognize them” (Evans-Wentz 1966, 77). In Scotland however informants seem a little less certain: “Then the question was asked if fairies were men or spirits . . . ’I never saw any myself,

and so cannot tell, but they must be spirits from all that the old people tell about them . . .” (Evans-Wentz 1966, 102) and “I believe that fairies exist as a tribe of spirits, and appear to us in the form of men and women” (Evans-Wentz 1966, 105). It is clear from these accounts that fairies are considered spirits. It seems to be widely but not universally held however, that they are the spirits of the deceased. Yet the connection is common enough and pronounced enough to suggest that MacDougall’s spirit muses could be considered the same class of supernatural beings as those that haunted these Cape Breton Scots’ ancestors in their mossy homeland and bestowed upon them inexplicable musical abilities.

### **Scottish Identity in Cape Breton**

In 1992, almost two decades after John MacDougall’s set was interrupted by ghostlike music on the same stage, native Cape Breton piper Barry Shears played a step-dance set at the annual Broad Cove concert. Shears was born and raised in Glace Bay. After years of rounding the competition circuit and winning several prestigious medals, he injured his hand and his throw on D (a standard piping embellishment) became unreliable. He quit competition and began to pioneer research into the early piping styles of the island. He uncovered a rich, vibrant tradition of dance piping that has now all but disappeared. Piping in Cape Breton, as well as worldwide, is predominately performed in a pipe-band, competition style. This means that the gracings are standardized, the expression tight and square, and the playing often generic. When Shears performed at Broad Cove he broke from this tradition and played a set of tunes in the style of the old Cape Breton pipers with an expression similar to that found in current Cape Breton fiddle music. His

performance was received with varying degrees of confusion and uncertainty. Pipers -- even in Cape Breton where Scottish music has thrived as an informally transmitted, community-based folk art -- were expected to come on stage in full Scottish regalia and play sharply cut-and-held MSRs<sup>8</sup> or hornpipe<sup>9</sup>-jigs, in the accepted and formally taught, British military style.

The following year however, Scottish piper Hamish Moore who, like Shears, has a strong interest in the early dance piping of Cape Breton, was visiting the island. Similarly, he performed a dance set on the highland pipes to guitar accompaniment at a local concert. But the reception was starkly different. He was received with enthusiasm and interest. Currently it is not uncommon to find rising Cape Breton pipers playing step-dance sets on their instruments. While there may have been many factors that influenced Moore's positive reception, there was certainly one major and notable factor: Moore is Scottish.

According to Shears, who conducted extensive fieldwork among the last of the traditional Cape Breton pipers, many of these seventy and eighty-year-old, ear-learned players were embarrassed or even somewhat ashamed of their piping. Though highland piping worldwide has truly been saved by band and competition piping, the style has been standardized to such an extent that traditional Cape Breton pipers had often heard that their playing was wrong, backward, or provincial. Though John MacDougall and other old style fiddlers are usually respected by the Cape Breton fiddle community, their rough and perhaps antiquated styles are often similarly disregarded. One can see this in the way that the flourishing recording industry in Cape Breton manages to produce full

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<sup>8</sup> See Glossary of Terms

<sup>9</sup> See Glossary of Terms

length recordings from nearly every young upcoming fiddler, and yet few to none of John MacDougall and his contemporaries.

It has only been within the last several decades that Cape Bretoners have largely begun to refer to their music as “Cape Breton fiddling.” Like most immigrants, Cape Bretoners have long identified their culture with their ancestral homeland. With music, this identification lasted long after significant differences from Scottish music had developed. Yet apparently the differences in the music were not evident, or important enough to warrant separate classification. Even today, a large quantity of the tunes played in Cape Breton are of Scottish, not Cape Breton, origin. Some of these, such as “King George IV,” “The King’s Reel,” “Miss Lyal,” “Put Me in the Big Chest,” “St. Kilda Wedding,” “Cabar Feidh,” or “The Haggis,” are still among the most often played tunes at dances and concerts. It seems locals only laid particularized claim to their music after outsiders began identifying it as the “lost gem” of 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish music: when musicians such as Hamish Moore began looking to Cape Breton in order to uncover the Gaelic roots of Scottish music. Here Scots could supposedly find their own traditional music unsullied by European, and specifically British, influences. This notion, as it spurred the teaching and touring industries, combined with the surprising international success of fiddling superstars Natalie MacMaster and Ashley MacIsaac, and suggested that playing Cape Breton music could perhaps, for the first time, be a viable means of making a living: something that has always been difficult to do in Cape Breton. Whether as an outgrowth of the new tourist industry’s marketing, or simply a surge of Cape Breton pride, the music is now clearly identified by insiders and outsiders alike, as distinct from that of Scotland or any of the other Celtic countries. And the island itself has been

claimed as a traditional music Mecca by North America.

