Carn Mor de Chlachan Beaga,
A Large Cairn from Small Stones: Multivocality and
Memory in Cape Breton Gaelic Singing

by

Stephanie Conn

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Music
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Since the first Scottish Gaelic-speaking settlers arrived in Nova Scotia in the late 18th century, their Gaelic singing tradition has been an integral part of life in communities on Cape Breton Island. With the waning of the Gaelic language, however, came efforts to collect and preserve the song tradition, and the intention to pass it along intact. This dissertation eschews the consideration of Gaelic singing as a monolithic tradition with a common repertoire and experience, and instead examines it as a multifaceted process enacted by individuals in three main sites: home, public performance and the archive. It examines the various ways the practice manifests itself, concluding that memory and individual agency are constants, both for singers and listeners.

Through interviews, participant-observer activity and archival research, this study demonstrates that Gaelic singers have been far from passive culture-bearers but have instead actively shaped their song practice by choosing repertoire, melody variants and texts. It also discusses the dynamic role of memory and social interaction in the transmission and performance of Gaelic song. Memories of other singers, discussion of the text, and contextual
details draw singers and listeners into a community that is both synchronic and diachronic. This practice is chiefly oral, but is supported by recordings and printed songbooks as well as an array of objects – photo albums, clippings, tapes – which evoke the sense of previous performances and their singers. Despite their intention to transmit the songs with little or no change, singers have a flexible relationship with the material and in some cases subvert the authority of recorded or printed sources by turning instead to first-hand experiences. This simultaneous presence of past and present has tremendous implications for what it means to know a song, and one comes to understand it as a composite of multiple memories, performances and meanings.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Nearing Iona, the highway hugs the shores of the Bras d’Or lakes in a postcard-pretty scene, all blue skies, sparkling water and rolling hills. At Grand Narrows the road dips across the big bridge that has been there since they retired the old ferry in 1993. Just across the Narrows is an official sign for Christmas Island, but locals know that this is actually Cooper’s Pond; they have placed a Gaelic sign there, “Pòn A’ Chùbair” and then a couple of hundred yards further another one marks Christmas Island proper: “Eilean na Nollaig”.

Driving past the red-and-white firehall I turn my car off the highway and onto the road called The Highlands, also marked by a Gaelic sign, “Am Baile Ard”. A washboarded gravel road leads up the hill then weaves through the woods past a few more turnoffs and isolated farms, until at last it breaks out into a large clearing. On the left, at the end of a very long driveway, is Gaelic singer Peter’s tall, white house, around which is scattered a collection of faded red sheds. He still maintains the land with a little help from neighbours, and the moral support of his two dogs. As I make my way down the dirt drive the dogs begin their boisterous announcement of my arrival. Peter, or Peadar Jack Pheadair mac Caluim
Ghobha as he is called in Gaelic\textsuperscript{1}, appears in the door: 90 years old, strong and striking, impeccably dressed in a crisp white dress shirt. He is a font of information on songs and stories, language and local history, but mainly he’s a wonderful person, and great company. Outwardly the community is quite conservative, but in private Peter is opinionated and outspoken. You know something good is coming when he leans in, fixes an intense glare on you and says, “Between you and me, dear…”.

For the next few hours, with tea and whisky, Peter and I hunch over the old reel-to-reel tape machine listening to recordings culled over several decades, page through a pile of Gaelic songbooks, and sift through boxes of newspaper clippings and faded photographs. Peter stops a tape dead to comment on a singer, or laugh out loud at a particularly rousing performance. “Would you like to learn that one?” he asks when “Air faill irinn illirinn oich irinn ù”\textsuperscript{2} comes on. “That’d be a good one for you, you know?” he says, but will not explain exactly why. At times like this I sometimes say yes and take note; other times I ask him to sing it. He makes a big deal of these little research recordings, anxious that they should be ‘correct’ so that I can learn a song properly, yet he will spontaneously sing a dozen verses to something else, unrehearsed and barely prompted. I never believe him when he says he doesn’t know a song. At the end of the day as I head out into the inky blackness to drive home, my notebook, tapes, head and heart filled, I do not feel any more certain of what is ‘typical’ of Gaelic song or how I can better sing one, but once again I am struck by the

\textsuperscript{1} This is Peter’s sloinneadh, a list of patronymics that identify familial lineage back by several generations.
\textsuperscript{2} Also known as “Òran do Ghille a Chaidh a Bháthadh”, Song for the Drowning of a Young Man.
kaleidoscope of stories, voices, and variations that make up this tradition as experienced by
Peter, and now by myself.

Great landmarks, viewed up close, reveal themselves to be created from their many
constituent pieces. In much the same way, my journey as singer and scholar into Cape Breton
Gaelic singing has led me to discover not one unified tradition but instead the individual
singers, songs, styles and genres which make up the whole of this practice. In considering
Gaelic song, then, one proverb seems particularly appropriate: *Nithear carn mor de Chlachan
beaga*, a large cairn can be made from small stones. Experience, conversation, and formal
research have all led me to understand that the ways in which a Gaelic song is sung and
understood differ according to the site in which it is performed, its stream of transmission,
who has sung it before, who sings it now, and who is listening. Although those whom we call
Gaelic singers share a large body of songs, some elements of musical style, and a common
culture, nevertheless specific repertoire, style and practices have differed from community to
community and even from singer to singer within the same community. In this dissertation,
therefore, I contend that there are as many practices as there are singers. I explore the various
ways Gaelic singing manifests itself in the home, in public performance and the recorded
archive, and I conclude that within this outwardly united tradition there is much variation of
individual practice and understanding, with memory playing a vital role in how these are
constructed.

I have chosen to consider Gaelic singing as a process that exists in three main sites –
home, public performance and the archive – all of which are open to social and geographic
negotiation. This approach illuminates the variety within the practice, and allows me to
explore the theme of memory and meaning throughout the dissertation. People sing differently and sometimes even sing different songs depending on where they are at the time. It seems that memory is a constant tool in how people understand and perform songs, yet there are different kinds of memory that are used in different ways by singers of Gaelic songs: to inform and enhance understanding, because their meaning for listeners or performers is directly affected by personal associations; and to invoke them in the present moment, by mechanisms of community history-keeping, and archival collecting.

Since today there are fewer living exemplars of the practice than in past generations, native speakers tend to place emphasist on being true to ‘the tradition’ and ‘getting it right’, while seldom articulating explicitly how one should do so. It is apparent, however, that Gaelic singers in the past have been far from passive culture-bearers and instead have actively shaped their song practice, and all Gaels who sing or listen have been participants in reconstructing the meaning of songs and song performances and the place these hold in their society. While the current language decline and socio-economic changes are major factors affecting the song tradition, as will be discussed in detail below, they are not the only influences on the development of the tradition over the past century. In addition to any diachronic explanation for the changes in Gaelic song there are synchronic factors that beg to be investigated, which is why I have chosen to focus on the individual experience in various locations.

In Chapter 2, “Song at Home,” I define this first site: I posit that home is a kind of micro-community consisting of family, neighbours, friends, and other Gaelic singers or speakers. As a rural culture, Cape Breton Gaels most often socialized and passed on musical
traditions in the home rather than in public. Although it is private in some ways, the home also has a more expansive, public element since doors are frequently opened to accommodate unexpected guests who drop by. Home is also the site of the céilidh, a party with music, storytelling, conversation, food and sometimes dance. Home, then, is not strictly private, nor is it restricted to the farmhouse, but rather it extends into the wider community and includes regular visitors. It is at home that Gaelic singers learn songs and style, and form their repertoire. Home is also the place where many singers have a private collection of tapes, Gaelic books, photos, and other souvenirs; I argue that these are tools in the transmission of repertoire and style, supporting memory on a personal, community, and cultural level. This Chapter will also consider the role memory plays in constructing performative meaning, and I will introduce Ricoeur’s idea of the ‘hermeneutic arc’ as a way of explaining that the way a Cape Breton Gael understands a Gaelic song is based on things that he or she already knows and understands – i.e., the meaning of a song in the present moment is constructed from knowledge of previous renditions and those who sang them. Thus, songs function as repositories of personal history, and the sharing of memories then plays a role in musical transmission.

Public performances are the first place an outsider to this culture would hear Gaelic songs; before I had made friends in Cape Breton it is in public that I first experienced the songs in live performance, instead of hearing them on tapes and CDs. In Chapter 3, Song and Public Performance, I chiefly consider the dynamics of a particular kind of Gaelic song performance: the milling frolic. Individual styles and repertoires are cultivated at home, as singers are exposed to the particular repertoire, variants and conventions of their own micro-community which might differ from those of others, but in public performance there is
necessarily a striving for consensus; they must agree on a common repertoire, and come together to sing the text and airs in a similar way. As we shall see, some song events have become imbued with a deeper meaning, as their old uses fall away and a new cultural function emerges. I will consider this in light of Victor Turner’s idea that performances constitute a “moment in and out of time”\(^3\) which connects both to the past and with present-day experience. This in some ways builds on the ideas in the previous chapter but with more emphasis on community memory rather than personal memory. The very specific way in which Gaels choose to share songs publicly says much about their cultural values, and so songs in this context galvanize the community as they contribute to the repository of culture. They are also a means through which ordinary people are publicly transformed into something extraordinary – musicians and culture-bearers.

In Chapter 4 I consider recording archives as a *de facto* ‘site’ of Gaelic singing, making a survey of early collections of Gaelic sound recordings and the collectors who compiled them, and considering how the attitudes and work of these mostly foreign collectors have affected the prevailing impression of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton. I also discuss ways in which they have sometimes failed to engage with the living song community. It seems problematic that an image of unified Gaelic singing practice has been constructed through recorded archives and their ‘monuments’ at the expense of the kaleidoscope of individual experiences to which I have alluded to thus far. Archives are static manifestations of cultural practices, fixed canons that represent a body of tradition that appears cohesive to those outside the community but which may only reflect a limited aspect of the more

amorphous and dynamic living canon. At the same time, archives carry an authority that is accepted by the community itself, and they are turned to more and more as they become more readily available. I therefore also consider how singers engage with the archives, and how such an engagement makes it possible to sustain a cultural practice through regeneration from within. In considering this aspect of the practice it seemed vital to acknowledge my own influence and impact as well as that of other scholars, collectors and learners from outside the community, for we have all functioned as mediators of the culture both internally and externally. In this Chapter, then, I include a case study, a personal anecdote about how I accidentally revived a song, and how this in turn provoked questions about the practice of Gaelic singing.

**Methodology**

My intention is to focus on individual experiences and the multifaceted practices that these have produced by rooting my research in subjective experience. This is not meant to be a broad historical study, then, or much of a look to future trends, or one that further reifies a concept of Gaelic singing as one unified practice. In fact, I shall expose the tension between two concepts: that of Gaelic song as an entity that has been or can be “preserved” without change and which is manifested in recorded archives, and that of the Gaelic singing practice as various, individual and subject to change, as I have experienced it. For this reason my research focuses on a smaller sample of informants, but has the advantage of my personal connection with all of them. I felt lucky to be able to learn from these singers and community members, and it is my hope that my conclusions shed some light on the way Cape Breton
Gaels sing and understand Gaelic songs, and perhaps how they understand their lives through their music.

My research draws not only on formal investigation made during my doctoral studies but also on 15 years of annual participant-observer research. I gathered information by audio recording and videotape, notebook and photographs, through multiple methods including interviews, casual conversations, singing and listening to others sing, visiting homes and attending community events and concerts. I was based in Cape Breton for several weeks each year to visit singers and attend milling frolics and workshops. I also examined archival materials, recordings and documents, and the private collections of my friends and informants. Finally, I read and compared analogous studies and sought theoretical underpinnings to give direction to and support for my own ideas about how Gaelic song functions in the lives of these people. For these I turned to the disciplines of ethnomusicology, folklore, anthropology and critical theory.

My first of many annual visits to Cape Breton was made in 1996 with the intention of learning some of the language in order to better understand and perform Gaelic songs. I attended the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts in St. Ann’s, Cape Breton as well as community classes, went to dances and concerts and community events that featured instrumental and vocal music, and learned the Cape Breton style of stepdance, which is done to fiddle music either solo or in square sets. I have returned every summer since then, and within a few years I had made friends and had begun to spend time with them, in particular with the Gaelic singers. I watched, listened, sang along, and took notes. After a few years I began to record the singing and the conversations. I took photographs, and later I filmed
interviews with my singing friends for a future television documentary. I was slowly becoming enculturated in the ways of the Gaelic singing community in Cape Breton until I found myself called upon as a singer at public events. In 1998 I had also toured around the island as a singer of Gaelic songs with the band, Puirt a Baroque. It seems important to mention all of this in order to point out that my early work as a learner of Gaelic song was done without the ‘frame’ of scholarship, and without the particular focus imposed by academic research. Although it has meant that in previous years I did not record or take notes as meticulously as I would now, or record as many songs as I wish I had, that experience has had the positive effect of enabling me to develop a more natural relationship with many singers, instrumentalists and Gaelic teachers. I did not interrogate them in the same way one is tempted to do as a scholar, and I had no pre-conceived intellectual expectations of such things as ‘canon’ or ‘social capital’. I rambled freely through the repertoire, requesting or learning any song that took my fancy. In addition to annual summer visits I have made concerted research trips, living in Cape Breton from September 2003 to March 2004, and in May 2009.

My Collaborators and Interview Subjects

Mainly because of such events as Christmas Island’s annual Féis ⁴ an Eilean (which will be discussed in subsequent chapters) and the high concentration of older Gaelic singers who

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⁴ A féis is a grassroots community cultural festival emphasizing language and music through workshops and concerts.
participate in public events such as this where I was first able to meet them, I have spent most of my time in one geographic area. Although it might be said that there are several distinct communities of Gaelic speakers on the Island, much of my research was done with Gaelic native-speakers who live in the communities surrounding the Grand Narrows in the heart of Cape Breton’s Bras D’Or lakes. The bulk of what I quote is in the language of the interview, that is, chiefly, English; for my video interviews I asked the same questions in interviews in English and Gaelic, but have used the English mainly because I feel I derived the most nuance from these discussions. I conducted long one-on-one interviews with Peter MacLean of Rear Christmas Island (‘rear’ is the term they use for inland properties, in contrast to those on the main coastal roads), Rod. C. MacNeil of Barra Glen, Maxie MacNeil of Highland Hill, Beth MacNeil of Beaver Cove, as well as Gaelic singer, educator and Highland Village manager of interpretation, Jim Watson. I interviewed Allan MacLeod of Gabarus as, along with the others above he is a member of “The Iona Gaelic singers” who sing habitually at events featuring Gaelic singing such as milling frolics (the Iona Gaelic singers and the milling frolic will be discussed in great detail in Chapter 3, “Song in Public Performance”). I interviewed Jeff MacDonald, a Gaelic singer and teacher, and Colin Watson, a young singer who is Jim Watson’s son, and conducted a group interview with some students at a Gaelic workshop in Iona. I made many visits over the years to Gaelic singers such as Margaret MacLean (Boisdale), Roddy MacInnes (Glendale), Theresa Burke (Big Pond), Alex Kerr (North River Bridge), Angus Rankin (Mabou Ridge), and Alex Goldie (Soldier’s Cove) as well as other musicians and members of Gaelic communities such as musician and producer Paul MacDonald, Gaelic teacher and singer Hector MacNeil, Gaelic speakers Flora and Murdock MacNeil (Christmas Island), musicians Janet (whom I
interviewed) and Francis Cameron (Boisdale) and Gaelic teacher Effie Rankin (Mabou). All of them have informed my broader understanding of Gaelic musical culture. To make the most of the deep personal experience I have had within this song practice and community, in this dissertation I eschew a wide range of empirical data in favour of close readings of individual cases, focusing on these individuals mentioned above. I then widen the lens to take in the broader historical and social context for comparison and contrast. I posit that each singer’s experience is unique, and that these individual manifestations of the tradition deserve to be read as texts unto themselves rather than being part of a general tradition or trend.

Although I did not intentionally avoid younger or female singers, it must seem conspicuous that the majority of my chief informants, the Iona Gaelic Singers, are men aged 75 to 97 with only a few exceptions. The language factor discussed above has been a major factor in constructing the Gaelic singing generation gap that has existed since the mid-twentieth century. For a few decades, there was a decline in interest in speaking Gaelic or singing Gaelic songs, but recent initiatives have specifically sought to involve younger people, and the rising number of fresh faces at milling frolics seems to indicate that they have been successful to some extent. As for the women, I have asked Helen MacNeil, wife of Gaelic singer Rod. C. MacNeil, why there are not more women from her generation at the milling table. She pointed out that she is from Ontario and did not have any Gaelic at all when she first came to Cape Breton as a young bride (like Joan MacNeil, Maxie’s wife), but that in addition she was the mother of many children, and that did not leave much time for learning Gaelic songs or going out in the evenings to milling frolics. In other communities, such as the North Shore, it seems that women were more integrated into such events (if one
can trust the evidence of the number we see on screen in such films as *The Gaels of Cape Breton*, but unfortunately none of those women were still living at the time of my research. Thus my experience with female singers of that generation is restricted to Theresa Burke and the late Margaret MacLean, whom I visited but did not interview, as she was not well enough to sing or speak extensively in her later years, and had conversations with Frances MacEachern and Kay MacDonald. As I investigated the recordings of several major collectors in Cape Breton between the 1930s and 1960s for Chapter 4, “Song and the Archive”, I discovered that not only did they repeatedly record the same singers but also they seldom recorded women or young people. Women did sing at concerts and millings, however, and were clearly participating in the tradition at home because many of my male informants say that they learned their first Gaelic songs from their mothers. A study in particular of the part women have played in maintaining this tradition is worthy of discussion in a future project.

Just as valuable to my research on Gaelic singing has been contact with Cape Bretoners outside of the Gaelic community, many of them musicians. Traditionally, singing, storytelling and instrumental music coexisted in the home. Today the worlds of fiddling and Gaelic singing appear relatively concentric and cliquish by comparison, and so the perspective of my instrumentalist or storytelling friends was most illuminating, especially that of Boisdale residents Janet Cameron and her brothers, Fathers Leo and Francis (who will

5 *The Gaels of Cape Breton*, part of a 1947 National Film Board series called *Peoples of the Maritimes.*
6 It is fortunate that Dr. John Shaw recorded and interviewed Margaret MacLean extensively in the 1970s.
figure in Chapter 2), and Gaelic native speaker and fiddler Joe Peter MacLean, who has shared much knowledge and good company, and whom I also interviewed.

![Plate 1: The author and Joe Peter MacLean at Highland Village, August 2007](image)

There is inevitably a strong, self-reflexive element that dominates the character and tone of this dissertation. I feel this was necessitated by my methodology. I now believe that – uncomfortable though it may be for me at times – it offers advantages since my deep experience of the tradition from within brings a unique perspective to my research which would not have been possible without such personal attachments and the insights they bring. Still, despite my many friendships in Cape Breton, I am and always will be an outsider to
these communities; I joined them as a learner and scholar, and I know that it is clearly impossible to experience these songs in the same way as someone who was raised there with Gaelic all around her. Nonetheless, I believe my natural, open, performance-oriented approach resulted in my becoming as close to a quasi-insider as one could hope for. I found myself part of those moments of spontaneous music-making, where the music flowed naturally out of conversation, the language slipped from English to Gaelic and back again, where songs were begun by one singer and finished by another as verses were pieced together in a collaborative feat of memory. Stories were told about the singers or about the neighbours, glasses of beer and whisky were raised. Many of these evenings are printed indelibly in my mind, and each time I glimpse this old-style culture which sometimes appears to have slipped away, I feel grateful that the relationships with my collaborators in the field and my continued exposure to their culture have provided me with the opportunities to observe much that is left unsaid. I draw on these encounters, these memories, because these in-depth experiences have formed my understanding of the practice of these songs in no less a way than has my reading of scholarly theory.

I must add a further caveat here: in twenty-first century Cape Breton, things cannot always be spontaneous and ‘traditional’, however one understands the word. As well as house visits and céilidhs, I have experienced just as many (or more) structured and slightly artificial events: song workshops in a classroom-like setting, ‘framed’ performances such as milling frolics in which observers and outsiders outnumber indigenous singers, and visits in which I either conducted formal interviews or casually questioned my collaborators. Some of these will also be discussed.
Historical Context: Gaelic Culture in Nova Scotia

Plate 2: Cape Breton shown in geographical context.

Cape Breton Island is in the province of Nova Scotia, on the east coast of Canada (see map, Plate 2). It remained separated from the mainland, and could only be reached by boat or ferry until 1955 when the Canso Causeway was opened. The Causeway is a two-lane section of the Trans-Canada highway, with a swing bridge for marine traffic, which spans the Strait of Canso from Cape Porcupine (Auld’s Cove) to Port Hastings. Despite the fact that they are linked to the mainland, many Cape Bretoners still consider themselves to be distinct from the
rest of Nova Scotia, or as the Gaels call it, “an Tir Mhór” (the mainland). Although my study focuses on Gaels living on Cape Breton Island, it should be noted that historically there were important Gaelic communities on the mainland, especially in Pictou and Antigonish counties.

As Dr. Michael Kennedy has pointed out, the common perception of Canada being built by two founding cultures is far from accurate; neither is the image of Nova Scotia as a purely Scottish place as it is so often depicted in tourism brochures and the public imagination. Ian McKay succinctly explains how this image was constructed in his article, “Tartanism Triumphant”; it was the provincial Premier, Angus L. MacDonald, who from 1933 to 1954 drew on romantic and essentialized ideas about his heritage to develop the Scottish image as a draw for tourists. Far from being alone or even dominant, the Scottish Gaels who are the focus of my study have always lived alongside communities of English, Acadian (French-speaking), Irish, and the first nation of the Mi’kmaq. To this day the Mi’kmaq have a strong presence on Cape Breton, retaining hunting and fishing rights assured in a 1752 treaty, and many of them live on four reservations on Cape Breton Island alone. The first British settlement was made in Cape Breton in 1629, at Port Royal (Louisburg) but fell to the French in 1632. The French developed their foothold in Cape Breton (Ile Royale) in 1713 with the founding of Louisburg, but this fell in 1745 to troops from New England and then again in 1758 to the British. Despite their expulsion from Canada in 1755, Acadian

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9 McKay, 8-9.
10 Mi’kmaq is the current accepted spelling of this people’s name; previously it was most commonly spelled “Mic Mac”, and this spelling is still found in some documents and literature quoted in this dissertation.
French people have maintained strong communities on the island, most notably in the northernmost region of Cheticamp and southeast on Ile Madame.

The British settlement itself was far from unicultural, despite what some Canadian history books suggest. One states that the “three most easterly Atlantic provinces (Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island) represent British unilingualism and uniculturalism, ninety-five per cent of the residents in the area speak English at home. Their long history is largely British, and demographically they are British”. 11 Rather, it was comprised of English, Lowland Scots, Scottish Gaels and Irish, who each embraced their own languages, customs, and religions. These religious differences also bisected individual cultural groups, but Gaelic communities were usually formed in a homogenous way; the North Shore and the Catalone, Whycocomagh, Louisburg and Loch Lomond areas were settled by Gaels who came from Protestant areas such as the islands of Lewis, Harris and North Uist, while many Inverness County Gaelic communities such as Margaree, Mabou, and Glendale came from the predominantly Catholic parts of the Highlands such as Lochaber, Morar and Moidart. In the 1903 history book Cape Breton Island, J. G. MacKinnon, Gaelic scholar and editor of the newspaper Mac Talla, gave this explanation of how Gaels settled in Cape Breton according to their Old Country communities (translation follows):

Ann an caochladh chearnan de ‘n eilean tha na Gaidheil a thainig as na h-aon aiteachan air suidheadachd comhladh. Ann am Mira, sgireachd mhor a tha deas air Sidni, cha ‘n fhaighhear ach Uidhistich ; ann an St. Ann’s, an siorrachd Bhictoria, agus aig na Caoil

Bheaga, gheibhear muinntir Leodhais ‘s na h-Earradh; aig Grand River, is aiteachan eile timchioll air, gheibhear muinntir Ghearrloch is Loch Aills [...] ; tha aireamh de na Sgiathanach timchioll Hogamah ‘s air cul Bhaddeck; tha na Barraich air taobh deas Lochan a Bhras d’Oir, ‘s air an taobh tuath eadar Sidni ‘s na Caol Mhara; tha Muileich, Collaich, Rumaich, Tirisdich is Mucanaich an ceann a deas siorrachd Inbhirnis [...] Gheibhear cuid de na h-aiteachan air an ainmeachadh air aiteachan anns an t-seann duthaich: Beinn Leodhais, Loch Uidhist, Gleann Bharra, Gleann is Beinn nan Sgiathanach, Beinn nan Gearrloch, an Abhainn Mhuileach, an Tairbeart, Sollas, Baoghasdal, Gleann-comhann, &c.

[In the various regions of the island, the Gaels who came from the same places settled together. In the Mira, a large parish south of Sydney, you will find nothing but Uistmen; in St. Ann’s, in the county of Victoria, and at Little Narrows, there are people from Lewis and Harris; at Grand River, and other places around there, there are people from Gairloch and Loch Alsh [...] ; there are numerous Skye descendents around Whycocomagh and the rear of Baddeck; there are Barramen on the south shores of the Bras D’Or Lakes and on the North Shore between Sidney and the Grand Narrows; there are descendents of those from Mull, Colla, Rum, Tiree and Muck at the south head of Inverness County [...] You will find some places are named for places in the old country: Ben Lewis, Loch Uist, Barra Glen, Skye Glen and Mountain, Gairloch Mountain, Mull River, Tarbot, Sollas, Boisdale, Glencoe, etc.]

The first of these Gaelic-speaking settlers landed at Pictou, Nova Scotia, in 1773 and established the first major Gaelic settlement, with immigration to other parts of the province including Cape Breton following shortly afterward. Many of my informants in the area around the Grand Narrows in the heart of the Bras D’Or region of Cape Breton trace the arrival of their ancestors to somewhere after 1801, when the first immigrants from Barra arrived. Since the nineteenth century, Cape Breton, particularly Sydney, has also been home to Italians, Syrian Coptic Christians and other cultural groups. Blacks who were the descendants of African-American slaves came to Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton, in

waves after the American Revolution and the war of 1812. In Cape Breton, particularly Sydney, another wave came as steelworkers in the early years of the twentieth-century.

Although Gaels have managed to preserve a distinct identity through continued language and traditions (which have limited connection to the tartanism promoted by Premier MacDonald), the multicultural and multilingual nature of the Gaels’ situation was a major factor in the steady decline of their language over the years after they arrived. The roots of this language loss, however, extend back to the power imbalances of old world Scottish culture, the echoes of which are still heard in Cape Breton. In eighteenth-century Scotland, Gaels saw their land taken and their language institutionally neglected and subjugated; they were used as workers by British landowners and there was mass out-migration to take advantage of opportunities in the New World. They came to North America as part of the British settlement, and Gaels became the landowners. As such they were ‘translated’ into the dominant society, at least officially, but their language was still not the vernacular of their government, commerce, or education. Much like the German language in Lunenburg county on the mainland, Gaelic was banned in schools as it was thought to be an impediment to progress, even though many Gaels spoke little else. There is much resentment among some native speakers that they were denied the right to be schooled in their own language, and many believe that the lack of places to speak Gaelic for any practical purpose led to the diminishing number of native speakers. Gaelic singer Peter MacLean, born in 1913, cannot

\[\text{McKay, 7.}\]

\[\text{For more information see Elizabeth Beaton, “An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904” in \textit{Acadiensis} 24: 65-97.}\]
always hide his bitterness for the role that government policy has played in undermining
Gaelic culture, and thus the song practice:

PML: The sad part is that in those days, the younger group didn’t want to learn to
speak Gàidhlig because as I’ve said, it was denied in school. When that was denied in
school, how else are you going to look at it or think about it? I can’t speak it in school
[so] it’s no good. You throw it away … then you wonder why this was allowed. Why
wasn’t it looked into? You’re deprived of your culture and discriminated against, in
your own country – and they got away with it! A lot of the younger group at that time
[his youth] suffered the consequences, turned completely against it. They were brought
up with Gàidhlig-speaking parents at home and they just turned against it. And you
think to yourself, “I’m not allowed to speak my own
language?” They couldn’t hang
onto it because they weren’t practicing it. The sad part is, the language was there at
home.

SC: You’ve told me about one of the teachers you had …

PML: Yes. I was one of the [smile] victims. She’d keep you in after school for talking
Gàidhlig. She was a local girl, could speak Gàidhlig fluently. But she had to obey the
law. Hey, come on – you can’t stop Gàidhlig! Then she would visit here [his family
home] occasionally, sit down with the group and sing songs.

SC: In Gaelic?

PML: [nods] I’d be sitting there looking at her. Try and figure it out. But you couldn’t
find fault with her. She was … obligated.\(^\text{15}\)

The fight to retain Gaelic in school had begun long before Peter’s experiences in the
1920s. In 1890, Senator Thomas Robert MacInnes had proposed a bill to recognize Gaelic as
an official language but it was overturned with comments that “… this Bill appears to me like
a sort of far-fetched joke”.\(^\text{16}\) Scots, whether Gaelic or English speaking, were still kept down
through disrespect and ridicule, and were one of the cultural groups openly mocked and
treated as a foreign, uncouth ‘Other’ by English speakers. The book *Baddeck, and That Sort*

\(^{15}\) Peter MacLean, interview with Stephanie Conn. February, 2004.

\(^{16}\) Kennedy, 36.
of Thing, published in 1874, is probably one of the first travelogues about Cape Breton. It chronicles a trip to Nova Scotia in which a writer from Hartford, Connecticut makes a long journey to the heart of Cape Breton by train and stagecoach, ferry and rowboat, and sometimes a farmer’s wagon. He makes special note of the ‘Indians’ or rustic Scots he meets along the way, and is stunned that Gaels do not simply speak another language, but actually have a different cultural context than English-speaking Lowlanders. He recalls this, from a meeting with Gaels at Whycocomagh:

We inquired what books they had. “Of course you all have the poems of Burns?”
“What’s the name o’ the mon?”
“Burns, Robert Burns”.
“Never heard tell of such a mon. Have heard of Robert Bruce. He was a Scotchman”.

This was nothing short of refreshing, to find a Scotchman who had never heard of Robert Burns! It was worth the whole journey to take this honest man by the hand. How far would I not travel to talk with an American who had never heard of George Washington!\(^{17}\)

Although Warner notes such differences as this, to him the “Scotchmen” must be a homogenous group, and he puts the Gaels’ unfamiliarity with Burns down to ignorance (comparable to an American not knowing of George Washington) rather than more important cultural differences such as an independent language and literature, and a different cultural narrative. Warner does not recognize that the Cape Breton Gaels are their own independent community, a diasporic community with limited continuous connection to Scotland, one that even in Scotland might not have been acquainted with the writings of an English and Scots-

speaking Lowlander such as Burns. As Homi Bhabha suggests, the fractured relationship between these two cultures should perhaps not be approached in terms of binary opposites of old world and new world, but instead by recognizing a “hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational as the translational”. In the case of Cape Breton Gaelic, there has been geographical displacement but also a new context for the culture in which it is understood or experienced differently. The original songs cannot simply be repeated in an attempt to recreate the experience of the Old Country but, rather, they are experienced differently in its new context and take on new characteristics so that as Bhabha would explain it, “mimesis gives way to hybridity;” repetition and imitation evolves into a new practice which has taken on its own influences. In Chapter 3 “Song and Public Performance”, I shall explore ideas about how Cape Bretoners have translated the meaning of their traditions for a New World context rather than simply replicating them.

The Gaels might not have known Burns, and they might have been excluded from the dominant English discourse of civic life in Colonial and post-Colonial Nova Scotia, but they have always made significant efforts to create their own discourse. Charles Dunn’s research shows that there were in fact few decades from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century that lacked a Gaelic newspaper, column, or book. Mac Talla (The Echo) holds the record as the longest-running Gaelic newspaper anywhere in the world; it was published in Sydney.

18 Robert Campbell, however, suggests that in Scotland there was more cultural hybridity than this anecdote suggests. Effie Rankin confirms this by remembering that Burns was popular with older people in North Uist. For more discussion of Lowland and Highland culture in conflict in Cape Breton see Mike Kennedy and Robert Campbell, “The Kennedy-Campbell Debate”, in Canadian Music: Issues of Hegemony and Identity, ed., Beverley Diamond and Robert Witmer (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press), 405-416.


Nova Scotia from 1892 to 1904. The Casket is a newspaper in Antigonish which has sporadically featured a Gaelic column from its founding in 1852 until the present. In the mid-twentieth century there were Gaelic-language radio shows broadcast from Sydney, and these regularly featured Gaelic songs sung by Cape Bretoners. Although in most decades of the twentieth century Gaelic was not taught as part of the provincial school curriculum, Gaelic classes sprang up in many communities outside of regular school hours.\(^{21}\) In 1853 when St. Francis Xavier University (St. FX) was founded in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, there was no place there for Gaelic or Celtic Studies, but even in Scotland the first Chair of Celtic studies (University of Edinburgh) was not established until 1882. The first Gaelic class was taught at St. FX in 1891, and in 1958 a Chair of Celtic was founded at that University.\(^{22}\) There is much to be investigated about how the publishing in Gaelic might have interacted with and affected the song practice, and how the entrance of Gaelic into ‘the Academy’ further legitimized the publication and dissemination of Gaelic songs. For the present, however, I mention printed publications in case there was any supposition that Gaelic culture was completely oral. The extent to which it is oral will be discussed in Chapter 2 with regard to its transmission and maintenance.

At the time of Confederation in 1867 there were perhaps 100,000 Gaelic speakers in the province,\(^{23}\) but there has been a steady decline in the number of native Gaelic speakers over the past 150 years. At the time of the 1901 Census there were likely 50,000, which

\(^{21}\) Kennedy, 45.
\(^{23}\) Although it has been suggested that this was a healthy exaggeration, and census reports from the time are not reliable. Kennedy, 26.
constituted approximately 10.7% of the population\textsuperscript{24} and by 1932 they numbered only 24,303;\textsuperscript{25} today their numbers are reported (perhaps generously and inaccurately) as five hundred\textsuperscript{26} and many of these are senior citizens; on the 2001 Census, only 125 people in Cape Breton reported speaking Gaelic regularly.\textsuperscript{27} The suppression of Gaelic in schools clearly had much to do with the demise of communities, but the economic situation in Cape Breton was a major factor. These are not just faceless figures; Gaelic singer Allan MacLeod remembers,

\begin{quote}
I grew up just out the road there, New Boston it’s called. There were 47 families there at one time but there’s nobody there today, not a soul. One house, that’s all that’s standing there today. There used to be all kinds of songs in Gaelic there, at one time, but all the people died off and the young people moved out, so … today it’s just empty.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Clearly this disintegration of a community had a devastating effect on the culture. Over the past decade or so, however, public interest and government investment in Gaelic language and culture has risen dramatically in Nova Scotia. In 2006, the provincial government showed its support by establishing an Office of Gaelic Affairs and dedicating money to fund organizations that foster Gaelic language. A Gaelic flag was unfurled in 2008. Such attempts to revive and cultivate a dying ancient culture – and notably its rich song repertoire – represent a belated effort to sustain the song practice as it existed up until the mid twentieth

\textsuperscript{25} Kennedy, 83.
\textsuperscript{26} Government of Nova Scotia website, “Gaelic Resources: Goireasan Gàidhlig” \url{http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/gaelic/}
\textsuperscript{28} Allan MacLeod, interview with Stephanie Conn. December, 2003.
century, and the monetary contributions are actually insubstantial, given the loss which has already been incurred.

As can be deduced from the numbers quoted above the majority of Cape Bretoners of Scottish descent do not speak Gaelic, but even the Gaelic-speaking minority use English primarily since it is the dominant language of Nova Scotia. Gaelic has become a private language, spoken at home or among friends, although efforts are now being made to bring it back into the public realm. Most of my informants are senior citizens who hold respect for ‘scholars’ of the language, those who read and write in Gaelic, both because they value accuracy in song renditions and also because song books with their written texts have come to serve as an authoritative reference point. It is important, then, to consider the tension which exists between the oral and written traditions in Cape Breton Gaelic culture. This will be explored throughout, but especially in Chapter 2, “Song at Home”.

One cannot dispute that the decline of the language has had an impact on the poetic and song traditions it engendered. In the 1990s Scottish feature film As an Eilean (From the Island) a schoolteacher tells his pupils that “Sorley [MacLean, esteemed modern Gaelic poet] himself has estimated the number of people who can read and fully appreciate his poetry to be between 7 and 70.” A similar comment could be made about Gaelic song in Cape Breton. To learn songs in any foreign language not spoken by the singer requires a feat of memory to absorb what amounts to a string of nonsense syllables, and much additional effort to understand and convey to an audience the subtleties of a foreign poetic tradition. In my

own experience, even for those who speak the language, most of the time spent learning a Gaelic song is devoted to a study of the text by singing it along with an older singer, listening to recordings, and poring over books or other printed sources. Given that some of this repertoire dates back to the seventeenth century it is understandable that a learner would have difficulty, but even my collaborators who are native speakers feel the desire to discuss or debate the shades of meaning in lines containing vocabulary, old verb forms, and idioms that have fallen out of usage. The first year that I visited Cape Breton I bought a t-shirt at the Christmas Island Féis which on the back read “Le Eolas thig Comas”. I innocently asked Rod. C MacNeil what that meant, and the result was an enthusiastic conversation, which as I remember also included Hector MacNeil, Peter MacLean and Maxie MacNeil. They agreed that the meaning of this proverb begins, “With knowledge comes …”, but the exact meaning of the final word, “Comas”, was less clear in this context because the word could variously mean ability, authority, competence, efficiency, liberty and the power to act – in effect, agency.\(^{30}\) It is most telling of the Gaelic culture that words are open to this amount of contextual interpretation, and it should not be surprising that native speakers are so enthusiastic about their literature. This proverb therefore seems a particularly important one to have been chosen by the organizers of a grassroots language and music festival. It speaks to the amount of individual agency available to singers of Gaelic songs in their performance and understanding.

\(^{30}\) Dwelly’s Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary [1911] (Glasgow:1994), 236.
The proverb itself also speaks to the complexity of the Gaels’ relationship with their language. Peter’s story is just one of many; Gaelic singer Jeff MacDonald, of my own generation, points out the extent to which Gaelic was rejected by its own people:

My grandfather would tease me saying, ‘Why did you spend the money to learn Gaelic? You should have learned French, you can get a job out of it. But I found out a few years after he died, he was listening to the radio in ’89 to me and Bernie Cameron [a Gaelic speaker and teacher, and son of fiddler Sandy Cameron], singing Gaelic songs at the Concert under the Stars in Antigonish. And [apparently] he had the tears flowing down his cheeks. Well, if I was singing English songs he wasn’t going to be feeling that way, so there was certainly depth there."

Perhaps the most obvious result of declining fluency is the lack of new songs being composed. Rod. C. MacNeil (Barra Glen), Jeff MacDonald (Queensville), and Mary Jane Lamond (now of Glendale) are perhaps the only contemporary bards, a dearth which contrasts sharply with the compositional activity I have heard about from my collaborators. Another consequence of declining fluency in Gaelic is that songs with more complex texts are less often sung, and even in the case of easier songs, fewer verses are learned. But the connection between language and culture involves much more than comprehension and facility; merely understanding a song does not ensure that one understands the culture that engendered it, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, “Song at Home”.

Following Bhabha’s idea of a hybrid culture, it is important to note that although they have a distinct culture, and live on an island, today’s Cape Breton Gaels are not a cultural island. They live most of their lives in English, in modern-day Canada and, contrary to some of the impressions conveyed by writers who have visited the island, they have not lacked

31 Jeff MacDonald, Interview with Stephanie Conn. December, 2003.
contact with the outside world. Even Folkways producer and collector Ralph Rinzler, in his program note for the 1965 Newport Folk festival at which he presented a group of singers from Cape Breton, perpetuated the impression that Cape Breton was backward and cut off entirely from the rest of the country. He wrote,

The advantages of contemporary civilization have been slow to penetrate Cape Breton. There has been virtually no industry on the island, and farming and commercial fishing are the main sources of income. Many houses lack electricity and therefore are without the influences of radio, television and phonograph records. It is therefore an ideal place to find material handed down by the oral tradition.32

This paragraph is misinformed and misleading for several reasons. It is true that Cape Breton is somewhat isolated – I can attest to that, having lived there in an isolated location during a long, hard winter – and that some people there have continued to live simply until the present times. As mentioned, however, there has been much industry on Cape Breton, including the steel plant in Sydney and the lumber Mill at Murray Road, St. Ann’s Bay, both of which employed many hundreds of men. There were coalmines in Glace Bay and elsewhere. My informants Maxie MacNeil and Peter MacLean both reminisce about radio shows from decades ago, and in Chapter 4 I shall discuss a local radio program from 1950. The tradition is not purely oral, but rather it supported by publications, radio shows and recordings, both commercial and self-made, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. In this dissertation I examine Gaelic singing in Cape Breton as something unique in character and practice, but I do not wish to perpetuate the impression that its proponents are anything but a set of individuals, each with his or her own experience and influences, and that they are not living in cultural

isolation when they instead might be called *transcultural*. As ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin puts it,

> Once it was easy to say that a ‘culture’ was the sum of the lived experience and stored knowledge of a discrete population that differed from neighboring groups. Now it seems that there is no one experience and knowledge that unifies everyone within a defined “cultural” boundary, or if there is, not the total content of their lives.\(^{33}\)

As mentioned above, issues of cultural politics are at work in Gaelic Cape Breton, and the recent efforts to bolster the language are propelled in part by much talk among Gaels of their culture being unique and intact. This stance begs an exploration of Gaeldom as a marginal culture, which it has always been in Scotland as well as the New World, and an island culture, which carries its own set of characteristics and challenges. In the introduction to *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*, Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman discuss the implications of “a world of structured and structuring relativities, in which ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’ are not separate social and cultural facts, whose violent coming together is to be understood not simply as a collision of abstracted political and cultural entities driven together by colonialism … but interwoven and musically constituting processes.”\(^{34}\) Although Gaelic culture has managed to remain distinct in Cape Breton, and regardless of insiders’ assertion that they are doing things the way they have been done for generations, it is impossible to consider Gaelic society either in Cape Breton or elsewhere without taking into account the hegemony of English-language culture and broader cultural and musical influences. Cape Breton Gaelic song might be termed a “micromusic” as identified by Mark


Slobin – a “subculture” operating within a larger “superculture” which exerts its hegemony in both overt and insidious ways.\textsuperscript{35} Slobin’s book \textit{Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West} borrows in part from principles of linguistics as developed by William Labov, and suggests that music making by these minorities involves complex code-shifting between the various levels of culture, as well as improvisation by the individual.\textsuperscript{36} One could not complain, as with some of the groups discussed by Slobin, that Gaelic culture has been completely repressed and ignored, especially in recent decades when commercial performers such as The Rankin Family, Mary Jane Lamond, and Ashley MacIsaac have performed Gaelic music on national and international broadcasts and concert tours. Like many minority musics, however, it has certainly been stereotyped, limited culturally and economically, and presented in a narrow way by media, scholarship and the recording industry. Gaelic song has been filed under ‘Celtic’ in record stores, and lumped together with the other British-derived music that is synonymous with Canada’s East Coast in the Canadian public imaginary. As Martin Stokes and Phillip V. Bohlman write, “the search for a hitherto misapprehended “real” coupled with a (less explicit) demand for its institutionalized habilitation remain unshaken ideological components in thinking and writing about music on the Celtic fringe”.\textsuperscript{37} Despite a familiarity with the tradition, it is problematic to select aspects for study, people to interview and songs to sing. Perhaps I am as guilty as anyone of trying to recapture a Gaelic past of my own understanding or imagining, and of judging a song by my own perceived notions of what is true to the tradition rather than simply observing what my

\textsuperscript{35} Slobin, 11
\textsuperscript{36} Slobin, 85ff.
\textsuperscript{37} Stokes and Bohlman, 5.
collaborators value. For the purposes of this project I do not focus on public, commercial representations of Gaelic singing as a kind of World Music, or with the newer styles and canon that are developed by the communities which the Gaelic resurgence is creating; rather, my concern is with the way in which the cultural hegemony of the “superculture” in Canada and Scotland has affected Gaelic singing as it was experienced by my indigenous Gael collaborators in their home communities of Cape Breton. My study, then, while not drawing directly on Slobin’s findings, nevertheless owes much to considering this concept as it has contributed to the ways in which individual experiences result in multiple manifestations of the song practice. Since my collaborators live within smaller communities, which are part of their Gaelic “subculture” but at the same time are part of the larger Nova Scotian or Canadian English-speaking landscape, the conditions are right for them to have developed regional or individual expressions of the same musical practice. This approach, in combination with Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology, has been chosen over alternatives such as Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, discussed in his book *Reassembling the Social*, or Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about field, as described in his book *A Theory of Practice*, although either approach would also be useful in examining this musical practice.