In his article “Powerful Pathos: the Triumph of Scottishness in Nova Scotia,” Michael Vance points out that despite approximately 72 percent of the population of the province not being of Scottish origin, according to a 1928 census, a Scottish dominated historiography was, and has remained, uncannily dominant. He identifies a kind of romanticization of the Highland Scot, beginning in Victorian Scotland, where a very British perception of the Highlander became dominant as the original culprit of this historiography. This romanticized image was then equated with Nova Scotia, and specifically Cape Breton, to encourage the tourist industry. Vance writes of Nova Scotia:

“The attachment of region to sentimentalism is, however, most apparent in Cape Breton...according to the province’s official guide book: ‘Scottish traditions and Gaelic folklore come alive along the Ceilidh Trail. Ceilidh...is Gaelic for party or gathering, and if you listen closely you might hear the heart-stirring music of bagpipes and fiddles echoing through the glens of this beautiful corner of Cape Breton’...” (Vance 2005, 163)

Vance goes on to illustrate how this romanticization has resulted in surprising misunderstandings and even fabrications of Cape Breton history and culture. “Indeed the Romantic portrayals of this part of Cape Breton have been so powerful that in 1947 Donald S. MacIntosh, a descendant of Highland Scots immigrants, had a ‘lone shieling’ constructed in Cape Breton along the Cabot Trail, part of the *Ceilidh* tourist route, in deference to a stanza from the *Canadian Boat Song* first published in 1829 in

*Blackwood’s* magazine:

‘From the lone shieling of the misty island  
Mountains divide us, and the waste of the seas;  
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland.  
And we, in dreams, behold the Hebrides.’

The authorship of this oft-repeated poem is not certain, but it is certain that with all the

wood available in Cape Breton, no Highland immigrant actually constructed a ‘shieling’ of stone and thatch. For MacIntosh...it did, however, represent the continuing importance of Scotland in Nova Scotia” (Vance 2005, 164). While today it would seem that Cape Bretoners have begun to extricate themselves much more completely from Scotland, the clout this heritage carries is still evident. My first week on the island, I participated in a five-day-long fiddle class at the Ceilidh Trail School of Music, a traditional music school now run by fiddler Jerry Holland. There were approximately twenty-five intermediate fiddlers all scratching away in the same classroom. We came from various locations around North America, with the exception of one student who had flown in from Glasgow. There were four instructors, and with only an hour a day, and such a large group to work with, none bothered to learn our names or any personal information about us. Clair, however, with her unmistakable Glaswegian accent, was recognized by all the instructors and referred to throughout the week as “Scotland.” When tunes were being taught by ear, often the instructors, before moving on, would stop to make sure “Scotland” had mastered the phrase. Again, while there were probably other factors at play as well, the instructors' singular recognition of Clair still serves to illustrate the significance Scotland (as an almost mythical place of origin) continues to hold in the minds of locals, and perhaps especially local musicians.

It is significant, then, that John MacDougall’s claim to supernatural authorship of his tunes connects them, in theory, to a Scottish origin. If the tunes are those that were lost when these fiddlers, raised in an aural tradition, died, then almost certainly some, if not most of the tunes were passed down directly from the Scottish immigrants that settled Cape Breton. They are tunes then that should carry with them the authenticity and clout

of the Scottish homeland.

### **Tune Authenticity and Correctness Among Cape Breton Fiddlers**

Cape Breton fiddling has been a predominately aural tradition from the time Scots first landed on the North American island. Unlike Irish music where the settings (or variations) proliferate and are generally valued (improvisation in general has traditionally been a much more important part of Irish music), Scottish music has had a strong tradition of “tune correctness.” Perhaps the most extreme example is among pipers within the pipe-band tradition where playing in unison depends upon consistency in not just the music, but also in the gracings or embellishments. But even today, when stylistic dilution is rampant in Celtic music, many Cape Breton fiddlers, particularly old style fiddlers such as John, still hold that there are correct and incorrect settings of tunes and that “master fiddlers” will play only correct settings (Graham 2004, 157). For example, the website for the Buddy MacMaster school of fiddling located in Judique, reads “Buddy...is nicknamed the ‘Master of the Cape Breton Fiddle’ because he is a smooth, correct player who inspires dancers and brings out the best of the sweet melodies of many Cape Breton and Scottish composers.” One is classified as a “master fiddler” at least in part because he is a “correct” player.

Because tune “correctness” has been so valued in the tradition, the aurally learned versions of Scottish tunes are surprisingly close to the old notated published versions. In the process of transmission players have been sticklers for correctness. While there are some small variations, (a certain degree of which would seem to be acceptable to even the most traditionally minded musician) and also different stylistic approaches to tunes,

note by note the melodies remain remarkably the same. Tunebooks and music reading itself came late to Cape Breton, and though it is much more common now to be notation-literate, the tradition still leans heavily toward aural learning. The majority, even, of the instruction offered at fiddle schools around the island is primarily aural. And some of the best fiddlers still remain notation illiterate. The most well known example is Brenda Stubberts, excellent fiddler and also prolific tune-maker, who is entirely ear-learned and who has a fellow musician notate her compositions for her. Yet most composers today have whole-heartedly embraced notation. John's composing in particular, with such a prolific output, relies heavily on notation. Even with an increasing amount of interplay between Cape Breton music and the various other Celtic musics, many in the tradition still seem to firmly hold that the best fiddlers play only the correct settings. And notation has only served to help solidify specific settings of tunes as correct and then proliferate them.

Interestingly, correctness is also valued in Cape Breton storytelling. The John Shaw compiled book *Tales Until Dawn* is a transcription of many of the folktales once common in Cape Breton as told by storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil. Among MacNeil's repertoire are tales from the Fenian cycle, a traditional Gaelic series of stories passed down orally for hundreds of years. Like the tunes in Cape Breton, these stories crossed the Atlantic with the island's Scottish immigrants. All one gets of these old stories from MacNeil is fragments. He begins these tales stutteringly as if trying to recall them in entirety and with exactness. Then, rather than improvising or exaggerating these tales, MacNeil will gloss over or just skip important pieces of the stories he cannot remember. Consequently, many of the stories' details are vague, and the tales are rendered nearly incoherent. When

MacNeil's memory of the story is unsure he seems to be afraid to say too much, that by so doing he would misguide the plot. In the tale "Diarmaid and the Slim Woman in the Green Coat," MacNeil tells the story thus: "it seems that the Fenians were in hard straits and apparently under spells. They were sticking to the place where they were sitting and a cup of water was obtained which contained something to counter the spells..."

(MacNeil 1987, 38) MacNeil gives us only sparse details of the situation. It's unclear why the Fenians were in hard straits or even if they are under spells at all -- this just appears to be the only explanation for the bizarre situation in which they've found themselves. Then the antidote for these spells is somehow obtained, but there is no reference to how, or to what that antidote is.

That correctness is not exclusive to fiddling or piping alone suggests there is a Cape Breton (perhaps even Scottish) impulse to preserve inherited culture as exactly as possible. I have heard it said that there is a timelessness in many of the old Scottish tunes, and it is specifically because they are of such an especially high quality that they are still played today and have been played continuously for centuries. Nearly all tunes though, and particularly newly composed tunes such as John's, will come in and out of popularity. It is somewhat rare for a newly composed tune to fully enter the common repertoire of fiddlers. Dan R. managed to write such tunes in "The Riverbend," "Trip to Windsor," and "Heather Hill," as has Jerry Holland with tunes such as "Brenda Stubbert's Reel." Many of these will find their way even beyond the Cape Breton circle to be picked up in the Scottish and Irish traditions. "Brenda Stubbert's" is probably the ideal example. But it is only a small number of the tunes being composed today that actually find their way into the common repertoire. Most new tunes remain exclusive to

certain fiddlers, groups of fiddlers, or certain communities. Yet, if it is true that John's tunes capture the spirit of the old Scottish tunes, then one could imagine that they would find their way seamlessly into many fiddlers' repertoires. So far this has not been the case because John has been anxiously protective of his compositions. He's held off publishing them. And though he has no problem playing you a tune, it's doubtful he'd give you a copy of the notation. When I visited with him, he refused to let me record him playing any of them, even after I assured him it would only be for my personal academic use. He said he could never be sure where a recording would end up.