Cape Breton Gaels whom I interviewed agree that song has been an integral part of their culture and their lives, and indeed it has been acknowledged that Gaelic song is an important aspect of how singers construct their identity as Cape Bretoners and Gaels. It might be noted, however, that my dissertation skirts around the topic of identity, partly because it is a topic that could easily expand to fill an entire study. Gaelic songs are a medium through which some Cape Bretoners express and understand their cultural history; pride in their history and culture figures prominently in Gaelic songs and stories. While the
songs contribute to what one might term their sense of identity, in this dissertation I have chosen to limit my overt discussion of the issue to a few specific examples, most notably in Chapter 2 where I explain the experience of Cape Breton Gaels in Boston, and also consider the choice of my informants to get together as the Iona Gaelic Singers. As is evident from the material in that chapter, they certainly consider Gaelic songs as something special and particular to them; Peter MacLean talks about performing in Washington, Rod. C MacNeil remarks on the lack of singing he experienced in the Army during World War II, and Maxie MacNeil resolves to help revive the Gaelic scene of milling frolics and song sharing when he returns from Ontario. I agree, then, that my informants have an understanding of themselves and their culture, which includes being a Gaelic speaker and singing Gaelic songs. At the same time I question the extent to which this issue itself should be examined under the aegis of the term “identity” within the confines of this particular project. In their discussion of the study of identity in anthropology and critical theory, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper suggest several meanings for the term “identity”; in the context of Gaelic singers in Cape Breton, one might apply their consideration of identity as a “specifically collective phenomenon” which “denotes a fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group or category”. It seems more productive, however, to think of “a core aspect of (individual or collective) selfhood … understood as something to be valued, cultivated, supported, recognized, and preserved.” Possibly, it is more appropriate to talk about identification rather than identity. Brubaker and Cooper suggest that we

39 Brubaker and Cooper, 7.
[...] avoid unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis .... It may be objected that this overlooks recent efforts to avoid reifying “identity” by theorizing identities as multiple, fragmented, and fluid.⁴⁰

Rather than labeling the way they understand and relate to the songs as expressions of identity, it has seemed more productive to examine the processes through which they derive meaning from the songs. Clearly the Gaelic language and the songs in particular are an important part of this culture, but many of my informants specifically said that these are simply the songs that they have known since childhood (see Chapter 2), suggesting that their importance is rooted in the personal meaning and enjoyment they derive from them rather than some wish to present themselves externally. Identity is indeed fluid and, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, Cape Breton Gaels exist within the broader culture of modern, English-speaking Canada. For this reason, communicating the existence of a unique heritage and language is of enormous importance, as it is to any minority culture, as the culture bearers seek to differentiate themselves from the mainstream within which they exist. There has been a history of publications and presentation of Cape Breton manifestations of Gaelic language and song to others, in particular those in the Old Country of Scotland. Formerly, this seemed to arise from a wish to overthrow Colonial attitudes (as will be discussed in Chapter 4 with reference to collecting); at present, it is largely generational and is symptomatic of the more dramatic decline of the Gaelic language and the more conscious efforts to bolster Gaelic language awareness and education. Clearly there is much that could

⁴⁰ Brubaker and Cooper, 5.
be written about this issue, but for the present time I have chosen to eschew it in favour of concentrating on the personal experience of my informants within their home communities.

**Existing Literature and Resources**

Despite the numerous songbooks, poetry collections, and Gaelic publications which Nova Scotia Gaels have been producing since the 1800s, there is a relative dearth of scholarship about Gaelic singing in Nova Scotia compared to work on other musical communities in the Celtic diaspora and the wider world of indigenous musical cultures. To gain an understanding of the existing discourse it seems necessary to not only examine what has been written about Gaelic culture in Cape Breton itself but also to look outside of Nova Scotia to the work that has been done in Gaelic Scotland, to analogous studies in the Irish Gaeltacht, and to work on English folksong. I also look to other ethnomusicological studies for examples of how to approach a traditional song genre, and for the critical tools that might be brought to this analysis.

There has been much written about the instrumental traditions of Cape Breton Gaels. The many books, articles and dissertations about fiddling and bagpiping include, most notably, Liz Doherty’s dissertation, “The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition, c. 1928-1995” (1996); Jackie Dunn’s B.A. thesis “Tha Blas na Gàidhlig air a h-uile Fidhleir [The Gaelic Flavour in Every Fiddler]” (1991); Burt Feintuch’s *In the Blood: Cape Breton Conversations on Culture* (2010) along with several articles and CD liner notes; John Gibson’s book *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping, 1745-1945* (2001); Glen
Graham’s book, *The Cape Breton Fiddle: Making and Maintaining Tradition* (2006); and the work of Kate Dunlay and David Greenberg, especially their book *Traditional Celtic Violin Music of Cape Breton* (1996). PhD candidate Tiber Falzett works on bagpiping in Gaelic Cape Breton. His work on local aesthetics, such as his forthcoming article “Blas agus Brigh/Taste and Essence: Metaphor, Music and Language in Scottish Gaelic-circles”, 41 will likely be influential in the future for its discussion of how Cape Breton Gaels’ use of metaphor is central to the transmission of their ideas about musical taste and style.

There is, however, comparatively less literature on Gaelic song culture in Cape Breton. Until the last decade, the writings have been primarily of a preservationist nature. From the 1930s to the 1960s such figures as the British scholar John Lorne Campbell, American folklorists Sidney Robertson Cowell, Ralph Rinzler and MacEdward Leach, and Canadian collector Helen Creighton went to Cape Breton to concentrate almost exclusively on recording and collecting songs. These collectors and the archives formed by their recordings will be discussed and problematized in great depth in Chapter 4, “Song in the Archive”. Numerous books of song texts have been published as well as local histories, which sometimes include song texts; these will be discussed in Chapter 2. In addition to the collections I discuss is Donald A. Ferguson’s book *Beyond the Hebrides including the Cape Breton Collection (Fad Air Falbh As Innse Gall leis Comh-chruinneachadh Cheap Breatuinn)* (1977), which includes 177 songs from Cape Breton and elsewhere in North America.

In the past decade or so, there has been an increase in the scholarly attention given to Cape Breton Gaelic singing. The ethnologist John Shaw, now of the University of Edinburgh, has conducted long-term fieldwork and research in Cape Breton within Gaelic-speaking communities, and has produced two valuable studies of individual informants: *Tales until Dawn* (1987), with renowned Gaelic storyteller Joe Neil Mac Neil; and *Brìgh an Òrain: A Story in Every Song* (2000), with Gaelic singer Lauchie Mac Lellan. This latter work in particular is compelling for the depth in which it documents the life of one Gaelic singer, situates him within a local aesthetic, and provides textual and musical transcriptions of much of his repertoire. Shaw collected and recorded extensively from singers who are considered to be key informants by living members of the present Gaelic-speaking communities, he contributed to our understanding of local aesthetics in Gaelic society (Shaw 1992), and he set the bar for the depth of detail and cultural context required in a study like this. John Shaw is now one of the foremost scholars working on Gaelic, and is a storehouse of knowledge of Gaelic songs, language, and traditions. He is, however, primarily an ethnologist so although his work is compelling, it is primarily concerned with text and folklore and has left much of the music or performance practices unexamined. Perhaps because the singers themselves, as will be discussed, are more likely to discuss text in great detail, and melody in passing, this approach is not inappropriate. It is also true that like much music-making, Gaelic singing is almost inseparable from the social contexts which engender it. It seems, however, that the musicianship of the Gaelic singers is often overlooked, perhaps because it is underplayed or simply not discussed in their own circles; yet I believe the musical choices they make and their musicality is key to the continuing development of the practice. This will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three.
Ethnomusicologist Heather Sparling and I share many of the same collaborators, and her work is closest to mine chronologically (her dissertation is from 2007. Her recent article, “Categorically Speaking: Towards a Theory of (Musical) Genre in Cape Breton Gaelic Culture”, summarizes some of the main points of her PhD dissertation. In it, she considers Gaelic song as an element of ‘social capital’ as defined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Sparling does a thorough job of analyzing the song practice through this lens, approaching song genres as markers of cultural position. She concludes that genres of Gaelic song are socially constructed, subject to change, and have an effect on how we “receive, understand and interpret” texts (songs). Sparling’s conclusions address an aspect of the practice seldom discussed by insiders, and are especially valid in a consideration of the current revivification (if not properly a ‘revival’) movement, which encompasses as many learners as native speakers and community members. We have come at this material from different angles, then: she as a scholar, and myself initially as a singer. I lead songs at the Milling table and perform them in public concerts, while Sparling, a flautist, attends song events but does not take a leading role. In my opinion, the theories she uses while well-argued, do not necessarily illuminate the underlying raison d’être of this practice as my collaborators experience it. In order to examine the processes through which Gaelic singing is experienced, I instead take as my lens the ideas of anthropologist Victor Turner, philosopher Paul Ricoeur, and performance theorist Diana Taylor. Since my work was done over a much longer period of time and, initially, from the perspective of a singer rather than a scholar, I attempt to draw on

43 Sparling, 422.
this personal history to present as nuanced and *emic* a perspective as possible, especially of the transmission practice, capitalizing on my own experience learning Gaelic songs while remaining cognizant of the fact that I cannot help but be subjective in my experiences and interpretations.

Folklorist and traditional music scholar Burt Feintuch has written on the socio-musical environment in Cape Breton, mainly concentrating on fiddle music. His work is relevant for its perceptive commentary on the interconnectedness in Cape Breton of different elements of culture, in particular his article “The conditions for Cape Breton fiddle music: the social and economic setting of a regional soundscape”. In this article he draws attention to such ideas as how social contact and place are interwoven with the musical practice; the contrast between music at home *céilidhs* and in public performances, and the shift from the former to the latter; and how Cape Breton musicians have adapted to and embraced change through using music as a draw for tourism and the creation of a thriving commercial recording industry. It seems Premier Angus MacDonald’s dream has come true, as Feintuch explains that Scotch-style music is the “primary emblem of identity” in Cape Breton and “its performance is almost certainly the primary enactment of that identity”. Feintuch has also produced wonderful recordings of Cape Breton fiddling with an ethnographer’s sensibility, such as “The Heart of Cape Breton: Fiddle Music recorded live along the Ceilidh Trail” (Smithsonian Folkways, 2002), which was recorded in one summer, live at square dances.

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45 *Céilidh* is the Gaelic word for a visit, but a céilidh is also understood to mean either a house party with music, or even a musical performance like a concert.

46 Feintuch, 81.
throughout Inverness county. Feintuch’s work on other musical traditions, such as
Northumbrian small piping, has also provided food for thought, and will be discussed in
Chapter 3 with regards to community. I draw on some ideas Feintuch puts forth in my
consideration of the singing, rather than the fiddling, tradition.

Ethnomusicologist Gordon Smith has also written about Cape Breton fiddling,
particularly in the Mi’kmaq community of Eskasoni, which is over the mountain from
Christmas Island where I do some of my research. Much of his own fieldwork was done
during five-years teaching at Cape Breton University, which enabled him to do sustained
research over a long period of time. Smith’s writings deal with historic and current issues of
representation in Canadian ethnomusicology; in his article “Lee Cremo: Narratives about a
Micmac Fiddler”, published in Canadian Music: Issues of Hegemony and Identity, he has
carefully considered how such individuals as this Eskasoni fiddler negotiated his music-
making as a Mi’kmaq who plays Scottish fiddle music. Since traditionally the various
performed aspects of Gaelic culture were socially intertwined, those of us involved in the
scholarship of Cape Breton culture’s particular aspects have much to learn from each other.
Smith’s work has been useful for me in consolidating ideas about the relationship between
Cape Bretoners, their lives and their music. Still, the practice of Gaelic singing has become
distinct from the instrumental music and its public manifestations, and other performed
aspects of Gaelic culture, mainly because knowledge of Gaelic is a filter that deters the
majority of people from participating in it. There is therefore a need for more study of how

47 Gordon C. Smith, “Lee Cremo: Narratives about a Micmac Fiddle”. In Canadian Music: Issues of Hegemony
48 For a first person interview with Lee Cremo also see Cape Breton’s Magazine 1(1972), 1.
Gaelic singing is part of the musico-social landscape in Cape Breton, and how it is practiced (and perceived by outsiders).

Perhaps the most valuable resource to anthropologists, historians, musicians or anyone interested in life in Cape Breton is Cape Breton’s Magazine, a publication by American-born Ron Caplan. In seventy-four issues from November 1972 to June 1999, along with researcher and writer Bonnie Thomson, he documented the lives of Cape Bretoners in words and photos, presenting judiciously edited transcripts in which he all but disappeared as interviewer, leaving his subjects to speak for themselves. Practical and artistic at the same time – printed on newsprint and sprinkled with advertisements, but rich in content – the magazine is a wealth of information which otherwise has all but disappeared. It covers all aspects of Cape Breton culture, from all of the constituent ethnic communities, and music is represented alongside historical or agricultural stories. In the debut issue, for example, an interview transcription entitled “Lee Cremo Speaks”, about the Mi’kmaq fiddler, is followed by the brief item, “How to make an axe handle”. In response to the destruction by fires of his tapes and back issues, Caplan has made the entire archives available online at his website, capebretonsmagazine.com. His related publishing house, Breton Books, has also published books of local interest and re-released old fiddle recordings, and there is talk of a final, seventy-fifth issue of the magazine.49

49 In December 2010 Caplan was appointed as a Member of the Order of Canada for his contribution to Canadian culture.
For musical analysis we must turn to studies of Gaelic song in Scotland, and an explanation of the place of Gaelic song in British folksong scholarship. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was an interest in collecting folk songs from all over the British Isles, the motivations and effects of which would provide fodder for another dissertation. Many analytical projects were carried out in the field of English folksong studies, most notably by Frank Kidson and Percy Grainger. Graham Freeman provides an excellent survey and analysis of these approaches in his dissertation, “Percy Grainger: Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Folk Music” (2008). Of the Scottish collections the most notable for the present purpose is Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser’s *Songs of the Hebrides* in four volumes published 1909 to 1925. Kennedy-Fraser (1857-1930) was a classically trained musician who
became interested in folksongs. She collected from singers with an Edison-Bell wax cylinder phonograph, transcribing these and then arranging them for voice and piano. The arrangements, however, altered the songs so as to make them fit with modern tonality, and like any prescriptive transcription, omitted anything she considered to be variations, ornaments or irregularities. As is evident from their correspondence, esteemed Scottish Gaelic writers Sorley MacLean and Hugh MacDiarmid did not think highly of the books, referring to them as “Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser’s fooleries”.\(^{50}\) As Susan Wilson explains, “Both MacLean and MacDiarmid felt that the renditions of Gaelic song published in her 1909 collection, Songs of the Hebrides, served only to sentimentalize Gaelic culture”.\(^{51}\) In the introduction to the set, which she made with the help of Lucy Broadwood and Anne Geddes-Gilchrist, Kennedy-Fraser posits that the Gaelic melodies might have come from Mongolia by way of Finland since she has not seen similar modes anywhere else. Despite such conjecture and her use of Western classical analytical techniques to analyze the music (she classifies the songs according to Western church modes and assigns polyrhythms to some), at least she concedes that the rhythms come from the songs’ association with labour, and that the melodies “differ slightly from anything we can convey by any system of notation as yet in use”,\(^{52}\) suggesting that perhaps Kennedy-Fraser’s intentions outweighed her results. She also states openly that the music in her publications is not meant to be performed as folk song

\[^{51}\] Wilson, 157.
\[^{52}\] Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, Introduction to Songs of the Hebrides, Several volumes. London; New York: Boosey, 1909-21.
but rather as compositions in which the piano is as important as the voice.\textsuperscript{53} Her work has had a wide reach despite the false impressions of Gaelic song that it has created, and despite criticisms of it in a 1948 issue of the *Journal of the English Folk Song and Dance Society* in which it is concluded that the only positive result of her work is that it drew attention to the repertoire which caused other, more capable folklorists to become interested in the music. The negative effect, however, is that Kennedy-Fraser not only misrepresented the songs but also, having no knowledge of Gaelic, did not notate all of the texts.\textsuperscript{54} As we shall see in this dissertation, the texts are of the highest importance to Gaelic singers, and thus her pre-occupation with melody and classical adaptation failed to capture the most vital elements.

The folksong scholar and editor Anne Geddes Gilchrist published an article on the modal system of Gaelic airs as the introduction to *Miss [Frances] Tolmie’s Collection of Gaelic Music*, published by The English Folk-Lore Journal in 1911. She classified them according to a set of altered pentatonic scales,\textsuperscript{55} but it is clear that she, too, had some difficulty making all of the songs fit into the scales as she defined them.\textsuperscript{56} Tolmie had heard Gaelic songs from her own aunt and grandmother, and collected the songs on her native island of Skye and throughout the Hebrides. Ironically, given the book’s titular focus on

\textsuperscript{53} Quoted in “Portraits”. Ralph Vaughan Williams, Frank Howes, Maud Karpeles and Rose Ethel Bassin. *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Dec., 1948), 127-146.

\textsuperscript{54} Rose Ethel Bassin, in “Portraits”. Ralph Vaughan Williams, Frank Howes, Maud Karpeles and Rose Ethel Bassin. *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Dec., 1948), 146.


Gaelic song, Tolmie did not include all the Gaelic texts but instead provided an excerpt, with English translations.

In 1938, musicologist Herman Reichenbach made another attempt at classifying these melodies by comparing the tonality (or rather, modality) in Gaelic and English folksongs, work that followed on the heels of his analysis of German folksong in 1929. He posited that modal melodies have inherent shapes, and that these influenced the way melodies were formed and varied, but he looked at English and Gaelic songs together for the purposes of this article, rather than considering them separately within the context of their communities of practice. It seems that not much work, however, has been done in analyzing the melodies of Gaelic songs in Nova Scotia, and that much of the work on variants has been concerned with text rather than melody. Given the amount of work that remains to be done and the gaps in the scholarship, it is my intention to engage in this discourse in future projects in order to compare the ways in which individuals perform Gaelic songs differently. It has not however, been my intention in this dissertation to undertake analysis of the melodies used in Gaelic song, as instead I choose here to examine performative elements of the practice itself.

The most comprehensive survey of traditional Gaelic song in Scotland is the three-volume set, *Hebridean Folksongs* (1969-1981). Translation of these was begun by Gaelic scholar Fr. Allan MacDonald; John Lorne Campbell completed the translations and edited the collection. This set is unusual for its inclusion of musical notation and analysis, done by Francis Collinson. Collinson had been trained in music at the University of Edinburgh and

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worked as a musical director, but it was while working for the BBC program Country Magazine in the 1940s that he began to collect and arrange folk songs throughout Britain. He went on to publish these as notated arrangements and 78 rpm recordings. When the University of Edinburgh established its School of Scottish Studies in 1951, Collinson became their first musical research fellow. His collection, study, and transcription of traditional song in both Scots and Gaelic culminated in *Hebridean Folksongs* and in his book *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (1966).

As I explore the various discourses which have affected the practice of Gaelic singing, it seems worthwhile to consider the methods and conclusions laid out in analogous studies of other song traditions or musical practices which seem to offer parallel circumstances. Lillis O’Laoire’s *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean* investigates singing on Tory island, off the north coast of Ireland, and poses a central question about the emotional power or significance of a song within this community. Like Cape Breton, Tory Island is somewhat isolated from the country’s cultural centre, and so its communities have been able to preserve an intact cultural continuity in which song plays an important role. Although music and context are inextricably linked, O’Laoirelavishes much attention on the nuances of the performance situations he experienced during many years of exposure, drawing on hermeneutics to tease out the meaning of the texts for these people. He concludes that songs serve as emotional bridges to the past, allowing singers to make connections, and younger people to ‘know’ people they can never meet,\(^{58}\) that music and song poetry are

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potent operators in the web of meaning.\textsuperscript{59} Similarly, in her study of immigrant Syrian Jews in New York City, \textit{Let Jasmine Rain Down}, the ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay suggested that songs can be thought of as “compound aural memories”, carrying both semantic memory – conceptual and factual knowledge – and procedural memory – skill and habitual knowledge.\textsuperscript{60} The work of these two scholars will contribute to my exploration of how memory plays a role in the transmission and understanding of Gaelic songs in Cape Breton.

Ian Russell, respected scholar of English and Scottish folk music, has done an excellent job of considering the work of both Cecil Sharp, who as an influential early collector and scholar of English folksong surely would have influenced early collectors in Cape Breton, and Percy Grainger, whose detailed transcriptions made from recordings and insistence on the importance of performance context foreshadowed later developments in ethnomusicology. Sharp’s ideas are now considered to be too focused on the evolution of songs rather than their synchronic existence in different forms; Grainger’s excessively detailed transcriptions proved to be impenetrable to laymen. As explained by Graham Freeman, Ian Russell takes the best ideas from both Sharp and Grainger; in his article “Stability and Change in a Sheffield Singing Tradition”\textsuperscript{61} he finds the balance between detailed transcription and accessibility, and emphasizes the idea that “a real understanding of the music can only come from consulting the recordings themselves [because] no method of

\textsuperscript{59} O’Laoire, 280.
\textsuperscript{60} Kay Kaufman Shelemay, quoting Schacter and Feder, in \textit{Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews} (Chicago, 1998), 212.
graphic representation can ever substitute for the actual musical experience”.62 The latter idea permeates much of this dissertation.

I also note the approaches taken and conclusions drawn in such seminal ethnomusicological works as Steven Feld’s *Sound and Sentiment* and Anthony Seeger’s *Why Suya Sing*, as they offer clues as to how Kaluli and Suya song traditions reflect and influence the cosmology of their practitioners. I apply Victor Turner’s idea that songs and song performances are “storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community.”63 In approaching Gaelic singing as a dynamic practice, I will bear in mind Seeger’s conclusion that, in the case of the Suya, “each performance recreates, re-establishes, or alters the significance of singing and also of the persons, times, places and audiences involved”.64 In Chapter 2, especially, I shall develop this idea of how individual interpretations of a song’s present-day meaning are constructed through a connection with past events – again, building on Turner’s ideas but also Clifford Geertz’s assertion that cultural events (including symbolic ritual and, by my analogy, certain public performances) refer to “webs of significance.”65

Finally, this dissertation (like many others) is influenced deeply by Clifford Geertz’s ideas about the meta-process of anthropological fieldwork and ethnography. Despite my efforts to be open I am necessarily subjective in my experiences of this musical tradition, and

I realize that it is “the intersection of subjectivity and objectivity [which] results in knowledge”. Like Geertz, I agree that “We are not, or rather I am not, seeking either to become natives … or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that”. Indeed, my main informant Peter MacLean advises against the imitation of others, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. For this reason I have felt justified in pushing the limits of detachment and objectivity in the ethnographic sections of my work, while keeping close to “concrete social events and occasions”. Like Geertz I am not aiming to “capture primitive facts in [seemingly] faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but … to clarify what goes on in such places and to attempt to reduce the puzzlement,” which I felt myself at the onset of my adventures in Cape Breton.

In my own efforts to learn to be a good Gaelic singer, I had many questions for which I could not find definitive answers. What is a good singer, after all? What is the ‘correct’ way to sing? Which version of a song is the correct one? Many of us want to learn the songs because we love them, but they mean different things to different people. How is this meaning constructed? It is my hope that my ethnography helps to answer some of those questions by conveying what I have experienced, what I have learned, and what I have tried to discover in my analysis. Through a dialogue between the important foundational work discussed above and my own original research I hope we may gain a deeper understanding of

67 Geertz, 13.  
68 Geertz, 30  
69 Geertz, 18
how Gaelic singers in Cape Breton remain “faithful to the song”\textsuperscript{70} despite or maybe because of their individual experiences of this tradition.

\textsuperscript{70} Peter MacLean has told me repeatedly that one must be “faithful to the song” in order to do it justice.
Chapter 2

Song at Home

It is the winter of 2004 and I am living on Cape Breton Island in an old, white schoolhouse perched on the hill that overlooks North River Bridge. Lulled by the soporific babbling of the river and the dancing shadows from the bedroom skylight, I experience the most profound sleep of my life while here. I am exhausted each night from shoveling, chopping wood and stoking my fire, but also from filling my head with the songs, stories, and bits of information that fly at me each time I look around or exchange words with anyone. On a sidetable in the schoolhouse, my friend and landlord Deanie has left several issues of Cape Breton’s Magazine, Ron Caplan’s masterful chronicling of life on this island; the people and times it tells of are all around me as I travel here. If I look out my window in one direction I see in the distance the ruins of the Murray Road lumber mill, which once employed 700 men; from another I can hear the whinnying of a lone horse on the property of Alex Kerr, a robust Gaelic singer whom I was lucky enough to visit just once before he died.

One evening while attending a dance in the community hall next door I meet my neighbour Duncan MacEachern, who attended class in the North River schoolhouse in the 1940s. He knows I am interested in Gaelic culture and so he tells me more about the history of this community, some of which is commemorated in framed photos and newspaper articles
that hang around us. Local people raised the money to build this hall – over $2000 in the early 1950 – by touring an original Gaelic play around Cape Breton. Duncan points to a faded photograph, and I lean in to see his father pictured onstage playing one of the roles. The weeks are filled with visits like this, to friends who have different stories, different songs, and different voices.

One day I drive across the island, over Kelly’s Mountain and across the Seal Island Bridge, down to Catalone to the home of Allan MacLeod. His wife is welcoming, pressing sandwiches and tea upon me; Allan pushes me the songs. I ask casually about differences in style, and suddenly he is singing “Ma Bhuannaich Thu Nighean Ghrinn” with a melody unlike the one with which I am familiar. Here are the chorus and first verse the way Allan sang it for me that day:

![Musical notation for “Ma Bhuannaich Thu Nighean Ghrinn”]

Fig. 1: “Ma Bhuannaich Thu, Nighean Ghrinn”, chorus and first verse as sung by Allan MacLeod

Here are the chorus and first verse as I have heard Jim Watson sing it; he first heard it from John Dan MacNeil of Barra Glen (who would have been a neighbour of Rod C. MacNeil):
As you can see, the airs are completely different. Allan said, “All the songs were kind of different. Like ‘Iu o ra hiu bho’, they had the same song [text], but the air was different on it. But the way I sing it – ”, and he is off again. “There’s a lot to that song,” he continues, “but down north they sing it differently”.  

Fig. 2: “Ma Bhuannaich Thu, Nighean Ghrinn, chorus and first verse as sung by Jim Watson.

As you can see, the airs are completely different. Allan said, “All the songs were kind of different. Like ‘Iu o ra hiu bho’, they had the same song [text], but the air was different on it. But the way I sing it – ”, and he is off again. “There’s a lot to that song,” he continues, “but down north they sing it differently”. I am astonished and delighted, and for the next hour I keep feeding him titles and he keeps singing them in all their variations.

Another time, another year, a friend and I decide to stop in at the Burkes’ place on our way to the annual Johnstown Milling Frolic. We never make it to Johnstown, as we are unable to tear ourselves away. At age 89, Theresa – Treasag nighean Pheadair Mhòir

71MacLeod, Allan. Interview with Stephanie Conn. December, 2003.
Steabhain Mhicheil\textsuperscript{72} – is tall and strong, bounding out in her plain white blouse to meet us as we arrive, and sweeping us into her tiny summer cottage with shouts of “Thig a-staigh! Dean suidhe” (Come in! Sit down!). The cottage itself is a like a curiosity shop and they must see my eyes widen as I enter, because her daughter Marion invites me to “Go ahead, walk around, look at everything!”. A photo of Marion’s father in regimental uniform hangs beside her childhood drawings, bits of driftwood, a wasp’s papery hive, and the tiny nest of some woodland bird. The cabin is small and rustic, so we ask Marion how long she will live there; will she stay on in the winter? “Oh, gus an tig am fuarachd”, she says (until the cold comes), but the next summer she will tell us proudly of how she stayed on.

Their company is delightful, their knowledge of Gaelic language and music idiosyncratic; it is as intriguing as the cabin itself which seems larger inside than it does from the outside. Theresa was home-schooled, growing up in the rear of Big Pond, an isolated community. Their mother played the bagpipe chanter, their uncle was a piper and their grandfather was a fiddler. Her Gaelic is peppered with phrases and words that I have never heard elsewhere, which suggest both a rich, unique tradition but also playful, creative minds. “It’s great to be bilingual”, says Theresa Burke. “I am in my own language, and in English”.

She recalls the many trees and plants on their property: crabapples, which she calls “crapaich” but also “smeuran ard”, (tall blackberries); “critheann” (poplar), “luibh bhuidhe” (goldenrod) and “craobh ghiuthais” (Scotch pine), all new words to me as they do not often come up in songs or general conversation. When they did not have words for things, they

\textsuperscript{72} Theresa’s Gaelic patronymic: Theresa, daughter of Big Peter, son of Stephen, son of Michael.
would make them up, and all of their cows and horses had Gaelic names. A visit with her is
worth an entire course, and is twice as much fun.

“A bheil thu ag iarraidh rud sam bith?” (Do you want anything?), asks Theresa.
“Còmhradh, orain”, (conversation, songs) I suggest, “or anything!” “Breugan” (Lies)
suggests my friend, and we all laugh. Theresa says drily, “Tha mi cinnteach gu bheil cus ‘sa
chorr agam a tha tuilleadh ach breagan” (I am sure I have enough in me without telling lies).
Instead she gives us “Oran a Bugs a Bhuntata” (The Song of the Potato Bugs), the first of
many songs we’ll hear that evening. Yes, her mother used to have some of the old
songbooks, Theresa recalls when I ask her, but I find that many of the songs they sing are
new to me despite all my books and tapes and years of trying to amass familiarity. They also
knew how to make their own bagpipe chan ters. The songs and chatter go on and on,
stretching into the night, and it is all we can do to keep up with our notebooks and tape
recorders.  

*    *    *

My first experience of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton was at a public event, but while I enjoy
such events immensely I now view them as a gateway to the heart of the Gaelic song
practice: the home. While attending milling frolics at Christmas Island, concerts at the Nova
Scotia Highland Village in Iona, and song-learning workshops, I have met singers and Gaelic
speakers who have welcomed me into their homes and shown me the place of song in their
lives. The public performance of songs is valued by Gaelic communities and is an important

73 Previous quotes transcribed from tape recording of the evening.
factor today in the coalescence of the song canon and is the place where most people will be exposed to Gaelic singing. The practice of song in more everyday settings, however, is vital to the development of a Gaelic singer. In this Chapter I shall examine the home as a ‘micro-community’ in which Gaelic singers acquire a core repertoire through various methods of transmission. Since my experiences of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton – listening, singing along, examining archival recordings, listening to verbal accounts, and speaking with living exemplars – continually suggests that repertoire, style and practices have always differed from community to community and even from singer to singer, it follows that these practices are rooted in streams of transmission that might themselves also be different. This multivocality is somewhat at odds with the emphasis on ‘correctness’ that exists in Cape Breton Gaelic culture as evidenced by the consultations that take place between singers, the collaborative singing of long or difficult songs, and the collection by some people of written sources such as songbooks, newspaper clippings and notebooks; this productive tension between orality and literacy, between individual experience and community authority, will also be discussed in this Chapter. Home is also the place where memory is cultivated as a powerful tool in the transmission of repertoire and style, as singers collect an array of objects to evoke the sense of previous performances and draw on these for context and meaning. This Chapter will also consider the role memory plays in constructing and deriving performative meaning, on personal as well as community levels.
Home as a Micro-Community of Song

It might seem conspicuous that I refer to “home” in this chapter and “public” in the next one, avoiding the more obvious binary opposites of “private” and “public”. Lauren Berlant argues that such clear taxonomies are never possible and goes as far as to suggest it is a “Victorian fantasy” to believe such they exist, when in fact there can be a public intimacy, and mass media invades the private sphere. It should not be surprising then that home in Cape Breton is not completely private, but is instead a place where the private and public intersect and distinctions between the two are blurred. Gaelic culture is one of sharing, and even the language gives clues to this, as in many cases the possessive form denotes position and not ownership; my house, for example, is “an taigh agam”, or “the house at me”, suggesting the transitory nature of material things, and only the body, attributes, or other personal possessions are described as my own – such as “m’agaibh”, my face, or “mo ghaol”, my beloved. While of course one’s house or car really are one’s own, there is a sense of welcome and generosity in the Gaelic communities I have visited that makes it seem acceptable to drop in unannounced to the home of a friend, to stay for a meal when only a coffee was planned, to bring along one friend when visiting another, and to call someone up and ask them if they can teach you a song. As Helen MacNeil, wife of singer Rod C. MacNeil, once said to me, “I don’t think you’ll find anyone around here who wouldn’t share what they’ve got with you. What’s the use of keeping things like songs and the language to yourself?” This open attitude is key to my consideration of the home as a kind of micro-community

consisting of family, neighbours, friends, and other Gaelic singers or speakers who might have a connection to the home or who might be strangers, referred through someone else.

“Home” is also a place that extends beyond the physical reaches of one’s house; it is the farm around it, the familiar roads on which Peter MacLean heard a man’s voice ringing out from miles away over the rumble of logging wagons, or in the woods near McAdams Lake, where the fire watchman would hear bagpipes from his tower. The wider community, then, is also home to a certain extent, but our understanding of “community” is constantly negotiated; the area in which I do most of my fieldwork extends from Boisdale on the Bras D’Or Highway through Christmas Island and across the Grand Narrows to Iona, Highland Hill and Jamesville, and until a couple of decades ago these were self-contained and distinct communities. These days, however, it is normal to drive for thirty minutes to visit someone or to attend a dance, and so it is easy to think of this as one big Gaelic community as it is today, in which families from all of these places know or at least are aware of each other, mingling together at their respective churches and firehalls for bingo, concerts, and codfish suppers.

Repertoire and style are linked to some extent to geographical area or, rather, their corresponding Gaelic communities; there is no disputing that certain local songs were not known elsewhere in the province, or that the communities around the North Shore had a recognizable style and some distinct repertoire. Moreover, it is not my wish to disprove that here. Rather, I would like to look at community on a smaller scale in order to place emphasis on the development of the individual singer within a broader community. Timothy Rice has explored the idea that each person is a kind of cultural centre; he writes, “I’m now prepared
to define musical experience as the history of the individual’s encounter with the world of musical symbols in which he finds himself. I view that individual singer as the nexus of what I shall call a “micro-community” as described above, in which an individual obtains repertoire, style and information about songs, and is part of a web of musical transmission that might be plotted as a kind of family tree or artistic genealogy. In his study of the relationship between community and individual in an English song practice in Sheffield, Ian Russell supplies a convincing argument for this approach:

[I]f the preferred terminology of ‘stability and change’ is to have any validity in the future, it must be understood in the concrete particularization of the relationship between singers. It is simply not enough to pursue the sterile exercise of comparing songs solely with each other or with their supposed predecessors. Rather we must work with songs as products of linked performers or of one performer at different times. In my study of a Sheffield singing tradition I have tried to show that a synchronic study is possible; a diachronic study would be no less feasible.

As mentioned in my introduction, I am positing that each singer’s experience is unique, and that these manifestations of the tradition deserve to be read as experiences unto themselves rather than being categorized geographically or temporally. Rather than look at this musical practice through the comparison of songs, as has been done in the past by such Scottish scholars as John Lorne Campbell and others, I turn my attention here to communities of knowledge and practice on a smaller scale. For this reason, in this study I do not gather and compare a large sample of historical data (apart from my survey of recording archives), but instead consider individual performances of Gaelic songs and try to determine how singers and listeners derive meaning from them in the moment.

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77 Russell, 336.
My early search for distinctions between regional styles or repertoires suggested that I should compare variants and different performances as individual variations that could occur synchronically or diachronically in the same community, or on different parts of the island. This still seems worth doing, but the idea of regional styles has been complicated by this redrawing of lines between communities, and new patterns of interaction between Gaelic singers. I have observed that even though they grew up in geographical proximity by today’s standards, their neighbourhoods were formerly considered to be far apart. My singing collaborators describe a variety of transmission methods, have different repertoires, and experience varying relationships with oral and written sources. In almost all cases, however, a Gaelic singer’s musical lineage is rooted in the home. Rod C. MacNeil of Barra Glen, Cape Breton – or Ruairidh mac Iain Sheumais Dhòmhnaill Òig Iain Ruaridh as he would be known in Gaelic – has fond memories of how song was part of his early life; he paints this image of rural life in Cape Breton in the 1920s and 1930s:

Here singing was part of the lifestyle. It seems that in those days people would sing no matter where they were. Out doing work, if there was a little air left over [laughs]. The ladies with their spinning wheels, they liked to sing with that or even if they were just knitting. And the children were always rocked to sleep [with songs]. The farms were small to begin with and houses were close together. You could hear, say, the neighbour on the east side of the farm singing, and maybe three of four neighbours on the other side of the farm, singing. Not all the time, but once in a while, and they’d all be on different songs. It was part of their lifestyle. If the work wasn’t too heavy, then use some of your wind singing a song. It lightens the work.78

Rod C. does not romanticize their lives – he makes it clear that there was a lot of work to be done and that there was not always time for singing and milling frolics – but his reminiscences do give the impression that song was woven into daily life, and that it was

very important to them. He spoke to me of how acutely he felt the difference when he moved away:

The place where I noticed that there was a big difference between other communities and here [was when I went to] Newmarket [Ontario] for basic [army] training. We had to sing as we marched. There were thirty or so men and sometimes only three or four were able to sing – I was quite surprised! Here all thirty would be singing – or at least twenty-eight [laughing]. “We can’t sing” is all they said, but I got the feeling they never tried. But they liked it all the same and they picked it up. It helped lighten the work.  

In Rod C’s experience growing up in Barra Glen, then, Gaelic singing was not a rarefied, elitist activity; it was folded into daily life and work. It also happened alongside instrumental music, although some degree of specialization is in place and the practitioners of vocal music are distinct from the fiddlers, pipers or pianists. The pianist Janet Cameron of Boisdale grew up in what is known as a “céilidh house”, a home known for its parties and music. She spoke to me of how her father, Gaelic singer Finlay Cameron, would preside over céilidhs at her house when she was a child in the 1940s, when fiddlers and singers would sometimes drop in unannounced.

An evening would usually start out with lots of lively tunes, and perhaps some slower ones [...] but eventually we’d have a number of Gaelic songs. Our father would perhaps sing a lively song, and our uncle some slow songs [...] and that was always part of it. Once in a while our father would tell a funny story in Gaelic [...] and the whole thing flowed along very gracefully. We’d always have a little deoch, and that was part of it, too [smiling]. A deoch, that’s a little drink! It was a very full evening.

I must confess to having dropped in unannounced on the Camerons (Janet and her two brothers, Father Francis and Father Leo) in more recent years. On one occasion in the

80 Janet Cameron, interview with Stephanie Conn, August 15, 2004.
summer of 2007, my unexpected visit with two singing friends found them at their dinner, but they nonetheless welcomed us, the kettle was put on, and they delighted in the chance to relive the spontaneous visits of their childhood. They are all over 75 yet bursting with energy and sense of fun even on such a sultry August day, informing us of their many plans for the rest of the weekend: saying mass in a town in another district; bingo; visiting with family, and more. Leo said,

You know, this is a proper céilidh! I mean, a real one like in the old days. Someone would come to the door and you’d answer it and no matter what you were doing, they’d be invited in to join you. You could be eating or playing music or saying the rosary, and they’d just join in! That would never happen in Toronto … and I’m sad to say, it wouldn’t happen much even around here anymore. You call ahead.  

We were all asked to sing Gaelic songs, Father Francis played the fiddle, and a family photo album was passed around. I had learned some songs from a tape of their father, and it was wonderful to sing these back to them, to experience the continuing hospitality of that famous house and to see first-hand the ease with which song and music were expressed in their home.

Allan MacLeod also has memories of céilidhs at his family home in New Boston. He says,

AML: My father was the best singer I ever heard. He had a pile of songs, good songs. People used to come and hear him sing all night, drink tea. They used to put planks around the room, between the chairs [to fit in more people].
SC: where did all the people come from?
AML: From all around here, but in later years they used to come from Sydney, Glace Bay. Fellows that moved away – they’d come back [to hear him].  

81 Personal conversation with Cameron Family. August 18, 2008.
82 Allan MacLeod, interview with Stephanie Conn. December, 2003.
Homes that functioned as *cèilidh* houses were important for the exchange of Gaelic culture, for exchanging tunes and influences. In his liner notes to Alex Francis McKay’s fiddle recording, *A Lifelong Home*, producer Paul MacDonald writes:

The MacKay farm was a [stop] along the road for various people of different backgrounds. They came for the forge, and for the music and friendship. For many musicians the farm eventually became a regular stopping point on a musical circuit that stretched from Margaret MacPhee’s house in New Waterford all the way through to Boston and Detroit …. Of all the visiting musicians, those who stayed the longest and made the most lasting impressions on Francis were the fiddler/composer Dan R. MacDonald (Alex’s cousin) and Dan Hughie MacEachern; and the renowned Scottish piper Sandy Boyd who immigrated to Cape Breton in the 30s. From these musicians he inherited a huge repertoire both by ear and in the form of printed collections.  

One night in 1998 I stopped at Alex Francis’ house along with a group of friends, including fiddlers David Greenberg and Paul Cranford. They played along with Alex Francis and pianist Gordon MacLean; I sang and stepdanced in my stocking feet; and another friend, guitarist Terry McKenna, was so moved by the evening that he wrote a song about it. It was a real *cèilidh*, in which music, song and stories flowed together. John Shaw elaborates on the significance of such houses to a Gaelic community, which extends beyond the exchange of music and friendship:

The centre of evening social gatherings, and therefore the main intellectual institution of rural Gaels, was the taigh cèilidh (the *cèilidh* house), a household in the community where people of all ages would gather in the evenings, particularly in the winter, to pass the time in conversation and informal entertainment. In some localities there could be more than one, and there are even accounts of some houses being renowned for tales, others for song or music. [...] The *cèilidh* (in its traditional form best translated as ‘house visit’) was an important and integrating social occasion and Joe Neil points out that modern Cape Breton is much the poorer, culturally and spiritually, for its demise.

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83 Paul MacDonald, notes to Alex Francis McKay’s recording, *A Lifelong Home*. Rounder, 1997  
Shaw draws attention to an important function of the *céilidh* – that of “the main intellectual institution”. Even today home *céilidhs* are a site of enculturation, in which not only music and entertainment are shared, but also news, opinions, and references to local and national history, cultural values, and musical style. Songs are encountered or sometimes learned at *céilidh*, but just as vital as the musical material is the web of associations that is invoked along the way. In the practice of Gaelic singing, any rendition of a song must resonate not only with the present circumstances but also with the memories of past performances, and *céilidhs* are an opportunity to gather such information. Shaw has also pointed out, however, that the *céilidh* culture has suffered from changes in Cape Breton’s social context. He quotes singer Lauchie MacLellan who said “The [electronic media] just wiped out the old-style *céilidhs*. People didn’t go [visiting] anywhere …. It put the lid on it and rendered the songs ineffective”. 85 It is most interesting that Lauchie says “ineffective” in the English translation; the word he used in Gaelic was in fact, the old bugbear “comas” which had stumped my collaborators with its usage on a t-shirt. According to Lauchie, songs were “ineffective” (or not capable, or perhaps not even authoritative) when they were sung on the radio instead of being sung and transmitted in a more social Gaelic environment. This points to many of the ideas I will raise about how Gaelic songs are understood by my collaborators.

Transmission

Today, of course, there are courses and workshops at which one can learn Gaelic songs, such as at The Gaelic College or at the annual Féis an Eilean (which will be discussed later); for someone such as myself who has studied Western classical music formally, these seem fairly natural and stand in contrast to the methods used by my collaborators. Like many other contemporary ‘learners’ of Gaelic language and song, though, I also visit Gaelic singers to be sociable but also to ‘get’ (learn) particular songs, or get help with my singing of them. It seems that if my collaborators are asked how they learned a song or what they remember of learning songs in general, most speak of learning them at home through repeated listening or, in some cases, with supporting materials such as printed sources or recordings. On several occasions I have asked Peter MacLean to help me learn a song, and have been concerned that learning in this way is too formal and contrived in comparison to the more ‘natural’ (or perhaps I mean ‘passive’) learning described by Rod C, who heard the songs from farmers in nearby fields, or Peter, whose parents repeated and discussed song texts in the evening as entertainment. Peter’s recollections, however, point to this as an ongoing practice, and older singers also tell of songs being exchanged at house visits.

If I ask Gaelic singers in Cape Breton to help me learn a particular song they might begin by commenting about its melody or clever wordplay. They will probably sing it for me, or ask me to sing part of it for them. If it has been published they might bring out a well-worn copy of a Gaelic songbook. Most often, however, they begin to reminisce in detail about who used to sing the song, and how, and under what circumstances. There is more than mere sentimentality behind this linking of musical associations. In The Anthropology of
Performance, Victor Turner wrote that performative meaning is constructed through, as he put it, “negotiating about ‘fit’ between present and past”. Indeed, it seems that any rendition of a Gaelic song resonates not only with the present circumstances but also with the memories of past performances. Thus it is important to examine the dynamic role of memory and social interaction in the transmission and performance of Gaelic song in Cape Breton, and to discuss how this ‘fit’ between past and present is made. Singers and listeners use personal anecdotes, photos and souvenirs, books and recordings to evoke their personal associations and pass them on to others. One comes to understand a song as a composite of evolving memories, performances and meanings, but the meaning of a song is not simply referential, and it does not point only towards the past.

It is May 2009, on the cusp of change between spring and summer, and Peter and I are sitting at his kitchen table. The day is cool and crisp, but sunny, and four hummingbirds dart around his brightly coloured feeder. He stops our conversation to point out the window, drawing my attention to the way their feathers shine a metallic green in some lights and a brilliant blue in others. In the hours we have spent together today we have been grocery shopping, had lunch, and chatted with a neighbour who dropped by to fix the tractor, but now I am anxious to get to the music. He finally asks me, “Now, dear, did you want to look at some songs?”

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86 Turner 1987, 96.
On some visits I want to see where Peter’s own whims will take us rather than requesting that he teach me specific songs; on this visit I bring just one thing to get us started, “Chlachan Ghlinn da Ruail”. It proves to be an excellent starting point as the text is printed in *Sar-obair nam bard Gaelach: or, the beauties of Gaelic poetry and lives of the Highland bards*, a substantial nineteenth-century collection of Gaelic songs, but is sung to an air that is often paired with different words at milling frolics in Cape Breton (such as “Mo shoraidh leis na caileagan”). Peter notes that it is a good song, “well put together” that is not often sung, a fact he had brought up years before at another house visit. “If they don’t pick these songs up and learn them, they’re going to go to ruin”, he says. “There was a fellow down the road, down the Farrell road, Dan Stephen MacNeil —he’d be a relative of [my neighbour] Martin’s
people. Oh, my, he was a good singer … good at Gàidhlig, too. He used to sing that song.”

After we have gone through it I ask him to show me some other neglected ones that I might learn. The result is a couple of hours of flipping through this classic book and another, *An T-Oranaiche*, and singing through some songs, some familiar and some new to me.

Later in this same visit with Peter, we turn to the song “Togainn Fonn air Lorg an Fhéidh (Raise a Song as we Chase the Deer), which Peter suggests would be a good one for me to learn. In the past I have heard Peter sing this song without hesitation, but he stumbles a bit this day when singing it from the book. He stops to explain, telling me that he is remembering the way another man had sung this song for him years ago, and then begins to compare the two versions of the song text:

PML: There were two or three verses that he has in the song … but they’re not here, now, those verses. So, which one is right? Did he have two songs mixed up together? You never know (laughs).

SC: Could they both be right?

PML: Could be, you never know. As I’m saying it’s on the same air, with the same chorus. The way we had it now is like this:

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87 Peter MacLean, Conversation with Stephanie Conn. August 18, 2008.
And here they have …

SC: It’s similar.

PML: It’s not much of a difference. It’s not worth contradicting [said with a smile. We both laugh]. Now – you got it?[88]

In fact there were several changes and simple textual substitutions which we then discussed: “bradan” or salmon replaces “trout”; the verb form is changed from the conditional, ‘bu

[88] Conversation with Peter MacLean May 29, 2009
mhiann’ (would desire) to present tense, ‘s miann’, (desires). Given his insistence on accuracy, I was quite surprised to hear Peter take such an accepting attitude towards such variations in text, and I wondered if he was being polite. Many singers, myself included, refer to printed sources as a way of ensuring accuracy and consistency in song renditions. Peter, however, consults printed sources but does not grant them ultimate authority. He acknowledges that there are different versions of a song, and remembers minute differences between the versions, careful to point out discrepancies or to say when he suspects that a song rendition contains a blending of what he considers to be different versions or even different songs entirely on the same air. The songbook, then, functions as a kind of aide memoire, one that prompts his memory of past performances but to which he does not defer.

Using printed books as a starting point might seem a rather structured and perhaps even untraditional way to learn the songs given the general perception of Gaelic culture as oral. As I have stated previously however, the tradition of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton is multifaceted, and printed sources have always coexisted within Gaelic culture. The existence of the both kinds of sources in Cape Breton culture is discussed by Liz Doherty in her PhD dissertation, “The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition c1928-1995”. She notes, “In fact notation has actually helped to reinforce and sustain the oral tradition …. What we have in Cape Breton effectively is an oral tradition which is supported, not threatened, by literacy.”\(^{89}\) Heather Sparling, too, has written of the complementary relationship between different methods of transmission. In her article “Transmission

Processes in Cape Breton Gaelic Song Culture,” she points out the conflict between the common perception that Gaelic is a completely oral culture and the existence of notated sources for centuries. Sparling concludes that “recordings are not supplanting face-to-face oral transmission, nor are they replacing published song collections. They are creating new ways of learning and circulating traditional Gaelic songs”. She also points out that it is the melodies of songs that are almost always transmitted orally, since the melodies are seldom printed in books. I would agree with all of these assertions, and she is right to draw attention to the inaccuracy of people’s assertions that Gaels in Nova Scotia “perpetuated a complete culture orally”. There are, however, caveats to be added. While it is true that notated Scottish Gaelic poetry might date back as far as the twelfth century, and fragments suggests that there was far more, these were rare documents which were not likely available to everyone. Similarly, while revered Canadian Gaelic poet Allan “The Ridge” MacDonald’s songs were recorded in several manuscripts, they were not necessarily part of the common repertoire. They were published in one volume in 2004, in Effie Rankin’s edited collection of songs by the bard Allan the Ridge, As a’ Bhraighe. Previously, individual songs were published in the Sydney newspaper Mac Talla, the Antigonish periodical, The Casket, and in Alexander MacLean Sinclair’s book, The Gaelic Bards from 1825 to 1875 (published by Mac Talla in 1904). Still, as independent scholar Lorrie MacKinnon has said, he is everywhere but nowhere, since many people know of Allan the Ridge’s songs but do not know them well

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enough to sing them.\textsuperscript{93} It seems then that the extent to which any of these media are used not only differs from singer to singer and from home to home, but is also dependent on the repertoire being sung. Maxie MacNeil (or, Maxie Dan Angus Iain Aonghais Eoin) sings many local songs, none of which to my knowledge has appeared in any publication, and most of which have not been recorded. He says this about the repertoire:

My father had four or five of those songs (of Sandy Mòr in Gillis Point) but there were a lot of them that you just couldn’t sing everywhere. Sandy used to make some nasty songs, if he didn’t get invited to a wedding or such a thing as that, he’d make a song that wasn’t too nice for the people involved, but there was others he made like the one he made for the old man, when his little house was falling apart and he didn’t want the fellows to be coming around anymore. And he also, my Father sang [a song] about a fox that was stealing his hens, which was a terrific little song. He made all kinds of them and they tried to send them up to get them printed but I guess the editor of the paper, he knew it would cause problems so he was smart enough to keep them out.\textsuperscript{94}

The songs were never published, although clearly someone did write them down. While it is possible that transcriptions of these songs have circulated, Maxie has not mentioned such a thing. Given the socially sensitive nature of this material, however, it seems unlikely that they would have been extensively circulated.

I have asked Peter MacLean if he used to read from \textit{An T-Orainaiche} when he was growing up, and he tells me that in fact the family did not own that book, but they did have others such as a collection of songs by Cape Breton bards such as Malcolm Gillis, \textit{Smeorach nan Cnoc ‘s nan Gleann} (The Songster of the Hills and the Glens) and also \textit{Clarsach na .}

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\textsuperscript{93} Lorrie MacKinnon, private correspondence. April 21, 2011. MacKinnon also points out that many of his compositions are 8-line songs without choruses, for which reason they would not be sung at social occasions. Some of the reasons behind repertoire selection for performance will be dealt with in Chapter 3, \textit{Song in Public Performance}, but these are discussed in great detail by Heather Sparling in her dissertation “Song genres, cultural capital and social distinctions in Gaelic Cape Breton”. Unpublished PhD Diss., York University, 2006.

\textsuperscript{94} Maxie MacNeil, interview with Stephanie Conn, December, 2003.
Coille (Harp of the Woods), another Canadian collection which includes the songs of immigrant bard, John MacLean. On some occasions when I visit, Peter brings out a big cardboard box, like a treasure chest, stuffed full of his mother’s old Gaelic clippings from newspapers such as *Mac Talla* and *The Casket*, that printed the texts of songs that had been sent in by their readers and sometimes inspired a series of letters debating their accuracy. I asked Peter how he learned the songs and he said this:

"You were picking up different songs at different times. In those days, I don’t know, I didn’t take much interest in it for a while, because it was all around me. You’d hear the songs and pick it up little by little. But to go out and singing [in public] – you weren’t doing that, it was a few people at the home. If you wanted to learn a song, it was no problem if you put your mind to it. Most of the songs my mother sang were out of the book."

There was, therefore, learning both by casual oral methods through participating and observing as well as by the use of books. Peter tells me that his mother used to sit and go through these papers and books as entertainment, reading out the songs to the family, which they would then discuss. Although his father was not a singer and could not read Gaelic, he would listen and later recite songs from memory, and knew verses to songs that were not printed in songbooks. As learned in his family home, then, Peter’s knowledge of songs involves negotiating a compromise between oral and printed sources. This is evident when he teaches a song, and thus is forced to account for and reconcile various versions, and it is in these moments that one can learn much about the workings of an individual practice. Peter regards a book as conditionally authoritative. Perhaps, like the feathers of the hummingbird at his window, there are different shades and nuances to be perceived.

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95 Peter MacLean, conversation with Stephanie Conn. February 2004.
Given that Peter is a well-respected singer who is often consulted by learners or even other native speakers to determine the air for a song, or whose version of the text is taken to be typical or “correct” (a value-laden word which will be discussed below), his attitude towards the conditional authority of books seems striking. Nevertheless, it seems that in some cases he has decided to live peaceably with differences by acknowledging them while accepting that there are variations, and that “maybe that was how he heard it sung”.\(^{96}\) It is as though he is immune to the classic pitfall for collectors of folk music – that of considering one rendition of a song to be a kind of *Urtext*. It should be noted, however, that on other occasions he has been much more critical of textual inconsistencies, and that despite his forgiveness of the variations, he was concerned that we should learn “Chlachan Ghlinn da Ruail” correctly despite his having sung it for me imperfectly that day, in his own opinion. Peter has often told the story of Bean Iain Ruairidh, John Rory MacNeil’s wife Catherine, a woman from the nearby community of Rear Castle Bay. She was a singer who also made her own songs, which I have heard Peter sing. He says, “She stayed with my mother for a week and the songs that she composed, she taught them to my mother. My mother learned all the songs and then when [the other woman] was leaving she said to my Mother, “Feuch nach bi ag annda”. Be careful to sing them right”.\(^{97}\) If asked directly about ‘correctness’, Peter will tell this story; he has also said, “I know when I was learning songs my mother would teach me. She would go to the book and help me translate it”.\(^{98}\)

\[^{96}\] Conversation with Peter MacLean May 26, 2009.
\[^{97}\] MacLean, 2004. Also told (in more detail) to John Shaw and quoted in John Shaw, *Brìgh an Òrain: A Story in Every Song* (Montreal & Kingston, 2000), 38
\[^{98}\] MacLean, 2004.
Working with the song traditions of Tory Island, Ireland, Lillis O’Laoire examines the issue of correctness in song performance in his article, “The Right Words: Conflict and Resolution in an Oral Gaelic Song Text”. In a consideration of the song itself as a kind of text he points to Paul Zumthor’s observation that orally transmitted material is difficult to classify as such since constant performance of oral poetry entails constant change: “From one performance to the next, we glide from nuance to nuance or to sudden mutation; where is there, in this deteriorated state, the demarcation between what is still the ‘work’ and what is no longer the ‘work’?” 99 O’Laoire counters, however, that “a textual analysis of both the differences and the similarities of both these performances of the same song delivered on the same occasion can and do reveal what is ‘the work’ and what is not. Comparison of both also reveals a middle ground of minor variations that are part of the work, perhaps crucially in that they contribute to an ongoing debate about correct form, structure, register, and communicative economy”. 100 O’Laoire’s observations are of Irish Gaelic singing on Tory Island, but they could also be applied to Scottish Gaelic singing in Cape Breton. Here, too, the extent to which one may take liberties with a song rendition is never explicitly discussed, but it seem that some changes are accepted while others are not. More importantly, however, a singer is perhaps afforded more individual liberties musically than textually, and will often make slight alterations in the rhythm or melody of a song in order to make it fit the text (although extensive ornamentation is not a characteristic of this style of singing) whereas one would never make a conscious change in the text. It is considered to be important to preserve

100 O’Laoire, 206.
the words as correctly as possible, but the melodies do not appear in most published sources and there is much less debate over melodic variations. I have observed both alternate airs for familiar songs (as Allan repeated) and small changes in familiar airs. One may sing a song in any key since they are usually *a capella*, and no one is chastised for modulating during the course of a song, whether accidentally, or intentionally for convenience. Errors in song texts, however, are often pointed out openly, and it seems that at times these are not acknowledged as ‘variants’ but rather as failures to achieve correctness.\(^{101}\) It could be true that musical illiteracy or lack of musical notation for the songs is a factor in the leniency of many singers towards variations in melody, or it could be that this is the place in which they allow the exercising of personal taste and musical invention.

Although Peter’s own repertoire is huge, he will often claim not to know a song when one feels sure that he does. When pressed to sing such a song he is often able to retrieve several verses from his memory with only the odd word missing (such as when I asked him about North Shore visitors to Christmas Island; he remembered the song “Maili Dhoon” but said he did not know it, and then pulled 36 lines of it from a distant memory. No one else I have asked knows this version). But his reluctance to sing these, much less to commit them to a recording, stems from concern that his rendition should be ‘correct’, and as complete as possible. Although the composers of all the songs Peter sings have since died, it seems that he feels a responsibility to transmit their work accurately. He says,

> “You’ve got to respect the Bard, the poet, the way he composed the song, and sing the song according to the way it was composed …. That’s my opinion of it. I think the

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\(^{101}\) Thanks to Lorrie MacKinnon for refining this point.
song should be sung completely out the way it was composed, regardless of the number of verses. There are some songs that [laughs] there’s no end to them. You probably wouldn’t know all of it. But whatever you learn and memorize, that you sing it out as much as you can. Most of the songs, not most of them but quite a few, have got 20 or 24 verses, so that’s a lot of singing”.

Peter does not wish to record a song unless he feels that he truly knows it. It might be said, then, that singers have both active and passive repertoire: active repertoire consists of the songs singers regularly sing, and passive repertoire includes those with which they have familiarity but do not feel they have mastered. Cecil Sharp wrote of a similar situation in his work, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions*; he noted that “the traditional singer, moreover, regards it as a manner of honour to pass on the tradition as nearly as possible as he received it. When I have asked a singer … whether he sang a particular song, I have often received the reply; ‘No, I have heard it but I do not sing it; it is so-and-so’s song’”. This concept of song ‘stewardship’ (if not actual ownership) is discussed further in Chapter 3, “Song and Public Performance”, where its implications become more evident.

Not all Gaelic singers in Cape Breton consult printed version of the words, an approach that might result in different attitudes towards correctness than might be held by a singer who learned from oral sources alone. Many of my collaborators claim that they picked songs up by ear as children after hearing the adults sing them. This is, after all, how we learn songs in any culture; although I am trained as a musician of European art music, my own head is also filled with lyrics and texts to other songs that I apparently have learned unintentionally – 1980s pop songs, Irish folk ballads, jazz standards, and an embarrassing

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number of Broadway show tunes, all acquired without any apparent effort. For learners of
Gaelic songs today, declining fluency in the language is a barrier to the easy learning of song
texts, but Rod C. MacNeil, Maxie MacNeil and Allan MacLeod all recall that they learned
songs from hearing them repeatedly around the house or at parties. As Maxie has told me,

There wasn’t too much music of any other description. Singing was the main means of
entertainment and at that time there were all kinds of singers and lots of songs. That’s
where I got my start. After you hear them for a while you gradually learned the
choruses they come automatically and in due time you learn the verses too, even if they
might not be right at time.\(^{104}\)

He does not at this point mention using printed sources; as mentioned earlier, this is possibly
because many of the songs in his repertoire are local and do not appear in any publications.
Maxie MacNeil’s father was known to be a fine Gaelic singer and as a result their home was
a céilidh house or as Maxie describes it, “a place where people gathered for different
occasions.”\(^{105}\) His experience of learning songs was entirely oral, as it was for many of those
who attended these parties. Since I had seen so many books at Peter’s house and at Rod C.’s,
I asked Maxie directly if he remembered anyone using books to learn the older Gaelic songs
when he was young. He replied,

Sure, there was an Oranaiche in every fifth or sixth house, like a Bible, but these
fellows [the singers] had picked the songs up [by ear] and they might not have been
perfectly right. Maybe that’s why today when you check the words they are different
from the book. But it was enjoyable and that was the main thing.\(^{106}\)

Here Maxie is referring to Old Country songs, many of which he of course knows, but he
also sings local songs which have newly-composed texts sung to old melodies, many of them

comical or even derisive depictions of neighbourhood incidents or characters. In the above excerpt he acknowledges that sometimes texts were learned incorrectly, and by this he probably means differently from how they are written in the book. He suggests that this learning by ear is likely the cause of textual variants, but then goes on to hint at his tolerance of the changes that result from oral transmission, pointing out different attitudes towards accuracy:

MMN: There were certain people that, you know, wouldn’t or didn’t want anyone else to sing unless it was just perfect. That’s just kind of foolish, you know. I think in later years they caught on that it wasn’t the right way to go.

SC: What do you think about the changes you hear in the songs today?

MMN: Well it doesn’t bother me too much. I like a different air on some songs, but there are some I am thinking of that have changed – take “O ho ro ille dhuinn”. I don’t think much of it at all, and I’m not the only one.\(^\text{107}\)

From his reference to the song “O ho ro ille dhuinn”, which is sung in Cape Breton on two distinctly different airs, it seems for Maxie that “changes” refer not only to textual or melodic variations, but also to alternate airs for the song texts, that is, airs that are different to the ones he heard in his home community when growing up. This substitution of airs is as complete as theose spoken of by Allan MacLeod with respect ot “Ma Bhuanach Thu Nigheann Ghrinn,” and these other airs have been imported from different communities or from Scotland, on recordings, books or visiting singers, or heard sung by singers from different communities.

Gaelic song has been a constant in the home life of all my collaborators, as well as in the lives of many non-singing members of the community. And yet it must be remembered that my work concerns Gaelic song in present-day Cape Breton, and my collaborators are not rustic relics, but members of a modern Canadian society as well as a traditional Gaelic one. Perhaps one could say they are a modern Gaelic society. As such they have been bilingual, literate in English and perhaps also in Gaelic; many have lost fluency; many of the mechanisms in which the songs thrive have been disrupted. I have stood with Rod C. MacNeil at his old family homestead, and looked across Barra Glen at the houses that would have been home to many Gaelic speakers and singers in his day, and I heard only the howling of the wind, rather than the echoes of Gaelic song he describes. These days, when you turn on the radio in Cape Breton, you hear English, or French, not Gaelic, but it was always the case for my collaborators that they knew English songs, as well as Gaelic. Maxie MacNeil has remarked to me with apparent puzzlement that no one wants to hear his English songs, adding that in ‘the old days’ there were all sorts of songs that would be sung at a party, not only Gaelic ones. Peter, too remembers that people used not to restrict themselves to singing only Gaelic songs:

PML: There was this Campbell fellow from Hunter’s Mountain, Tommy Campbell, a noted Gàidhlig singer. Now in those days [1930s?] those fellows were young, working in the lumber woods, but they knew all the old songs, some of the songs we’re still singing today. Good singers. There were part of the North Shore group some of them. Tommy would be driving a team of horses over to the Island [Christmas Island] and you could hear him singing away at the top of his voice. He was a really, really good singer – a powerful, clear voice, and it was a pleasure to hear him. In English or Gàidhlig – he was good at both.

SC: So in those days you would not be so fussy about only singing Gaelic songs?

PML: Well, in those days there was a group of young people around who sang a lot of Irish songs in English. They were good at both.
Peter is also an appreciator of good ‘professional’ singing, as he calls it, and told me of going to hear an Irish tenor sing in the concert hall in Glace Bay, and a classical violinist in Boston. Angus Rankin of Mabou Ridge says that he remembers songs being sung in English, that men had learned while working in logging or mining camps in Ontario or New Brunswick. The antagonism between Gaelic and English is deep-rooted in Gaelic culture, and it is surely significant that at some point my collaborators in Cape Breton made the choice to get together for the purpose of singing only Gaelic songs, and that they perform at public events and community gatherings as “The Iona Gaelic Singers.” This choice of Gaelic over English, however, was perhaps in part dictated by the repertoire itself, as these are the songs they remember from their childhood and youth and have continued to enjoy; but it does not mean that they did not have an experience or fondness for other kinds of songs, or other kinds of music. Perhaps a characteristic of today’s efforts to preserve a threatened tradition is to limit it not only by copying what is believed to be correct within the repertoire of Gaelic sings, but by the very limitation of the tradition to Gaelic songs, rather than viewing the act of singing in all its variations as an integral part of life that has many manifestations.

In the article “Raising One Higher than the Other: The Hierarchy of Tradition in Representations of Gaelic and English Language Song in Ireland”, Anthony McGann and Lillis O’Laoire discuss the way that Irish Gaelic song is viewed in terms of binary opposition: that is, Gaelic, especially rural, singing is the ‘other’ to English, urban song, as though the two practices and repertoires are completely distinct in the experience of their participants. In their opinion, this approach suppresses adequate understandings of the practices or experiences of singers themselves. Indeed, it will be argued that the simplistic nature of the binary opposition
accomplishes two things of note. First, it encourages structuralist and deterministic approaches to songs and texts and foregrounds a reified view of “tradition”, thereby concealing important questions of social context and personal meaning. Second, as we have already noted, it leads us to understand the experiences of people who sing in terms of an either/or language choice between distinct, alternative entities.  

There are other implications, however, in O’Laoire and McGann’s observations. This binary opposition does indeed contribute to the standardization of the song repertoire and practice, but perhaps more importantly it appears to overlook the wide range of individual experiences and practices, presenting Gaelic culture as isolated and monolithic. Mark Slobin has described the individual musician as an intersection of several cultural streams, writing that “there is no one experience and knowledge that unifies everyone within a defined ‘cultural’ boundary, or if there is, not the total content of their lives”.  

This image seems particularly apt when applied to a hybrid culture such as that of the Gaels in Cape Breton. A woman from Toronto recently remarked to me that she had visited Cape Breton a few years ago but was disappointed not to find any Gaelic singing there. Her point is well taken, since today one must sometimes seek out Gaelic singing because it is a more specialized interest and activity. Even though it is the Gaelic songs with which this dissertation is primarily concerned, and which have been my gateway to Cape Breton, if we are to describe the quotidian musical experiences of native speaking communities it seems important to remain aware of other

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109 Slobin, 11.
genres alongside which Gaelic song has been practiced: genres that might have exerted an
influence, intentionally or subconsciously, on my collaborators\textsuperscript{110}

\section*{Music and Text}

It seems fruitless to discuss music and text separately, since my collaborators do not
seem inclined to separate the two. During the 2006 Celtic Colours Festival in Cape Breton,
several of the older singers I know took part in a concert to demonstrate milling songs. They
sang several songs, beginning with “Air faill irinn illirinn oich irinn ù” with Peter MacLean
singing the solo verses, followed by “Deoch Slainte nan Feara\textsuperscript{111}”, with Maxie MacNeil
leading. It seemed a strange programming choice to me, since although the songs texts are
very different, the melodies seem quite similar, so that to the non-Gaelic speaking audience it
would seem as though the same song were being sung twice. Compare the choruses, notated
here in the same key for convenience:

\begin{music}
\begin{musicTick}{Air fàil î-rìnn î ri-rìnn, oich a rhìnn ù. Air fàil î-rìnn, î ri-rìnn, ê ho-rò, ê ho Air fàil î-rìnn, î ri-rìnn, oich a rhìnn ù.}
\end{musicTick}
\end{music}

\textsuperscript{110} For example, local radio stations are most likely to play contemporary popular music such as would be heard
anywhere else in North America, and country music in particular has long been popular in Nova Scotia.
\textsuperscript{111} Text by A.T. MacDonald, Antigonish. Also in Donald Fergusson, \textit{Fad Air Falbh As Inne Gall: Leis Comh-Chruinneachadh Cheap Breatainn - Beyond the Hebrides: Including the Cape Breton Collection} (Halifax, N.S.: 1977), 112.
When I asked Peter about this, he was very surprised to learn that I found the songs similar. “They’re different songs,” he said. “I know,” I said, “but the melodies sound similar to me, and so the songs might sound almost the same to someone who doesn’t speak Gaelic”. He thought about this for a moment, then his eyes widened. “You know what – you’re right. I’ve never thought about that before”. My intention was not to win him to my point of view; rather, I was interested to hear that the concept was new to him, and interested too to deduce that it was not shared by any of the others who participated in its singing, either, because it seems unlikely that anyone would want to perform such similar songs consecutively in a concert. Peter is right, however, to think of the songs differently. The melodies are of course not identical, and they are sung differently in the context of each song. “Air faill irinn illirinn oich irinn ü” I have chosen to notate in $\frac{6}{8}$ to bring out the swung quality of the eighth

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112 Private conversation with Peter MacLean, October, 2006.
notes. “Deoch Slainte”, however, has its beats stressed in different places and thus feels more like it is in $4/4$. These differences in timing are as much because of the way the character of these songs has been transmitted as it is about the way the words themselves are set to each melody, and in fact both songs are on sombre topics so subject matter cannot really be considered to make a major difference in this case (and seldom does anyway with Gaelic songs). The more time I spend comparing these two songs, the more I realize that they are in fact very different, but it is still evident that the melodies themselves are similar in many ways and would be perceived as such by many listeners who are not Gaelic speakers, or are unfamiliar with Gaelic song.

Ian Russell has also discussed the similar attitudes of traditional singers in Sheffield towards the melodies and texts of their songs. He notes a case when he heard two people sing a song that they learned from the same source. There were differences in how they rendered the melody, yet it was the textual differences they wanted to discuss afterwards. He writes, “the stylistic implications of this incident are far-reaching as it encapsulates an attitude that I have encountered in West Sheffield – that a singer conceives a song in terms of its text whereas the melody functions subconsciously as the vehicle of its expression.” He has suggested that one of the contributing factors to this attitude is the difference between states of verbal and musical literacy; I would add to this the issue of limited access to musical notation, which is seldom included in Gaelic songbooks, which in turn are not always used

113 The “Scotch snap’ which is much imitated in art music settings of Scottish melodies is in almost all cases an exaggeration of a much gentler rhythm, which in my opinion is usually better-represented by multiples of three eighths.

114 Russell, 329.
by my collaborators. The use of musical notation would influence a more uniform
reproduction of melodies, although I do not think it would necessarily result in the more
ready recognition of similar melodies, since the melodies are not considered separately from
their texts.

Issues of concurrence and compromise between singers is discussed further in
Chapter 3, “Song and Public Performance”, but for now it seems worthwhile to consider this
issue of the interconnectedness of text and music, since it contributes to my ongoing inquiry
into what constitutes a song. John Shaw writes of this in Cape Breton culture in his article,
“Language, Music and Local Aesthetics: A view from Gaeldom and Beyond”:

Cape Breton informants … often appear perplexed when asked about the relative
importance of the words or the air in the performance of a song. The true perceived
relation is one of complementarity: Gaelic oral poetry is customarily sung and only
rarely are recitations of any length in a traditional setting heard without the song air.¹¹⁵

The idea that words and music are thought of together explains something about how songs
are transmitted and rendered, and why changes or variations in either element are met with
disapproval. Shaw points out that Bruno Nettl and Ruth Finnegan have both written of
similar attitudes in other cultures.¹¹⁶ As I shall explain further in my examination of the role
of memory in this song tradition, a song is not merely the pairing of these elements, text and
music, but rather a malleable thing which includes these two elements but also encompasses
the sum of all the performances of it that exist in the memory of the singer and the listener as

¹¹⁵ John Shaw, “Language, Music and Local Aesthetics: Views from Gaeldom and Beyond”, in Scottish
Language 11/12 (1992/3), 39
¹¹⁶ Shaw, 39.
a bundle of associations. It therefore makes no sense to separate any of these elements; without them, it is simply not the same song.

**Style and Individuality**

Participants in a music community can usually identify when someone has the right sound for their tradition, but often they are hard-pressed to articulate it. Similarly, Gaelic singers or community members have a very clear idea of what the “right” sound is for their music; because of their common cultural fluency, certain musical features are tacitly agreed upon and accepted, and seldom do they use language which defines the characteristics of that style, although I have heard them say that they love someone’s singing, commend a singer on his large repertoire, or point it out when a young person has “the old style”. For an outsider, it is not always easy to determine what the sound is that the members of this community deem to be “authentic” and desirable, why it is such an integral part of the songs, and why good singing by the standards of other musical genres – such as a voice trained in the Western classical tradition – might not be well-received in this context.

As with any genre, context is a factor in how a song is sung, and it has an influence on the sound; this is apparent in the different observations I make between “home” and “public” in this and the following chapter. The quiet singing of a song in a kitchen can have a freedom, intimacy, and dynamic range that one might not find in public performances; there, men invariably sing high in their range, to the very edge and almost beyond their capability using a vigorous chest voice, sometimes with a tremolo and in some cases a kind of ‘goat
trill’ vibrato. Women double in octaves or sing low in their range, in unison with the men, but also using a tight, straight style. Songs might also be sung like this at home, but of course at home there is no competition with the chatter of an audience, sounds of clinking glasses and bottles at the bar, the scuffling of feet and chairs. This sound is strong and fairly straightforward, and can be contrasted with the style used when singing Oràin Mhòr (Big Songs), as the serious eight-line songs are sometimes called, which share some characteristics with the lighter and more florid style used in sean nós (old-style) Gaelic singing. On the choruses, people sing in unison, fairly tightly, and for this reason there is very little embellishment and little rubato. The Gaelic language includes many pronounced consonants including fricatives as well as complex vowels including dipthongs and triphthongs, and these linguistic elements add sonic opportunities to Gaelic singing. In most cases the text is set syllabically, increasing the possibility for emphasis and stress on key words.

Regardless of how the song is learned, in singing communities throughout Cape Breton it seems to have always been the case that a good singer is considered to be one who communicated the words clearly. Ethnologist John Shaw’s book, Brìgh an Òrain: A Story in Every Song, paints a masterful portrait of Gaelic culture in twentieth-century Margaree, Cape Breton. Shaw’s collaborators told him that a good singer is someone who pronounces the text clearly, but who also understands brìgh an òrain – the essence of the song. Some go as far to say “[t]hough the singer might not be that musical … if he knew the words properly, that

117 This consonant sound is typified in the “ch” of the German word, “Bach”. This work will not contain extensive linguistic discussion but it might prove a useful exercise in the further examination of sound in Gaelic singing.

118 Shaw 2000, 24.
was what I desired”. Yet clearly, as Peter’s instructions to me demonstrate, singers and connoisseurs of the style do have a clear idea of how these songs should sound musically, as well as textually. As a singer trying to learn songs, I have noted when my collaborators praise or comment on another singer’s style. When I ask Peter MacLean what he makes a good singer, and how I can be one, he says,

A good clean strong voice … good words … I would say any Gaelic singer should learn the song and the pronunciation and the air. [But] you should use your own natural instincts and your own natural way of singing. You can’t duplicate anybody. Like a violin player – your natural talent, that’s what counts, that’s what’ll come out.  

It is possible that the relationship between music and words in this repertoire is akin to that of church music during the Counter-Reformation: the music is there to serve the text, and not to detract from it but to set the text in a way that it is intelligible. In my own experience, and with Peter’s encouragement, much of the time spent learning a Gaelic song is devoted to a study of the text, poring over books and recordings, and deciphering the meaning of every line. As mentioned in the Introduction, this debate over shades of meaning extends to native speakers of Gaelic, too. With an understanding of the song, one can go on to sing it, and commit it to memory. One might infer from this that only when a song is fully understood, and only when one can pronounce its words clearly, can one sing it properly.

In his article “The Grain of the Voice”, the French literary critic Roland Barthes posits that “the materiality of a body speaking its native tongue” is perhaps the most

119 Shaw 2000, 38.
120 MacLean, 2004
essential element of vocal music. He writes that this ‘grain’ is “in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values”. Barthes separates what he calls the Pheno-song (the structural and compositional elements, such as language, grammar, compositional style, representation implicit in text and music) from the Geno-song (the actual physical production of the sound). At the outset of my investigation into this singing style, I presupposed that this Geno-song held the clue to Cape Breton Gaelic stylistic aesthetics, and that their vocal style was not only the most readily recognizable aspect of their performance but also the most important. Singers talk bout the ‘blas”, or “taste”, of a singer or violinist’s style, referring to that intangible quality which feels right. Further considering the issue, one could point to the usefulness of Barthes’ argument in examining the texture and tessitura of this song culture, because it appears that the style is as vital an aspect of performance as the song itself; indeed, the two are intrinsically intertwined. Barthes is speaking of an individual quality in singing style, and in the case of Cape Breton singing, they are looking for a style that is also connected to physical body but in a general way – that is, they want a voice to sound personally authentic rather than masqued by an artificial technnique. It is therefore problematic to separate the textual from the musical, or to separate the song from its performance, because the contents of a song, namely the words, their meaning, their allusions, and the stories they tell, are intrinsically bound up with the medium in which they are presented.

122 Barthes, 295.
This binding together of sound with meaning is hinted at instinctively by Jeff MacDonald, a fluent Gaelic learner and speaker who was in his late thirties at the time of our formal interview, and one of the only living Gaelic ‘bards’ in Cape Breton. When asked to reflect on what it is that makes Peter MacLean one of the prime examples of this singing style, he said:

Peter couldn’t sing any way other than the way he does, because what he got from his mother and all those he was exposed to when he was young is these time-honoured ways – that this is the way a song should be done – that came from generation to generation to generation, and it’s the best stuff that’s stuck, and the best style. And it’s what the language gave birth to. And for Peter, I’m sure most times that he sings, he’s got this abandon, he doesn’t have to try. He’s like a conduit or whatever, and he lets the song come through him.123

A song itself, then, carries embedded information about the way it should be sung, and those fluent in the style perceive the sound and style implicit in the text (as MacDonald says, “it’s what the language gave birth to”). This comment suggests that there is a productive tension between singer’s role as passive conduit to the remembered past and his role as an individual who may give in to creative abandon, and raises questions about how far an individual may go in his interpretation of a song before it has become something else in style or content.

Because participation and observation are often more illuminating than interviews, I have learned more from my informal, participatory experiences than I have from my carefully planned sessions of questioning; therefore, because our definition of “home” has been expanded in this chapter, it seems appropriate to tell the story of how I learned a song from Peter during a long car trip. On a sunny day in November 2003 Peter MacLean and I

123 Jef MacDonald, Interview with Stephanie Conn. December, 2003.
left his house and set out across the island to Mabou Ridge for a visit with his old friend, Angus Rankin. We drove together through the woods on the Eskasoni Mountain in Rear Christmas Island, and across the Grand Narrows bridge where, to our amazement, we saw the old white, steepled heritage church from Malagawatch being floated across a brilliant blue Bras D’Or lake to its new home at the Nova Scotia Highland Village. This surreal image was not, however, the most remarkable feature of my day. Our two-hour drive seemed the perfect opportunity to ask Peter for help in learning one of my favourite songs, the rousing sea song “Ochòin a Righ, Gur e mi tha muladach” (Alas, I am Unhappy). He had played me a recording of the song earlier that year, and it had caught my ear. When I first asked Peter if I could ‘get’ the song from him told me that few people know the song, and that it is very difficult because of its archaic words (and I believe, the wide-ranging melody, too). I told him I had already started to learn it, so Peter asked me to sing the chorus for him a few times as he sang the verses in between.
Then he began to coach me in an informal way, urging me to open up more, to make the
most of the strength of my voice: “You have to give it a lift”, he would say, and then
demonstrate by singing the line in question. We had recently been listening to a recording of
the late Johnny Beaton singing this song, and he had remarked on how well Johnny had sung
it. Here is the way Johnny Beaton sang the opening:

Fig. 7: “Ochôin a Righ, gur a Mi tha Muladach”, chorus and first verse,
transcribed from the singing of Peter MacLean.
There are a few small differences between the two versions, not just word changes (for example, “mo mhiann” in place of “ur miann” in measures 11-12, “Gur” for “Far” in the penultimate measure) but also slight variations in melody (for example, in measure 4 Johnny sings a leap upward where Peter moves in step-wise fashion, and in measure 15 instead of Peter’s gapped interval Johnny sings the notes in between). I asked Peter if I should try to imitate that performance. “No”, he said emphatically, “You should never try to imitate
anyone else. Use your own God-given talents”.124 More of the song and text (with translation) as Peter sang it can be found in the Appendix, Example 1.

This exchange illuminates much about Peter’s approach to singing Gaelic songs. By urging me to lift my voice and responding to my increase of both volume and resonance, he was indirectly indicating the criteria of good performance by steering me deeper into the powerful style that is the norm in his region for Gaelic singing, one that particularly suits this song and also one in which he is known to be a master. At the same time, he was sending me the contradictory message that I should sing in my own voice, rather than copying the style of another. He therefore established Johnny Beaton’s rendition of the song as a reference point for both of us, and set it as something to be remembered as “good” but not to be copied, and as more of a guide to style than a template. I also note that in every verse, and with every rendition, he varied the opening line of the melody slightly, although the basic melody is the same for chorus as for the verses, and Peter, too, makes small changes both in rhythm and in notes. Even in this short excerpt, it can be seen that the opening notes of the chorus are altered slightly when sung as a verse – compare the setting of “Ochoin a right gur a mi …” to “’Nuair chaidh sinn sios bha gaoth ’n iar-eas …”; the third measure of the chorus “mula (dach)” is a dotted rhythm, while the same notes are swung as a triplet when sung in the first verse to “again[ne]”. His changes add musical variety, but are also made to fit the natural emphasis of spoken Gaelic. These changes might also vary on different occasions, according to the energy of the performance. The best Gaelic singers are masters of text setting, using subtle invention and responding to circumstance.

There is a kind of productive tension at work here: an element of individualism is being encouraged within a certain pre-determined paradigm. In this tradition, accuracy is highly prized, and different versions of a song might be perceived as mistakes. Paradoxically, Gaelic singers seem to have a complex idea of what ‘accurate’ means. As I posited earlier, they must understand a song as a composite of evolving memories, performances and meanings. If this were not so then they would surely all sing songs the same way, whereas there seem to be as many ways of singing a song as there are singers. I asked Peter why he thought there were so many individual styles. He thought about it for a minute and then said:

It’s all about your mood and how you understand the mood and the meaning of the song. Sometimes you’ll sing a song and make a mess of it … and at other times you’ll really do it justice. If you’re in the mood, that is. A song can sound completely different from person to person but also sung by the same person, from one occasion to another.¹²⁵

A certain amount of personal expressiveness is allowed, then, and individuality is not just from person to person but from moment to moment. This suggests that even though the Gaelic singers intend to remain “faithful to the song” (as Peter has put it), they do not reproduce it slavishly and allow for individual variation. As James Kippen writes in his examination of the *tabla* tradition of Lucknow, “the musical tradition, then, is really a reservoir of knowledge from which each individual may draw selectively, and to which each may contribute new ideas that result from varying interpretations of the tradition”.¹²⁶ In Gaelic singing, this results from the multivocal nature of the tradition, in which each singer’s experience and associations are different. For Peter, this artistic license and contribution

¹²⁵ Peter MacLean, conversation with Stephanie Conn. May 24, 2008.
encompasses such features as melodic flourishes, limited pitch substitution, and starting pitch but, as discussed above, it does not extend to word variation, reordering of verses, or the mixture of verses from what are perceived to be different versions of the same song. Peter’s quest for accuracy in text is evidenced by his debating the sense of a line, or the shade of meaning in a particular word. Like many of the older Gaelic singers, he will point out when someone sings the air “a little differently” or makes a mistake. Still, it is clear that he sings a song differently than Johnny Beaton does on his tapes, and acknowledges that each performance is slightly different. Direct questions about song accuracy almost always result in a conversation about text, but on this occasion, Peter and I were talking about, or around, ideas about musical style. In either case, it seems that the musical and textual choices made by singers reflect a compromise between conservatism and individualism, and between orality and literacy, but also and most importantly, these choices allow them a present-day experience of these songs that resonates with the past. I posit that this is the most important role of memory in the practice of Cape Breton Gaelic singing.

Memory and Social Context in Cape Breton Gaelic Singing

In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner wrote that performative meaning is constructed though “negotiating about ‘fit’ between present and past”. In Cape Breton, Gaelic songs are learned through patient observation and repetition at *cèilidhs* and milling

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127 Although the probing of the meaning of a text informs a singer’s own personal understanding and perhaps performance, it might not be explicitly evident to those who listen.

128 Turner 1987, 96.
frolics, in the car on a long drive, or at the kitchen table; just as vital as the musical and
textual material, however, is the web of associations that is invoked along the way. This
simultaneous presence of past and present in the experience of Gaelic song has tremendous
implications for what it means to “know” a song, and one comes to understand it as a
composite of multiple memories, performances and meanings. Turner’s ideas about the ritual
aspect of performance also has great relevance for this musical practice, and in this
discussion of song in the home it is Turner’s ideas about the “‘fit’ between present and past”
that seem most pertinent.

When I think of times spent in Cape Breton it is the sounds that I recall most vividly
— the cadence of my friends’ voices, the rough timbre of the local fiddle style, the crackling
of a wood fire, the murmuring of trees, and the soft babble of the river which runs past the
house where I often stay. And, of course, there are the songs – sung in the car on the way to
the Johnstown Milling Frolic, at my friend Peter’s kitchen table, in the residences of the
Gaelic College, and the firehall in Christmas Island, where milling frolics and a féis are held
each summer. Philip Bohlman has written that fieldwork is at its best when it “brings us
closer to the fluidity and experiences on the boundaries between past and present”;\(^{129}\) this
suggestion has resonance for me in my own work, as I find that music and memory are
intrinsically bound together in Cape Breton’s Gaelic song repertoire, and new sounds are
laden with the association of the past they recall. After visiting Cape Breton for so many
years, each song reminds me of the person I first heard sing it; I will never hear \textit{A Fhleasgaich Uasail} without thinking of the late Donald MacDonnell of Mabou, or \textit{Il Eileadh

\[^{129}\text{Philip Bohlman.}\textit{The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World}\text{(Bloomington, 1988), 141-2.}\]
o Gu without thinking of Peter who at this time is, thankfully, still around to sing it for me. This sense of personal association between song and singer seems to be common; the mention of a song will usually prompt a community member to reminisce about who used to sing it, and how they sang it. Most singers can trace the ‘lineage’ of their own experience of a song: “I got this song from Peter MacLean, who got it from Mrs Patterson”. The ways that songs are repeated, transmitted and received are affected by appraisals of correctness and stylistic integrity by culturally fluent insiders of the community, because the style and sound of a song must resonate not only with the circumstances under which it is presently being performed but also with the memories of past renditions. For those who are part of this culture, the memory of a past presentation of a song is a reference point, a precedent to meet and uphold. It is as if there is a dialogue between past and present, between ritual and artistry, in which the way a singer ‘gives’ resonates with both. Singers might attempt exact duplication, yet every understanding or performance is unique.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur offers a possible route to reconciling this apparent paradox in his discussion of the hermeneutic arc. He writes, “hermeneutics proceeds from a prior understanding of the very thing it tries to understand by interpreting it”. In other words, we must already have an understanding of the world in order to interpret a text and thus understand the world better – a process that he considers to be a “living and stimulating circle”. Ricoeur describes our process of interpreting a work as appropriation – which he

defines as “the act of making one’s own that which was previously alien”\textsuperscript{131}. He adds that during this process, we “struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation”\textsuperscript{132}. Through interpretation of the symbols in a text we uncover its “intention” – the themes or meaning it embodies through an “intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader”.\textsuperscript{133} The hermeneutic arc positions the text and its receiver to be equal participants in the creation and understanding of its meaning. Thus, the process of singing and receiving the song in the present, and the way it is individually understood within the context of Gaelic culture, is as much a part of the song as the music and the text.

Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice has applied Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology to his own fieldwork experience. In his article, “Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience”, Rice sees it as a way to explain his own journey through fieldwork into a deeper understanding of Bulgarian music. He embraces the distinction made by Ricoeur between discourse as text with a fixed meaning, and discourse as an event that references the world implicated in the dialogue between sender and receiver. He says this about the hermeneutic arc:

The arc begins with pre-understandings of music, either as a performer or listener who finds it coherent, and passes through a structural explanation of music as sound, behaviour and cognition, to arrive at an interpretation and new understanding of the world or culture referenced by music acting as a symbol.\textsuperscript{134}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{132} Ricoeur 1981, 192.
\end{flushleft}
Each performance of a Gaelic song, then, is part of a continually evolving process that is both collective and individual. The contextual information offered by my collaborators, then, is not meant to impose an authoritative meaning for the song. Rather, the connection with past performances helps to establish a pre-understanding of the music, so that I can pass though the process of interpretation and arrive at my own personal meaning and individual rendition, contributing myself to the multivocality of the tradition.

Like the rituals described by Turner, Gaelic songs are tremendous storehouses of meaningful symbols, and my singing friends are aware of their usefulness as reflections of their culture. They take care to discuss the meaning and history of texts, and to analyze their rhymes. Still, songs only live while they are being sung, and the process of performance is as important as the content of the song itself. This is evidenced not only by the stylistic differences in their renditions, despite their intention to transmit the songs with little or no change, but also in the flexible relationship which singers have with printed sources, in many cases subverting their authority and turning instead to first-hand experiences. Perhaps, then, in the practice of Gaelic singing, Turner’s idea of fitting between past and present is really about taking part in the discourse – but not about one’s individual performance being reflective of any sort of unified whole.

How, then, does this negotiating a “fit” between past and present contribute to the way singers or listeners understand a Gaelic song? I’d like to suggest that this dialogue with the past, aided by the use of personally collected memorabilia, serves several purposes. Memory provides wider context – part of the “Brìgh an Òrain” of which John Shaw wrote – that helps the singer to understand the song more fully as part of a social process. It supports
the accurate rendition of a song – even if the ‘accuracy’ is judged subjectively. It also reveals the song’s meaning as multi-faceted, and influenced not only by past singers and historical or cultural background, but also the individual who sings it today. This simultaneous presence of past and present does not tether me to some previous meaning; rather, a multiplicity of individual experiences and idiosyncratic minor changes come together in the moment of present-day performance, allowing me to move beyond the role of passive conduit and become active in the process of creating music and community (as will be discussed further in Chapter 4, “Song and the Archive”, in light of how and why songs can be revived and re-inserted into an active repertoire). A song is not an entity unto itself but is rather many things, including a musical artifact and an audio icon of the past; a mediator of culture and shorthand for cultural information; an historical document; a mnemonic device; and a bridge to past emotional connections.

The folding-in of context to the collecting of content is now the norm in ethnomusicology, but was pioneered and championed by such early collectors of field recordings as Percy Grainger. In his 1908 article, “Collecting with the Phonograph”, he explains the usefulness of this method, but in doing so illuminates this discussion of performative meaning. As well as capturing the notes and words, he writes, recordings also capture:

… such entertaining accessories as the vocal quality, singing-habits, and other personal characteristics of singers. And a knowledge of such points is every bit as indispensable to good renderings of folkmusic as is experience of the traditions of cultured music to its proper interpretation. I think that most folk-song enthusiasts who have had the good luck to hear the singing of gifted folk-singers and chantymen, must feel that much of
the attractiveness of the live art lies in the execution as well as in the contents of the songs.\textsuperscript{135}

In response to this, musicologist Graham Freeman has suggested that Grainger’s transcriptions were just one element in a larger, living artwork, which included many other aspects of a singer. Just as each verse of a song is part of a greater whole, so the song was part of the life of a singer, connected by that individual performance.\textsuperscript{136} At this point it might be useful to distinguish between singers such as Peter – who, albeit subconsciously, acknowledges a song to be a process – and members of the community such as the Camerons – for whom a song is an object if not of sentimentality, then of nostalgia, much like their photos, stories or other memorabilia. Still in both cases, the performance of songs constitutes a part of the repertoire, and the life of the singer is part of the experience of a song. This, too, contributes to our understanding of why text and melody are so interconnected; the text is conveyed by the air, but the air on its own does not carry the same nuances and meaning.

\section*{Song and Private Collections}

I pay another impromptu visit to the Cameron family a few years later, in 2009. Father Leo is happy to be home visiting from British Columbia, Father Francis is hale and hearty, recovered from a long illness, and Janet is as radiant as ever. My friend Lorrie and I receive a warm welcome from the three siblings; this time Peter is not with us, and in fact we cannot

\textsuperscript{135} Percy Grainger, ‘Collecting with the Phonograph’, \textit{Journal of the Folk Song Society} 12 (1908), 150.

\textsuperscript{136} Graham Freeman, “‘It wants all the creases ironing out’: The Folk Song Society and the Ideology of the Archive”. \textit{Music and Letters}, forthcoming.
stay for long as we are on our way to visit him in the hospital. Still, we are whisked into the kitchen and offered a variety of things to eat or drink, and just as we settle on biscuits and tea Janet protests that, no, we must move into the other room, closer to the piano, so that we can have some music because they are all eager to hear us sing again. Leo is excited to hear Gaelic singing; he feels that if he could just spend some time here, at home, all the Gaelic he’s ever heard would all come back to him. None of them has ever been a fluent speaker, but they now regret not having learned from their parents. To that end, Janet and Francis meet up weekly with other local Gaelic learners at the Beaver Cove take-out for an hour of coffee and Gaelic conversation.

To my embarrassment, they all insist that I must sing “their father’s song”. “He would be sitting right there, singing”, says Leo, and with a sort of ceremony I am made to sit in a large, wood-trimmed rocking armchair in order to sing the song. Leo brings out his camera to capture the moment, they all take a seat, and I sing “O Gur mise tha fo mhighean” (Oh, but I am unhappy), a song about a man who was wrongfully accused and forced into service but yearns to return home to his family and his true love. I learned it from a home recording on which their father, Finlay Cameron, sings it in a particularly rousing fashion with little twists in the air and different words than are found in printed sources. He was joined on the chorus by neighbour Joe Lawrence MacDonald, who likely made the recording, as he was an avid collector. Finlay sang it like this (the complete transcription can be found in the Appendix, Example 2):
Fig. 9: “O Gur Mise Tha fo mhighean”, first verses and chorus, transcribed from the singing of Finlay Cameron.

The song is met with vocal approval; Leo proclaims that, as I sing, he feels that his father is here among us. Janet says that when she was listening to me sing she felt a little nostalgic at remembering old times. Now I ask to hear them play or sing, and with much apology Leo sings a comic song in English. Then Janet moves to the piano. Francis opens his fiddle case, rosins his bow, and begins to play a slow air – haunting, and free – with Janet’s chords fluttering below. I take out my video camera to capture some of it but then decide to put it away and instead give myself to the moment. When he is done, Francis tells us that this air is dedicated to John Morris Rankin, the fiddler from the Rankin Family (i.e., the band)
who died a few years ago. We move back to the big chairs, and drink some tea. The memory card fills up on my camera, but Lorrie and I are scribbling notes, furiously, and we will not forget.

Despite the singers’ intention that they should be passed along unchanged, these Gaelic songs are not passed along as static works or artefacts but rather as amalgams of many elements including past performances, multiple versions, memories of people and places, all of which contribute to this ‘fit’ between past and present. At home, sharing songs in the present, older singers draw me into both the synchronic and diachronic network of this musical community by sharing their memories of other singers and musicians, by discussing the text, and providing contextual details. As the Camerons did with photographs and their father’s chair, they often use an array of objects – photo albums, clippings, tapes – to evoke the sense of previous performances and singers.
In his essay, “Unpacking my Library”, Walter Benjamin writes of the “spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories”. He is referring to private book collections, but his observations on their embedded meaning resonates with my experience of the collections shown to me by my friends in Cape Breton. These collections include printed volumes and recordings but also scrapbooks and notebooks, photographs, and other souvenirs – such as that large wooden

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rocking chair at the Camerons’ house. There are several public archives in the province, which are increasingly important as the number of Gaelic native speakers declines.\textsuperscript{138} The collections I have seen in private homes, however, are perhaps even more vital. In this essay, Benjamin suggests why this might be so. He writes,

\begin{quote}
[O]ne thing should be noted: the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

As Benjamin indicates, collected objects are most meaningful when viewed as part of a social process; his books are meaningful not just for their content, but also because of the act of their collection. True, the recordings in the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University are a vital aid to the learner of Gaelic songs. They are well-organized and, where possible, they are attributed to a particular collector – but they are still divorced from their original context, and so in perusing them one must work hard to find related letters, newspapers, and other documents to connect the melodies and words with all that once surrounded them. This is not meant to undermine the value of archives in any way – and as I have said, they will surely play an increasingly key role in this song practice, even standing in as a simulacrum of community memory. Still, artefacts in a public collection are disconnected from the process of performance, and so their meaning is necessarily altered. It seems, however, that the fit between present and past of which Turner wrote can only truly be achieved through social interaction, and in a case where it is not possible these personally collected objects stand in as excellent intermediaries. As I sit in that wooden rocking chair at the Camerons, looking at

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{138} This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, Song and the Archive.
\textsuperscript{139} Benjamin, 67.
\end{quote}
his old family photographs, and hearing the recollections of his children, I am able to connect with him and his rendition of the song (that I had previously heard only on tape) in a far more meaningful way than I would have without all of this. This connection goes beyond awareness of stylistic or other musical features, and extends to a more holistic relationship with the material. I am aware that I must be ‘faithful to the song’ as I understand it; but also that I, too, have a role to play in evoking the past for others.

While Cecil Sharp’s work is somewhat unfashionable these days – his theory of “continuity, variation and selection”\(^\text{140}\) has been called “Darwinist” by Ian Russell\(^\text{141}\) – there is something to be drawn from the basic ideas behind it. The conventions of a practice influence an individual in that a singer inherits repertoire and style that he or she hears. Any performance of a Gaelic song, then, inherently references past performances which have been experienced by the singer and listeners; the performer enters into dialogue with them in realizing the present performance, and the listeners engage with past performances as they listen in the present.\(^\text{142}\) This is not a new concept in ethnomusicology: it was explored by Alfred Lord, and Lillis O’Laoire also writes of a referentiality in traditional culture, a kind of intertextuality which enfolds a greater context than the song itself.\(^\text{143}\) It is important, additionally, to continue to stress the multiplicity of individual experiences, the idiosyncratic changes that are brought to these, consciously or subconsciously, during the creative process.

\(^{140}\) Cecil J. Sharp, English Folk Song: Some Conclusions (London, 1907).

\(^{141}\) Russell, 317.

\(^{142}\) The same principal would extend to the composition of new songs but I shall not examine this in the present chapter.

of music making, and the effect of the particular discourse that each singer has heard. This referential process also compels my collaborators to practice Gaelic song in a way that is intrinsically conversant with the past and also with the contemporary English language world in which they presently live, always in a way that takes into account their own particular influences and preferences.

How does this dialogue with the past contribute to the experience of a song for its singers or participants, and with their ability to convey the “Brìgh an Òrain” (the sense of the song) of which John Shaw wrote? It surely has something to do with the concern for ‘correctness’ – stylistically, musically and textually – but also contributes to the meaning that song holds in people’s lives. In his essay “The Anthropology of Performance”, Turner posits that this ‘fit’ between past and present is tied to the way people derive meaning from artistic performance. Expanding on the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Turner writes,

If a given human collectivity scans its recent or more distant history – usually through the mediation of representative figures, such as chronicler, bards, historians, or in the lineal lens of performative or narrative genres – it seeks to find in it a structural unity to whose total character every past, culturally stressed collective experience has contributed something. If the relevant agents of reflexivity go further and seek to understand … and interpret … the structural unity of their past social life, to explore in detail the character and structure of the whole and the contradictions made by its various parts, we must develop new categories to understand the nature of their quest. One is meaning which Dilthey employs in two ways. The first defines the meaning of a part as “the contribution it makes to the whole”. The “whole” here would seem to be a complex of ideas and values akin to Clifford Geertz’s notions of “world view” (itself akin to Dilthey’s Weltbild) and ethos (or moral system). The resultant character of the whole is also said to possess “meaning” (Bedeutung) or sense (Sinn).\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{144} Turner 1987, 95.
In this essay, and in this section in particular, Turner is concerned with process-related issues and the connection between social drama and the meaning that people derive from cultural performance. Perhaps his folding-in of Geertz’s concept of ‘world view’ takes the scope wider than is required here, although one might argue that Gaelic performance culture is imbued with tenets of their cosmology and that the enculturation of children depends on these messages being communicated through cultural activities such as song, storytelling, etc. But his central idea, the extension of Dilthey’s ideas about how meaning in the present is derived from a connection to the past, is most relevant here. Thomas Turino skirts this issue in his book *Music as Social Life*, commenting that “Time, transmission across generations, is required for new cultural practices and styles to take on the rich indexical meanings and depth of habits of a cultural formation”.

While I wish he had developed this concept more fully, he does fold it into a relevant discussion of participatory folk traditions and how they are rooted in social processes that in turn have deep connections to the past.

* * *

I am at Peter’s another day, listening to his reel-to-reel tapes. Some of them he made in this house – of his Mother and of neighbours, at house parties, or on quiet evenings – but a few of them, he made while living in Boston in the 1960s, and many of these are of Johnny Beaton, from Little Judique. I ask him how he decided to make these recordings, and he tells me:

PML: So … we were singing with Johnny Beaton and the group, and Joe MacKenzie and I went to Johnny Beaton’s a lot. We got along wonderfully; we thought the world of Johnny and he thought the world of us. Joe and I decided, why don’t we go and have

a talk with Johnny Beaton, and take the tape recorder over some evening. We’d sit down and get him to tape some of the songs. Because when we leave [grimace], they’re all gone [the songs]. You know … and he’d leave [die]. So I asked and, Oh! he couldn’t wish anything better. So we went over there, and started about 8 o’clock in the evening, ‘til about midnight or one o’clock in the morning. And that’s how I got the tape.

SC: And you were singing the whole time?

PML: [nods silently] There was this Malcolm MacLennan, I love his singing--

SC: Why?

PML: He has a different voice. It’s so distinct – you know? The emphasis he puts on the words [smiles and shakes his head]. There was Johnny Beaton, Kay MacDonald, Malcolm MacLennan, Joe MacKenzie, and myself. Yeah. And out of that, there’s only Kay MacDonald and I living. [Laughs] Aw, now I’m talking sad. Anything else, dear?146

Peter’s account is interesting in itself for its rhythm and rhetoric, but also for the flourish with which he finishes – “And that’s how I got the tape” – which brings to mind the importance that Benjamin places on acquisition and personal possession of personal archives. Peter is also acutely aware that as his peers pass away and his singing friends diminish in number, the tapes are the only way of assuring that the songs won’t “go”. The tapes become a stand-in for his singing community, sustaining him in his own practice at home.147

All of my friends and contacts in Cape Breton whose lives revolve around the songs keep private collections of some sort, and treasure small details of related experiences. As I reflect on these, memory drops me into a jumble of sounds and scenes: the rustling of summer grasses mingle with last night’s tunes, half-remembered; I wake to the smell of salt, and lilies and highland pine, throat hoarse with singing and laughing. I am at the house of my

146 MacLean, 2004.
147 The implications of this will be discussed further in Chapter 4, “Song and the Archive”.

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friend Paul MacDonald, a musician and independent scholar, as I often am on summer trips. We joke that Paul has saved my life three times, and I have saved his only once, but in fact our visits over the past ten or more years have chiefly consisted of long sunny afternoons spent languishing on his porch debating musical points, countless hours inside the dark house hunched over reel-to-reel machines, and most excellent coffee. Paul stops in the middle of an interesting train of thought to contemplate the “Scotchtman” who had built this house late in the last century, clearing the land by hand and hewing the beams, so that we can sit here comfortably, sipping from steaming mugs. Hummingbirds hover at the window; I am a city girl, as he always reminds me, and I first saw hummingbirds here one summer.

Paul brings his personal touch to the house: a poster of Louis Armstrong; an old LP he made with his family band, Scumalash; a small pottery bird made by our friend Sarah Beck; pieces of beach glass left by his previous visitors; a framed photograph of his late friend, the mouth organ player, Tommy Basker. The heart of the house is an old upright piano, its guts exposed, rings from coffee cups on its lid, its keys scarred but its soul intact. On top rests a guitar of rich golden wood, made by one of our luthier friends, Otis Tomas. More guitars lean against the wall in their cases. The dining room is devoted to recording machines, a computer, old reel-to-reels, and tapes. He moves among his equipment like a cat, silent and confident, as if he himself is coaxing the sound out of the 1950s. “Wait ‘til you hear this!” he will often insist as he lunges for a tape, and I am amazed at what he plays for me: a house party in a community that has long since vanished; Gaelic songs sung sweetly by an old lady who no longer ‘has a voice’; and announcements from the past such as, “This tape was recorded at the home of Doug and Peggy Mac Master at 32 Ripley Road”. Paul knows most of the fiddle tunes and many of the Gaelic songs, and hums along under his
breath with some of them. For others he closes his eyes and smiles. He usually has a story about each person.

Paul is a musician, chiefly a guitarist, from a large Cape Breton Family. They no longer speak Gaelic but have strong ties to Gaelic culture, as Paul remembers here:

My father’s aunt Lizzie came to live with us when I was born. She was a first-class lilter\textsuperscript{148} and a great source for Gaelic songs. She often corrected her brothers (all four of whom were fiddlers) and other local musicians on their settings of the old tunes.

The first years of my life were difficult because I had asthma, and because I was home a lot Lizzie and I became very close. I used to get up early and find her in the corner of the kitchen, knitting and gently lilting in her rocking chair. I’d climb up onto her lap, curl up there, and rock the chair to the rhythm of her lilting. It became our morning ritual, and lasted all through my childhood.\textsuperscript{149}

Despite his concentration on instrumental music, both as a player and a recording engineer, Paul maintains empathy for the culture as a whole and the place that Gaelic has had within it. It might seem odd to turn the spotlight on a non-singer in this chapter on “Song at Home”, but song and instrumental music and storytelling were formerly interwoven in Cape Breton, and connected to so many other aspects of culture and to the larger community. In Paul’s story I also see the role of memory and the importance of the private archive.

My collaborators are not the only ones with these personal collections. Over the years since 1995 when I began to learn Gaelic songs I have amassed over seventy cassette tapes. They came to me in various ways; in some cases, I sought out a recording of a song I wanted to sing, either from archives or from the equally voluminous tape collection of my fellow

\textsuperscript{148} ‘Lilting’ is one word used to describe the singing of instrumental tunes either with words or nonsense syllables; also called ‘jigging’ or ‘mouth music’ (in Gaelic, \textit{puirt a beul}).

Gaelic enthusiasts. In other cases, a friend gave me a tape thinking I might like to learn one of the songs on it. One tape I received as thanks for writing an article for the Gaelic newspaper, *Am Braighe*. In 1998 I began to record tapes at milling frolics and Gaelic song workshops, and then, as I got to know Gaelic singers, I began to visit them at home and ask them to sing specific songs for me, or songs of their choosing. In 2003, the year in which I lived in Cape Breton for seven months, I recorded with the most intensity, and filmed video interviews and performances for a future video documentary. Like Peter’s collection, these tapes now provide me with a sort of virtual Gaelic community during the months between visits to Cape Breton, and support my memory of millings, ceilidhs and visits. But what do they represent? It seems that I might have skewed my own impression of Gaelic singing activity and canon, since I exercised so much personal choice, but it is possible that I would have done this even if I had grown up in a Gaelic-speaking community, for example as Peter’s contemporary in Christmas Island in the 1920s and 30s. Paul MacDonald maintains that choice has always been available to Cape Breton Gaelic musicians, as they have always been surrounded not only by ‘Scotch’ music of their own communities but also Irish, French and Mi’kmaq. They did not simply pick up everything, or only one thing, but rather exercised musicianship, preference, etc. Perhaps it is not so different, then, that I have been selective in which songs I recorded and learned. Still, if I had my life over I would always roll tape and never make requests; I would record complete events and not only selected parts; I would fight for better placement of my microphones, as in some cases the audio was so bad that I discarded the tape. Perhaps I would have collected a more complete selection of songs. My personal archives are created through many deliberate decisions, but so are those of my collaborators.
One of the cassette tapes in my collection is labeled “Tape From Maxie MacNeil”, which I received from my friend Lorrie MacKinnon. As friends, singers and fellow Gaelic enthusiasts, Lorrie and I attend many of the same events, make many visits together, and share research. She hosts a yearly Symposium at Christmas Island, which focuses on aspects of Gaelic culture in Christmas Island and beyond. We also trade whatever tapes we can get our hands on, but we are not alone in this practice. Maxie had offered to make a tape for Lorrie with songs sung by Christmas Island bard and musician, Hugh MacKenzie. She had provided him with a tape that was blank on only one side, the other containing songs taped for her by Angus (Sandy) Rankin (including himself, Finlay Cameron of Boisdale, with his daughter Janet accompanying him on piano, and a few songs from Mabou singer, Angus (Red) Rankin). When Maxie gave Lorrie back the tape he told her had had recognized some voices on it, such as Finlay Cameron, and made a copy of that for himself. I have seen a similarly labeled tape at the home of Peter MacLean, but I am unsure if it is a clone of the same tape, or if it contains a different set of selections. I have some of the Cameron recordings on another tape, which I received from someone else. Tapes are therefore circulated and excerpted, re-dubbed and re-selected, and each singer curates the song list, much as in any tape-trading culture; recordings are exchanged and given and thus personal collections become overlapped and interwoven, creating a web of individual memories that support individual singers.

Song lives in the home as a multifaceted and malleable thing, overlaid with layers of associations. Memory and social interaction contribute to the process of transmission, and to how singers and listeners derive meaning from the songs. This personal experience, along with the unique experiences of each singer in the micro-community of their own homes,
result in a varying repertoire and set of styles. The practice of Gaelic singing at home is thus particularly multivocal. How, then, do memory and individual experience coalesce in more public performances? I shall explore this in the following Chapter.
I first visited Cape Breton in August 1996 during a week of particularly spectacular Perseid meteor showers. Cape Breton was a perfect place from which to view these, as I have never seen a sky as inky black as it is there. After each night of driving and dancing or singing and laughing with my friends in our halting Gaelic I would walk to my room at the Gaelic

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Plate 6: Perseid Meteor shower. August 12, 1996.\(^{150}\)

College and pass by knots of people sitting or lying on the grass, watching the darting points of light.

On one such night, I had been to my first milling frolic. There, the noise and light inside the Christmas Island firehall could barely be contained, and both spilled out into the inky black, Perseid-lit parking lot. The force of the voices, the moving songs in an as-yet unknown tongue, and the warm but curious greetings offered to me by community members made such an impression that the Perseid showers, surely a more significant historical event, have all but faded from my memory. I have returned to Cape Breton every year since then, and almost always make it to the Christmas Island milling in August.

At its best, a milling frolic is a stream of Gaelic songs that burst forth like runaway horses until they become a blur of choruses and whoops and laughter, leaving you hoarse and longing for the night lunch of sandwiches, biscuits and tea set out in the back room. The milling blanket cloth is rough on the hands, and as we beat it on the table in time to the music. Inhaled bits of flying wool and dust necessitate cups of beer and whisky, which we stash under our seats. The chatter of the community is all around, filling the space between songs and silence. Singers lean across the table to shake hands, or to shout inquiries about a song, or the farm, or each other’s wives. I turn to my right to comment on a song to someone; when I turn back to the left, someone different has taken the seat. I look around the table to see Maxie MacNeil, Barry George, Rod C. MacNeil, Hector MacNeil, Colin Watson, Allan MacLeod from Gabarus, Betty Lord, who drives all the way from New Glasgow. Everyone is a wit; the quips fly in English and in Gaelic, especially from Rod C.’s brother Jamie MacNeil who never misses a chance to make someone blush.
Everyone is too polite to begin the evening by being the first to sing. “Come on Peter, *Gabh oran* (give a song), go on, now”. “No, no, what about you, Maxie, you have a good strong voice. Why don’t you start yourself?” “Stephanie, you know what we want to hear you sing”. “No, Roddy, I can’t sing before you do!” At some point, Peter sings “Air faill irinn i irinn”, a song with a winding melody about a drowning; he knows how to make the best use of his voice as he drives the verses up to their climax and then swoops down again, scooping up the rest of us so that we coalesce to make the chorus strident and fierce. We remember that it is the songs we have come for – to hear them come alive in the voices of powerful singers, to be moved once more by their melodies and stories, and to be one with each other through the music.

My annual experiences at this song event combine the peace of continuity with the surprises that each occasion brings. There was the year that the large and woodsly Jimmy “Calaman” MacNeil brought the room to silence with his moving rendition of a lullaby, “Ba, mo leanabh”; another year a very young Colin Watson sang “A ceud òran Ghaidhlig aice”, his first Gaelic song. We keep the singing going as long as we can, holding our ground until it is so late that Joe Peter MacLean and Paul Wukitsch, waiting patiently with their fiddles and the pianist, Janet Cameron, wonder if this might be the night they do not get to play after the singing is done. We are a circle of singers around a table, but community members are dotted all around us in constellations, listening and sometimes joining hands to swing their arms in time to the music. One year we sang without a stop from eight in the evening until midnight, and the songs numbered at least seventy-five, with not a scrap of paper or a

151 See notation on page 89.
songbook in sight. Perhaps tonight will contain some other special moment, or it will sink into memory along with all the other milling frolics, songs and singers as numerous as the points of light which form those Perseid showers. We will talk about it over tea at Rod C.’s kitchen table, or in the car with Peter on the way to the milling at Johnstown, then we will sing some different songs, ones too slow or gentle for a milling frolic, or Peter will sing a long-forgotten local song that only he knows.


Although outwardly they look much the same as always, the way millings are practiced in contemporary Cape Breton reflects a change not only in purpose but also in meaning – and this meaning cannot be accessed easily even with all the existing community histories, songbooks or recorded archives of Gaelic song. In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Cultural Memory and Performance in the Americas*, Diana Taylor looks to performed repertoire rather than inscribed canon as a prime site of cultural knowledge. Taylor evaluates the ideas that embodied performances can convey, and considers some opposing points of
view. Structuralists such as Victor Turner considered performance as a representation of a
culture’s syntax and character. Using a hermeneutic approach, Clifford Geertz read them as
texts with multiple layers of meaning. But others might argue that performances cannot
reflect a culture since they are consciously constructed and are thus, by their nature, artificial.
Taylor offers instead, a synthesis of these points of view. She writes:

> Although a dance, a ritual or a manifestation requires bracketing or framing that
differentiates it from other social practices surrounding it, this does not imply that
performance is not real or true. On the contrary, the idea that performance distills a
“truer” truth than life itself runs from Aristotle through Shakespeare and Calderón de la
Barca, through Artaud and Grotowski and into the present.\(^{152}\)

Taylor’s comments seem very much in tune with Victor Turner’s idea that rituals and, by
analogy, performances are storehouses of meaningful symbols which are themselves
revelatory of a culture’s values; these might perhaps be read as representative rather than a
literal presentation. This seems to connect with Turner’s idea that performances constitute a
“moment in and out of time”\(^{153}\) which connect both to the past and with present-day
experience. Clearly memory – of people, past performances, and community history – plays a
vital role in making this connection. In applying this point of view to a study of Gaelic
singing in Cape Breton, it is necessary to problematize public performances in general and
position them in the context of Gaelic culture. A strictly structuralist approach seems
inappropriate, so I will instead use Turner’s ideas about ritual as a starting point to consider
Gaelic singing in public as personal experience from which meaning is derived in different
ways than it is in private.

\(^{152}\) Diana Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (Durham:
Duke University Press, 2003), 4

\(^{153}\) Turner 1964, 96.
It is also necessary to remember that all performances are curated to some extent. As James Clifford reminds us, we as ethnographers are called to question how our acts of collecting and archiving create an unavoidably subjective view of the music we study, but at the same time members of the societies we study also participate in a process of selection, creating systems of meaning for the elements they choose to represent their culture. This is evident and significant in the public performance of Gaelic song in Cape Breton, in which there is a productive tension between the multivocality of private performance and the unity of public ones.

This chapter considers the public performance of Gaelic songs, and what they tell us about the meaning of these songs both to individuals and to a community. Having looked at the home as the prime site of the practice, it seems appropriate to consider public performance as a secondary one. The singing of songs here must be differentiated from the singing of Gaelic songs at home or in private, or any circumstances in which they are not at all framed as a formal performance – one with a paying audience in particular, or one in which everyone is not expected to participate (as they would most often at a house party). Public performance presents different aspects of the practice than can be seen at home, and at the same time confirms some aspects as constants. It might be argued that all discourse is performance, since it is all curated and knowingly presented; this is true to some extent but in this chapter I attempt to understand how the presentation or performance of Gaelic songs is different when there is a separation between singer and audience, and when a metaphorical frame (however tenuous) is placed around the song renditions.
My study focuses on the significance of Gaelic singing to its singers rather than analyzing the songs themselves. I do not seek to dissociate practice from the canon it engenders and from which it feeds, but rather to view the canon as a result of complex individual and community practices. For now I will examine the musical choices made by individual singers, exploring how a multiplicity of individual practices come together and are synthesized in contemporary group performances. I posit that milling frolics exemplify how the Gaelic song practice in Cape Breton changed in the last century; although milling frolics are in some ways slightly artificial presentations of Gaelic singing, they continue to be practiced and singers take an active part in shaping how this is done. I will explore the idea of these events as a secular ritual, and suggest that this is part of the reason why millings and Gaelic songs have survived in Cape Breton. I also examine the effect that dislocation from place (namely, from home communities) had on some Cape Breton Gaelic singers who performed abroad. Public performances also provide a lens through which to view the interconnectedness of song and place, both as a factor in how one experiences the song practice and as part of how one constructs one’s self-identification or, at least, how people understand their lives and their history. This chapter ends with a consideration of the association of place and community with Gaelic songs and styles of singing.

Chapter 4, “Song and the Archive”, will consider the relationship between the two in greater detail.
Performance of Gaelic culture

If Gaels have not amassed significant monuments of tangible culture, it might be in part because of the place of *dualchas* in their societies. *Dualchas* is a Gaelic word that can be variously interpreted as heritage but also culture, inheritance, tradition and, in the abstract, one’s character. If it is considered to mean ‘tradition’ in the broadest sense, then it seems useful to think of Gaelic *dualchas* as a “store of available elements”\(^{155}\) which are drawn upon by members of a culture and which include storytelling, dance, instrumental music (chiefly tunes played by fiddle or bagpipe but now extending to piano and guitar, sometimes mandolin, banjo, and more), and singing. The ethnographic moment with which I began this chapter plunges us into a specific type of public musical experience – the milling frolic, at which Gaelic songs are sung – but before discussing it further I would like to clarify that this is just one of the many kinds of music making that go on in Cape Breton communities with Scottish roots. Of course, neighbouring Mi’kmaq and Acadian communities hold their own musical events. Although it is generally maintained that the societies are separate, it seems that Mi’kmaq always played Scottish fiddle and learned Gaelic language and hymns, which the Cape Breton Gaels sing in a style that is unlike current Gaelic singing in Scotland but not unlike the style of Mi’kmaq singers. The question of how much crossover exists or ever did

happen between these cultures has been explored by Gordon Smith in his article “Lee Cremo: Narratives about a Micmac Fiddler” and mentioned by Glen Graham in his book.

Milling frolics are self-contained events, although they are sometimes followed by a party and dance. There are detailed accounts of milling frolics that combined the practical purpose of working cloth with entertainment in the article “A Milling Frolic on the North Shore”, in Cape Breton’s Magazine, but none of my informants could remember such an event. The music played by fiddles and pipes comprises a repertoire distinct from Gaelic songs sung at millings, and is most often experienced as an independent entertainment: as accompaniment at local square dances, which take place at church halls and firehalls in various communities around the island, or at private house parties or sessions. Some fiddle tunes do have Gaelic words put to them, called puirt a beul, Gaelic for mouth music, but otherwise the song repertoire is separate. In general, just one or two fiddlers play at a time, accompanied by piano and sometimes guitar as well. This Scotch music, as it is often called in Cape Breton, is not only heard at millings but also at concerts which are put on by communities (and which are sometimes called céilidhs, although this word has a different connotation discussed previously) at more commercial concerts such as those put on at larger venues, or those which are part of an international festival such as Celtic Colours, which is

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157 Glenn Graham, The Cape Breton Fiddle: Making and Maintaining Tradition (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2006).
158 Cape Breton’s Magazine 21 (December 1978), 39-46.
159 Because my informants do not sing puirt a beul and claim not to know them and Heather Sparling has written about this issue in her Master’s thesis, I do not include this song genre in my present study. Likewise I do not discuss the Protestant tradition of Psalm precenting, which is not practised by my informants (and has sadly all but died out in Nova Scotia).
held every October. One area in which there is some crossover in repertoire from vocal to instrumental music is in the playing of Gaelic songs as slow airs on the pipes or the fiddle. This is done as a break between the faster sets of dance tunes such as jigs and reels, whether these are played at a dance or simply for listening at a formal concert.

Gaelic culture emphasizes specialization to some extent. Such performers as the Rankin Family, the Barra MacNeils, Natalie MacMaster and Ashley MacIsaac – all of whom have achieved commercial success in Canada in concerts, recordings, and on television – might have given the impression that Cape Breton is full of huge families in which everyone can sing, step-dance, play fiddle and piano. It is certain that some individuals are particularly talented, but also that the conventions of a contemporary commercial performing style demands that one entertain in multiple ways, with entertainment being the key here. It is for this reason that while a member of the band Puirt a Baroque, I myself had to develop and demonstrate my stepdance and bodhrán-playing skills, although my role in the ensemble was chiefly to sing. Some Cape Bretoners practice more than one of these arts, but in general my Gaelic-speaking collaborators specialize in, or rather, identify with, just one: singing. Peter MacLean is one of the foremost Gaelic singers on the island, but it happens that he also knows many Gaelic stories and tells them well. In his youth he played fiddle for local dances. Still, he thinks of himself as a singer. Now in his nineties, he performs on stage or at milling frolics if requested to, but he does not consider himself to be a storyteller and so he would not tell stories in public. In my experience, there are few members of the older generation of Gaelic speakers who would identify with more than one practice to the extent that they would perform both in public.
The *dualchas* of Gaelic culture is performed; stories, songs and tunebooks have been collected but it is in the moment of embodiment that it comes alive. Among those who seek to encourage and revive the Gaelic culture in Cape Breton, there is a great emphasis on the interconnectedness of all of these elements and on their sharing and casual presentation in the home or other everyday settings rather than on stage at a concert. The presentation, however, of music or dance or stories might not always be framed as performance; is Peter performing when he tells a comic story to us around his kitchen table? Is a milling frolic a performance or a social event that includes singing? And is any of the dancing or fiddling at the little hall at Glencoe Mills a performance, or is it merely the sharing of tunes and a physical response? For the purposes of this chapter, I am beginning with the assumption that public renditions of music with non-participating bystanders are public performances, but that the spontaneous renditions of songs or fiddle tunes, which happen at home or when visiting, are not framed or understood as such. I shall consider the milling frolic as a particular kind of public performance, and try to understand its significance in the lives of those who sing or listen.

**Milling Frolic: Background and Description**

The sun is slipping behind the hills over the Bras D’Or lakes as I park across the road from the Christmas Island firehall. The building is fairly new; none of the original town buildings remain, and the beautiful old church hall was demolished just two years ago. The firehall is white and utilitarian with crimson trim, and two large fire engines peer out of its glass garage doors. I am not the first to arrive, so I feel a sense of urgency: Peter MacLean is getting out of his car, Hector MacNeil is standing in the doorway, and Sandy MacNeil is tying on his
orange safety vest as he prepares for a night of directing cars into the small parking lot that will soon be overflowing. I put away my papers, tuck a few dollars in my pocket, and go on in.

Many years after that first visit in 1996, Féis an Eilean (Festival of the Island) in Christmas Island, Cape Breton feels like a second home to me now because of the abundance of familiar faces and the warmth with which I am greeted. Entering the hall I find Peter immediately; after his usual big hug, we scan the crowd, and he breaks into a grin as he waves to Maxie MacNeil. “Dé mar a tha sibh?” (How are you?) they shout to each other across the rising din of the room, shaking hands vigorously and slapping each other on the shoulder. I am relieved to see the older singers, my collaborators, arrive and wave to me. These days there are as many learners as native speakers at the table, but the older singers are the pillars upon which a great milling is built. Their presence provides the event with a core of performances that are connected to the singing practices of the surrounding communities, and to the past. For this reason the organizers of the féis go to great pains to make sure they are there, organizing rides, fetching them personally, and paying a small gas honorarium to those who drive a great distance.

Beth MacNeil, also a Gaelic singer but from a younger generation than Peter, is behind the table at the entrance taking in the modest fee, which in 2009 still cost just $8 with refreshments included. She urges me to sign the guest book, and then proudly shows this year’s commemorative Féis t-shirt. I am abashed that it features a photograph I took at a milling here years ago, but also flattered to feel like I am accepted not only for my participation in the singing, but also as a kind of adjunct member of this community. The
audience has begun to gather inside the hall now, taking their place in the orange, straight-backed chairs, which have been set up in a large horseshoe around the room. They are friends or relatives of the singers, people who live down the road, cousins and aunts and nieces and grandsons of Gaelic speakers in the community, and sometimes Peter’s friend Blue who runs a gas station on the Eskasoni Mi’kmaq reservation just on the other side of the mountain.

Milling frolics are an intersection of various ways of experiencing music involving native speakers, learners, and non-speakers of Gaelic: as both formal performance and informal sharing; as a public event and a community gathering; as tradition yet with innovation. For this reason, millings not only reveal much about how Gaelic song functions within a community, but also how it has been adapted along with other aspects of cultural life in Cape Breton. The way millings are practiced in contemporary Cape Breton reflects a change in meaning and purpose, but historically they had a very practical use. Gaelic-speaking settlers brought over the practice of the milling frolic from Scotland. It is worth noting that despite the popularity today of cable-knit Scottish sweaters, eighteenth-century inhabitants of Scotland’s Hebrides would not have been able to knit, and so all clothing would have been woven and tailored; thus, the shrinking or fulling of cloth to make it softer, more tightly-woven and warmer would have been important. Milling, or waulking as they call it in Scotland, was accompanied by singing in order to lighten the work and was often followed by a party. In the new world, these events became known as milling frolics. Milling was chiefly women’s work in Scotland: while men were out or away doing other work such as fishing or farming, women would work the cloth they had woven. In the New World,

\[160\] Vicky Quimby, “Gaels and the knitting tradition”, in An Rubha Vol. 11 No. 2 Fall 2009.
millings were often held in the winter, the ‘frolic’ element described above was added, and everyone would attend.\textsuperscript{161} The long, wide cloth would be laid on the table; it would be wet with water or urine, and then beaten against the table in rhythm with the music. Periodically the cloth would have to be measured to see if it had shrunk enough.

There is a genre of songs which were specifically composed for this work called \textit{Orain Luaidh} (Milling or Waulking Songs) but it came to be that many other kinds of songs are sung at millings, including sailing songs or other songs which shared such characteristics as a driving rhythm known as ‘swing’, solo verses with chorus, unison singing, and sometimes choruses which consist of vocables (nonsense syllables). The songs lend themselves to singing at various tempi, but this suited the work; when the blanket was wet it would be heavier, and so slower songs would be used, but as it dried the tempo could quicken. Because of the history of the practice of milling, many songs are composed from the point of view of the woman; and as is the case with Gaelic songs in general, there are multiple songs composed on same ‘air’ (melody). These days almost any song with a strong rhythm and a chorus can be sung at a milling. If I were to assemble a sort of fantasy milling frolic in my mind it would likely include a wide variety of songs that are often sung at these events. Peter might start off with “Ho Ro ‘s Toil leam fhin thu”, an old-country song that anticipates a wedding. Maxie MacNeil follows with “Cumha Do Dhòmhnail MacFhionnigain”, a lament on the death of a local boy in World War II, with a chorus of vocables. Next perhaps Allan MacLeod will unleash his powerful vibrato with the hilarious

\textsuperscript{161} See “A Milling Frolic on the North Shore” in \textit{Cape Breton’s Magazine} 21(1978), 39-44.
and wordy “Óran Do Sheann Ford”, which makes fun of a man’s broken-down car. The room quiets a bit for Rod. C. MacNeil’s soft voice on another lament, “Cumha Aonghais”, but then lifts when Jeff MacDonald with his supple, sweet voice, sings the love song “O Chruinneag”. Each voice is so different, and the choice of song so particular and varied. The songs come from different communities, some from the old world and some from the new; they are laments and love songs, jokes and work songs. The singers’ voices are soft or loud, rough or sweet. I could write a historical note for each song I have listed, but it would tell you much more if I could write the story of how each singer learned the song and what it means to him. However, there is no time for such discussion at these gatherings.

The physical arrangements of song performance at a milling frolic reveal much about social dynamics. In a formal concert, even at community concerts such as the annual Highland Village Day in Iona, the flow of performance energy is largely one way – outward from the performer to audience – and there is little feeding back to the performer with the exception of applause at the end. In a concert, a soloist would stand alone, or at the front and centre of the group, facing the audience. At a milling frolic the singers sit in a circle around a table – as though they are at a hearth or kitchen table – and the members of the audience sit all around, encircling the singers, but they are also free to come and go, talk, or observe from different viewpoints. Singers and listeners shout encouragement to the solo singer, so that cries of Suas e! (Lift it!) or Sin thu thein! (Good for you!) might overlap with the solo verses. Even the role of soloist is constantly in flux; individual singers take turns singing the solo verses, with the others join in on chorus, so that the role of leader is passed around. This arrangement seems very much in fitting with Turner’s suggestion that subjects in a ritual performance are all treated equally, constituting “a community … of comrades and not a
structure of hierarchically arrayed positions”. It should be noted that a reluctance to put oneself forward is typical of Gaelic culture in general, so in this way, too, it seems that millings suit Gaelic dualchas more than would a formal concert. The physicality is an integral part of the song performance: as songs are sung the singers handle the cloth, pass it around, feel the scratchiness of the wool, brush hands against the wooden table.

It seems milling frolics have been this way for as long as anyone can remember, and the ruckus of the observers, which is so much a part of them today, does not seem to reflect a diminishing respect for the music. When the folklorist Sidney Robertson Cowell visited the North Shore of Cape Breton in 1953 to collect Gaelic singing, she attended and recorded several millings, but then decided to reconvene the singers in an empty hall on other days to re-record some of the material. Her field notes reflect the frustration she must have felt (and to which I can certainly relate) at not being able to hear the singing very clearly, but they also reveal the social milieu of a milling that seems to have changed little in more than fifty years. She writes, “A length of cloth is pounded with singing as was common 20 years ago. The pounding is actually going on here and on tape 116 …. A group of shifting membership in one corner, talking, tea served elsewhere, children romping … most of these songs recorded later on”. 162 This might be annoying for someone making a recording, but it is definitely an inseparable part of the atmosphere of a milling.

R. Murray Schafer has suggested that one is automatically situated at the centre of a soundscape, rather than observing it from one given vantage point, as is the case with visual

162 Sidney Robertson Cowell, field notes to Reel no. 114 and 115, recorded August 15, 1953. AFS 11, 308
landscape.\textsuperscript{163} It is true that when plunged into the middle of a noisy scene we have little choice but to interact in some way as it is very difficult to shut it out or withdraw from it. Such is the case at a milling: whether or not you are singing at the table, you are battered by layers of sound and are situated in the heart of it because of the way a milling is arranged. The singer must also raise his or her voice above the sound of the beating of a blanket on the table, talking, clinking of glasses or beer bottles from the bar, footsteps on the ground, doors slamming, etc. It is fortunate but perhaps not entirely coincidental that the sound of this singing is so forceful, although recently the organizers of milling frolics have made use of amplification. In some places, such as at the annual Johnstown Milling Frolic, a volunteer stands behind the solo singer, holding the microphone to the singer’s mouth (see Plate 8); at the Christmas Island \textit{Féis} a sound technician is employed to make sure an archival recording is made. He hangs a set of microphones from stands affixed to the ceiling, and solo singers crane their necks to sing towards these. In either case, it seems that this artificial sound reinforcement changes the dynamic of the event: from something that is organic and integrated to something that is more of a self-consciously framed performance. I have heard singers complain that the microphones are annoying, but they are also annoyed when they cannot hear the solo verses, so it is difficult to conclude if the sound reinforcement is helpful or merely an irritation.

This use of microphones is perhaps the most visible change in how milling frolics are practiced. Another more subtle change is in the number of attendees who can actually participate in the musical performance itself. Recently I once again viewed the National Film Board’s short film, The Gaels of Cape Breton, part of a 1947 series called Peoples of the Maritimes. The film ends with brief footage of a milling frolic on the North Shore. For any Cape Breton Gaelic singer today, it is exciting to see and hear such well-known, now-departed singers as Tommi Peigi MacDonald, Malcolm Angus MacLeod, and more. Most striking, however, is the number of singers present and singing – far more than can be
accommodated at the milling table. Eleven strong singers are visible at the table, and twice as many stand around with their arms linked, singing in full voice. However staged this scene might have been for the purposes of this taping, it is stirring and poignant to imagine a time when that many singers could be mustered in one community, as currently one must recruit from the entire island and beyond to fill a milling table with Gaelic singers. The impact of this change on the performance and repertoire of millings will be discussed further below. For now, it seems worth considering how such a scene conveys the physicality of a milling, with its inward-facing sharing and its concentric rings, even more clearly than present-day practice.

**Millings and Changing Meaning**

In 1978, Ron Caplan interviewed residents of the North Shore region for his *Cape Breton’s Magazine* and was told about the abundance of millings that would have been held in the 1920s. One singer recalls, “As far as singing is concerned, it was quite common to go to three millings a week. I was to four millings one [particular] week”. In his remembrances of growing up in the Loch Lomand/Framboise area, Gaelic singer Kenneth Morrison makes several mentions of millings, and hints at the social aspect: “Framboise was a hotbed of Gaelic singers. Everyone in Framboise could sing a milling song…. From Gabarus Lake there were the brothers Angus and Philip MacDonald. Angus was one of the best singers I

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can remember …. Philip would entertain at the milling table with his personal versions of humorous songs”.\textsuperscript{165}

From what my collaborators tell me, millings were never held with such frequency in Iona, Christmas Island or Boisdale. Peter MacLean says that “in those days there were very, very few milling frolics – probably just a house gathering, and people visiting, sing a few songs”.\textsuperscript{166} As Hector MacNeil writes,

\begin{quote}

It seems that milling frolics did not enjoy the same longevity in the Grand Narrows area. The coming of the railroad to Grand Narrows in the late 1800s allowed for the shipping of wool from homes in that area to mainland Nova Scotia and later Prince Edward Island for processing. One informant dated the last milling frolic in the Castle Bay-Benacadie area at the late 1920s to early 1930s. That was held to celebrate someone “from away”. Nevertheless frolics, and for a short time, milling song competitions, were held periodically in the parish halls in Christmas Island, Iona, and neighbouring MacKinnon’s Harbour into the 1960s.\textsuperscript{167}
\end{quote}

By the mid twentieth century milling frolics were no longer actually needed anywhere for functional work (although occasionally local artisan weavers give their cloth to be milled as a special demonstration). Nevertheless, millings continued to be held because they held a value that extended beyond the function of processing woollen cloth. An annual milling frolic was begun in Johnstown in 1934 and continues to this day; since the establishment of Christmas Island’s \textit{Féis an Eilein} in 1991 several more \textit{féisean}\textsuperscript{168} have been established and these

\textsuperscript{166} Peter MacLean, interview with Stephanie Conn. February, 2004.  
\textsuperscript{168} Plural of \textit{féis}.  

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usually include a milling as part of their Gaelic singing events; in addition, there are an increasing number of Gaelic activities sponsored by the Gaelic Council of Nova Scotia.

What, then, is the function of millings in a post-industrial society that no longer requires them for the original use? Millings mean different things to different people depending on the role taken in them, but they are almost always important both as musical events and as social occasions at which community members gather, old friends visit and tourists drop in. There are layers of inclusion at such events; older fluent Gaelic speakers converse in Gaelic and many of these are the ones who lead the songs; learners and younger Gaelic speakers enjoy the chance to practice speaking Gaelic and begin to take a solo role in the singing as they progress and are encouraged by the older singers; some community members speak Gaelic but do not sing; some community members neither sing or speak Gaelic, and they listen and socialize at millings; and cultural tourists drop in to hear Gaelic singing and get a taste of local culture.

Perhaps the most paradoxically peripheral group is that of local youth. In an interview with several teenagers selected to be part of the *Eilean nan Og* training program at Highland Village I was told that they prefer to listen to the milling from outside the hall; beyond the parking lot, up in the small grove of trees, you can still hear the singing and the thumping of the blanket, mingled with the voices of others who gather to drink and talk in the bushes, the voices of the parking attendants, and the occasional passing of a vehicle on the road. Some community members take offense when this is drawn to their attention, attributing the

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169 “Island of Youth”, a Cultural Internship program held each summer at Highland Village Museum in Iona. It is a paid learning experience in Cape Breton’s Gaelic culture, history, and language, for youth age 14 to 18.
behaviour to a lack of appreciation for the musical tradition. Alternatively, it might indicate that the youth are keenly aware of where their place is on the spectrum of inclusion (that is, not at its centre). It could also be related to an appreciation of the quality of these sounds as heard from afar, and seems oddly appropriate given that the vivid sound memories my singing collaborators have shared with me are peppered with the mention of a boy’s voice ringing out over the rumble of logging wagons miles down the road, or the sound of bagpipes drifting over the woods from where the fire watchman would play from his tower. Since they participate in the *Eilean nan Og* program it seems likely that these young people have some interest in Gaelic culture, and so it seems odd that they do not wish to sit at the table and join in the singing, or at least observe at closer range. They could be too shy to take part; they might not have learned any song choruses and do not feel comfortable about being encouraged to participate; or perhaps they are more interested in other aspects of the culture than the Gaelic songs. An examination of the involvement of youth in Gaelic musical and cultural activities, especially at the community level, would be a worthwhile study for someone in the future, especially with the increased government incentive to develop a larger base of learners.

The social element is important, of course, as is pointed out by Cape Breton journalist Frank Macdonald:

More important than its “performance” appeal, however, is the practical function the milling frolic continues to play in communities like Christmas Island. The milling frolic brings together several of the island’s Gaelic speakers for a social event, a gathering where something more than songs are sung. The small community
strengthens itself, native speakers giving time, instruction and encouragement to the Gaelic learners.\textsuperscript{170}

Heather Sparling, too, has pointed out the importance of the opportunity to socialize in the Gaelic language\textsuperscript{171}. She notes that a milling is one of the few events at which one can expect to converse in Gaelic. I would, however, like to point out that one could speak Gaelic very easily with these same people wherever you met them, but especially at their homes. Perhaps it is important to note, instead, that it is because the event revolves around the singing of Gaelic songs in such a socially integrated way that conversation in Gaelic seems to survive in this social context.

I do agree that music-making and social interaction are inextricably bound in Cape Breton, and would go as far as to suggest that the milling frolic in particular is an example of how a social process is transformed into a kind of secular ritual – but I propose that it is the act of music-making which is the key to this transformation, taking inspiration from Turner’s own definition of ritual and transformation. He explains,

\begin{quote}
Let me comment on the difference between my use of the term “ritual” and the definitions of Schechner and Goffman. By and large they seem to mean by ritual a standardized unit act, which may be secular as well as sacred, while I mean the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts. Ritual for me … is a “transformative performance” revealing major classifications, categories and contradictions of cultural processes.\textsuperscript{172}
\end{quote}

Millings include a sequence of acts which have long lost their practical use and have become symbolic: the arranging of the milling blanket or cloth on the table, the wetting of the cloth,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{170} Frank Macdonald, “Gaelic recording brings listener to the milling frolic”, in \textit{The Inverness Oran}, also on Féis an Eilean website http://www.feisaneilein.ca/merchandise.html Accessed May 14, 2011.
\textsuperscript{171} Heather Sparling, “Song genres, cultural capital and social distinctions in Gaelic Cape Breton”. Unpublished PhD Diss., York University, 2006,188ff
\textsuperscript{172} Turner 1987, 75
\end{flushleft}
the beating of the cloth on the table. While it is true that these acts have accrued new usefulness – wetting the cloth keeps the dust down, beating the cloth on the table drives the groove and keeps the group together rhythmically – they are not essential, strictly speaking, to the performance of these Gaelic songs; still they are performed without hesitation or discussion, automatically and yet with great care. My own video footage captures the care with which my collaborators lay out the cloth before the milling begins, wet it with water, and set it in place.

Plate 9: Maxie MacNeil, Jamie and Rod. C. MacNeil arranging milling blanket on table before a milling frolic at the Christmas Island Féis. Photo by the author.

In addition to the performance of this sequence of symbolic acts, a sort of transformation also occurs. The native-speaking Gaels who sing at millings are farmers,
carpenters, machinists, fishermen, and not one of them is a professional musician, but they are nonetheless considered to be experts at Gaelic singing. They each know many songs, they have a rich store of background knowledge about each of these, and they are considered to sing their songs well. Through all of this they are treasured as culture bearers and, thus, they are invaluable to the community. Arguably, the transformation that occurs at a milling is this very shifting of roles, so that people who have what might be considered ordinary, everyday lives are, in other ways and particularly within the context of the milling frolic, elevated to a special status and recognized to have extraordinary talent. They are always respected for this, of course, but at a milling frolic, they publicly enact their role as culture bearers.

In his first essay on the processual form of ritual, Turner noted that subjects in a ritual performance are all treated equally, deprived of all distinguishing characteristics of social structure, constituting “a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions”. To Turner, it is important for human beings to experience both the structure of everyday life, and the more liminal state of communitas. Communitas represents a “moment in and out of time … which reveals however fleetingly some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties”. While the overall structure of the milling frolic is not completely lacking in hierarchy – the inner circle is comprised of the singers, while the outer circle and periphery is comprised of those who are listening or watching – still, within the groups of performers who

173 Turner 1967, 100.
174 Turner 1964, 96.
sit in the inner circle there is a sense of equality, camaraderie and mutual support. No one particular singer is the leader; instead, they take turns in leading by singing the solo verses. Learners are invited to join the inner circle to sing along with choruses, and this is how many people begin to learn these Gaelic songs. The different degrees to which one is proficient in the singing of Gaelic songs is not obvious to the casual observer; the subtle cues which are given and protocol which is observed are part of a deeper level of the performance practice (to be discussed below). Again, a circle of singers linked by their hands on the loop of cloth is a powerful image of communal purpose and sharing, one that is sometimes echoed by the linked hands of those who are listening in the outer circles. The ‘societal bonds’ Turner wrote of are indeed reflected and reinforced at millings.

Turner indicates that rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community.\footnote{175 Turner 1987, 2.} As I discussed in Chapter 2, “Song at Home”, these songs themselves contain embedded information about the culture from which they arise – historical, geographical and cultural data within their texts – as well as attitudes, cultural values, and musical style, and behavioural data in how they are performed. They also act as a touchstone for memory, since songs are learned and shared in social contexts and are bound to memories of these events, people and performances. In addition, as described here, the way in which milling frolics are physically constructed and socially negotiated also says much about Gaelic society itself. Milling frolics, then, are no longer work, or even a simple enactment of work, but a way in
which Gaels both interact with their culture, and reveal publicly their identity as musicians, thus undergoing the transformation of which Turner speaks.

It might be argued that I am still taking Turner’s idea too literally and I would like to dispel that suggestion here. A milling frolic is not, of course, a ritual, but a fun musical event where people see old friends and sing some favourite songs. Their songs, however, are special: they are not widely sung in twenty-first-century Canada, or even widely sung on the island of Cape Breton, and not everyone can sing them since they require a knowledge of Gaelic and they must be sought out in order to be learned properly. Community members who attend are affirming their place as part of the community that shares this common thing – heritage, history, or, for those from away such as myself, a love of the music and the people who make it. The transformation is perhaps, a shift in perspective. Although the singers are always acknowledged as cultural leaders and are respected by everyone, a public performance such as a milling presents an opportunity to define their status more clearly than at other times. As mentioned earlier, there is a modest entrance fee for a milling frolic, but Gaelic singers need not pay to attend, and they are provided with free drinks and snacks. The respect paid to Gaelic singers is thus practical, as well as symbolic.

Turner’s theories of ritual, then, may be seen as a guideline or perhaps just a starting point for thinking about the ways in which this particular kind of musical performance is imbued with meaning that goes beyond mere socializing or entertainment, and is part of how people express and understand their culture through milling. Milling frolics take place in a liminal space between performance and participation, and are not simply historical enactments or social occasions. Older native speakers make great efforts to come to millings,
not just to see each other but to sing songs, to connect with memories of past performances, and to help push Gaelic songs into the future. At a milling, my collaborators are ‘transformed’ from individual English-speaking farmers, carpenters, mechanics or fishermen into a community of Gaelic singers. In the process, the world is remade in Gaelic.

**Performance Practice in Millings**

As Diana Taylor suggests, embodied performance is not only “a way of storing and transmitting knowledge” but also, and just as importantly, “a way of knowing”.\(^\text{176}\) She writes,

> Performances travel, challenging and influencing other performances. Yet they are, in a sense, always in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environment and issues surrounding them. The is/as [a term of Robert Schechner’s] underlines the understanding of performance as simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘constructed’, as practices that bring together what have historically been kept separate as discrete, supposedly free-standing, ontological and epistemological discourses.\(^\text{177}\)

Although milling frolics are public performances which may be attended by anyone, to the singers they also feel private; we sit in our little circle and almost forget about the melée around us, so that in the moment of singing it can feel quite intimate and not artificial. In this way, then, as Taylor suggests, millings are simultaneously ‘real’ and ‘constructed’. In the public performance of Gaelic songs, the integrally *in situ* nature of performance means that not only the musical and textual content of the repertoire are presented but also much is conveyed about the culture that is not explicitly expressed, and the performance is

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176 Taylor, 278.
177 Taylor, 3.
understood through the present contextual experience. By participating in milling frolics I have been inspired to learn many songs and have observed various individual styles, but have also learned much about how the singing of these songs expresses Gaelic culture in a more abstract sense. In a public, group setting certain aspects float to the surface and become more visible. For example, in viewing videos of milling frolics that I have made on past visits, I am reminded of details of the event that might not have seemed important at the time but which reveal much about the tradition, and they are not the type of thing one would usually find in written archives. This difference between embodied and inscribed memory (really, the difference between an individual’s memory and a written history) is discussed by Pierre Nora in his article, “Between Memory and History: Les lieux de memoire,” and I will return to this idea in Chapter 4 when discussing recorded archives of Gaelic song.

The way that a milling begins is itself worth noting. Although everyone is there to sing, the social element that surrounds the event is distracting, and so it takes some time to gather several singers at the long table. One of the organizers will tell a few of the singers that it is time to start and eventually enough will have gathered there to be ready to sing. There is no set list, no plan, and no explicit set of rules for how to proceed, but there seems nonetheless to be a protocol that is observed and there is a repertoire that tends to be repeated. In my opening ethnography to this chapter, I described the conversation and negotiation between singers at the table, which results in the first few songs being sung.

As I described in my ethnography, I am always asked to sing early in a milling, in fact as soon as I sit at the table, for which reason I have recently taken to delaying my arrival at the table. I feel compelled to refuse the request to sing, or at least to defer temporarily to the unspoken protocols at millings, which dictate that the eldest singers are asked to sing first. I also defer because although I love to sing at millings I feel it will be judged as un-Gaelach (culturally Gaelic) to seek the spotlight so eagerly. Admittedly, I do not relish the initial few verses of my first song, when all eyes and ears will be upon me wanting to hear what new song I have learned, or to confirm that I’ve still ‘got the old style’, or that I remember all of the song text. After a little while, the next time I am asked, I will have to acquiesce so as not to be rude or to seem unwilling to share my songs, voice, talent, etc., which would also be un-Gaelach! I realize that being asked to sing is an honour: it indicates that I have achieved a competency in learning the songs, and perhaps even become good at some of them. I note carefully which ones they ask for most often in order to try to understand what they might be valuing in my participation.

So, my refusal or reluctance to sing when first asked is an attempt to match the reticence of my collaborators to leap into the solo role despite the fact that it is clear they have come to the event to sing, and that everyone wants to hear them. This is typical of performers of all sorts in Cape Breton. It is not that they believe silence is golden at a singing event but rather they wish to be polite, despite the proverb “S math am modh a bhi samhach” (It’s good manners to be silent). It is more reflective of a humble attitude which was

expressed so well by legendary storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil in the Preface to *Tales until Dawn*: “Please do not regard me as deserving of special praise, but see this book as a tribute to those living in times past who were gifted, kindly, and sensible, and generous with their store of tales”.\(^{180}\) Here, he seems to suggest that he is just a conduit; the stories or songs are conveyors of memory, of people and times past, rather than objects which stand on their own and are owned by the present singer.

Declining to sing is part of the process of deciding which of the singers at the table will begin the milling frolic. This involves some discussion, deference to each other, debating of choices. Often it seems that it is the singers with the loudest, strongest voices and most swing (as they call it) to their style that will begin at a milling, such as Peter MacLean (also the most senior), Maxie MacNeil or Alan MacLeod. Finally someone agrees to begin, and his first solo line rises out of the buzz and chatter of conversation; the room does not fall silent, but by the time the other singers gathered at the table have joined in on the chorus the audience has begun to listen. In choosing a singer, one has also in effect narrowed the choice of song that will be sung, because singers are known for singing particular songs. This is, of course, partly practical: even for native singers, it is not easy to learn all of the verses and their oftentimes archaic language. The choice of song itself is also important. Peter will often begin with “*A Nigheanag a Chùil Duinn, Nach Fhan Thu*?”, a song with verses which sit in a higher register than its chorus, and on which the solo singer’s voice can ring out quite forcefully – especially when that singer is Peter MacLean.

\(^{180}\) Joe Neil MacNeil, Preface to *Tales until Dawn*, ed. John Shaw (no page number).
Allan MacLeod also speaks of songs that were habitually used to begin the singing at milling frolics. He says, “An Té Sin air an Robh mi ‘n Geal”, that was [my father’s] starting song. He’d sing that one first. Once he got going … he had oodles [of verses] of that one!” Like Peter’s song, this one has a melody that rises high above the tonic, and an arc-like shape.
Allan’s comment, like those of Peter, suggests that a starting song should be of good
duration, and have ‘oodles’ of verses.

**Music and Millings**

Clearly, the communal element is central to the meaning which milling frolics hold
for a singers and listeners. Like many other commonly held views of Gaelic traditional
singing, however, this stance gives little attention to the musical activity that is at the centre
of a milling and overlooks my collaborators’ identity as musicians. To this end, it seems
important to explain some of the conventions I have observed in public milling frolics. I find
it particularly interesting to consider the implications of their emphasis on the social and
textual (that is, language) aspects of the song practice while enacting a musical aspect in
which they must negotiate and mediate their own individuality as musicians and performers.
I also wish to examine the consensus to which they must come when singing together in public, such as at a milling.

As mentioned above, it has been suggested that sociability is the key reason to attend a milling. There are, however, countless opportunities to socialize in rural Cape Breton; the firehall at Christmas Island which hosts the Féis is also home to regular Bingo games, darts, dances, codfish suppers, Gaelic classes and other community meetings and events such as weddings, wakes, anniversary and birthday parties. While living in Cape Breton, I have been part of more spontaneous visits and events per month than I ever have while living elsewhere. I do not think that the sole or most important reason to attend a milling frolic is to socialize, although admittedly it brings out a larger number of Gaelic speakers than other events typically do, and invites conversation in Gaelic. Still, I have found that Gaelic speaking or learner friends are always eager to speak in Gaelic, so that I have spoken Gaelic extensively (and imperfectly) at the Glencoe Square dance, at a pub in Antigonish, for hours at a private home, and on long car drives. As for the welcoming attitude of the older singers at the milling table, it is true that no one is ever turned away from the table but this behaviour, to me, reflects the welcoming, kind nature of my collaborators in Cape Breton.

The fact that they accept and encourage learners does not mean that the Gaelic singers do not appreciate correctness and also note when errors have been made. They wish to hear songs sung well and correctly, and in fact aspects of the musical performance are just as important as the social context. These are the things that we will talk about afterward, for years to come. Of course, music is socially constructed, and social factors determine these aesthetic judgments and influence the musical decisions which are made: a loud voice will
cut through the noise; the older singers must sing first; the new young singer will be praised
in public and corrected in private; ‘good’ singers are those who sound like another singer
who is in turn remembered for a fine style or distinctive voice. It might seem counter-
productive to separate the two aspects, as the social and musical aspects are so interwoven.
Still, my suspicion that the musical activity at a milling frolic is of key importance for Gaelic
singers is confirmed by my collaborator Maxie MacNeil. As he says:

“I found the milling frolics started the singing [again] when I came back, after the
1970s. We started going around to milling frolics and all the songs started. I give credit
to all the songs that are around today to the milling frolic. Because I know lots of
people would never sing them unless they sat around the table. Yeah. This idea of
walking out on a stage, two or three fellows, to sing … [shakes his head]. You’re not
gonna learn too many songs. But we’ve put an awful lot of songs together since the last
twenty years. They’d have been gone today”.

His words here confirm my suggestion that millings, because they are more Gaelach in their
color, provide the perfect setting for the sharing of Gaelic songs since some singers feel
comfortable singing at them whereas they would not feel the same way on a stage for a more
formal concert. There is more significance here, though: Maxie MacNeil is suggesting that
millings play an important role in the continued survival of the songs themselves. Millings
help them to remember the songs, and he hints at the practice of putting songs together
communally when each person only remembers pieces. As we have already seen in the way
songs are transmitted in Gaelic culture, their communal sharing is important for the
flourishing of the tradition. I do not think he is saying here that it is important that they are
being shared in a public performance, nor is he highlighting the social element per se, but
rather that the shared experience, which formerly would have been found at home or at

céilidhs, is of key importance. The connection he makes between the survival of the songs and the milling frolic reinforces my belief that musical ideals are of prime importance at a milling frolic, at least for the singers. The social element supports the musical one rather than being a separate activity.

**Performance and Canon**

In current public performances of Gaelic song, a somewhat limited repertoire has been created; that is, there are many more songs in the printed collections, archival recordings, and memories of my collaborators than are heard at a milling frolic or céilidhs. There are many reasons why this might be so. There are fewer native speakers of Gaelic these days, and even for them it is not easy to learn all of the verses and archaic language. At public performances, such as a formal concert, there is a certain pressure to sing at one’s best (musically and textually) and to sing only songs that one knows by heart in their entirety. This is as true at a milling frolic, which blurs the line between performance and casual sharing. At home, however, you might hear someone sing songs that he or she would not present at the milling table, or use a book to stop and chat in between verses. I once visited Roddy MacInnes along with Peter MacLean, and together they put together more verses of a rare song than I had ever heard before, taking turns in the singing and affirming of each other’s verses, with everyone singing the chorus. Partly for practical reasons, there is a critical mass of songs that are often sung at participatory events such as millings. Through repetition they become familiar to many singers, and the choruses can be sung more confidently. As Hector MacNeil has pointed out, however, these days there are so many learners (of language and song) at
milling frolics that they continually must try to learn the choruses to new songs as they go, so perhaps it matters less if one sings a less common song. Another thing to be considered is the accuracy and completeness of song presentations at a milling. In a private setting, a singer will sing as many verses as he or she wishes, but sometimes at a milling there is pressure to shorten them, or sometimes new singers will not know all of the verses. Peter MacLean reminds us of the importance of singing songs as fully as possible out of respect for the bard. He has also said, “[Sometimes] if you don’t sing it out you’re not being disrespectful – it depends on the occasion … the purpose of singing. Usually at a milling frolic you sing quite a few of them, sing them out”. One singer, however, has said to me “Four of five verses, that’s enough of that song!” However, this might reflect a personal taste rather than a more widely held aesthetic. Still, it seems that there is some variation in the number of verses sung to each song, which is linked to all the factors above: respect, taste, and lack of knowledge or recall of the other verses.

It seems, then, that the repertoire of public performances is shaped consciously and unconsciously, by both unintentional and intentional factors. As ethnomusicologists and anthropologists we are called to question how our own acts of collecting and archiving create an unavoidably subjective view of the music we study. Clifford, however, reminds us that members of the societies we study also participate in a process of selection, creating systems of meaning for the elements they choose to represent their culture. Clifford writes, “All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of self [and]

183 Peter MacLean, personal conversation with Stephanie Conn, August 18, 2008.
184 Name withheld.
contested encodings of past and future”. Although this study emphasizes the individual experience in Gaelic singing – that is, the influences of one’s family, community, resources result in a mosaic of style and repertoire even within one group of singers from the same geographical area – personal choices are nevertheless being made all the time by the singers. It is paradoxical, then, to have a situation such as the communal singing of a milling frolic in which these singers must come together to share and present some kind of unified practice despite the fact that their styles and repertoires are somewhat distinct. Kay Kaufman Shelemay writes of this in her article “Music, Memory, and History” with reference to Syrian Jewish communities in New York. One of her informants suggests that hearing all the songs sung together by a group reinforces the connection between individual and community. Shelemay observes that members combine personal recollections to construct their memories and collective history. In a situation such as this, decisions must be made about which songs to sing, and how. It has hardly seemed worth mentioning that the songs are always sung in Gaelic at milling frolics, as indeed they usually are. I have witnessed, however, a few rare occasions on which a song was sung in English. The late Jimmy ‘Calaman’ MacNeil of St. Colomba Mountain would sometimes sing the song, “Ho ro mo nighean donn bhoidheach” by alternating Gaelic and English verses. As I never had the opportunity to interview him, I do not know what his own experience was of learning Gaelic songs, or why he sang that song this way, although it is known that his family included Gaelic speakers. At the Johnstown milling frolic a few years ago I heard someone sing a rare comic local song in English, because an Old Country, traditional version of this song is well known in its Gaelic

version and the chorus was well-supported by the singers at the milling table. Later that evening, however, I heard another of the older singers express his incomprehension that anyone would do such a thing. To him it seemed inappropriate, both in its content and because it was in English.186

In her discussion of embodied repertoire, Diana Taylor also examines the idea of how canon is shaped by performers within a culture. She writes,

Performances also replicate themselves through their own structures and codes. This means that the repertoire, like the archive, is mediated. The process of selection, memorization or internalization, and transmission takes place within (and in turn helps constitute) specific systems of re-presentation.187

As seen above in the discussion of performance practice, there are indeed ‘structures and codes’ for the performance of Gaelic songs at millings, and these affect not only the way songs are performed – and the ‘way of knowing’ this conveys – but also extend to the content, the songs themselves. The songs that are prized as good starting songs are sung frequently at millings, and older singers do tend to sing the songs they are known for – ones they have known most of their lives. Learners are open to picking up new songs, and thus if a song is recorded or included in a publication, this increases its chances of being learned by new singers, as learners increasingly depend on such resources.188

Another way in which this community of practice has changed is in the way its borders are redrawn, and not just geographically, as people become accustomed to driving

187 Taylor, 21.
188 This interaction between performance of the practice and inscribed sources such as archives, will be discussed at length in Chapter 4, Song and the Archive
long distances for milling frolics or visits. As community and government efforts to strengthen the Gaelic language in Cape Breton are admirable and have resulted in a growing number of Gaelic language learners, but these learners have in effect formed a new de facto community of their own which is very different from the indigenous Gaelic communities of the past. The bringing together of musicians from different places means that we form our own community of sorts, with our own shared repertoire, which does not replicate any of the single communities in which any of my informants grew up. Each singer has a repertoire of songs learned at home or in a micro-community that are not necessarily shared by all who go to today’s milling frolics. At millings, then, only a portion of each singer’s repertoire is heard, because singers tend to choose songs that are better known, or more widely known, so that more people will be able to join in on the chorus. In his article “Musical Revival as Musical Transformation,” folklorist Burt Feintuch discusses an analogous situation in which musicians seeking to revive the practice of Northumberland piping effect changes in that practice:

The term revival implies resuscitation, reactivation, and rekindling, and many revivalist musicians assert that they’re bolstering a declining musical tradition. But rather than encourage continuity, musical revivals recast the music – and culture – they refer to, they are actually musical transformations, a kind of reinvention. And in reality, each revival achieves its own momentum with its own standard repertoire and its own selective view of the past. 189

This new Gaelic singing community is not exactly part of a revival, but it is recomposed. Learners participate in the singing of songs alongside the tradition-bearers, but many of them lack the authoritative connoisseurship which would have been held not only by the older

singers but also those on the periphery of actual performance – passive culture-bearers, such as those who do not sing anymore because of age or illness, and community members who have had a lifetime’s exposure to the genre and could claim a fairly complete cultural literacy such as the Camerons. When removed from the context of this indigenous song community, there is no choice but to develop one’s own selective view of a culture, as Feintuch has pointed out. According to the reminiscences of Peter MacLean and my other my collaborators, and Gaelic singing in Cape Breton was formerly an activity very much tied to home and community, shared among cultural insiders and unfolding naturally as an integral part of life. At events such as milling frolics, cèilidhs, and concerts, Gaelic singing is more often presented as a public activity by singers and listeners from different geographical communities and presented to cultural outsiders or the majority of community members who do not take an active part in the music making. This shift is one of the most influential factors in the evolution of this musical style and repertoire, and one that has upset the way in which it was transmitted in previous generations. One tactic my native-speaking singing collaborators employ to deal with this is to make a concerted effort to attend song events such as milling frolics, song-learning workshops such as are held at the Christmas Island Féis, and language classes, as well as performing at public concerts. In this way there is an integration between the generations, and between Gaelic native speakers and learners, which approximates that which one would have encountered in old fashioned cèilidhs in the home.
My collaborators in Cape Breton sometimes get together as The Iona Gaelic Singers for the purpose of singing only Gaelic songs, and to formalize their participation as performers at public events and community gatherings. They sing concerts, do workshops, and have sometimes gathered if not for a formal rehearsal then to run more informally through some songs. Their meetings were a way of helping each other to remember the songs and to come to consensus on the melody and words of the choruses. I do think, however, that there are further implications in the formation of this group and in its very name. Through the group they identified themselves as Gaelic, thus eschewing the other repertoire that they all surely
must know, and as discussed there was formerly less effort to sing only Gaelic songs, In her article “Music of modern indigeneity: from identity to alliance studies”, Beverley Diamond has discussed how “language choice is a complex and critical choice for contemporary musicians. The choice of a local language and dialect can solidify one’s community position or, if the choice is to imitate a different dialect or use a language other than one’s own, it can signal a desire to ally one’s self with others.”

Perhaps just as importantly, though, the Iona Gaelic Singers come together not just as Gaels but as singers and musicians. The designation of themselves as ‘Gaelic Singers’ is in fact about more than their ‘Gaelic identity’: it is as much about them declaring themselves ‘singers’, public performing musicians, as it is about their repertoire being in Gaelic. The commonly used term ‘tradition bearer’ creates a false understanding of the role of these singers. It seems evident that they are more active in this singing practice than the passive title of ‘bearer’ would suggest, although I suspect they would demur at the suggestion that they do more than merely bear the tradition, picking it up and carrying it for a while before passing it along to someone like me. It is a complex issue, however, not only because there is a lack of explicit dialogue about the performance practice (as it is learned through participant-observer techniques), but also because the culture is not given to self-promotion or aggrandizement, and they do not call themselves musicians. Evidently, then, the practice of Gaelic singing and their public performances as ‘Gaelic Singers’ is as much about their self-identification as musicians as it is about their identity as Gaels or even Cape Bretoners.

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One musical element they must come to terms with is that of uniting their individual experiences of Gaelic singing in order to perform together. Public performances, including those in a traditional and largely social format such as a milling frolic, showcase a community singing style, but also provide a reason to shape and define it. The recording of groups by collectors enables us to hear differences in accent and tone. Previously, songs and styles were associated with places, as well as with individual singers. Some of my collaborators remember noting stylistic differences in the singing of those from other parts of Cape Breton. Peter MacLean mentions that when he was in Boston, he heard Gaelic songs sung with “a different accent or pronunciation”. He also remembers that as a young man he heard singers from the Murray Road, North River (at the other end of the island) for the first time, and noticed that they had a different Gaelic accent, and a different sound to their singing. Maxie MacNeil from Highland Hill, near Barra Glen, speaks of listening to a Cape Breton radio program in the 1960s and being amazed at the singing style of men from Framboise, which he had never heard before; he remarked on the ‘distinct sound’ of their voices. Even this preliminary anecdotal evidence points to variations in regional and individual singing styles.

The singers from one region in particular, the North Shore, received much attention from collectors and subsequently their style and repertoire have become known to those interested in Gaelic singing in Cape Breton. The intense documentation of this particular group by multiple collectors has led to the identification of a distinctive style and repertoire

191 Interview with Peter – see tape info below for Boston diaspora
192 Peter MacLean, personal conversation, August 2005.
associated with it, whereas fewer recordings were made and disseminated from other singing communities in Cape Breton. The North Shore Singers came together for a concert in Baddeck in the early 1950s; they were subsequently recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell at the Gaelic College and in their private homes, and this led to their being invited to perform at Harvard University in 1955. Though their Harvard performance they caught the attention of Ralph Rinzler, who visited Cape Breton in the 1960s to collect more from this region, and was responsible for having the North Shore Gaelic singers appear at the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island in 1965. The repeated documentation of these singers in particular is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, “Song and the Archive.” It would, however, clearly be fruitful to gather together recordings of singing from different areas in order to compare and contrast. This might require research into personal collections since, as mentioned, no other group was as widely recorded as the one on the North Shore.

Case Study: The Boston Diaspora

A particular case study might serve as a small-scale but influential example of how social changes exerted an influence on this musical practice, and how these were enacted in public performances in a new location. This case study also points to the larger issue of how Gaelic singing in Cape Breton was changing in this period and the decades that followed. I feel the need to justify my use of the term ‘diaspora’ in the discussion of this issue. It seems appropriate since as James Clifford writes, “[the] language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home. This sense of connection must be strong enough to resist erasure through the
normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing”.

In a special issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, Clifford discussed the usefulness and limits of the term ‘diasporas’ in his article of the same name. He acknowledges that diasporic dialogues are as much about loss as they are about survival, and that they essentialize or commodify culture to some extent. In the case of Cape Bretoners in Boston, I am referring to a relatively small pocket of people who are displaced by about 1200km, many of whom returned to their homeland or maintained close ties with it. Their isolated origins and use of another language seems to make their situation analogous to that of people who are displaced by a greater distance. Like many diasporic communities, however, Cape Bretoners in Boston felt a sense of exile; they continued to use their language, socialize with each other, and practice cultural activities such as music and dance, publicly presenting a package of cultural information about themselves to their new community. It might seem unlikely that a social club in another country could have shed much light on a musical tradition many miles away in the homeland, but such is the case with the Boston-Cape Breton Gaelic Club. The social circumstances of this club and of the Boston ‘diaspora’ in general are an example in miniature of the accelerated change that came about decades later in Cape Breton.

My consideration of the Boston diaspora arose from thoughts about the present-day cultural situation in Cape Breton. It is true that the steady decline in native Gaelic speakers in Nova Scotia over the past hundred years is largely responsible for the atrophy of the Gaelic song tradition; it is my belief, however, that in addition to any diachronic explanation for the

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decline of Gaelic song there is currently a synchronic moment of crisis in the life cycle of this musical practice. It is too simple to blame a cultural-linguistic deterioration alone for all the changes in the song tradition; the socio-economic changes which took place in twentieth-century Cape Breton, including new social contexts and an accelerated geographical displacement of its people, are responsible for the decline in Gaelic language use, as well as the noticeable changes in Gaelic singing which occurred, specifically from the late 1950s until the present. In periods of economic hardship many Cape Bretoners left the island seeking work in the more prosperous locations of Ontario, Detroit, and Boston. Boston, or ‘The Boston States’, was a particularly popular destination, being a vibrant city with plentiful employment. As early as 1880 it was recorded that the Boston area housed more Nova Scotians than the cities of Sydney (Cape Breton), Yarmouth and Pictou (on the Nova Scotia mainland) combined, and a notice in the December 12, 1887 issue of the The Scottish-American Journal, stated that there were “between three and four thousand people in the city who speak the Gaelic language”. In the 1950s many more migrated south, and it is estimated that their numbers might have reached several thousand. In some cases it meant that people left small, largely Gaelic or French-speaking Acadian communities, and found themselves instead in an English-speaking yet multicultural environment. Nova Scotian immigrants to the Boston region established various social organizations and gravitated to certain churches. One of these, the Old Scotch or Scotch Presbyterian Church, held services

www.uwm.edu/Dept/celtic/ekeltoi/volumes/vol2/2_3/newton_2_3.html
in Gaelic. An important fulcrum for many Cape Bretoners was the Cape Breton Gaelic Club of Boston, which was founded in 1940\textsuperscript{198} with the aim to foster Gaelic culture in this outpost community. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the club was presided over by Bill Lamey, a respected fiddler from River Denys, Cape Breton who had moved to Boston in 1953 and whose recordings were popular both in Boston and at home. As President, he reputedly opened the weekly proceedings with a greeting in Gaelic. He encouraged the inclusion of Gaelic songs at club meetings, led by a Gaelic chorus of ex-patriot Cape Breton Gaels, but fiddling and dancing were the main entertainment. The performance of Gaelic songs, then, was a valued part of how they shared their culture and, perhaps, celebrated their identity as Cape Bretoners and as Gaels. It might be said it was also part of how they presented themselves as Gaels (although I am not sure of how many cultural outsiders would have attended the meetings).

Peter MacLean grew up in Christmas Island and has lived much of his life there, making a living as a farmer and a carpenter. He lived for a time in Sydney, but then in the 1960s he and his wife went to work in Boston, and remained there for fifteen years.

PML: There were all kinds of Cape Bretoners. There was Joe MacKenzie, a cousin of mine [from Christmas Island]. He was in the Cape Breton Gaelic Club. He was up there a few years ahead of us, and he wanted me to go to the meetings, which I did. He was President for a while, then Bill Lamey was president … At that time, when it was in its glory, there was about 30 or 35 Gaelic singers there. That would be in the 60s. It was nothing to put 10 or 15 singers up on the stage every night.

SC: Where were they all from?

\textsuperscript{198} Nilsen, 88.
PML: They were from all over Cape Breton. Loch Lomand, North Shore, Inverness, Margaree, a mixture. Oh, yeah. You know, Bucky Carmichael? His brother, Kenny Carmichael, he was there, and his sister, Maude and her husband, Neil MacLean. There was that group from Judique. And Johnny Beaton from Little Judique. Angus Rankin was there.¹⁹⁹

I asked Peter what the singing was like, and how similar it was to what he heard at home. He said:

They had songs you’d heard before but you might not have memorized them …. They had a little different accent but you could understand it. Probably a little different in the pronunciation. Some of the airs were different …. ²⁰⁰

Peter acknowledges the differences but also that these seem to have been easily accepted. As pointed out by independent scholar Lorrie MacKinnon, this ‘melting pot’ aspect of Gaelic culture in Boston during the 1950s and 1960s contrasted sharply with the relative isolation of communities in Cape Breton at that time.²⁰¹ As she points out, it was a very different situation in “Baile nan Beans” (Beantown):

In Boston, although Gaels from the different areas each had their own singing style and unique repertoire, not to mention religious differences, the love of their culture … and singing … brought them together. Age was not a barrier either – it was not uncommon for people some thirty years apart in age to spend evenings together at the club.²⁰²

Boston offered social opportunities that would not have been available back home, since people lived together in one community instead of being spread out all over the island of Cape Breton. The house parties which took place several times a month would draw singers such as Angus Rankin of Mabou Ridge, Peter MacLean of Christmas Island, Kay

¹⁹⁹ Peter MacLean, conversation with Stephanie Conn. February, 2004.
²⁰⁰ MacLean, 2004
MacDonald of Margaree, Johnny Beaton of Little Judique, Kenny Carmichael and Malcolm MacLellan from North River, and Roy MacLeod from Gabarus; a glance at the map (Plate 11) shows just how far-flung these locations are, and suggests the unlikelihood that these singers would have ever sung together had they remained in their home communities in Cape Breton.

Plate 11: Far-flung Gaelic communities in Cape Breton
The lines of transmission that were commonly found in the communities of Cape Breton were crossed and blended as singers from different singing experiences came together to sing, resulting in the possibility of an exchange of musical practices. Still, many of the Gaelic singers who went to Boston were mature adults of 40 or older when they had this experience. It is therefore difficult to determine to what extent this would have changed their attitudes or behaviour as Gaelic singers, or how much it affected the way they experienced Gaelic songs when they went home to Cape Breton, or how it affected those they sang with back at home who never left. Linguists seem to agree that individuals can influence change within a group, and that it is fruitful to make case studies of these outliers and their social history and patterns of behaviour. In his book, *Principles of Linguistic Change*, William Labov discusses a concept generally accepted in linguistics – that we all speak our mother’s vernacular, and that linguistic change is only possible when we learn a new one from our peers. Labov states, “Many writers on socio-linguistic themes … have argued that the major focus of socio-linguistic analysis should be placed on the individual speaker rather than the group”. It does seem that my collaborators who lived away in Boston (or elsewhere, such as Ontario) experienced a heightened awareness of themselves as Gaels from Cape Breton, and brought home this new attitude to Cape Breton; it is perhaps not coincidental that many of the older native speakers who are most active as culture-bearers, singing at concerts and milling frolics, helping out at song workshops, and urging learners to visit them, are the ones who lived away in the Boston or Ontario Gaelic diasporas. At any rate, the coming together of different singing repertoire and styles would have been unusual

204 Labov, 33.
in the 1950s and 60s in Cape Breton, but is typical of public performances of Gaelic singing today, and thus the situation in the Boston diaspora was a foreshadowing of how things would change back home.

In Boston, Gaelic singers performed at public events. Even those who did not live permanently in Boston were invited down to sing, most notably at Harvard University in 1955. Sidney Robertson Cowell helped to organize this event, having met many of the singers while she was collecting songs in Cape Breton ten years before (this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, “Song and the Archive”). The following is a rather long quote, yet one that is not only amusing but also shows some the disparity in attitudes about prestige and performing between academics at Harvard and the Gaelic singers in Cape Breton:

Some time in the early 1950’s [it was 1955] there was a meeting at Harvard of some folk song organization, perhaps the American branch of the International Folk Music Council, and I was asked to present an evening’s program of local singing .... Malcolm Angus MacLeod, “pivot man” of the North Shore Singers, assured me that the group would be delighted to come .... Then I began getting plaintive letters from the Harvard administrator: he could not get what he considered a dependable reply from any of the Canadian singers. He had rather foolishly sent each man a contract to sign, but everybody was Scottish and too cautious for that. The replies were wonderfully Scottish and carefully qualified. One man wrote he would surely come if the grain harvest was not too early, and another man wrote that he would come if his granddaughter’s child was born early enough. Malcolm Angus’ idea of an agreement was to write that “The singers would surely like to come, and would probably be there”. The administrator wrote in a wonderfully aggrieved tone: “Mrs. Cowell, these people don’t seem to realize that they’re being addressed by Harvard University!” – a remark I have always treasured. My reply explained that these were people on an isolated Canadian island where they could hardly ever have heard of Harvard University. I explained about the qualified statements indigenous to cautious Scotsmen, and assured him that I felt satisfied we could count on our performers, but [not] because the name of Harvard University meant anything to them. Their native caution was a well-understood cultural trait, and did not mean a negative reaction as it would with us. Correspondence slackened and the group of course did come, and with

We actually learn much about everybody here. The Gaels considered song to be a part of life that did not supplant other aspects, so that harvesting crops and greeting new grandchildren took precedence. Sidney Cowell had an understanding of “Scottish” attitudes, but still assumed that Cape Bretoners were so “isolated” that they did not know of Harvard University, a ridiculous assumption since they had newspapers and radios as early as any other part of North America; a railway ran through the centre of the island, connecting points as far north as Cheticamp and far east as Sydney to the straight of Canso and though to Halifax. By performing publicly in Boston and Newport as the Gaelic Singers I do not think these men wished to perpetuate an image of themselves as rustic and backward but rather to show outsiders the special tradition which was unique to their home place. Peter MacLean was amazed at the response he got from audiences, and recalls that this was the first time he realized that what they took for granted was actually something very special, and he has many vivid memories of individual responses to his Gaelic songs.\footnote{Peter MacLean, private conversation, February 2004}


\footnote{Peter MacLean, private conversation, February 2004}
As well as singing at the famous Newport Festival in 1965, the Gaelic singers who lived in Boston joined together with the North Shore Gaelic singers to perform twice at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival in Washington (to which they were invited by Norman Kennedy, a Scot who was studying at Harvard). When they came home several decades later, they were surprised to find that the scene was much changed and that the conscious and concerted efforts to share Gaelic language and song which had been experienced while

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‘away’ in Boston were now necessary at home in Cape Breton as well. Maxie MacNeil has said that when he returned from Ontario, in the 1970s, he found that there was less singing than there used to be until they started to make an effort to attend milling frolics.  

Perhaps the Gaels who gathered for fiddle music and singing from back home were not only sharing the music they love, but also creating a space for themselves in the new location; Gaelic song became a tool to remake their new home in the image of their old one. As Martin Stokes has suggested, social performances are “a practice in which meanings are generated, manipulated, even ironised, within certain limitations. Music and dance … do not simply ‘reflect’. Rather, they provide a means by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed”. It is not my intention here, however, to analyze in great depth how Cape Breton Gaels negotiated their identity through their music or to what extent my collaborators are representative of the majority of Cape Breton immigrants to Boston. Rather, I note the different ways in which their public identification as Gaels in Boston affected their individual experience of Gaelic song, how this affected their outlook upon returning to Cape Breton, and how this changing social situation mirrors current changes in the Gaelic singing practice in Cape Breton.

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Performance and Meaning

Since public performances do not arise naturally but rather are constructed as events set apart from daily life and framed as special moments, they might be viewed as either stylized rituals that reveal underlying truths (as posited by Turner and re-interpreted by Taylor) or conversely, as distortion and manipulation of a much broader cultural legacy and everyday practice found at home. The former position is justifiable; as mentioned earlier, public millings which are not functional but which are presented as entertainment have been held for many decades in Cape Breton such as the long-running Johnstown Milling Frolic, as have community concerts and formal céilidhs (the Broad Cove concert has been held on the last Sunday in July since 1956), so they are not an artificial product of the current language and cultural revival. All of the long-running events mentioned here as examples were established in the mid twentieth century, and they are reflective of the presentation of musical entertainment that was a part of community picnics and celebrations in Cape Breton since the documentation of early settlers in the nineteenth century. In his book Highland Settler, Charles Dunn mentions (if somewhat vaguely) that winters in nineteenth-century Cape Breton were “devoted to gaity, to Milling Frolics, dances, school concerts, church meetings, Red Cross gatherings and visiting.”210 This is mentioned specifically in local songs, such as John V. MacNeil’s “Gleann na Maiseadh” (Benacadie Glen, not far from Christmas Island). He writes, “Eadar froilicean is luaidh, ‘S ged a bhiodh an geamhradh fuar, Cha bhiodh gruaman air na balaich” (Between frolics and millings, although the winter would be cold,  

the boys would not complain). Peter MacLean has told me of a church picnic in Eskasoni in 1942 or 1943 at which the excellent food took a backseat to a concert of entertainment by such big-name fiddlers as Angus Chisolm, Bill Lamey, Joe MacLean, with Lila Hashem on piano. In the article “Gaelic Singers I knew and remember well”, Kenneth Morrison mentions that “Peggy [Strachan] was a good singer herself and she taught her school students music with piano accordion. She taught the late John Holmes and me “Oran Cheap Breatainn” to sing as a duet in the Christmas concert at Mount Auburn School”. Given Kenneth’s current age, this would likely have been in the 1940s.

Clearly, then, the public sharing of music in concerts has been part of Cape Breton culture for a long time and thus perhaps should no longer be considered as something that is unnatural, although it is framed and arises differently from singing at home. How, then, might this public presentation mean different things to its participants, and how they might have changed over the last century or so? Some comparison can be made between a public performance that somehow represents the tradition of a community, to themselves and to others, and to the presentation of folklore in a museum. James Clifford discusses how the museum’s ‘framing’ of the objects increases their strangeness, and he points out that “[the] ‘authenticity’ accorded to both human groups and their artistic work is shown to proceed

212 He was unsure of the exact date.
from specific assumptions about temporality, wholeness, and continuity”. What might be overlooked here is the idea that culture is not an absolute, but rather, as Clifford puts it, a kind of ethnographic collection which continues over a span of time but does not remain intact. The manner of presenting artefacts, such as in the Cape Breton folk museum called The Highland Village, necessarily freezes objects in a certain form and in a certain time; it also suggests that there is an inherent coherence and continuity of folklore. Gaelic song is presented prominently at the museum; CDs are played in the entranceway and, on occasion, demonstrations of millings or céilidhs are presented. Such a presentation, however, seems to suggest that the song tradition is static, handed down by individuals who act as conduits, rather than the dynamic, individually shaped practice I have discussed. At present, however, it seems worth considering how embodied musical performance is also curated through unspoken protocols and a culturally cultivated aesthetic that determines which songs are selected, how style is groomed, etc. In a way, this makes public performance even more revealing of what songs mean to Cape Breton Gaels, despite the fact that these performances are constructed and are artificial to some extent (as is my own selective recollection of these moments as ethnography or examples). “Wouldn’t they be just as happy singing these songs at home?” a singing friend once suggested to me. Yes, they would, but perhaps singing songs in public, in performances such as milling frolics, facilitates connection with the songs in another way, because of the transformative element discussed above, and the coalescing of community. Diana Taylor writes,

215 Clifford, 50.
216 Clifford, 61.
217 These ideas will be discussed further in the next chapter, “Song and the Archive”.
The way I see it, performance makes visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life. These specters, made manifest through performance, alter future phantoms, future fantasies …. It provokes emotions it claims to only represent, evokes memories and grief that belong to some other body. It conjures up and makes visible not just the live but the powerful army of the always already living. The power of seeing through performance is the recognition that we’ve seen it all before – the fantasies that shape our sense of self, of community, that organize our scenarios of interaction, conflict and resolution.\footnote{218}

Taylor’s idea is in tune with Turner’s idea of “a moment in and out of time”, in which musical experience in the present connects with past memories of performances and of people, of community and place, of a collective \textit{dualchas} but also of individuality. Memories of the “ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life” are conjured up while singing together; as we join hands and sing, we remember all the milling we have been to before, and the performances we have heard of each song, and the moment seems to straddle past and present. Community members also feel pride in their history, and in the long-standing tradition that the milling continues. There are subtle changes as new faces appear at the table, different songs are sung, but this is part of how it survives. As Clifford writes, “Culture is a process of ordering, not of disruption. It changes and develops like a living organism. It does not normally ‘survive’ abrupt changes”.\footnote{219} It is evident that milling frolics and other public performances of Gaelic song, singers come to a consensus, and define a new shared repertoire but are free to continue to construct their own personal meaning and experiences we witnessed in the home practice. Through this musical cohesion they reinforce societal bonds, and celebrate their shared cultural, historic and community memories. In the liminal space of a milling frolic– this moment in and out of time – memory

\footnote{218} Taylor, 143.\footnote{219} Clifford, 64.
facilitates a dialogue with the past and engagement in the present making the songs “newly, traditionally meaningful” to the individuals who experience them today.\footnote{Clifford, 71.}
Chapter 4

Song and the Archive

It is the summer of 2007 and I am on the North Shore of Cape Breton for the wedding of two fiddler friends. The celebrations last for several days, so on the second afternoon I take a break from the nonstop music, food and laughter to drive further up the coast to a seaside cemetery. I park my car at the edge of this serene field, perched on a hill overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. As I walk among the gravestones I see some familiar names, including members of the renowned “North Shore Gaelic singers” – Tommy “Peigi” Macdonald’s name in particular catches my eye. As someone trying to learn Gaelic songs in a time when many of the legendary singers have passed away, I have only encountered his great voice on archival tapes rather than across a milling table or a kitchen table. Sadly, I am reminded of the dark joke sometimes dished out to learners these days by those who teach Gaelic in Cape Breton: “Tha Gàidhlig gu leòr anns a’ chladh” – there’s plenty of Gaelic in the graveyard.

That summer, I also go to the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University in Sydney. Much like walks in that North Shore cemetery, visits to archives of Cape Breton music can be sombre, as there I hear the voices of those who have passed away or encounter for the first time a wonderful singer whom I never had the chance to meet. At the same time, however, archives offer the excitement of hearing these deceased singers about whom I have heard my
collaborators speak. The recordings can be awe-inspiring, since so many songs and so many singers are gathered together in one place like an impossibly well-attended céilidh. I have the feeling not just of walking among gravestones but also perhaps of visiting a famous monument.

My visits to archives are more singular in purpose than a house visit because they are intended to survey material or gather particular information. Archival staff and librarians become my lifelines there, compatriots in an otherwise faceless landscape, and I welcome the chance to ask a question or request materials. In Sydney at the Beaton Institute I fumble in card catalogues before Jane Arnold sets me up at a computer with some digitized recordings; in Ottawa at the Museum of Civilization archives, Louis Campeau digs among the boxes prepared for moving to bring me binders of faded indices. In both places I spend many hours alone wearing headphones. In archival work the stimulation is often only one-way: it is easy to journey in, single-mindedly, since the singers do not reach out tangibly from the indices to engage me. In contrast, a visit to music-making friends in Cape Breton is multi-purposed: it is for hearing music and probably offering some of my own but mainly for seeing friends, and catching up on their news and views. New tunes or songs are discovered and old anecdotes are told in this living archive, and I am invited into and led through personal collections. I might go for a short visit and end up spending all day singing songs; other times I go for help with a specific song but instead chat with neighbours, share a meal, and perhaps never get as far as the music. My early visits to Cape Breton were for the purpose of gathering songs, but now I return for the friends and social interaction as much as for the music. It seems impossible, in fact, to separate the two, as they are so entwined in my experiences there, and just as entwined are my associations of certain music or songs with
certain people. At milling frolics, the songs flow past me in a constant stream, and I sometimes wish I could stop the tape to re-listen. While I find many wonderful songs in the archive, as I listen I do not have that same feeling as I do when Peter spontaneously sings me a couple of verses of a song at his kitchen table, or Maxie launches a milling frolic with his soaring voice. The archival recordings might be more complete in content, but their meanings are divorced from the embodied experience.

As ethnomusicologists we might often work with living practitioners of music, but for historical work we are still required to research in archives and cemeteries as well as in homes and at community halls. The contrasts between these are sharp. Archives are not, of course, cemeteries: they contain more than mute gravestones and they speak to us in more detail, and if one posits (as I have in earlier chapters) that much of a culture’s meaning is constructed by an individual though personal experience and understanding, then perhaps one might also posit that archives are as equally valid a source for acquiring musical material as any other. Institutional archives are becoming more accessible than ever to the public at large, with the increasing digitization of existing resources making it possible to share them remotely and immediately. Sound recordings of Gaelic songs have been collected and archived in Cape Breton since the 1920s – some of them made by outsiders, others by Cape Bretoners, some of them stored in Nova Scotia, and others held in collections abroad.

Following my pattern of examining Gaelic song in sites, at home and in public, in this chapter I consider the song archive as a de facto site of Gaelic singing in order to examine its growing importance in the transmission, meaning and representation of Cape Breton Gaelic song within its current community. Of course, a thorough examination of the role that
recordings and archives play in any current musical tradition would offer enough material for an entire dissertation in itself. Here, then, I hope to describe and problematize the use of archives in the current practice of Cape Breton Gaelic singing, and to understand how their use supports or otherwise affects the oral tradition. Since they are so numerous, it seems important to consider their intended purpose, the extent to which Gaelic singers have used them as substitutes for memory, and their effect on the current practice.

Recordings also mediate our experience in a way that is not possible in a live performance. We are as close as we want to be, we can hear songs on demand and as many times in a row as we wish. We can slow them down, speed them up, skip the verses when we are bored, or configure a fantasy set. In some ways, then, archives create new possibilities for the interaction with and the experience of these songs.

Archives help to support the living tradition, prompting memories or creating new ones. They shape our idea of the song canon, and make it possible to revive or even introduce songs into the living repertoire. Although it is clearly advantageous to have these recordings of performances from the past, however, public archives of Gaelic songs are most unlike the experience of a live performance because they are unmediated by the social interaction and cultural context with which Gaelic singing is so connected. In this way they are also different from the personal collections that my collaborators and I have in our homes. Private collections of tapes and documents play an important role in the practice of Gaelic singing as a reinforcement of living memory, and are a way of including community members who have passed away. Those collections are very much a part of the living practice: their owners use them, and share them with visitors; they are added to, reconfigured, circulated, and are
constantly developing. They connect the present-day singing of Gaelic songs with memories of past performances, aiding in the creation of a ‘moment in and out of time’. In this chapter, however, I mainly consider public audio archives in institutions, and my chief concern for the purposes of this study is with field recordings. It is evident that they differ greatly from personal collections although, as we shall see, personal collections are sometimes absorbed into public archives.

The recording archive represents a manifestation of the musical canon both within the community and to outsiders, and so one must also consider the ways in which these involve objective choices of re-evaluating and reshaping the repertoire not only through the mediation of collectors and ethnomusicologists but also by Gaelic singers themselves, thus feeding back into the current song practice. These issues of representation seem particularly important since, in many cases, the archives have not been accessible to the communities from which they were collected; this will be seen through my survey of the scholars who collected the recordings that are in these song archives, and then in a discussion of the purposes behind the collections.

Collectors and Their Archives

Ethnomusicologists have recently been reconceptualising the role of archives and of those who create or use them, realizing that they are not just objects but also processes which are shaped in form and content by discourses of power. Anthony Seeger and Bruno Nettl have
debated their use and interpretation in various writings, with Seeger making specific suggestions as to a methodology that would yield the most useful results. Aaron Fox, in his role of Director at Columbia University’s Center for Ethnomusicology, has been involved in repatriating recordings made by Laura Boulton in Alaskan Iñupiat (North Slope) communities; this gesture acknowledges that they are not just subjects to be studied but people with a living tradition who would benefit from the support of heritage materials. Already these recordings have been embraced and absorbed into the performance practice of the North Slope community. Recently, recordings which Alan Lomax made in Haiti were rediscovered by his daughter and made available to Haiti and the world; ethnomusicologist Gage Averill edited and researched the material for presentation in a commercial CD set, *Alan Lomax in Haiti: Recordings For The Library of Congress, 1936-1937*. For outsiders to the singing or scholarly community of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton it might seem that the existence of many recording archives has been a great boon to the practice, but even a brief look at the circumstances of their collection seems to tell a different story. In fact, like these Alaskan or Haitian communities, many Cape Breton Gaels have been cut off from their heritage materials, and this absence has had consequences.

Since the beginning of audio recording technology in the first decades of the twentieth century, researchers have visited Cape Breton and mainland Nova Scotia to record

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Gaelic singing. Many of these sound recordings are housed at institutional sound archives in North America: in Canada the major collections include St. Francis Xavier University, Cape Breton University’s Beaton Institute, Memorial University, and the Museum of Civilization. In the United States, recordings of music from Gaelic Nova Scotia are held at the Smithsonian Institute, the Library of Congress, Indiana University, and Columbia University. The collections of Gaelic songs were amassed for very different reasons. It seems that almost all collectors were aware of a need for preservation, but they did not always collect for that chief purpose but rather for scholarly ones, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Because there has been so much collecting in Cape Breton it would be easy to assume that all these archives have contributed to the living song practice, and there are occasions when this has happened. Yet it is important to note that most of these tapes have not been available to the general public in the intervening time since their recording, and that many of them are still inaccessible at the time of writing. More often, at least in the early history of sound recording in Cape Breton, collectors were outsiders who took the tapes home with them when they left and, as I discuss further below, some of these have since deteriorated to the point of being unplayable. Some collectors transcribed their recordings for publication. After the mid-twentieth century, they sometimes produced commercial recordings with selected tracks from their collections, and increasingly organizations (such as Cainnt mo Mhàthar223) create websites to present their findings. There is evidently a rift, however, between the community of practice from which recordings were made, the bulk of raw tape that the collector creates, and the selections which have become part of the common

223 www.cainntmomhathar.com
discourse within a musical practice through their public distribution as commercial recordings or websites.

It is difficult to generalize about the effect of collecting and preserving recordings on the tradition, and it is best to look at the most significant individual cases. It will be evident that there is a sharp divide (directly linked to the so-called digital divide) between younger, present-day Gaelic singers and learners and those of previous generations. In past decades it simply was not possible to access recordings as easily as we are able to today with some of the collections, yet some have made their way around the Gaelic community all the same. I am also interested in noting which singers and songs were consistently chosen by the collectors, as the small selection that recurs in many recordings belies the richness of Gaelic singers and songs which existed at the time, according to the memories of my collaborators. In addition, the materials left to us by most of these earlier researchers stand alone with little ethnographic detail, sketchy or no field notes and no interpretation or analysis. What follows is a short survey of the recording history of Gaelic song in Cape Breton in which I describe the work that was done by major collectors, and its use by and usefulness to Gaelic singers and learners.

John Lorne Campbell

One of the first to record Gaelic singing in Nova Scotia was John Lorne Campbell, English-born but fluent in Gaelic, who is well known to many Gaelic singers or learners today. Campbell made his first trip to Cape Breton in 1932 to assess the state of Gaelic language and community and to make contacts, returning in 1937 with his American wife,
Margaret Fay Shaw (also a collector of songs and folklore) and an Ediphone wax cylinder machine. Campbell’s interest lay specifically in the dialect and repertoire of Scotland’s island of Barra. From his personal letters we learn that his collecting project in Cape Breton was “for the purpose of recording traditional Gaelic songs amongst the descendants of Barra emigrants living there, for the purpose of comparison with the tradition of the old country, the first and only time such a study has been carried out in the Gaelic sphere”. \(^{224}\) This trip resulted in forty-three cylinders, containing “ninety traditional songs, five traditional ballads … two traditional games, seven local songs, and three original songs sung by their composer, A. J. MacKenzie”. \(^{225}\) Campbell kept a field journal while in Cape Breton on his initial trip in 1932 and again in 1937, some of which he reproduced in his book of field notes, texts and transcriptions, *Songs Remembered in Exile*. From this book we can learn something about his working methods, especially how he selected informants and material. He also provides much of the information he gathered about Gaelic society in Nova Scotia: this includes empirical data such as census figures, lists of publications, educational opportunities, religious affiliations, but also personal observations. Campbell’s collections are generally considered to be of great value.

Campbell’s work was very focused. Since he was concentrating on Barra descendants he went to the specific area of Cape Breton where they had settled – mainly the area in central Cape Breton around Grand Narrows – and eschewed other communities that were also rich in Gaelic heritage such as Margaree, Mabou, and the North Shore. He planned to


compare versions of old songs, but he did also record some newly composed songs. *Songs Remembered in Exile* was not published until 1989, more than fifty years after his trip, and even then contained just sixty of the songs he recorded. Although he took his recordings and notes back to Scotland he did maintain contact with some of his contributors or their families. Campbell sent the mother of my collaborator Peter MacLean a copy one of the song texts that a neighbour had given to Campbell, since the song was not found in any other printed or recorded collection at that time, but I am otherwise unsure how much mutual sharing occurred. Instead, many recordings of Gaelic singing from Nova Scotia such as these made their way back to Scotland without being copied for Canadian institutions, and thus remained inaccessible to Gaelic singers and scholars on this side of the Atlantic. Campbell notes in his report and in the introduction to *Songs Remembered in Exile* that he was unable to find an archival home at any Scottish institution for his Cape Breton recordings, although he did give copies of some recordings to St. Francis Xavier University. He also notes that for this reason, and also as a response to the physical deterioration of the recordings, he felt compelled to have the songs transcribed in musical notation (Seamas Ennis of Ireland did this for Campbell, and a copy of his original manuscripts are held at St. Francis Xavier University Library). I can personally attest to the difficulty of discerning musical content on the Campbell recordings. In 2004 some of them were transferred to a digital format for Lorrie MacKinnon, as part of her *Féis an Eilean* symposium on Campbell’s work in the Christmas Island area. While we were glad to have the recordings we were also distressed at how poor the audio quality had become.

John Lorne Campbell was in contact with many Gaelic scholars at St. Francis Xavier University, such as Monsignor (Dr Patrick) P.J. Nicholson and Rev. Gregory MacKinnon
(both of whom held the post of University President) and information gleaned through these relationships doubtless helped him to plan his research trips. It might seem necessary to problematize his role as an outsider from the “Old Country”, with all the colonial baggage that encompasses, being looked to as an authority in the field of Gaelic song in Cape Breton; after all, Campbell directly influenced the country’s first and most important Celtic Studies Department, the one at St. Francis Xavier University, by corresponding with staff and recommending books. For this reason his first honorary PhD was granted to him not in the United Kingdom but in Nova Scotia by St. Francis Xavier University itself (his second was given by Oxford for his contribution to the three-volume set, *Hebridean Folksongs*).

Campbell also had an effect on subsequent collectors in Nova Scotia: he assisted the American scholar MacEdward Leach by making suggestions as to whom he might record, as Monsignor Nicholson of St. Francis Xavier University (himself a Cape Breton Gael, from Boisdale) mentions in a 1949 letter to Campbell which reports on Leach’s then-current trip. It has been suggested that Campbell appears to play the role of the ‘colonizer’ here in the New World when he exerts his intellectual power and authority, but on the contrary this does not seem to be the case. Instead it seems that he is merely trying to share his knowledge from the field, and he does so not in a limiting manner which privileges some material over others but rather in a way that encourages a wider casting of the net. It seems that in fact Campbell’s work did not in fact inform or influence the tradition as much as one might imagine. It is true that a couple of the songs he recorded in Cape Breton (from Mrs Patterson and Mrs MacInnes) were included in *Hebridean Folksongs*, but, as mentioned, his book of

Cape Breton songs, *Songs Remembered in Exile*, was not published until 1989, and his recordings have never been made easily accessible to the public, so it is only recently that his work can be considered as a resource to Cape Breton Gaelic singers.

Monsignor Nicholson’s letters to Campbell, however, reveal other details about an attitude which seems to have been prevalent among collectors and folklorists throughout the history of Gaelic song scholarship, one that is worth mentioning in this survey of collecting: the assumption that the tradition was rapidly dying. In his letter to John Lorne Campbell of March 19, 1937 Nicholson writes:

> I greatly regret to state that I am pessimistic about your quest. Forty years ago one might have found many things; at present there is practically nothing in circulation by way of old songs, lays [ancient songs which are recited in a chant-like style], and *sgeulachdan* [stories] except what people have read. I have had a watch for such things myself and have picked up a little; but at present time practically all the *seanachaidhs* [tradition-bearers] have passed beyond. Further, it is difficult enough to get anyone going that has a song or a tale – it seems that they have to be given time to thaw out and I usually have not patience enough for that.227

Although he seemed to be encouraged somewhat by Campbell’s and his own results – the next year he wrote to Campbell, “my achievement of last summer stimulates me to try harder this coming summer”228 – still, Nicholson clearly thought he was collecting in order to preserve something which was eroding, namely the living practice of singing these particular songs.

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A sense of desperate preservation pervades much of the collecting that goes on in Cape Breton, with the prediction that soon there will be nothing left, although there has clearly been much to collect in Cape Breton throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day. Ten years later, Nicholson and Campbell corresponded regarding the collecting expedition of the American scholar MacEdward Leach. Nicholson writes, with a dry humour:

Several of the persons whose names you gave to Dr. Leach are now dead. My cousin Mrs. MacLean of Beaver Cove has been trying to die for weeks. However, a name crops up here and there of whom I have not heard before, and it looks as if there would be enough to keep Dr. Leach going for some weeks. My impression is that in ten more years there will be nothing left.  

All of this preservation of songs that are being lost suggests the attitude that the singing tradition carries forward songs that are entities unto themselves, capable of ceasing to exist, rather than ‘performances’ that are part of an ever-changing tradition. It is true, of course, that songs are most truly meaningful in the moment of performance, but here I point to the fact that these collectors are most interested in the content of the singing, and mainly the song texts rather than the melodies. This is evident again in this passage from another 1949 letter to Campbell about Leach’s project:

During a good part of his tour he was accompanied by Dougald MacFarlane, one of our recent graduates who speaks Gaelic and a grandson of Malcolm H. Gillis. Both of them were at the disadvantage of not being able to discriminate between things that are already well-known and things that are new, but despite that, I am sure there are many valuable and interesting things in the reels.

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Leach was mainly interested in stories and had little interest in additional performances of the same song, instead favouring the collecting of as many unique items as possible. To me this is a great pity, as there would be as much to learn from the comparison of different performances within Cape Breton, as there was between song texts in the old and new world, since the same song might be sung differently by the same person on different occasions and very differently by different singers. Dismissing the known as less worthwhile seems to limit the knowledge that could be gleaned from comparing different performances of the same song.

**MacEdward Leach**

Despite Nicholson’s qualms, the American scholar MacEdward Leach did make visits to Nova Scotia in 1949, 1950, and 1951, collecting specifically in Gaelic Cape Breton during that first 1949 trip. His wife at the time was from Nova Scotia, and it was through her that he became interested in collecting there, although he reveals in a letter than he made his initial contacts (including Nicholson, one presumes) through Duncan Emrich who at the time headed the Folklore Section at the Library of Congress. It seems that Leach had high hopes for the volume of material he would acquire, and that Emrich was providing more than contacts. He wrote to Emrich:

> As you know we are going to Cape Breton in July for six weeks or more. I have some very good contacts – thanks to you – and I think we should get some valuable material. We have only four reels of tape. Can you lend us more? You remember I left six reels of plastic tape at the Library when we came thru; if we could have that (replacing the
Leach was a scholar of medieval literature and folklore who taught at the University of Pennsylvania, and who was known for his work on the Ulster cycle *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. He, too, seems to have been on a quest to collect songs as entities, and although he did not speak Gaelic he had a very specific interest in ancient Celtic texts, such as those referred to as the ‘Fenian lays’. It seems he was aided by and collecting in part for the Library of Congress, since his contact Duncan Emrich not only provided him with tapes and contacts, but also discussed his work with Harold Spivacke, his own supervisor there:

> The project has been systematically planned with residents of Antigonish [presumably, Monsignor Nicholson] and following correspondence with Mr. John L. Campbell, collector of Gaelic materials in Scotland. It is of importance to add to our collections additional songs in this rapidly disappearing language. Some of the songs go as far back as Ossian and other early poets.  

Again, Emrich underlines the importance of the ‘song-objects’, rather than the living performances. Leach collected fifteen tapes (at this time I am unable to determine their size or capacity) and it seems his interest lay chiefly in preserving ‘ancient’ texts. Also, it seemed, he was chiefly interested in English texts. As he apparently failed to find many of these, he was disappointed with what he found in Cape Breton. He published one article about the stories, “Celtic Tales from Cape Breton,” but did little with his song collection, despite Emrich’s warm response upon hearing them. Emrich wrote, “Your tapes had wonderful stuff”

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on them! That’s a good hunting ground, better than any place in our country, it would seem”.\textsuperscript{234} Leach donated copies of his tapes to the American Folklife Centre at the Library of Congress, but the tapes were not readily available to the public until 2004, at which time students and faculty at Memorial University of Newfoundland’s Department of Folklore brought together selected recordings and information about Leach’s work and presented it on a public website, \textit{MacEdward Leach and the Songs of Atlantic Canada}.\textsuperscript{235} Even so, I do not believe many of my collaborators have heard these, and they never refer to them. It is also a pity they present only excerpts, rather than entire songs.

Before MacEdward Leach, other American collectors had taken an interest in Cape Breton. Charles Dunn was a Scottish-born scholar who earned a PhD at Harvard University, home of the first (and still well respected) Celtic studies department in North America. Dunn first went to Cape Breton in 1941 and then returned to Cape Breton in 1942-43 on a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. He conducted research for his historical book, \textit{Highland Settler} (1953), which was published while he was associate professor of English at the University of Toronto from 1946 to 1956. He, too, recorded widely, amassing some 161 Gaelic songs and numerous stories (although some of these were recorded on the mainland, or in the Gaelic-speaking communities of Glengarry, Ontario and Scotstown, Quebec). The tapes are housed today at Harvard University’s Boylston Hall, but I do not know anyone who has been able to hear them. This is a collection that would be worth repatriating, as it

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{234} Emrich.
\textsuperscript{235} http://www.mun.ca/folkl/leach/index.html Produced with support from the government project, Canada’s Digital Collections, now housed at Library and Archives Canada.
\end{flushright}
includes singers from numerous Cape Breton Gaelic communities and might therefore display a variety of singing styles and song variants.

Laura Boulton

A certain mystery surrounds the work of the American collector Laura Boulton, an ethnomusicologist who made a voluminous contribution to recorded archival collections, mainly because the existence of these Cape Breton tapes is virtually absent from any discourse about her life’s work. Boulton had begun collecting music in the 1920s, even before she undertook graduate studies at the University of Chicago’s anthropology department. She went on to have a long career during which she recorded an enormous number of ethnographic tapes during international travels, later establishing an eponymous archival centre through the sale of her recordings to Columbia University; copies of these are now also in Indiana University’s Archives of Traditional Music and the William Mathers Museum of World Cultures. She later chronicled much of her career in her Autobiography The Music Hunter: The Autobiography of a Career. In 1941, Boulton travelled to Cape Breton to film a documentary called New Scotland (1943) with photographer Judy Crawley (1914-1986) who had done extensive work for the National Film Board. Marius Barbeau reportedly championed Boulton’s project, arranging for the film to be made for the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada and also persuading the young collector Helen Creighton to

237 Clary Croft, Helen Creighton: Canada’s First Lady of Folklore (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1999), 78.
help out. Creighton escorted Boulton around the province and led her to appropriate informants, or in some cases brought them to Boulton. *New Scotland*, just over ten minutes long, paints a pastoral picture of life in Nova Scotia and presents its people of Scottish, English and French communities as preserving their old traditional ways at work as well as music-making. Boulton spends a few minutes on the Gaels, making note of their “ancient poetic language”, showing brief clips of singing at church (Psalm precenting, specific to Presbyterian congregations), children singing a Gaelic song and playing at school, and forty-five seconds of a milling frolic. These clips are tantalizing: the indices of her tape collection make it clear that she collected much more material than this in Cape Breton, including several reel-to-reel tapes of singers who are not represented in other contemporaneous collections. There are copies of Boulton’s materials at the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress, including twenty reels (seven-inch, recorded at 7½ ips) of ‘Scottish’ music (as she labelled it) mostly from Cape Breton, but these have not made their way into public circulation through a commercial recording, as did selected recordings by Creighton, Cowell, and other collectors. Although Boulton’s name seems to be cross-referenced in many discussions of collecting in Cape Breton, her work does not seem to have had a significant impact on the Gaelic singing practice, either to singers or scholars, and the most puzzling and significant thing to me about her work in this area is the fact that she did not disseminate it in any way. In addition, Boulton’s work in Cape Breton is oddly absent from the narrative of her life’s work, and she does not mention it in her autobiography *The Music Hunter* (1969), not even in passing in her section on “The Americas,” or as a footnote, or in any list of her work. I do not believe this was due to negative judgment about the material itself, but rather due to her uneasy relations during the project with another collector – her assistant at the
time, Helen Creighton. Creighton is now known as perhaps Canada’s greatest collector of folk songs. She worked in Nova Scotia from the 1940s to the 1960s, but at the time of Boulton’s visit she had not yet concentrated on Gaelic Cape Breton. As mentioned, Barbeau had persuaded Creighton to help Boulton. Clary Croft explains this in his book about Creighton:

She wasn’t comfortable with the fact that Laura would be making film and audio recordings of material she considered to be hers – or at least from her collection …. Things grew worse a few days later when Laura said she couldn’t afford to pay Helen’s fee and per diem to have her accompany the film crew to any locations outside the Halifax/Dartmouth area. The best she could offer was three cents per mile for car expenses. But Helen was in too deep to quit. She was not about to have Laura Bolton [sic] going off into “her” territory filming folk singers without being present to monitor the situation.  

In retrospect this concern over ‘territory’ seems strange. It is at odds with the cooperative attitude of Campbell and Nicholson, both of whom were concerned with getting the job of preservation done; moreover, it also seems superfluous, since in retrospect collectors seemed to end up recording many of the same singers anyway. It is possible that ultimately Boulton did agree to keep out of Creighton’s territory, and that this is the reason her many tapes from Gaelic singers and musicians remained unpublished or discussed. In her diaries, Creighton wrote about her confrontation with Boulton to express her concerns about this territorial overlap. Apparently “[Boulton] didn’t fuss or plead or do anything silly, but buttered me up in her charming way and faced the problem sensibly. She couldn’t have been nicer about it. Then having discussed it we talked of other things. She felt her work and mine should be

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Croft, 79.
correlated and not conflicting”. Later, Creighton was firmer with Boulton and on the advice of her brother Mac suggested “a written affidavit stating that everything Laura Bolton collected as a result of Helen’s assistance with informants be considered theirs jointly, and any of Helen’s previously collected songs used by Laura would remain Helen’s exclusively”. She wrote up this document and tells us that Boulton “said she would sign anything. Had no idea I had this possessive feeling, but I gave her paper all typed out, said she had no rights to anything, and wouldn’t sign. She very nearly lost her temper but controlled herself with effort. Instead got very nice and understanding and kissed me most affectionately. But of course I was no further ahead”. Ultimately, the question of the rights to work done on this particular field trip for the documentary film was settled by the National Film Board, who determined that they (the NFB) would hold Canadian rights to the film, and Boulton would retain international rights.

This remains an uncomfortable incident, one that has had repercussions for scholarship on Gaelic singing in Cape Breton. I have yet to hear Boulton’s raw audio recordings, but a perusal of their sketchy index of contents reveals the names of both singers who are familiar from other recordings and those I have not heard elsewhere. It is a pity that they are not readily accessible, and that no LP was ever made with all of the audio material. Although copies of the tapes have been deposited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, I have not been able to hear them, nor have any of the Gaelic singers or scholars I know. It is my hope that I shall be able to help repatriate these recordings to the communities of Cape

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239 Helen Creighton Diary, 13 June, 1939, Helen Creighton Fonds, PANS MG1 Volume 2830 #2.
240 Croft, 80.
241 Helen Creighton, Diary, 8 October, 1941, Helen Creighton Fonds, PANS MG1 Volume 2830 #2.
Breton in which they were recorded, and I have had preliminary discussions with Aaron Fox at Columbia University about this.

Helen Creighton and C.I.N. MacLeod

In 1954 Helen Creighton made progress on her own project of collecting Gaelic songs. Ten year later she published the edited results in *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, one of the more popular reference books for Gaelic song in Canada since it not only contains a large number of popular songs but also because it contains musical notation for each. This is noteworthy because musical notation does not feature in most Gaelic songbooks (especially those printed before 1900) with a few exceptions (such as books designed as pedagogical tools for Scottish choirs, such as *A Choisir Chiùil*). It is also worth noting that the transcriptions were made by various musicians who were not necessarily familiar with Gaelic song, including the Halifax-based English conductor Kenneth Elloway and Dalhousie music professor Harold Hamer, while some were made by folk collector Kenneth Peacock. This book is popular among Gaelic learners and is owned by a few of my informants. Although the book is an excellent reference tool, the many recordings from which Creighton derived the content would be even more valued, although they are not readily available to the public and are not in the possession of most Gaelic singers I know. The Nova Scotia Archives holds 307 audio discs, 15 audio cassettes, 4 audio cartridges, 4 cylinder recordings, 4 videocassettes, and 3 film reels, all recorded by Creighton in the province (although not all of these are of Gaelic singers). The Canadian Museum of Civilization (formerly National Museum) and the Library of Congress hold copies of selected audio recordings from
Creighton’s collection. These may be accessed and some may be copied for personal
listening, but they do not seem to have made their way into the hands of many Gaelic singers
in Cape Breton. Apparently, during World War II Creighton had made additional recordings
with a disc recorder on loan from the Library of Congress, but these were lost because of
technical problems.\textsuperscript{242}

Creighton had first visited Cape Breton with Doreen Senior in August 1932, and at that
time they apparently had few contacts to lead them to singers of ‘old songs’. Like Hamilton
and Cowell, she was directed toward the North Shore and Malcolm MacLeod. As David
Gregory writes,

\begin{quote}
The road to Cape Breton led via Antigonish to Port Hawkesbury and then Baddeck, but
none of the two women’s initial inquiries about singers of old songs bore fruit. They
were counselled to continue north to Breton Cove, where they would find tourist
accommodation and the most renowned local singer, D. B. (Donald) MacLeod. His
songs were in Gaelic, as were those of another local informant, Malcolm Angus
MacLeod, of nearby Birch Plain.\textsuperscript{243}
\end{quote}

It is important to remember that Creighton was not particularly focused on Gaelic songs at
this time; she had an interest in singers and songs from many different traditions, as
evidenced by the extensive range of genres she collected and published, and turned her
energy toward different foci for each project. As she wrote,

\begin{quote}
[...]In 1947 I joined the staff of the National Museum of Canada and later went on other
trips to Cape Breton with more modern tape recorders .... No trip was made to collect
Gaelic songs specifically, but there were always some put on tapes. Consequently, they
were all scattered through my recorded collections – a few here, a few there. There
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{242} David Gregory, “Helen Creighton and the Traditional Songs of Nova Scotia”. \textit{Canadian Folk Music Bulletin}
38:2 1-11, 7.
\textsuperscript{243} Gregory, 5.
were some, too, from the Gaelic-speaking section of Guysborough County on the Nova Scotia mainland and a few from the province of Prince Edward Island where I spent an all too short visit in 1956.\textsuperscript{244}

Her statement that she did not intentionally seek out Gaelic songs seems to offer some explanation as to why the songs in her collection are from such a broad range of styles and genres and come from such far-flung communities. It is possible that collecting work that placed most importance on Gaelic songs, such as that of John Lorne Campbell or more recently John Shaw, would have resulted in a fuller picture of the Gaelic song styles and repertoires from any one particular community rather than a scattershot sampling. At the same time, of course, collecting and presenting artefacts are intrinsically subjective acts which represent many deliberate choices; it is also possible that Creighton’s varied (and perhaps haphazard at times) collecting process yielded a more varied range than more focused collecting would have done. Still, the songs which made their way into the printed collection and thus are more available to the public did so after a curatorial process exerted by both Creighton and her Gaelic advisor Major C.I.N. MacLeod who was Professor of Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier University. As Creighton writes in her introduction to \textit{Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia}, “My hopes were high as I played him those songs I considered superior in quality, and I rejoiced when he assured me I had chosen well”.\textsuperscript{245} One wonders what criteria she used to judge a song as “quality”. She mentions the elements from MacLeod’s background that made him a suitable collaborator for this project: he was a Gaelic speaker from Kintail, Scotland; his father was a Gaelic scholar; MacLeod himself


\textsuperscript{245} Creighton, x.
studied at university in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and was a champion bard at the National Mod — a kind of Gaelic song competition in Scotland which imposes a strict, set repertoire list, and in which singing is judged by standards which are arguably out-of-step with aesthetics in Cape Breton Gaelic singing. MacLeod did seem to have had some positive effect on the project. As well as transcribing song texts and translating them, which was necessary since Creighton did not speak Gaelic, MacLeod also encouraged Creighton to return to Gillisdale in Margaree to re-record songs which had been of poor recording quality on a previous trip because he deemed the songs to be good. This second trip yielded more songs than the first. At the same time, however, I suggest that some of the very qualities that Creighton considered to be contributions to MacLeod’s qualifications as a Gaelic advisor might have worked against his suitability in the case of this particular project by biasing him in several ways. As a former prizewinner at the Scottish National Mod, his taste would have been influenced by the aesthetics of this event. His judgment of quality would likely have been influenced by his education and experience in communities and universities in Scotland rather than by local aesthetics in Cape Breton communities. Although he clearly was involved in Gaelic education on several levels, which is in itself a good thing, MacLeod seemed to have been one of those who continued to privilege Gaelic culture as it was practiced in the Old Country over Gaelic culture in the New World.

There is evidence of his attitude in some of his other projects while working as Gaelic advisor for the Department of Education in 1950, such as a children’s radio show made at
CBI Sydney (CBC) to be broadcast in Scotland on St. Andrew’s Day. The script of this short program is housed at the Nova Scotia Archives and is included in their online virtual exhibit of Gaelic culture. The radio show represents Cape Bretoners as no different than Scots, as if their culture did not change after it was transplanted from Scotland to Canada. They sing songs in English about Bonnie Prince Charlie, and just one verse of a well-known Gaelic song (“Ho ro mo nighean donn bhòidheach”) in an English translation. An excerpt from the opening of the radio show indicating this can be seen in Plate 13:


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246 St. Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland but not as associated with Gaelic Scotland as other saints, such as St. Columba or Brigid.
The script, a dialogue between children and their teacher Mrs. Cameron (Mae Cameron, who became the director of the Gaelic choir “Oranaiche Cheap Breatuinn”), emphasizes the similarities between Old Scotland and New Scotland by including surnames and place names, and then underlines that the song repertoire is not only identical to that in Scotland but has simply been transplanted to Nova Scotia, as can be seen in Plate 14:

![Plate 14: Further dialogue from the children’s radio show for St Andrew’s Day, from CBI Sydney, 1950](image)

I think it is safe to say that none of the Gaelic singers I know would ever sing the Skye Boat song (“Speed Bonny Boat”) unbidden, and I am willing to bet that most of them do not even know it.

It is somewhat alarming that the ideas expressed in this program may have represented the personal opinion of Major MacLeod, whose official job was intended to foster local Gaelic culture. Whether or not they were actually reflective of his ideas, he nonetheless seems to have placed his stamp of approval on the document. It is not so surprising, however, when it is considered alongside the attitude that led collectors to ‘preserve’ that which was being lost, or to seek specific texts that had been transplanted from
the Old Country. It seems impossible that Major MacLeod’s colonial attitude would not have affected the choices he made and the editorial decisions he exercised in work he did with Helen Creighton. This likely affected which renditions of songs Creighton chose for her book and also, in turn, this may have influenced the songs so many Gaelic singers choose to learn today. It is also telling that the Creighton collection in Ottawa includes several tapes of MacLeod singing some of the songs that Creighton had collected from Cape Breton informants.

Creighton produced just one commercial recording of music collected in Nova Scotia, *Folk Music from Nova Scotia*, for the Ethnic Folkways Library (FM4006). Out of all the Gaelic song performances that Creighton recorded, only one appears on this LP: Malcolm Angus MacLeod’s performance of “Mo Dhachaidh” (My Home). It is a well-known song but seems an odd choice for this well-respected singer (and both song and singer were also recorded by Diane Hamilton and Sidney Robertson Cowell, although not in this combination) so one wonders if the song was Major MacLeod’s choice. Given the richness of his repertoire and how much of it Creighton recorded, it is unfortunate that more of the MacLeod recordings are not in circulation. Creighton’s book *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia*, however, is perhaps more valuable because Creighton did take note of song variants: she lists the singer and location of the version which is transcribed for the book but also lists alternate versions so that one could conceivably look up the recordings at the Archives to compare them. This, though, is labour intensive and does not make the songs easily accessible to most Gaelic singers.
Lilias Toward

Buried in the files of the Museum of Civilization is the material collected by Cape Breton native, Lilias Toward. She was a lawyer from Baddeck whose only published work is a biography of Mabel Bell, wife of Alexander Graham Bell. In a lull between a marriage in England (in the 1930s) and her law studies she acted on her interest in Cape Breton culture by making some recordings for the National Museum (now the Museum of Civilization). In a letter to collector Margaret Sargent, with whom she made some field recordings, she writes,

I may be quite wrong but I firmly believe that the American people – by that I mean the continent – are desperately in need of roots…. Some of those roots are here in Cape Breton; and it has been my duty to try and preserve something of what is here … but I feel the need of direction and guidance as well a encouragement for up to the present it has been a ‘lone enterprise’ – a peculiar hobby for one not old enough to be in her dotage!249

With this as her impetus, in 1950 she went about collecting Gaelic and Acadian songs, and from this letter it seems she had the intention of doing much more work in this area that never came to pass. Toward organized some song evenings in Middle River, recorded a milling frolic in Whycocomagh, and sought out local songwriters. It is odd that she expresses the feeling that she is working alone, because later in the same document she acknowledges that Helen Creighton is working there (which she would likely have known about through Sargent), and of course we know Laura Boulton and Diane Hamilton (discussed below) were there too, in Baddeck. Toward’s tapes are not of great quality (the sound is poor, songs are incomplete, few singers are clearly identified) and there are fewer than one would hope for,

248 Lilias Toward, Mabel Bell: Alexander’s Silent Partner (Sydney: Breton Books, 1988).
but they are nonetheless interesting for their inclusion of singers from communities not well represented in other field collections, such as Middle River and Whycocomagh. Apparently Toward wished to record further for the Museum but it was not possible, despite her many ideas as to what might be done (and which was not done by other collectors before or since). Most worthy of note is her comment about Major MacLeod’s work. She writes, “It is true that through Major [C.I.N] MacLeod of the Department of Education an attempt is being made to revive an interest in Gaelic. But that is an artificial thing and not the spontaneous expression of a living language.” My perspective in 2011 on MacLeod’s work, then, and ideas about the role played by social context, is not so out-of-tune with that of a Cape Bretoner from 1950, which confirms my opinion that his effect on Creighton’s collecting, however well intentioned, might not have been most beneficial to the tradition. At any rate, Toward became active as a lawyer after 1951 and did not record further or publish her work on Gaelic songs, perhaps because these became the property of the Museum.

Diane Hamilton

In 1954, the American collector Diane Hamilton made a trip to Cape Breton to record music for the Elektra record label; the result of that trip was published on the LP, *Nova Scotia Folk Music from Cape Breton* (EKL 23, 1954). Diane Hamilton was actually a pseudonym of Diane Guggenheim, daughter of Henry Guggenheim and herself a patron of

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250 This is referred to in a letter from George Herzog, Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, to Marius Barbeau. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Postmarked May 26, 1952. TOW-B-1.

the arts and folk music in particular. She made the acquaintance of the now-famous singing
family the Clancy brothers, and in 1955 with the help of Paddy Clancy she launched
Tradition Records, which was largely devoted to Irish folk music. In his memoir, The
Mountain of the Women: Memoirs of an Irish Troubadour, Liam Clancy writes:

[I]n our travels up to now, she had continually talked of someone named Mick Hill and
their recent collecting trip together in Nova Scotia. He was a psychiatry student at Yale
University in New Haven, Connecticut, not far from Deep River, which she also spoke
of frequently. Mick Hill is credited as the photographer and field technician in the liner notes to the Elektra
recording, but did not appear to have any knowledge of Gaelic language or music. He seems
to have been a friend of Hamilton’s from New York, and his name comes up later as a
collaborator with Ralph Rinzler on the presentation of Gaelic singers at the 1965 Newport
Folk Festival. It seems that Hamilton’s interest in Gaelic came from her early life; in her
introductory program notes to the album she states that she was pursuing her childhood
fascination with Hebridean songs and stories, and that to find the songs she ‘followed her
instincts’. She writes:

In the summer of 1953 while visiting Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, I was irresistibly
drawn to the Gaelic-sounding names: Iona, Barra Glen, Skir Dhu, Dunvegan …. On
leaving Cape Breton I knew I would be back again equipped to record the music and
life which had grown to mean so much to me. In August 1954, I arrived at Port
Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia in my station wagon, loaded down with clothing, a new
Ampex 600 tape player, a suitcase containing a small playback amplifier, a Shure 55
microphone and various electrical extension wires …. Finding singers and songs
usually involved many hours of driving over the rough dirt roads and inquiring at small
country stores and gas stations …. My first contact was through a woman in Halifax
who rented rooms to summer tourists. On hearing of my interest in Gaelic music, she

suggested I go see the town clerk in Baddeck. I hesitantly approached him and asked for possible singers in the area …. From there he sent me to the Rev. A. D. MacDonald, then a minister in Baddeck, who sang for me and in turn sent me to Malcolm Angus MacLeod and other singers around Breton Cove and the North Shore.²⁵³

I confess to being somewhat suspicious of this explanation. Hamilton was, after all, well-connected, and it seems unlikely that she would make the trip to Nova Scotia without some preliminary research, or that she would be so rudderless in her search for singers. She established some preliminary contacts on that first trip in 1953. She also records many of the same singers from the North Shore, but is the only one to have recorded singers from Barra Glen, including Stephen Dan MacNeil, about whose singing many of my singing collaborators have spoken highly.

Plate 15: American Collector Diane Hamilton in a sort of tartan costume. Photocopy from back jacket of the Elektra LP Nova Scotia Folk Music from Cape Breton

²⁵³ Diane Hamilton, liner notes to Elektra LP Nova Scotia Folk Music from Cape Breton, EKL-23.
Sidney Robertson Cowell

Sidney Robertson Cowell was another American collector who visited Cape Breton specifically to record Gaelic singing. She, too, first went in 1953 and was aware of Hamilton’s work. Cowell refers to Hamilton in her diary, in notes written between 1954 and 1956, and they met at some point according to the best guess of Deirdre Ni Chonghaile.²⁵⁴ It seems they worked independently and it is difficult to determine who was first to know about Cape Breton Gaelic singing, or who provided the list of initial contacts. Still, Cowell wrote in her notes,

A bright young field collector of folk song named Diane Hamilton recorded the Canadian group [the North Shore Gaelic singers] on one of these visits [to Nova Scotia] and I vaguely remember that her recording of their precenting of the psalm printed in The Bay Psalm Book preceded mine. In any case, it will provide interesting variance to any future student. But I lost track of Miss Hamilton.²⁵⁵

I have seen Cowell’s field notes and listened to most of the tapes, and it is worth noting that she made the majority of her recordings of Gaelic singing in just one area of Cape Breton. This seems to be at odds with her early methodology, influenced by the advice of her mentor Charles Seeger: “Record EVERYthing …. Don’t select, don’t omit, don’t concentrate on any single style. We know so little! Record everything!”²⁵⁶ From her recordings, it seems that Cowell went only to communities in the St. Ann’s Bay to North Shore area, and recorded

²⁵⁴ Deirdre Ni Chonghaile, personal notes made at the Sidney Robertson Cowell Ireland Collections in the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress in April 2001.
²⁵⁵ Folder 5. Sidney Robertson Cowell Ireland Collections in the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. Transcribed by Deirdre ní Chonghaile.
twelve seven-inch double-track tapes of Gaelic music that are now housed in the Library of Congress. It is unclear as to why she targeted this particular region, and if perhaps she had had the chance to hear Laura Boulton’s tapes, or to speak with Helen Creighton (I cannot find any record of correspondence between these two). Given her inclusive philosophy of collecting it seems unlikely that she would not have been curious about Gaelic singing in other parts of the island, so her concentration on this area appears to be intentional. Ni Chonghaile has done extensive research on Sidney Robertson Cowell for her own work on musical collecting on Ireland’s Aran islands, and some of her observations on Cowell’s methodology shed light on this issue. She writes,

James P. Leary has suggested that the wide scope of Sidney’s early fieldwork was created ‘more by chance than design’: ‘As far as I can tell from her correspondence and the recordings she made, Sidney Robertson was somewhat scattershot … in her approach to folksong/music recording in the Upper Midwest’ (Email correspondence with the author, 23 November 2009). However, this suggestion does not acknowledge the sense of purpose with which Sidney pursued the diverse avenues of research that opened up to her, even if by chance, in America in the 1930s and 1940s, and later in Ireland in the 1950s. The wide scope of her collections should, therefore, be interpreted simply as a reflection of her attempts to ‘record everything’ that came her way (Filene 2000, 142).

Perhaps, Cowell would begin by casting the net widely and then hone in on an area of interest; according to Ni Chonghaile she seems to have done this in the Aran Islands. By the time she made her plan to go to Cape Breton, however, she was very sure of the type of material she wanted, as evidenced by this letter to the Library of Congress from 1953:

My first port of call is the Gaelic College at St. Ann [sic], N.S., on Cape Breton Island, because there is to be a Gaelic Mod there the week of August 3rd (plays; games;

singing and chanting competitions) … and this seems a good set-up, at least for meeting singers who use traditional styles still, even if in Gaelic, tho’ I prefer English, of course. I am of course after the traditional singing most interesting musically, with the “graces” in the voice as the Irish call them; and unaccompanied styles generally; in sea songs and woods songs related to music I recorded in the woods in the Great Lake States; and in general in capturing examples of the music that is least susceptible to reproduction in notation. This is not of course a commercial venture, I am financing it myself. And of course the Library of Congress is welcome to copy anything as always before.258

Cowell is most interested in English songs, and in their musical content, so perhaps for this reason the fact that she does not understand Gaelic does not deter her. She also seems interested in tracing song families, as she is looking for songs “related to music I recorded in the woods in the Great Lake States”. Once in Cape Breton she remained geographically very focused. Singers from the North Shore, up the coast from St. Ann’s, whom she met at the Gaelic College event, were almost exclusively Presbyterian and mostly descended from settlers born on the islands of Lewis and Harris. As such they would have a distinct accent in their Gaelic speech and some consistent choices of text and melody in their singing. Cowell might have begun with the intention of being inclusive, but in fact in Cape Breton she was very exclusive. Although she recorded numerous tracks, just thirteen of these were made available to the public through their inclusion on the LP *Songs from Cape Breton Island* (Folkways Records, 1955).

One consistently positive aspect of Cowell’s collecting philosophy was that she sought the trust of her collaborators, something which possibly resulted in more and better material. She was critical of those who took a different approach:

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\end{flushright}
‘The Seegers felt that the collection I was making would make a wonderful grist for a number of publications. The Lomaxes were very anxious to make money off their collecting, and I didn’t feel that was fair to the people who did the singing. I knew that they would resent it very much, and it would make it very difficult for future collectors. Because they were already very suspicious … some of the people who I knew best, I could never get it through their heads that I wasn’t making any money off of this. I had my expenses paid at a very low rate, and they never really believed that I would do a thing, go to so much trouble, for nothing. Anyway, what I should tell these people is that the United States government was interested in preserving the old music, which they appreciated because they recognized that it was disappearing. And that there was no commercial aspect to the enterprise at all. But that publishers sometimes went through the Library’s collections and wanted to publish stuff. And if anybody showed an interest in their music, he would be referred to them. This happened in a couple of instances. But no commercial use could be made under the terms of my agreement with the Library, always, without some return to the singers. They weren’t always entitled to that, except for the performance, because they didn’t own the songs of course. Which is difficult to get through their heads. In any case, I was just not going to have them exploited.  

For all of these reasons, it is my intention to examine these recordings in detail for a future study in order to discover what else might have been recorded on them and how that content might illuminate our understanding of individual and community singing style in one area of Cape Breton. Recorded exclusively in the North Shore area, they include the same group of singers whom she first met at the 1953 Gaelic Mod at St Ann’s Gaelic College. For the purposes of my current work, however, it is the absence of these recordings from the discourse of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton that is of the most interest, especially since the Gaelic community of The North Shore has suffered from an almost complete decimation, and the best-known singers are spoken of much though are known through very few recordings. A more extensive circulation of Cowell’s tape recordings might have encouraged local singers, and might yet be able to do so.

Ralph Rinzler and Kathleen MacKinnon

In 1964 Ralph Rinzler went to Cape Breton and recorded many singers, including some of the same informants that others had before him. By then he would have been familiar with these singers through the 1955 concert at Harvard University which he and Sidney Cowell organized using Cowell’s connections from previous visits. Rinzler also had copies of Cowell’s tapes in his personal collection, which is now housed at the Smithsonian. Rinzler culled his own recordings to make a compilation of Gaelic songs that was marketed to Japan, not North America, and there is no copy of this in the regular Folkways catalogue.

Perhaps the last foreign collector to do a significant amount of work in Cape Breton was Kathleen MacKinnon, a graduate student at St. Francis Xavier University who came from Oban, Scotland. She visited Cape Breton in the early 1960s to collect stories and songs as research for her Master’s thesis, “A short study of the history and traditions of the Highland Scot in Nova Scotia” (1964). MacKinnon’s work is most remembered for her collecting and transcription of a famous legend, “Cath na Eun”, from Cape Bretoner Hughie Dan MacDonnell, which she published in Gairm Magazine, but she was also knowledgeable on Gaelic songs as they were sung in Scotland at the time. She wrote a detailed report on her collecting activities in Cape Breton, and there is a copy of this at the Beaton Institute; from this it is evident that she was interested in such features of the practice as the choice of commonly sung songs. She writes, “I heard many other songs … so popular that almost any Cape Bretoner will sing them to you, yet many of them I had never heard in Scotland – songs like “An t-Each Odhar”, “Ho Cruinneag, he cruinneag” and “A nionag [sic] a’ chuil dhuinn
nach fhan thu” … and of course the very popular song to “Mairi nigh’n Domhnail”, “Ho ro’s toil leam fhin thu”. Peter MacLean regularly sings the last two mentioned here. She did not, to my knowledge, publish any of her findings on Gaelic singing in Cape Breton.

Collectors from within the Nova Scotia Gaelic tradition

The work of these collectors from outside the Cape Breton Gaelic community is significant, but Gaels in Cape Breton and mainland Nova Scotia have taken it upon themselves to record singers since recording equipment became available to them, just as they were always active in documenting and publishing their history and culture via print media (as was mentioned in the introduction). It is interesting that much of the material collected by Cape Bretoners has been used for education, and thus has had more connection than that of the visiting collectors so far surveyed. The Beaton Institute in Sydney (formerly Cape Bretoniana) was founded in 1957 by the librarian Mother St. Margaret of Scotland (Sister Margaret Beaton), with the intention of preserving old documents. Its scope grew, and it now contains over 2,500 sound recordings. Unlike the collecting of visiting scholars, which often took place in a concentrated period of time, the Beaton Institute has grown sporadically and has depended on donations from Cape Bretoners themselves. These include musical performances of all kinds, and not only from Gaelic communities but also from Mi’kmaq, African Nova Scotian, Jewish, Acadian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish and Italian communities. Among its Gaelic song holdings are sets of tapes made by single collectors, such as Joe Lawrence MacDonald of Boisdale who, at the request of Sr. Margaret at the

Beaton, recorded himself and other notable Gaelic singers from his neighbourhood in the 1960s and 70s. It is he whom I have to thank for the wonderful recording of Finlay Cameron. Collections at the Beaton Institute include some recordings of radio shows with Gaelic singing, such as *Mac Talla nan Eilean* (*Island Echoes*, which lives on as the name of a local CBC English Radio program), although lamentably most radio shows were broadcast live and so no tapes of them remain. The Beaton also continues to absorb some individual private collections: when I visited in May 2009, they had just received a box of tapes which had come from the estate of Donald John (D.J.) MacDermaid, himself a fine Gaelic singer but also a taper of Gaelic singing in the southeast part of the island. The Beaton is thus different from other recordings archives of Cape Breton Gaelic singing: it is located within the province, right on Cape Breton Island, and although it is not common for people to visit it, perhaps it is comforting to know that it is close at hand. The collection was made by the people themselves, not by outsiders; it represents what Gaelic speakers from Cape Breton thought was important to record and preserve; it grows over time, rather than being collected in one concentrated period. For these reasons, much more than any other of the collections I have discussed, the Beaton Institute archives are more akin to Peter MacLean’s private tape collections, and less like the other archives discussed above.

Several other individuals based in Nova Scotia have recorded Gaelic singers over the years and sought to learn and disseminate their songs. From 1964 to the 1980s, the American-born scholar John Shaw (Professor of Ethnology at the University of Edinburgh) lived and worked in Cape Breton, recording extensively for St. Francis Xavier University. Shaw’s rich collection of tapes formed the bulk of the *Cape Breton Gaelic Folklore Collection*, founded by Sr. Margaret MacDonnell (also a Gaelic scholar, author of *The*
Emigrant Experience and an instructor at St FX Celtic Studies Department). Because of the volume and quality of the recordings, but even more so now for their accessibility to the public, Shaw is one of the most important collectors of Cape Breton Gaelic song. In 2005, with the support of Department of the Canadian Heritage, the majority of these recordings were digitized and placed on a public website. Struth nan Gaidheal / Gael Stream is available in Gaelic, English, and French, and is searchable by artist, collector, song title or other keywords, and has become a very popular way of accessing and Gaelic song recordings. It is now common to hear younger learners say at the milling table that they picked up a song from Gael Stream.

Professor Kenneth Nilssen of St Francis Xavier University’s Celtic Studies department was educated at Harvard and arrived in Nova Scotia in the 1980s. Since then he has been recording informants, and was perhaps the first to videotape storytellers and singers. He uses his own private collection of recordings as a tremendous resource for the classroom, both at St FX as well as in summer programs and other Gaelic language workshops.

Scottish-born Rosemary McCormack and her husband Brian lived in Cape Breton from the 1970s to the 1990s, and while there she recorded songs, distributed commercial recordings, held regular song workshops and published a Gaelic song newsletter. McCormack’s work seems most valuable for its concentration on many informants from the Grand Narrows area, from Barra Glen to Iona, and across the bridge through to Christmas Island and Boisdale. She also deserves credit for producing Gaelic singer Mary Jane

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Lamond’s first CD in 1995. Since then Lamond has become the best-known singer of Gaelic songs from Cape Breton and has performed internationally, collaborating with such musicians as The Chieftains.

Seumas Watson, now at the Highland Village Museum and formerly co-editor of *Am Braighe* (the Gaelic newspaper) immersed himself in Gaelic since his arrival in Cape Breton in the 1970s. He has recorded and transcribed many Gaelic songs and stories, many of them from the North Shore, and he disseminates these though his various positions and also in song workshops so that his work is very much part of the living tradition, both in a retrospective and revivifying way.

By writing in positive tones about more recent collecting trends, I do not mean to suggest that the early collectors I discussed earlier did not have the best intentions as to the purpose of their collecting work. Collector Sidney Robertson Cowell herself said:

> Recording is not necessarily a museum thing, of course (in case that was implied) but is the only true way of knowing – preserving the knowledge – of what native culture is, in a form that can then be circulated with truth. The old is being snowed under so fast at the moment, and people will want so badly to know what it actually was in another generation or two, it needs an extra support at the moment.\(^{262}\)

Cowell seems to be alluding to this idea that embodied performance is a vital part of preserving cultural knowledge, presaging Diana Taylor’s ideas about performance as a “true way of knowing.” We are grateful to her and many of her fellow-collectors for preserving

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what they did of this earlier era of Gaelic song performance, as it illuminates aspects of today’s practice.

Cowell did make efforts to disseminate some of what she collected, but clearly there is still much work to be done in making other recorded archives more accessible to singers and the public in general. The archives that I use in Nova Scotia and Ottawa have been grappling with the challenges of how to best present and preserve their materials and, just as importantly, how to make them available to the public. They are clearly not alone in these efforts: in keeping with its commitment to support intangible culture, UNESCO announced in 2009 the first annual World Day for Audio-visual Heritage “to raise awareness of the importance of AV documents as integral part of national identities and the world’s memory and to draw attention to the urgent need to safeguard them”.

Gaelic song collections in Canada are among those that have recently received attention, such as *Struth nan Gaidheal / Gael Stream*, which received financial support from various levels of government. Other institutions such as The Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University are transferring their own fragile tape collections to digital format although, as Anthony Seeger has pointed out, these are not without their own problems of preservation. Until the archives are more accessible, however, and without the circulation of the rich resources I encountered in my research, it seems that many of the same tapes and commercial recordings are the ones that are most likely heard and circulated. Even in 1964, the scholar Kathleen MacKinnon remarked that

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people were listening to records from Scotland rather than learning their own songs, and that “The Grand Mira chorus, led by Lauchie Gillis, entertained me with practically every song ever put on record by the GaelFonn Company [a Scottish record company]. In this rather unusual method, a link with the Old Country is being maintained”. 265 Each year I hear songs being sung by learners, even at the milling table, which they have learned from “a [traditional] CD from Scotland”. Since the style and repertoire is different there I am surprised or even somewhat disappointed that they have not learned songs from Cape Breton recordings instead, but I remind myself that although several commercial recordings of traditional singers are available, it is a limited amount in comparison to all of the collecting which was done, especially in the middle of the twentieth century. This needs to be rectified.

**Return of the Wanderer: a Song Comes Home from the Archives**

I have established the relative inaccessibility of archival recordings, or at least their absence from the everyday practice of Gaelic song. My opening ethnography might seem to drive that point even further by suggesting that archives are relatively static and divorced from the living practice because they require a more deliberate participation from the visitor. Some archives, however, may in fact play an influential and active role in Gaelic singing – but through individual experiences that ripple out into the community. I have witnessed a few examples of this, as many of the Gaelic singers, enthusiasts, teachers and singers I know have sought out archival recordings of songs they wish to learn. Most notable of these is the singer

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265 (Kathleen) MacKinnon.
and teacher Mary Jane Lamond, who has learned many songs from archival tapes and revived them though their inclusion on her commercial recordings, which are very popular among the younger generation of Gaelic learners. Her second solo CD, *Suas E* (1997) was accompanied by a contemporary band and styled to appeal to a young demographic extending beyond the Gaelic singing communities of Cape Breton. She nevertheless includes a recording of the (now deceased) Margaret MacLean from Boisdale singing the milling song, “lù ò a hiù ò”, providing a link to an older generation of traditional bearers from the community. On her album *Làndùil* (1999) she begins a track with an archival tape of Joe Neil MacNeil reciting the words to a piece of Gaelic mouth music. Her albums are appealing, modern and fun, but it is also clear that many younger Gaelic singers look up to her as someone who is thought of as authoritative by the Gaelic community. She can therefore exert some influence on the song repertoire, at least among the younger demographic, and draw some songs from the archives into the current practice. It should be emphasized, though, that she lives in Cape Breton and knew the singers who appear on the archival recordings, so her singing of the songs is informed by this experience, and not drawn from the archives in a disconnected way.

I had a personal experience of how archives can have an impact on present-day repertoire when I inadvertently revived a song, or rather inserted a song into the active repertoire where it had not been before. The reaction of community members to my singing raised myriad questions about the relationship between memory, archive, and present-day practice of these songs. The experience has also prompted me to question my own role, and that of an archive, in the present-day practice of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton. Being an outsider to Cape Breton society and a learner of Gaelic language and song I had always
considered my place to be on the periphery of the tradition, so this occurrence seemed to indicate an important shift in my position, as well as illuminating an aspect of the place of song in the lives of the people within one Gaelic community.

In 1996 I was singing with the musical ensemble, Puirt a Baroque, which made connections between Cape Breton music and its Scottish eighteenth-century roots. I had recently begun to visit Cape Breton to learn Gaelic songs and was keen to select a special one that would serve as a sort of centerpiece for Puirt a Baroque’s tour and album. After consulting with Gaelic singers, songbooks, and my own field recordings, I spent hours pulling tapes and listening at the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University. On a recording of the now-defunct Gaelic radio program, Air Bord, broadcast on CHER in 1979, one song in particular caught my attention: “Tilleadh an Eilthirich” or “Return of the Wanderer”. It was composed and sung by Archie Alex MacKenzie from Christmas Island, the area where I do much of my research. Although at the time I did not speak Gaelic well enough to understand all of the song or his explanation of its genesis, there was something there that appealed to me strongly. Further research revealed that the song is included in the collection of Gaelic songs, From the Farthest Hebrides (1977) by Donald A. Fergusson, and in the independent publication, The MacKenzes’ History of Christmas Island Parish (2nd edition, 1984).

A year and a half later my ensemble had recorded “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”, our CD had been released, and the song was receiving some play on CBC radio. When I returned to Cape Breton that summer I was surprised to learn that word of the recording had spread among singers in Christmas Island and the neighbouring communities of Boisdale, Iona, and Barra Glen. For the first time in the years since I had begun learning Gaelic songs I was
asked to lead a song at the milling table, and what they wanted me to sing was Archie Alex MacKenzie’s “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”. At the end of the evening, strangers from the community approached me to praise the beauty of the song, to ask where I had come from, how I had learned it, and if I had known MacKenzie. In the years that have passed since then, and despite the fact that I have since learned and sung many other songs, it is this song I am asked to sing each time I visit. I was dismayed to be the object of such attention, although it is an honour to lead a song and to receive such words of encouragement. As a learner I was there to listen to the members of the community sing, not to sing to them. From the safe distance of a few years, however, I can see that what happened here is worth considering.

Even those who are part of native-speaking Gaelic communities cannot be familiar with the entire enormous repertoire of Gaelic songs, which is expansive and varied and comprises several different genres. Much of it dates back to the sixteenth century, but it also includes many songs composed in Cape Breton. Like any repertoire, however, it contains many songs which enjoy continued popularity and seem to turn up at almost every gathering where Gaelic songs are sung; these songs also appear in printed collections, and on recordings, both archival and commercial. The song that I had chosen, however, is relatively new, and even its melody cannot hold the key to its sentimental appeal since, although most songs composed by Cape Breton Gaels set new words to pre-existing melodies, MacKenzie had composed original music for this one. The composer Archie Alex MacKenzie was a Cape Breton Gaelic singer, fiddler, bard, historian, genealogist and storyteller who wrote this song in 1975 for his first visit to the “Old Country” specifically the island of Barra in Scotland’s Hebridean islands. He was the first of his family to return there since the early nineteenth century when his great-grandfather had immigrated to the Christmas Island area of
Cape Breton. As the story goes, he composed the song on the plane to express his excitement at this long-anticipated journey, and he sang it at many céilidhs when he arrived in Scotland.

The chorus contains both a hint of nostalgia, and a nod to modern technology:

\[\text{Fig. 12: Tilleadh an Eilthirich, chorus and first verse, transcribed from the singing of Archie Alex MacKenzie (the composer).}\]

(Hi ho ro and ho ro ghealladh
I am as lighthearted as a youngster
Right on course to the island of Barra
We’ll be there tomorrow)\(^{266}\)

In the first verse, also transcribed above, MacKenzie says,

\['S iomadh sgeul a rinn mi cluinntinn
Bhun a bha mi og 'nam naoidh-ein\]

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\(^{266}\) Translation by the composer.
Many a story was related Since the time that I was cradled Of the country and the people The best in all of Europe)\textsuperscript{267}

This song, with its lists of islands and work activities, is a musical spin on this record-keeping of which Cape Breton Gaels are so fond. MacKenzie says in the fifth verse

\begin{verbatim}
Siud a dh’fhag againn an dileab
Tha an diugh a fas cho priseil
\end{verbatim}

(They left us a legacy which today is growing so precious)\textsuperscript{268}

Subsequent verses make explicit reference to these stories he has heard all his life, and with which most others from Christmas Island would also be familiar. The complete song text can be found in the Appendix, as Example 3.

Cultivating knowledge of one’s heritage is a long-established aspect of Gaelic culture in Cape Breton; the Gaels kept their family history by the reciting of a \textit{sloinneadh}, a list of patronyms that identify their familial lineage back several generations. The MacKenzies of Christmas Island were well known as musicians and singers, but also as keepers of local history. Archibald J. MacKenzie was the father of the man who wrote my chosen song. In 1926 he assembled a history of the area, including genealogical sketches, stories and song texts composed by family members and others in the community. In 1984, his son Archie Alex MacKenzie expanded and republished that book, including more songs by himself and

\textsuperscript{267} Translation by the composer.  
\textsuperscript{268} Translation by Stephanie Conn for clarification. The composer wrote instead, “The legacy they left behind them people all are now admiring”, presumably so that it would fit the tune more closely.
his brother – among them, this song, “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”. The MacKenzies’ *History of Christmas Island* is just one of several books which are the product of Cape Breton Gaels’ love of familial and local record-keeping; other examples include *To the Hills of Boisdale: Pioneer families of Boisdale, Cape Breton and Surrounding Areas* and the two-volume *Mabou Pioneers*. Mackenzie’s song, then, is an overt acknowledgment of his cultural inheritance, and in composing it he drew on the broader cultural and historical associations that he knew would speak to listeners within his community in Cape Breton as well as to those he would visit in the Old Country. My suspicion is that when I sang it, I tapped into the collective memory of these people, into their identification with Gaelic culture, with their Scottish history, and the ongoing musical creativity of Christmas Island and the surrounding area. I previously discussed the role that memory plays in the transmission and meaning of Gaelic singing: it is cultivated as a powerful tool in the transmission of repertoire and style, providing meaning and context of the songs on a personal, community, and cultural level. The way “Tilleadh an Eilthirich” was received reflects the role that memory plays in the acceptance of a song into the canon – and thus, in the life of a song itself. It therefore partly provides an answer to my ongoing question of why some songs continue to be popular while others fade away.

Although performances of oral practices such as Gaelic singing are captured in recordings, sound is nevertheless evanescent and the present moment is the only one in which a song truly lives. Memory becomes a powerful factor in how a song is performed and received. In his book *Memory in Oral Tradition*, psychologist David C. Ruben explores similar issues and notes that “Oral traditions are viewed as human behaviour, not as reified texts [which] must be stored in one person’s memory and be passed to another person who is
also capable of storing and retelling it.\textsuperscript{269} As has been evident from my own experience in visiting members of the Gaelic community such as the Camerons, the practice of Gaelic song is inherently social in nature, and so as Rubin perhaps reductively notes, “by studying the song, something can be learned of the environment of memory in which it exists, and by studying memory, something can be learned about the song.\textsuperscript{270} I take that idea a step further, then, and posit that a Gaelic song is formed, informed and invoked by memory: formed, because in the moment of its composition or performance, memory plays an active role in how it is rendered; informed, because its meaning for listeners or performers is directly affected by associations; and invoked because these mechanisms of community history-keeping, archival collecting, and personal reference make it possible for an individual to call it forth from where it might otherwise be forgotten. When I sang Archie Alex MacKenzie’s song, then, several levels of memory were involved: communal memory, that shared cultural heritage; reminiscence, for example the memories of those who knew the MacKenzie family, all of whom were musicians and are no longer living; and this third kind of individual memory which is intertwined with the practice of the music, and which helps to invoke it in the present.

\textsuperscript{270} Rubin, 10.

From Archive to Performance

Gaelic learners use recording archives as pedagogic tools and regard them as representations of the Gaelic song canon; they are used at workshops, and when we are lucky, we are able to get our hands on a tape from which to learn songs. Singers enter into active dialogue with the recordings and documents, retrieving them from archives, learning a version of the song from that rendition, and bringing them back into the living practice. Through these actions they invest them with authority; it is generally believed that if one has heard it on a tape, then it is correct in some way, much as the printed word is respected in books or printed documents (although if a tradition-bearer is present, his version of a given song would be privileged over the one on a recording).
Archives are usually spoken of positively but complaints are often made about what is missing. Taped copies of recordings are treasured and shared. Gaelic enthusiasts celebrated when St. Francis Xavier University launched *Struth nan Gaidheal / Gael Stream*. It is possible, then – and my story confirms this – that a song may be resurrected from the archives, and yet perhaps it is not just any song or performance that would be so successful, or perhaps even there are certain conditions of performance that must be met. “Tilleadh an Eilthirich” in particular resonated with people from Christmas Island and the surrounding area for various reasons discussed above, but there are many other factors that must have contributed to how it was received. Since I learned the song from a recording, I was able to hear the way it was sung by its composer Archie Alex MacKenzie, at least they way it was sung on one particular occasion. Moreover, since I learned the song on my own from an archival recording, I was not influenced by inflections that might possibly have changed in the intervening years, or by subjective feedback from a living Gaelic singer. Instead, as I sang this song I imitated the phrasing and accent of Archie Alex as closely as I could, so perhaps my listeners heard familiar timing or were reminded by my inflection of other singers they had heard in the past. I do not doubt that they were comparing me and judging the textual, musical, and stylistic appropriateness of my rendition, and apparently they found it to be good. Few people would know this song in particular, and so they would not be appraising the song itself as they would a well-known one – that is, they would not be comparing it to some other version they would have heard and comparing textual differences or melodic variants. Still, they would have noted if I sang with “swing” and if my pronunciation of the words was clear and my Gaelic accent familiar. They would not notice that in fact, for the sake of our arrangement with instruments, I had standardized the air to
make it the same in every verse (instead of it being subtly altered each time as it was by Archie Alex), or that I had made a slight change to the end of the first phrase so that it would carry better from a concert stage.

I should not have been so surprised that my singing of “Tilleadh an Eilthirich” caught the attention of this singing community, or that a song which was not formerly part of that community’s repertoire was embraced so enthusiastically. The meaning of a song seems to reside within its ability to connect with memory on a personal and cultural level, with those who experience it as singers or listeners. It is through the interactions between memory and present-day performance that people learn the songs, understand their cultural meaning, and bring them forth into present experience. It seems that the archives can therefore feed a practice from within, but not necessarily with familiar material. For most people in Cape Breton Gaelic communities this song is not part of the remembered past as it was never in the commonly-heard repertoire and is not centuries old like many of the other songs which are commonly sung at community cultural events; rather, the song is relatively new, having been composed in 1975. Still, many years after my first performance of the song at Christmas Island in 1998 there are at least three other people singing this song in Halifax and Glendale, and many more who can join in on the chorus, even joining me in the singing of the final line of the fourth verse, “seinn an oran Ghaidhlig (sing a Gaelic song). When I presented an academic paper on this topic at the conference Rannsachadh na Ghaidhlig 2008 at St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, I was surprised to hear people singing along as I played a recording of Archie Alex MacKenzie’s original rendition. The song has thus made its way from the archive and back into the active repertoire, despite its unfamiliarity when I first sang it.
It is not entirely unusual for a song that is unfamiliar to a community to be offered at the milling table, since Gaelic song repertoire is constantly changing and differs from home to home or town to town. Singers become known for singing particular songs and so the presence of particular singers is a major factor in determining whether a song will be heard at any given gathering, and songs sometimes fall away as their singers pass on. This is especially the case with New-World or local songs; the song in my story here had fallen out of practice entirely when its composer died. The songs of Archie Alex’s brother Hugh MacKenzie have maintained a limited existence in the repertoires of some older Gaelic speakers, mainly those who attend the Christmas Island Gaelic events such as Peter MacLean and Rod C. MacNeil, and more recently with learners and scholars such as Lorrie MacKinnon, Jeff MacDonald and Jim Watson. Despite the cleverness of Hugh’s texts and the fact that he used pre-existing melodies that might be familiar to singers and listeners, his songs have not made their way into the more public repertoire. There are many factors affecting this: the songs are largely written about local events; some of the songs are comic and make fun of specific events or individuals from his neighbourhood, and thus people are reluctant to sing some of these in pubic; but perhaps most importantly, Hugh’s songs have not been made easily accessible until recently, and have not been published; most are absent from The MacKenzie's History of Christmas Island Parish, which does include songs by Archie Alex and their father Archibald A. MacKenzie. Several recordings of Hugh MacKenzie singing his own songs are in the Beaton Institute, Sydney; these are not available online and the Beaton collection does not yet have a comprehensive searchable

271 For example, Beaton Tape T242.
index. In 2010, Rod C. MacNeil and Paul Cranford began work on a book compiling Hugh MacKenzie’s songs along with background information and a recording, but at the time of writing it is still in progress.

These are among the reasons why many of Hugh MacKenzie’s songs have remained the province of the connoisseur, particularly those who knew him, as is the case with many local songs. Two of Hugh’s songs, however, have become well known and loved in his home community of Christmas Island. “Bu Deònach Leam Tilleadh” is set to a pre-existing tune, one used for the older song “Bu Chaomh Leam bhi Mireadh” and which is played often on pipes. Here is the melody, based on the playing of piper Barry Shears:

![Melody of Bu Deònach Leam Tilleadh](image)

*Fig. 13: “Bu Deònach Leam Tilleadh”, transcribed from the playing of Barry Shears on the recording, “Tir mo Ghràidh”*

MacKenzie wrote the text, “I would willingly return”, while he was away from Cape Breton to work, likely in Ontario. He praises the beauty of Cape Breton and specifically Christmas Island’s *cul* or ‘rear’. This song has become a sort of theme song for the annual
Féis an Eilean. Perhaps its popularity as a pipe tune has contributed to the popularity of the song, as it is fairly well known, and so the Gaelic song version is easily recognizable by many members of the community. The song is also in Helen Creighton’s book, but also circulated within the Christmas Island area. It is likely that as in the case of “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”, it is the text as written by Hugh MacKenzie that is the key to its popularity. It invites listeners to make an association on a personal and community level. Like many panegyric songs written by Gaelic poets since early nineteenth century, it praises the beauty of their own home; it also, however, makes reference to those who have had to leave to find work, a situation Cape Bretoners know all too well.

In Plate 17, featuring an on-stage presentation at the 2006 Féis, one can see that Hugh MacKenzie’s song title is emblazoned on a banner behind the singers as a slogan:

The song is also appropriate as a rallying call to the people from far-flung communities who visit Christmas Island each year to attend the Féis:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ged \text{ } th\text{ }a\text{ } m\text{ }i\text{ }am\text{ } b\text{ }liadhna\text{ } iomadh\text{ } m\text{ }ile\text{ } a\text{ }n\text{ } iar \text{ } uai\text{ }b, \\
Ri \text{ } anradh\text{ } i\text{ }s \text{ } riasladh, \text{ } chan \text{ } fhiach\text{ } mi\text{ } na\text{'}s \text{ } fhe\text{'}arr; \\
Cha\text{ } do\text{ } leig\text{ } mi\text{ } air\text{ } diochumh\text{'}n\text{'} an\text{ } comunn\text{ } bha\text{ } ciatach, \\
B\text{'}e\text{ } m\text{'}aighear\text{ } 's\text{ } mo\text{ } mhiann\text{ } a\text{ } bhi\text{ } shiособ\text{ } leibh\text{ } an\text{ } dràsd.
\end{align*}
\]

[Although I am this year many a mile to the west of you, Wandering and sorely distressed, I am not worth anything better; I did not forget the pleasant company, It would be my joy and desire to be with you down there just now.]

\[
\begin{align*}
Gur\text{ } muladach\text{ } tha\text{ } m\text{ }i\text{ } gach\text{ } là\text{ } o\text{'}n\text{ } a\text{ } dh\text{'}fhàg \text{ } mi, \\
Chan\text{ } eil\text{ } sunnd\text{ } orm\text{ } an\text{ } dràsda\text{ } làmh\text{ } thoir\text{ } air\text{ } ceòl; \\
Chan\text{ } eil\text{ } agam\text{ } de\text{ } bhàrdachd\text{ } a\text{ } dh\text{'}innseas\text{ } an\text{ } dàn\text{ } dhuibh, \\
Gach\text{ } buaidh\text{ } th\text{'}air\text{ } an\text{ } àit\text{ } 's\text{ } an\text{ } deach\text{ } m'ùrach\text{ } glè\text{ } òg.
\end{align*}
\]

Perhaps most interesting is that, like many other Gaelic bards, MacKenzie makes a connection between general contentment with his life and music making, underlining the interconnection of the two in Gaelic culture. He writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
Gur\text{ } muladach\text{ } tha\text{ } m\text{ }i\text{ } gach\text{ } là\text{ } o\text{'}n\text{ } a\text{ } dh\text{'}fhàg \text{ } mi, \\
Chan\text{ } eil\text{ } sunnd\text{ } orm\text{ } an\text{ } dràsda\text{ } làmh\text{ } thoir\text{ } air\text{ } ceòl; \\
Chan\text{ } eil\text{ } agam\text{ } de\text{ } bhàrdachd\text{ } a\text{ } dh\text{'}innseas\text{ } an\text{ } dàn\text{ } dhuibh, \\
Gach\text{ } buaidh\text{ } th\text{'}air\text{ } an\text{ } àit\text{ } 's\text{ } an\text{ } deach\text{ } m'ùrach\text{ } glè\text{ } òg.
\end{align*}
\]

[I am sad each day since I left I am not happy (enough) now to put my hand to music I have not the Bardic skill to say a verse to you About each virtue of the place I was raised from when I was very young]\(^{272}\)

This song is an ideal anthem as it binds the community with love of the place, compels people to stay or, if they leave, to return again (clearly this works as a marketing tack for the

\[^{272}\text{Translation by Stephanie Conn.}\]
Féis, as well), and reminds everyone that music-making is a sign of cohesion with one’s home community and of personal happiness. A song like this might seem destined for a permanent place in the practiced canon but it got there by being retrieved from a recorded archive, namely those of the Beaton Institute, and Helen Creighton who also printed the text and music in her book. In 1999 the Féis included an excerpt of the text in its annual program booklet; this text, along with translation and the melody, can be found in the Appendix as Example 4.

Recording Archives as Shapers of Canon

It would be counterproductive to criticize the role of archives in the practice of a minority culture that is waning, since archives clearly have great value. Obviously, they enable Gaelic singers to support living memory with concrete examples of performance, and make it possible to revive songs that have fallen out of practice. Audio recordings are especially valuable not only for the proper pronunciation of texts (the words themselves have sometimes been notated elsewhere) but even more so for musical aspects such as melody, ornamentation and the singer’s manner of emphasizing and phrasing (which Gaelic singers call ‘swing’). Peter will often play a tape for me in order to help me learn a song, and public recording archives make many more tapes available to people who would otherwise not have heard them. Nothing can replace the feedback given by living culture-bearers, but recordings give the learner a good start; and for older singers like Peter MacLean or Maxie MacNeil, they are reminders of the great singers from the past. I would, however, like to consider other implications of using archives as a simulacrum of memory. The Archive, with its lists and
indices and rows of tapes, represents a manifestation of the musical canon both within the
song community and to outsiders. All the hundreds of songs whose titles are listed there,
however, do not represent any one cohesive practice, because such a thing did not seem to
exist in the lifetime of my older singing collaborators and so likely did not exist at the time
most of the recordings discussed above were made. Song repertoire and style differed from
region to region, from community to community, and from home to home – from micro-
community to micro-community. The difference in each singer’s personal experience of the
practice is evident when they come together to sing as a group. Any archive, then, represents
a patchwork of overlapping canons as performed by different groups of people, rather than
one well from which everyone would draw.

Archives are playing an increasing role in the transmission process, just as oral
histories, personal tapes and records have been for some time, and for this reason they are
engendering changes in repertoire when singers draw on songs that are forgotten or have
lapsed from common usage. Songs have always been shared and learned in a community
context, but as we are left with fewer living exemplars who have had this experience we find
that the dissemination of songs is often mediated, spread though recordings and printed
sources, and seldom absorbed in a long-term, organic way. In cases such as in my account of
the reintroduction of “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”, the use of archival recordings enables the
revival of songs that had become artefacts. It is worth noting, however, that repertoire is
constantly evolving within a musical community; the song which I am known for was
revived because deliberate choices were made, first by me and then by the community of
Gaelic singers and listeners; yet even without my ‘interference’ the canon itself is being
constantly re-evaluated and reshaped to fit the needs of the group, to reflect their current taste
and abilities, and to bridge their past and their future. Perhaps particular songs are chosen to join or remain in the repertoire not simply because they are familiar (although this is a reason some of them are sung) or conversely because they are rare (although sometimes learners delight in pulling out a song which might not have been sung for many years) but rather because they serve the needs of the group in aesthetic value, content, and association. The song I revived, “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”, met these criteria: it was in Gaelic; it was directly connected to their shared past; it resonated with the personal memories of some of my listeners; it sounded familiar to them, although it was an original composition – clearly one that sat very comfortably within the boundaries of stylistic acceptability; it was a good song in the opinion of the Gaelic singers; and, finally, because my performance of the song was deemed to be good since it reproduced the qualities of older fluent Gaelic singers and yet was not an exact reproduction because it was conveyed to them in my own unique voice. Hugh Mackenzie’s “Bu Deònach Leam Tilleadh” has been adopted by a community because of its meaning and also because the few who sing it today heard the composer sing it. It matters little that it was a new composition. Through the stories of those who did know him, Hugh MacKenzie lives on in this community as a fiddler, singer, songwriter and raconteur, and his song has been accepted back into the living repertoire because of the shared history it relates. These two cases are similar in that they both depend on the content of the song, but different because Hugh Mackenzie’s song was consciously revived because the Féis organizers knew it would suit their event; Archie Alex MacKenzie’s song was revived (by me) accidentally, because other Gaelic signers latched onto its meaning and began to request it regularly. Songs are revived and reintroduced into the repertoire thorough archival discoveries in different ways and for different reasons.
A puzzling aspect of these various archival collections that I outlined earlier in this chapter, and one that surely has an impact on the formation of canon, is the repeated recording of the same informants. An examination of the indices for Hamilton, Cowell, Creighton and Ralph Rinzler’s tapes reveal that they all recorded Malcolm MacLeod, Tommy Peigi MacDonald, and Dan Morrison, as well as a few other well-known singers from the North Shore area. Boulton’s notes are sketchy and I have not yet had access to the tapes, but she too seems to have recorded some of the same North Shore singers. Independent scholar Paul MacDonald has suggested that what they all had in common was an acquaintance with Folkways producer, Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records.\(^{273}\) Her brief mention in the book *Greenwich Village: The Happy Folk Singing Days 1950s and 1960s* does seem to suggest that she was moving in this circle of other folksong collectors and small record company producers, and would likely have known someone like Moses Asch. Since Hamilton did not publish her recording on his Folkways records label, but rather on Elektra, I am uncertain at this point what influence Asch may have had on Hamilton’s Cape Breton trip. Still, it does seem a peculiar coincidence that Sidney Robertson Cowell visited the same area in Cape Breton at approximately the same time. Hamilton’s trips were 1953 and 1954, while Cowell’s was in 1953. Boulton was there just a few years before.

This repeated recording of the same songs and singers calls into question the implications of emphasis, but just as strongly, those of omission. Song traditions varied from community to community, and although fundamental style and repertoire was common to most of them, individual communities often had their own specific repertoire and renowned

\(^{273}\) Paul MacDonald, Private conversation with Stephanie Conn.
singers. However, since only a few of these communities were targeted for taping and archiving, our knowledge of the styles and repertoire of Gaelic singing is patchwork and contains many intriguing lacunae. Without many tapes of the singing in these other areas we can only guess at how much stylistic cohesion there was, or how many of the same songs the North Shore singers recorded were also sung in other communities such as Gabarus. I would also argue that some of the acknowledged ‘great’ singers and songs of the Cape Breton Gaelic repertoire (including much from the North Shore region) have earned their widespread reputation because they appeared on several recordings of milling songs, or were recorded extensively as individuals, as John Shaw did with Lauchie MacLellan. For this reason, and also because they were good singers of Gaelic songs, they have become legends of sorts, while other singers and songs which were not collected widely (including the Framboise and Barra Glen regions) have slipped away from the knowledge of many of today’s Gaelic singers and learners. This is particularly the case in a place like Framboise, where the Gaelic-speaking community is greatly diminished and there is thus little living memory of their song tradition.

The chart below presents data emphasizing my point about how these early foreign collectors concentrated on one Gaelic-speaking region. The bars represent the number of times a singer was recorded by Laura Boulton, Diane Hamilton, Sidney Robertson Cowell, Ralph Rinzler or MacEdward Leach. I did not tabulate every singer collected by Helen Creighton as they are too numerous, but if Helen Creighton also recorded one of the singers that the abovementioned recorded, I added her to the statistic. In the North Shore region, then, there are 32 incidences of a Gaelic singer being recorded by the above collectors. In some cases the same singer is recorded by different collectors – for example, Malcom Angus
MacLeod was recorded by 6 people so I counted this as 6 incidences, rather than tabulating the number of songs collected from each singer or in each place (which would make in interesting study, especially if all the collectors I discuss were included).

*Plate 18: Incidences of a singer being recorded by foreign collectors in Cape Breton, by region.*

For a detailed breakdown of the collectors, singers they recorded, and locations, see Example 5 in the Appendix.

This recurrent recording of songs and singers calls into question the adverse effect that archives might have on a living practice, even if their chief purpose is to ‘preserve’ that which is fading from living memory. The French Philosopher Jacques Derrida might be
amused to see archive and memory being placed side-by-side, with one named as a source of the other. In his book *Archive Fever*, Derrida reminds us specifically that archive is not the same thing as memory but rather that “the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory;”\(^{274}\) as Derrida emphasizes, the archive is exterior, whereas memory is interior, and is inherently conservative since it involves repetition, stasis, and reproduction.\(^{275}\) This seems particularly true of recorded archives that are removed from their source and cut off from the continuing practice; they are merely ‘traces’, as Ricoeur put it. Derrida also writes that archives are not about the past but about the future, evidenced by my story regarding “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”, in which archives intruded upon present-day experience in a productive way. In Cape Breton communities, the careful preservation of archives makes it possible for a song to be rediscovered and performed, but one must interrogate the results, asking who collected the materials, who made the archives, who uses them, and how they are able to enter into dialogue with both the archive and a knowledge of the embodied performance.

Despite Derrida’s misgivings, it might be true that as memory fades and people pass on archives do become a simulacrum of communal memory because songs held in archives are the ones that will be remembered the longest and by the greatest number of people. In the case of the collections I have discussed here, it is the songs and singers that were disseminated most freely through their inclusion on commercial recordings (and thus are more widely available) which have become most widely remembered and even revered,

\(^{275}\) Derrida, 11.
while others have been forgotten. In the interactions between archive and memory, then, it seems that there can be stultifying effects, such as when the same songs are reproduced in the same way ad infinitum, at the same time as stimulating ones, such as when the song repertoire is refreshed from within its own canon when songs are revived that would otherwise have been forgotten when they passed out of living memory. Hugh Shields discusses this issue with respect to one particular song, “The Lass Of Aughrim”, which has been made famous for its inclusion by James Joyce in his story, “The Dead”.276 As Shields explains, the song is well known to many who are interested in ballads because it was recorded from the singing of Elizabeth Cronin. Like many of the so-called Child Ballads it goes by different names and in fact seems to be a family of songs rather than one, for it exists in many versions, with different airs and variations in text. As a result of the commercial dissemination of the famous field recording of Elizabeth Cronin, however, the version she sings and which was particular to her regional tradition has become widely used in regions that might formerly have had a different one. He also questions the reproduction of her text:

> Is it because of [audio recordings] that the versions which have used Elizabeth Cronin’s verbal text have broadly adhered to it with what would formerly have seemed unnatural fidelity? That the tune, while perhaps more varying, remains similarly faithful? Other factors are significant, notably the size and dispersion of the ‘folk’ who practise the song; also their motivation – Joe Heaney’s singing voice tells us that learning it was an assignment more than a craving – and the rapidity of transmission: we know of only one intermediary [Sinie Crotty, who recorded it] between Mrs Cronin and her musical posterity.277

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276 From his collection of short stories, *Dubliners* (1914).
In the case of this song, it was its inclusion on a commercially available recording that propelled it to such renown; but the same might be said of several Cape Breton Gaelic songs that have found their way onto LPs or CDs and thus have been learned by many more people than those that languish in seldom-heard archival tapes. I recently heard Julie Fowlis of Scotland singing “Ged a Sheol me air m’aineol”, which I believe she learned from a recording made on the North Shore in Cape Breton. In her liner notes to her most recent album, however, she writes:

The title of this album ‘Uam’ means ‘from me’ in English. The idea of passing a song, a tune or a story from one person to another is a common one throughout Gaelic Scotland, and I often feel being given a song is like being given a gift. One you can use and enjoy yourself, but one which ultimately must be passed on to someone else. The song is always more important than the singer and must be passed on to survive. 278

Here she references the idea that transmission is ideally an intimate, one-on-one experience. Her second thought, that songs are more important than the singer, hearkens back to Jeff MacDonald’s statement that Peter MacLean is a ‘conduit’ for the song. Perhaps her second statement is her way of reconciling the inherent conflict in the first, in which she says that one-on-one transmission is a gift even though she has learned this song from a recording. 279

As was evident from my survey of collectors and their methodology, the collecting of recordings involves subjective choices. Those who create the recordings sometimes make these choices: they might ask for a particular song which they heard before but failed to capture on tape; or perhaps they are chasing particular songs for the purpose of comparison, as did John Lorne Campbell and Kathleen MacKinnon; or they are collecting a particular

279 I do not mean this as a negative attack on MS. Fowlis, who sings the song beautifully.
genre, as in the case of MacEdward Leach. At the same time, however, the singers themselves make choices. When given the chance to record a song ‘for posterity’, why does a singer choose any particular song? It is difficult to know what was said before the tape started rolling, but on Sidney Robertson Cowell’s tapes you can hear Cowell asking her informants what they will sing, and it seems possible that the choice of song in most cases was not hers. This calls into question choices that are not considered typical or natural by today’s community. A clear example of this is the case of Diane Hamilton’s recording of the fiddler Michael MacDougall of Ingonish Beach. I have heard fiddlers debate the reason why he would have chosen the tunes he did to record for Hamilton, namely “Haste to the wedding”, “Speed the Plow” and “Soldier’s Joy” (see Plate 18), neither of which is considered to be particularly typical of Scottish Cape Breton repertoire. It is difficult to conclude whether he played these tunes because she asked him to, or because he suspected she would know them since they are played in many fiddle traditions, or because they were actually popular and well loved in Ingonish. At any rate, they appear on Hamilton’s commercial LP of Cape Breton music, and represented local fiddling for posterity through this recording.
At the milling table, many of my collaborators sing the same songs year after year. Why do some songs continue to have a strong presence in the repertoire while others are less frequently performed? Given that in the circumstances I have mentioned in passing, each singer knows many more songs than the ones we have on tape, the song canon is a flexible thing.\textsuperscript{280} It contains even more songs than are listed on those archival indices if one looks at

\begin{quote}
Plate 19: Diane Hamilton’s recording of Mike MacDougall.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{280} Philip Bohlman discusses these issues in his book, \textit{The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World}. In Chapter 7. “Folk Music and Canon-formation: The Creative Dialectic between Text and Contact” he writes that “because the social basis of a community is continuously in flux, the folk music canon is always in the process of forming and of responding creatively to new texts and changing contexts... Folk music canons therefore articulate cultural values both diachronically and synchronically”, 104.
the big picture, but fewer or different songs if one looks at individual communities. Rod C. MacNeil described the popular Gaelic song repertoire from his youth in this way:

> You wouldn’t call it classical music, but I would say they were classics, the Gaelic songs that lasted for I would say a hundred or two hundred years, passed along from generation to generation, and they are still being sung. Like “Mo Dhachaidh”, “Ho ro mo nighean donn bhoidheach”, “Gur he mo ghille dubh, donn”. 281

He nods to me knowingly as he lists them – he is naming songs with which he knows I am familiar as they are “still being sung” at milling frolics and concerts in Cape Breton. Despite their repeated singing of the same songs, however, my collaborators clearly enjoy many more songs than those that are sung repeatedly at public events. Rod C. names these songs which are popular at millings, but when I ask him to sing a song for me he chooses Hugh MacKenzie’s comic song about his father’s supposed fetishizing of the milling competition champion cup. Peter sings several milling songs at public events, but at his kitchen table he will often sing the quietly rocking and many-versed “Il eileadh o gu”, or, again, a comic local song. While they sometimes grumble privately about being asked to sing the same songs every year, they are also aware that there are certain songs that non-speakers of Gaelic enjoy hearing for their familiarity, and they sing such songs as “Fail il o agus ho ro eile” at virtually every milling frolic partly to oblige those who come to listen but cannot sing Gaelic songs. It is also clear that an examination of song popularity would yield different results, as popularity is measured differently depending on what demographic is invoked: older Native speaker of Gaelic, learners, young people, or cultural tourists.

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The Gaelic song canon is evidently chameleon-like, always responding to context and need. From all the recordings and songbooks that have been collected and published we know that there are a staggering number of Gaelic songs, but amassing them in these collections does not convey the scope or character of the song practice as it existed within any one community of practice, and the publishing of commercial recordings of Gaelic song has further fixed certain songs and singers into the collective understanding of what the Gaelic song practice was like in mid twentieth century Cape Breton. Given this effect, it is no wonder that collections of music have sometimes been referred to as virtual monuments, as evidenced by many collections of national music which attempt to be comprehensive. One of the best-known European examples of these is Denkmäler Deutscher Tonkunst (Monuments of German Musical Arts, Wiesbaden, 1957-61), funded by the German government. Ricoeur, however, disputes that archival documents (which for the purposes of this study are understood to include recordings) hold the same significance as monuments. He counters that “the most valuable traces are the ones that were not intended for our information” rather than consciously assembled archives. He then contrasts documents to monuments: monuments commemorate “events which its contemporaries – especially the most powerful among them – judged worthy of being integrated into the collective memory. Conversely, a document, even though it is collected and not simply inherited, seems to possess an objectivity opposed to the intention of the monument”. 282 One could not say that a document such as the recording of a song performance is objective, especially in cases where the song was recorded expressly for the purpose of being deposited in archives, and in fact I have been

asserting the opposite. In addition, the way in which a living song repertoire is assembled and maintained is perhaps less conscious than the way a songbook (or ‘monument’) is collected and presented, but nevertheless it also involves conscious decisions. Given their organic emergence from the community of Gaelic singers, however, it seems to me that private collections of tapes and song cutting, etc., are more like the ‘traces’ Ricoeur speaks of, while the public or institutional archives which were gathered mostly by outsiders to the tradition, and in a very focused manner in a limited length of time, are more like the ‘monuments’.

**Archives and Fragments**

Gaelic song archives are divorced from the practice of Gaelic singing in various ways that pertain to the content of songs themselves, but also to wider issues of the performance practice. I have demonstrated that the sharing of memories and the establishment of a common ground of meaning is a vital aspect of the Gaelic singing practice. Recordings, then, are only traces of reality and cannot stand alone without any cultural context. Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje broaches a similar issue in his novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, which is overtly musical in its style as well as its subject matter. This foray into contemporary Canadian literature might seem like a digression from the subject at hand, but the conditions described in *Coming Through Slaughter* are hardly unique to this character, or to jazz musicians, and in fact seem to have much in common with an oral tradition such as Gaelic singing. In his novel, Ondaatje tells the story of legendary jazz trumpeter, Buddy Bolden, taking inspiration from a hazy photograph and reconstructing the rest in a sort of riff that draws on the imagined memories of those who knew him. The real-life Bolden was
reputedly an inspiration to New Orleans jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and pianist Jelly Roll Morton, but ironically, his own playing was never recorded. Ondaatje, however, suggests that even if recordings of Bolden existed we could not fully experience his playing. Musical expression must be interpreted within a context, in part because of its physicality and the embodied aspects of the creative act. As one character recalls,

> It was a music that had so little wisdom you wanted to clean nearly every note he passed, passed it seemed along the way as if travelling in a car, passed before he even approached it and said it properly. There was no control except the mood of his power … and it is for this reason it is good you never heard him play on recordings. If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes – then you should never have heard him at all. He was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history, those who said later that Bolden broke the path. It was just as important to watch him stretch and wheel around on the last notes or watch nerves jumping under the sweat of his head.  

> Just as my visit to the Camerons illuminated my understanding of their father’s song, seeing Bolden perform and sharing the atmosphere of the mercurial New Orleans weather was just as important as the content of his playing. All we have of Bolden is a hazy photograph, and even that must be ‘translated’ into a clearer image, since it is as imprecise as the recorded sound would be. Later in the novel, one character writes that in consulting with all those who knew Bolden he found that “their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with each one of them”. They are talking about Bolden as a person, but it seems a good analogy for the relationship people have with Gaelic song, in my experience, where one might draw spokes out from a song to different communities, and

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284 Ondaatje, 60.
from there to various individuals, each experience being slightly different, and each performance of the song slightly changed.

Using archives as a support for the Gaelic song practice, then, is clearly problematic for many reasons. Ricoeur suggests that archived documents represent experience from which we are not only separated by time but also by *distanciation* – a kind of social detachment – since archives are not internalized memories but rather externalized traces. In the experience of any music we lose a little with each step we take away from its embodiment, and so to learn a Gaelic song from the notation in a book is to only glimpse a shadow of what it would have sounded like being sung by a Gael; to learn it from a recording is better, but is still an incomplete experience of transmission. To hear stories about the person singing on the recording is a step closer, but nothing can equal first hand transmission “Bho bheul gu beul, bho ghlùin gu glùin” (from mouth to mouth, from knee to knee), with all the contextual memory which that moment evokes. Memory imbues fragments of recollection with meaning but it also conjures up the physicality of a creative moment, and for this reason the oral aspect of a practice such as Gaelic singing relies heavily on personal contact. These memories of individual experiences are paramount, and perhaps their importance even surpasses that of other memory functions such as cultural memory, nostalgia, and collective wisdom gathered from discussion of the music and texts. In my discussion of singers’ private collections in the chapter “Song at Home” I turned to Walter Benjamin’s discussion of personal libraries, and how they were more deeply meaningful in some ways than public ones. Here I turn once more to Benjamin, but this time his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in which he discusses the
intersection of technological, artistic and political developments. He, too, discusses the
dislocation of a recording from its originator and place and time of origin:

[Technical] reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations that would be
out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.\footnote{285}

It is important to note that “the cathedral leaves its locale” – we do not travel to the cathedral. Benjamin goes as far as to say that a recording “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition”.\footnote{286} This issue of distanciation also figures in Hugh Shields’ article about “The Lass of Aughrim”. He explores the idea that this is ‘distant music’, evoking something from the past, divorced from current modes of transmission, but also considers its implications:

Not one but many voices sang in the past, and it is characteristic of all traditional music to evoke distance. One voice is rescued by audio technology, and insights are provided which are, after all, in some respects mere glimpses. Could it be the best fate which might befall so fine a recording was that, after the song had been recycled by some excellent new singers, a cataclysm should destroy it? Such an event cannot be counted on: so it is profitable to reflect seriously on the best use that may be made of musical archives.\footnote{287}

It is positive, of course, that in the absence of more living proponents of the tradition we can hear performances that we otherwise could not hear; in the case of a tradition that is already withering in some respects, it is important to have these recordings. Archives also preserve multiple, complete or relatively complete performances, or at least renditions of a song which

\footnote{285}{Benjamin 1968, 220-221.}
\footnote{286}{Benjamin 1968, 221.}
\footnote{287}{Shields, 69-70.}
are accepted as authoritative, just as a songbook reproduces all the known verses for a song, or all of those sung by an informant. But songs exist in many different versions, with various verses being included or omitted, or entirely different sets of verses being sung with a common chorus. As I learned from my discussion with Peter MacLean, there is a tension between the authority of an archival source and a live performance. Gaelic singers might point out when verses are different or missing, yet in truth, most song renditions are technically ‘incomplete’ since singers, whether intentionally or accidentally, very often neglect to sing all of the verses. This was also the case in the Old Country: in their collecting in Scotland, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Maud Karpeles remarked on the “natives of the Hebrides, who are fully aware of many gaps amongst the verses”.  

There is, then, an acceptance of the incomplete, and not always an acknowledging of the lacunae. Archives, then, throw the gaps or variants into relief – there they can be compared side by side. Gaelic singers emphasize correctness but this consists not only of the content (text and melody) that is present in archives, but also the social milieu. It is possible, then, that despite their wish for songs to be sung in their entirety (and the way that archives make this possible by providing a complete version of the song), the song is only complete when all the other elements are present: namely, the connection with memory of various levels, and the stylistic cohesion. This suggests that it might be a positive thing for the practice that songs are partly forgotten, their airs slightly changed and their texts partially incomplete. In his book, The Aesthetics of Ruins, Robert Ginzer writes that the importance of

ruins is constituted by their expressiveness, rather than by how complete they are; ruin liberates the form and intention of a building, and grants the observer the right and ability to enter into an intimate contact with it. When in a state of ruins, the form of a building is freed from its function.  

By analogy, it seems that incomplete songs grant the singer and listener the agency to derive and construct one’s own understanding of the song’s meaning; also, work songs such as milling songs that are freed from the actual work of milling (and thus fragments of their former social context) take on a new meaning and symbolism. It is memory, and a sense of both continuity and personal involvement, through which these things take on significance.

Music Archives and Colonialism

Cape Breton song archives are fraught with issues of conflicting identity, both of the music itself and the people who create them. In the discussion of Cape Breton Gaelic culture, one can easily get lost in a liminal space where regional and cultural identities and musical authenticity are contested and debated. Even in modern-day Cape Breton there are echoes of the power imbalances present in old world Scottish culture.

In her book, “Colonialism/ Postcolonialism”, Ania Loomba reminds us that “Neither the colonizer nor the colonized are homogenous categories.” By the same token, we can observe that neither colonizer nor colonized purveys the more authoritative narrative of a

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society’s history, and that under the stress of these competing forces, no musical practice presents a unified face. Similarly, even one archive, such as that of the Beaton Institute, does not present one unified story of the tradition of Gaelic singing, but rather it weaves together the threads of multiple conflicting narratives.

I was recently reminded of my first visit to the folk museum and interpretive centre called Highland Village, or An Chlachan Gàidhealach. It is perched atop a hill overlooking the Bras D’Or lakes near Iona, Cape Breton. The village includes houses, a church, a General store, guides in period costumes and even Highland cattle. The pride of the museum is the Taigh Dubh, or Black House, a replica of a simple dwelling that would have been the kind built in South Uist and Barra in the Scottish Hebrides in the 1780s and also by early settlers to Cape Breton who came from those areas. On that first visit, my Gaelic language immersion class gathered around the door of the Taigh Dubh and peered into its inky blackness, just glimpsing the open hearth inside. The experience was made more exotic by my only half-understanding our tour guide’s Gaelic narrative. A friend whispered translated fragments into my ear. The place seemed foreign, and otherworldly. I had not thought about this for years until I read James Clifford’s article “On Collecting Art and Culture” in which he quotes a James Fenton poem about the fear and fascination felt by a visitor confronting strange artefacts in an Oxford Museum. The scene at the Highland Village is consistent with Clifford’s description of museums as “… historio-cultural theatres of memory. Whose Memory? For what purposes?”

The Highland Village’s website presents the Gael as an inherently musical creature. It states, “If you could walk back in time through rural Cape Breton, you would certainly be surprised to hear singing on the breeze coming from everyday people who unconsciously went about setting their chores and everyday lives to music”.292 One of the museum’s interpreters, Joanne MacIntyre, sings a Gaelic song and explains that “You hear the music in the language; you hear the language in the music. It’s just who you are if you come from that background. It’s who we are here”.293 My collaborators have told me stories affirming the central place occupied by song in their lives. Here, however, Gaels and their music are presented as if they are of another time and place, seemingly as far removed from us by distanciation as are the archived document about which Ricoeur wrote, and framed (if unintentionally) as an ‘other’ to the hegemony of English culture in Canada including Nova Scotia. In his discussion of assumptions about African music, Kofi Agawu quotes an eleventh-century missionary who wrote: “If a black were to fall from the sky to the earth, he would fall in rhythm”. This is just one example in which African rhythms are presented as “complex, superior, yet ultimately incomprehensible”.294 In the nineteenth century, Thomas Furlong’s view of the Irish framed them as foreign: he wrote, “Justly has Ireland been called the Land of Song. The very atmosphere is poetical – the breezes that play around us seem the

very breathings of melody”. Similarly, the singing of Cape Breton Gaels is viewed here as otherworldly, their innate musical skills viewed as somewhat ‘incomprehensible’ or perhaps autochthonous, thus unavailable to outsiders. Gaelic song is presented in much the same way as the Taigh Dubh: a rarified artefact, divorced from contemporary life despite statements on the website that it is part of “a living culture” and interwoven with the quotidian.

It is worth considering the similarities between museums and archives. Both are assembled consciously, both present historical artefacts, and both create some kind of body of cultural matter that coalesces into a cultural identity. Museums are generally more overt in their presentation of a specific image, and there is often an explanatory commentary to guide the visitor through the objects or images. Museums and their close cousins, ‘interpretive centres’ such as the Highland Village, are intended to be very public places. Archives, in contrast, are more insidious in their presentation of a cultural image. They are not designed to be self-explanatory: the researcher must divine his or her own connections. But can independent conclusions really be drawn? Clifford points out that all collections are intentional and create an intentional cultural identity calling attention to the “hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of self [and] contested encodings of past and future” that are involved in the curating of museum artefacts. The assembly of recording archives, however, involves choices that are just as deliberate, and they result in a body of material that gives a distinct impression frozen in time, divorced from the living practice.

296 Clifford, 52.
James Clifford discusses how the museum’s ‘framing’ of the objects increases their strangeness, and he points out that “[the] ‘authenticity’ accorded to both human groups and their artistic work is shown to proceed from specific assumptions about temporality, wholeness, and continuity”. What is overlooked here is the idea that culture is not an absolute; rather, as Clifford puts it, “Cultures are ethnographic collections”, continuing over a span of time but not remaining intact. The manner of presenting artefacts in a museum suggests inherent coherence and authenticity that are unlikely to exist; in the case of the Highland Village or other ‘living museums’ and interpretive centres, the suggestion is that our imaginations around the objects and displays in the static museum constitute an entirely different order of culture that can in turn inform ‘living’ culture. This is in fact in keeping with Clifford’s remarks about a culture being invented and mutable.

I am actually very fond of the Highland Village and respect the interpreters there, especially the work of Jim Watson, and I know several others who are on its staff, including the singer Beth MacNeil. I do not think it is Watson’s intention at all to present the practice of Gaelic singing as static – far from it, in fact, and as I mentioned Watson is himself a collector who uses his recordings in teaching and publishing. Watson celebrates the differences within the repertoire, and by incorporating living informants into many of his presentations and projects he underlines the fact that the singers are not passive conduits handing down their style and canon unchanged but rather active participants in the shaping of their own musical tradition in its New World. Much of what he does seems to almost subvert

297 Clifford, 58.
298 Clifford, 66.
the superficial impression given by a museum like Highland Village, which itself seems to hint at the contradictory attitudes held in Cape Breton about the old country. Cape Breton Gaels are also proud of their own contributions, discussing local bards with great enthusiasm and praising local singers. But they are also very proud of their Scottish heritage, and tracing their ancestry back to specific communities in Scotland, noting that they have passed down “time-honoured ways”, as Jeff MacDonald put it. Just like the reconstruction of the old Scottish Taigh Dubh, the penchant for collecting songs which were brought over from the old country seems to suggest that there is a tension between their wish to be accepted by or approved of by the Old World by gathering and displaying their cultural wealth, and a wish to be appreciated as Cape Bretoners with their own traditions rather than as eternal exiles. This attitude was often brought in by outside scholars, but perhaps Cape Breton Gaels themselves felt the pressure to produce these artefacts for scholars, or felt slighted for being overlooked.

One of the communities overlooked by Hamilton, Boulton, Creighton or any other of the collectors surveyed here was Big Baddeck. It is tucked away off the main highway in the rear of the area between St. Ann’s Bay and Baddeck. I am fortunate to have been given a tape which had lain undiscovered in a box for decades; it documents a céilidh at the home of Alex MacLean, year unknown but probably in the mid-1960s. A few songs into the recording, an unidentified man speaks a very formal introduction. He says:

300 The exception I am aware of is J.D. Nelson MacDonald, (Baddeck forks/Big Baddeck) who was recorded by Charles Dunn.
These are some of the songs being sung at a typical Big Baddeck céilidh. We are sorry we did not record the conversation or some of the stories told at this Gaelic gathering held at the home of Alec MacLean of Big Baddeck. But the songs sung this evening are by some of the best talent, Gaelic talent, in the island of Cape Breton – namely, Alec MacLean, Neil MacKay, and Murdoch MacKay.

We hope that the Reverend Somerled MacMillan, when he next visits Canada, will come to Big Baddeck, and enjoy the demonstration of some of the highest Gàidhlig [sic] … uh … folklore and talent equal to that that he’ll find in Old Scotland”. [Clapping and cheers].

This framing of the recording and specific reference to Somerled MacMillan causes me to wonder for whom this tape was made and who was meant to hear it. Somerled MacMillan was apparently the minister of the United Free Church in Fort William, Scotland, and the author of books on Gaelic songs and history. His Bygone Lochaber (Glasgow 1971) included discussion of immigration to Cape Breton’s Inverness Country, which possibly suggests why he would have less interest in a place such as Big Baddeck, which did not have a settlement of immigrants from Lochaber. He also edited Sporan Dhòmhnaill: Gaelic Poems and Songs by the Late Donald MacIntyre, (Edinburgh 1968) and this work with traditional song is possibly the reason why the Big Baddeck residents sought his attention. Alex MacLean is the only one of these singers whom I have found on other collector’s recordings. He was recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell but only because he attended the milling frolic at French River on August 11 1953. On that tape, over the din of the rowdy gathering, one can hear him being urged to sing by the others (Come on MacLean!” … “Come on Alec … from Big Baddeck … after coming so far”).

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301 Transcribed from tape, personal posession of Paul MacDonald.
302 Recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell, August 11 1953. Library of Congress AFS 11,308
Here, then, are echoes of Creighton’s research partner Major MacLeod’s colonial attitude, and once again selection has had an impact on who is chosen to be remembered, and who is not. It is worthwhile to look back into the time of printed collecting, particularly the work of Nova Scotia Gaelic scholar Alexander MacLean Sinclair, for its scope and for what it reveals about how Nova Scotian Gaels wished to represent their song culture to Scotland and the rest of the world. Maclean Sinclair was a Presbyterian minister and the grandson of the most famous Canadian Gaelic Bard, John MacLean. From 1883 to 1885 he edited a Gaelic column “Cùil na Gàidhlig” (Gaelic Corner)\(^{303}\) in which he often printed the texts of songs that were sent to him; between 1880 and 1904 he published fifteen books of songs texts and poetry (musical notation was not included) with the goal of creating a presence for Nova Scotia in the wider world of Gaelic literature. These volumes such as *Clàrsach Na Coille* (Harp of the Woods 1881) gathered up songs composed in Canada and gave prominence to those of his Grandfather, John MacLean. In orchestrating an image for Nova Scotia Gaelic song and scholarship, however, MacLean Sinclair consciously selected and omitted items, and ‘corrected’ those that he deemed to be erroneous. He justifies his decision to do so as follows:

The first difficulty is the fact that, with very few exceptions, our Gaelic poets and song-makers were uneducated persons, and consequently frequently violated the rules of grammar and composition, and even the rules of prosody. The second difficulty is that in handing down songs from one person to another, words, lines and even verses become lost. The third difficulty is that in the case of old poems one frequently meets with words which he does not understand and which he cannot find in any dictionary.

…. I would rather burn all the songs in my possession than publish one which would have a tendency to do harm, or contain indelicate expressions.  

By ‘correcting’ texts and censoring content, Sinclair upholds the established rules, evidently because recognition or accomplishment at home in the former colony is not enough. And once more, he is overlooking the possible value of comparing versions; they say much about a song’s past transmission, and about the social networks of song dissemination. Sinclair also exemplifies the paradox examined in this study in that he seems to struggle with conflicting impulses: to gain the approval of the Gaelic scholarly elite in the Old World (by showing how they have preserved the old tradition “correctly”) and to assert the voice of the New. He writes,

I would rather be known by name in the old country than have all the people in Pictou county speak highly of me …. To have a name in Nova Scotia is better than to have a name in Pictou county; to have a name in Scotland is better than to have a name in Nova Scotia; but to have a name in the world is better than to have a name in Scotland.

Although MacLean Sinclair’s contribution to Gaelic print culture is significant, and books such as Clàrsach na Coille are treasured today by the few people who have them, it should be noted that he exercised an editorial control which was selective in its representation of local compositions, and he favoured consistency with established grammar and texts from Scotland. This has necessarily had an impact on some transmission streams of the practice. In subsequent projects I intend to examine more examples of the effects of colonialism on the representation of Gaelic culture, including radio programs featuring Gaelic song that were

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305 Linkletter, 245.
created for broadcast within Nova Scotia, if they are available. It might also be fruitful to include institutions such as The Gaelic College, a summer school of “The Celtic Arts” (including language, song, piping, fiddling, weaving) which employs a full-time, kilted piper at its gates, and houses a “Great Hall of the Clans” to emphasize the connection with Scottish heritage.

**Archives and the Living Practice**

How, then, can archives be used in an organic way that connects with the living practice? Many Gaelic instructors use archival tapes in their workshops to teach songs or stories. Often they are accompanied by a handout on which the song text and information about the singer is transcribed. Ideally, one of the older singers who is a native Gaelic speaker will attend the workshop and be on hand to contribute his opinion on certain words or pronunciations, or to debate the meaning of the song. I have been to countless workshops like this at the Christmas Island Féis and Gaelic College, and Jim Watson uses this method at his workshops at the Highland Village. Archival video is an even more vivid way of conveying the singer or storyteller’s demeanour and way of performing, and Kenneth Nilsen uses much of his own ethnographic video for this.

Community festivals such as the Christmas Island Féis are seeking to make a connection between various aspects of Gaelic culture – language, song, instrumental music, dance – and are doing it in a way which ties it into the social context in a way that does not duplicate, but suggests the more traditional ways; it is a public event at a firehall, not a
house-party, but it is relaxed, there is food, all ages are present at most events, and it feels rather like a large family gathering. When they began, they were conscious that there had been a disconnection from previous ways of sharing these cultural elements, and that a concentrated week-long event might blossom into something more perennial and widespread, as indeed it has. They have always brought in local native speakers to support the workshops and céilidhs, and the milling frolic is one of the central events. Through the use of such phrases as “Bu Deonach Leam Tilleadh” they anchor the modern, formal event in something more organic and also homespun, grounded in their own culture and community, and more specific than the generic but also declamatory subtitle, “Gaelic Concert Series”.

Websites offer the possibility of capturing all these aspects, and Gaelic organizations on both sides of the ocean are using them increasingly to showcase their oral culture. In Nova Scotia this has been done with the project *Cainnt mo Mhàthar*,[306] which was established mainly as an educational tool to “supply instructors and students with an unparalleled learning resource based on video recordings of fluent speakers using everyday, idiomatic Gaelic”. From the beginning, *Cainnt mo Mhàthair* has aimed to be a community-based initiative with international vision that showcases “a linguistic and cultural legacy of local, national and international significance”.[307] All of the material on the website was newly recorded for the project, and consists predominantly of interviews and spoken word rather than songs, although Gaelic singers (such as my collaborators, many of whom participated in the project) also sang a song as part of their interview. These accessible repositories of

306 Website, www.cainntmomhathar.com
307 “About the project”, *Cainnt mo Mhàthair* website, http://www.cainntmomhathar.com/about.php
recordings seem to be the ideal manifestation of collections, and stand in stark contrast to the old model of museum or recorded archives such as those I discussed earlier in this chapter, because they attempt to bring together the content of the songs or stories and the social context which accompanies them. Photos of the informants add another layer of familiarity, helping to approximate a home visit or céilidh.

Archives, then, are not only tools for the current practice but also monuments to the past, as well as being dynamic sites of interaction. They are what Pierre Nora has termed lieux de mémoire where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” in a contradictory yet complementary manner. For Nora, these include physical places such as museums, cathedrals, palaces, cemeteries, and memorials, but also archives and, by extension, the documents and recordings within them. According to Nora, the purpose of these sites is “to stop time, to block the work of forgetting”, and they all share “a will to remember”. This is clearly the case with archives of Gaelic songs, as well, which were assembled for the main purpose of preserving, and which threaten sometimes to halt time by asserting repetition rather than development. If song lives in its cultural context, then a memory site such as a recorded song archive is like Nora’s “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, nor yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded”.

309 Nora, 19.
310 Nora, 12.
Nora’s thoughts about the plurality of memory being contrary to the monolith of history resonate with my own ideas about the Gaelic song archive creating a false sense of canon. He writes that “memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural and yet individual. History on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one.” Like Ondaatje and the Cameron family, he emphasizes the distanciation from embodied practice found in “true memory, which has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories”. Finally, in a reflection on archives everywhere – but particularly as a site of the Gaelic song practice – one must consider another question raised by Nora: “Whose will to remember do they ultimately reflect, that of the interviewer or that of the interviewed? … [T]he archive has become the deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memory”. As such, it seems, the only way for them to become and remain a living site of Gaelic song is to be folded into the living practice of Gaelic song so that they can become a true reflection of the ongoing singing tradition, much like the private collections of my collaborators.

311 Nora, 9.
312 Nora, 13.
313 Nora, 14
Chapter 5

Conclusion

In minority cultures that are waning under the influence of multiculturalism and the hegemony of a dominant regional culture the urge to collect and preserve is understandable. We are all grateful that this has been done in Cape Breton, but as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, there is much more to be collected than texts and melodies, and much more to be translated than words. This study has described the different ways that Gaelic song is practiced and understood by individuals and communities in different sites: at home, in public, in the intersection of these two spaces, and in the archive, which can in turn be a gateway to both home and public performance. In this project I have taken for granted that there is a common body of songs and stylistic understanding, but I have explored the idea that within a general cultural unity there is much variation. I have also acknowledged that my experiences and interpretations are, necessarily, subjective, and that all researchers can themselves act as agents of unwitting change.

Examination of the way song is practiced in the home revealed that this is a place open to social and geographic negotiation. Far from simply a private family place, as rural Cape Breton society homes were a hub of activity in which songs were learned, sung and woven into everyday life. I have referred to home as a micro-community where song is
transmitted, repertoire formed, and collections amassed that support the meaning of the songs themselves. In public performances and events these different experiences born in the home are brought together and shared on a communal level. This means that a consensus must be arrived at as to how and what is sung, and by whom. Sharing songs together supports the practice, but also provides both singers and community members who gather to listen with a touchstone to deeper meaning. This singing together is paradoxical, for it results in an overlap between individual and community experience: at a milling frolic, singers and listeners have the agency to map their own values and meanings onto the songs, drawing on individual experience; but at the same time it is a touchstone to their common history and dualchas. The milling frolic, then, may be thought of as a secular ritual in which the world is remade in Gaelic, and ordinary people are acknowledged publicly as extraordinary.

The archive, the third site, is the most problematic, but I believe it also holds the key to the future of this practice. From my examination of how songs are experienced within the context of this culture, I have shown that a song is not a thing easily learned from a book, or gathered up like other artefacts into a collection. Despite the intention to pass the songs along unchanged, each song is a continuously morphing collective entity which exists in the moment and comprises many things including all the known texts, the air and its variants, memories of all past performances and the people associated with them, historical background information implied or discussed in the text, present experience, and possibly implied future performances. It is actually more accurate to think of a song as a process and to concentrate on the act and moment of performance rather than on the song as an object. Scholars of the Gaelic language will continue to use historical and poetic methods of analysis, and there is much to be learned from these approaches to the songs that have
already been collected. Indeed, I myself intend to undertake musical analysis of different individual performances to better understand how they differ. These do not, however, provide a window into the meanings of these songs as they were understood by the Gaels of my collaborators’ generation in Cape Breton who sang or listened to them. Peter MacLean has said that this tradition will never be the same: he mentions the difficulty of learning on one’s own, removed from everyone, instead of absorbing the songs more naturally through repeated exposure over an extended period of time. Perhaps he also refers to the self-evident truth that no musical culture can survive when the social structures that nourished it are no longer in place, for these processes have necessarily shaped how songs are sung and understood.

In his article “Voices and Places: History, Repetition and the Musical Imagination”, Martin Stokes considers the way music enables musicians to engage with experiences of time and history. He considers the significance of repetition in music, and suggests the following:

This is the raw form of a historical consciousness that is not to be found in historical textbooks and has no place in the monumental architecture of a city. It is a way of experiencing history which embraces a number of contradictions but does little to seek to resolve them. It is part of the modern, but is implicitly critical of it. It is part of the nationalist narrative, but somewhat uncertain of where it has led …. Whilst music is built on repetition … it is also built on paradox: that which is repeated can never be exactly the same. Rather than ‘obliterating time’ … we might substitute a notion of music as an instrument for questioning time: a mode of imagination that participates in its dominant schemes and their representations, but also reminds us that these schemes do not have an absolute and determining grip on the way we see things.314

Through their music, Gaels commemorate history and share their *dualchas*, and they affirm their cultural if not national pride. In Cape Breton they have seldom wielded it as a political tool or an agent of change. Their acceptance of variation and personal expression underlines Stokes’ assertion that while history can be referenced, it cannot be repeated, and that for my collaborators, those who sing and those who listen, their music can be a ‘mode of imagination’, which might reflect who they are, but not *how*.

What then, will happen to Gaelic and, more pointedly for this study, Gaelic singing in Cape Breton? The clock cannot be turned back on the changes in transmission that have been brought about by the socio-economic changes in Cape Breton society. At the same time, songs are more available than ever, yet they do not permeate life in the same way. As Peter MacLean said of his youth, “You didn’t have to go looking for it. It was all around you, in those days, in every house, Gaelic spoken there, especially older people. I guess we took too much for granted. But things changed … changed a lot, too”.315 From Peter’s candid diatribe against the repression of Gaelic which I quoted in my introduction, one wants to take a positive stance – “You can’t stop Gàidhlig!” – but as John Shaw has pointed out, the social landscape has changed irrevocably. He points out,

Due to the weight of institutions and mass movements, along with the continuing Cape Breton Diaspora with its brief reunions during the summer parish concert season, Gaels have not resisted change to the tradition; nor have they welcomed them as a matter of personal preference as did their non-Gaelic-speaking relatives and neighbours. The social context has altered almost beyond recognition, yet Gaelic singing retains a high emblematic value, where a variety of communal events ‘would not be the same without a Gaelic song’.316

316 Shaw 2000, 54.
His consideration of Gaelic singing as ‘emblematic’ points to the more symbolic role it has taken for many people in public contexts such as the concerts he mentions, or the milling frolics. It also stands in contrast to the way Gaelic song formerly functioned within communities. In “The Kennedy-Campbell Debate”, which republished letters from The Clansman, Michael Kennedy and Robert Campbell debate the merits or faults of instituting such ‘pan-Scottish’ and invented traditions as Mods and Burns’ suppers in Nova Scotia. Campbell argues that Scottish culture has always been hybrid, but Kennedy emphasizes the ruptured unity of local Gaelic culture in Cape Breton, and points to the hegemony of English-language majority culture as the force behind any current hybridity. Kennedy writes,

Today when Gaelic communities choose to celebrate their Scottishness by using cliches, like paying tribute to someone like Robert Burns rather than to a Gaelic poet, it is in one sense a celebration of the decline of Gaelic and the triumph of English. As good as Burns is, and as Scottish as he is, he is not a part of our Gaelic heritage …. [It] cannot be denied that Gaels were not taught to read, write and speak their own language and that the mere use of it on the school grounds was cause for punishment, usually in the form of public humiliation. All the school system taught Gaels about their own traditions was to be ashamed. It should not be forgotten that the shame was felt strongly enough that the generations which “reverenced” Burns produced a generation which could not speak Gaelic. This is not an example of a “cosmopolitan” culture being exposed to new ideas and healthy interaction with other cultures but of a severely marginalized one having its identity forcefully redefined. To look back uncritically at this abysmal failure to promote our language and culture and to use it as an excuse for such continued failure is a perfect example of a “dumb adherence to the past”. 317

Kennedy alludes to the tension I mentioned previously between pride in heritage, and pride in local, independent identity. He advocates, rather than a salute to Burns, the celebration of Gaelic poets such as the 18th-century Scottish bard Alasdair MacMhaighster Alasdair or

perhaps pioneer Nova Scotian Allan “The Ridge” MacDonald. Some work is being done to remedy this: Gaelic language and poetry is now taught in many Cape Breton schools, and Effie Rankin has edited a collection of songs by Allan “The Ridge”. Grassroots organizations such as the Féis at Christmas Island try to “make sure that anything we offer is definitely based in Gaelic culture …. We don’t go into the trappings that some people perceive to be Scottish culture; that’s not what this festival is about. It’s based on the language and what comes out of the language, through the music, the dance, and the song”. Cape Bretoners differentiate themselves from Scottish Gaels but they do look to Scotland for examples of and ideas of how to keep Gaelic going at home in Nova Scotia. The Féis is one such initiative. It is well-attended, and clearly has raised the awareness of local youth and their parents. Still, it is possible that Gaelic might indeed become increasingly ‘emblematic’, with the t-shirt phrases like “Le Eolas Thig Comas” and slogans like “Bu Deonach leum Tileadh” standing in for a more in-depth knowledge of Gaelic language and song. Still, since I began to visit Cape Breton, many new initiatives for Gaelic education have been implemented, including support for language programs in school and volunteer-run weekend courses. The websites I have mentioned are gathering up and presenting material in a more holistic way than was possible in the past. There are new faces at the milling table, and new ways of singing the old songs – but not, as of yet, many new songs. There is even a fledgling Gaelic film festival on the North Shore. It is clear that it is important to many Gaels from many generations, to retain what was uniquely theirs.

I asked Gaelic singer and educator Jeff MacDonald what he would say in answer to those who might suggest that Gaelic is already on the upswing in Scotland, that many of the songs are still sung there, and that the language is being given a new status in government, broadcasting, etc. What is special about Gaelic culture in Cape Breton in particular that it should be bolstered? He had this to say:

What is there that special about any tradition, what’s special about any culture that anybody should get interested in it? [Long pause, and laugh] I don’t know! But what I DO know is that my culture is awfully impressive, and beautiful, and important to me … and I would give anybody else the same right … I don’t have to explain to anybody what’s in my heart and what fails me for it. But God help the man who stands in my way to take that chance of passing that feeling along to my son, that my son can be 36 years of age and feel just as proud as I do. I’d fight to the death for it …. We’re not used to going out in the streets and speaking about things that in a way should be taken for granted … but we’ve got just as many rights in Gaelic as we have in English. 319

Jeff’s impassioned talk is the kind that sweeps students along in his wake. He is raising his son as a Gaelic speaker, as are several other Cape Bretoners of our generation, and inspiring others with his enthusiasm and gifts as a Gaelic teacher and singer.

Close to the end of my time writing this dissertation I hear of the death of Murdock MacNeil of Rear Christmas Island – Murchadh mac Dhòmhnaill ‘ic Sheumais a’ Chùil. The extended community is filled with sadness at his loss, and reportedly there are six priests at the altar at his funeral including Francis Cameron. Murdock was a man of quiet warmth who grew up in Gaelic and would lose no opportunity to speak it whether you met him at the firehall for a social event or at home with his equally kind wife Flora. He was one of the last storytellers who knew the old local stories, and was widely recorded by collectors and

published in *Am Braighe* and other Gaelic publications. From Murdock I learned that it was not idiomatic to say “suas na staighre” – upstairs, as the textbooks teach – but instead “anns a loftaigh”, in the loft. He told me that in fierce winter storms, the currents and tides in the Grand Narrows were strong enough to throw the old ferry off course, short as that hundred-metre voyage might seem now that it is spanned by a bridge. Murdock was also a keeper of parish history, and would relate comic and supernatural tales made by a local storyteller who reputedly had the second sight, Michael MacNeil (Migi Ceataidh) of Benacadie Pond.

Thinking of Murdock, I am reminded of one particular evening at his home in Christmas Island. After a storytelling session at the Grand Narrows hotel, a few of us drop in for a visit. Murdock and Flora’s farm is on Peter’s road – *Am Baile Ard*, The Highlands – and was founded in the early 1800s when the MacNeils emigrated from Barra. We are greeted with exclamations of joy and hugs and the insistence that we take the best chairs. Flora puts on the kettle and begins to bring out cookies, tea and whiskey. We, in turn, are invited to bring out some songs. To the delight of Flora and Murdock, Peter is soon singing a local song about a run-down car to the air of “Gur dé ni mi mur faigh mi thu”. Flora runs to click on the cassette-recording machine, and the tape keeps rolling through a series of songs and chatter that evening. Lorrie starts to sing “Mo Nighean Dubh” and Peter takes it up, finishing the verses. Lorrie amazes us all by singing the epic “Il eleadh o gu”, which she learned from Peter, with twenty-five verses all in their place. Then they ask me to sing ‘my’ song, “Tilleadh an Eilthirich”, whose composer Archie Alex MacKenzie lived just minutes from where we are sitting. I sing it and, as the tape attests, the many words come easily that night, our voices relaxed from the laughter and the whiskey. They join in despite the unfamiliar chorus, and clap enthusiastically when I am finished. We then sing one that everyone knows,
“Fail il o agus ho ro eile”; by this point Murdock’s niece and her daughters have joined us, and even they join in on the chorus, although they are not Gaelic speakers, since the song is an old favourite throughout Cape Breton. At some point in the following year, copies of the recording reach us.

Upon hearing of Murdock’s death I go to my box of seventy or so Gaelic tapes – my own personal archive – and take out the cassette labeled “Party at Murdock and Flo’s”. I put in the tape and listen to it as I write. Despite a few odd skips and dropouts in the audio, it fills in the analogous gaps in my memory. I am grateful that Flora recorded it, for I had forgotten that Peter sang “Ho robh ‘s toil leam fhin thu”, and so beautifully, with a vocal strength that belied his ninety-odd years. I imagine that some day someone might ask me to help her learn this song, and instead of singing it I will put on this tape and say, “Just listen to this. Peter MacLean could really sing it”. I will tell her about Murdock and Flora and this one special evening which was just one of many late nights of singing I have had among friends at Christmas Island. Then, she will be able to understand the song.

I began this work in an attempt to answer many of the questions I had as a Gaelic singer: How could I become a good one? What did the songs really mean? And how could I help to carry on such a tradition? It is my hope that my work will begin to answer these questions for others, too. Finding answers is key to the future of the practice, for among the challenges for today’s and tomorrow’s singers and listeners, educators and collectors, is that of how to carry on Gaelic singing not as a single repertoire or style but rather a multi-faceted song practice which is intrinsically bound to social settings and the memories and personal associations that spring from these. It is only through a continued effort to understand how
each individual draws from and contributes to the simultaneous and continuous practice of