Because John has composed such a large body of tunes, it will be a wonder if many of his best compositions do not become obscured by sheer quantity. He has been planning to publish them for years. In Mazurkewich's article John says that he is waiting until he reaches 35,000 tunes before he publishes. Yet a year after the article was written he had over 42,000 tunes completed and had yet to begin publishing. The task of editing and compiling these tunes alone will be monumental and a major obstacle to publication. John is also resistant to relinquishing any control over his tunes. When I asked whether he would consider Paul Cranford as a publisher he opened a Jerry Holland collection of fiddle music to a tune he'd written and which he had allowed Cranford to include. He played the tune for me and told me to follow along with the sheet music. While the notes were correct, the rhythm with which John played the tune was clearly different. The Cranford version was written as a waltz and the original, which John showed me, was notated in 2/4 time. While neither piece of music truly captured the correct rhythm (and John was as mistaken as Cranford in his notation) he said that after that, he'd never give Cranford another one of his tunes.

Yet it seems John is fighting an uphill battle against the threat that his significant work will go unnoticed after his death. Perhaps the story John tells about his tune making, even with, or perhaps because of its supernatural overlay, may ultimately generate the interest I believe John is hoping for. He has already garnered the attention of reporters, and has been the subject of two news articles. Ultimately the story may save the tunes from general disinterest and obscurity. Whether or not one takes John's sort of ghostly revision of aural transmission seriously, it seems to have motivated him to compose an astronomical number of tunes, and for that reason it is impossible to just simply write off.

Many fiddlers, especially old style fiddlers, are very concerned about the preservation of the tradition. While some of the changes that have occurred are welcomed, there is the constant anxiety among many Cape Breton fiddlers that the music is becoming too diluted with other influences: that it is following the typical pattern of many folk musics and becoming a hodge podge of once distinct local styles. If the dilution continues at a certain point they fear the tradition, a defining piece of Cape Bretoners' cultural identity, will wash away. At its best, John's story authenticates his tunes in a way that is nearly perfectly attuned to these anxieties and concerns. He returns an undeniable Scottishness to the tradition but through a Cape Breton conduit by re-imagining traditional motifs. At the very least John's story simply calls attention to his tunes which could potentially serve upcoming fiddlers for generations. In his way, if these tunes can be fully embraced by the tradition, John will have strengthened ties of culture and ancestry that go straight back to Scotland, to a potent, even if exaggerated, image of a golden age of Scottish music, and by so doing helped to anchor current Cape Breton music to its origins.

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## **Glossary of Terms**

**Chanter** – The melody pipe that a player fingers on a set of bagpipes. The conical shape of the highland bagpipe chanter gives this set of pipes its distinctive sound where high notes, quieter than low notes, practically disappear into the drones.

**Hornpipe** – An up tempo tune, usually with a cut and held rhythm, written in 2/4 time that originated as a dance tune in Ireland, and has, more recently, been adopted fairly widely by Scottish and Cape Breton musicians.

**Jig** – A dance tune written in complex time, either 6/8 or 9/8, which is played widely in traditional Celtic music and accompanies the first figure of Cape Breton square dancing sets.

**MSR** – A medley of tunes, common to Cape Breton and Scotland, that consists of a march, one or several strathspeys, and several reels.

**Practice Chanter** – A quiet, mouthblown, double-reeded pipe, bagpipers use to learn proper fingering techniques when they are new to the instrument and to learn new tunes even after they are more experienced. In Cape Breton practice chanters were often considered an instrument in their own right and were used to accompany step dancing in the living room or kitchen.

**Reel** – A dance tune written in either 2/4 or 4/4 time (nearly always read as if it were in 4/4) that is extremely common in Celtic musics and accompanies the final figure of Cape Breton square dancing as well as the majority of step-dancing.

**Skye Collection** – A collection of tunes that Scottish immigrants brought with them to and that still provides the basis for much of a Cape Breton fiddlers repertoire.

**Strathspey** – A dance tune unique to Scotland and Cape Breton written in 4/4 time and characterized by the “Scottish snap” or a sixteenth note on the stressed beat of a measure, followed by a dotted eighth note. In Cape Breton fiddling, strathspeys are played rounded, very much as they are written, to accompany step dancing, whereas in highland piping they are nearly always played in a way that emphasizes the cut and held notes to such a degree that the tune sounds as if it were written in 12/8 time.

**Stylistic Dilution** – The disintegration of the many individual styles that were once associated with specific locales in Scotland and Cape Breton and the formation of a general style associated with a much broader geographic location; for example, rather than Mabou or Inverness styles of fiddling, the Cape Breton style of fiddling.

**Turn** – One part of a multi-parted tune. Two-part tunes are most commonly found in Cape Breton music. Each turn is usually repeated and the tune is usually played twice within a medley of tunes.

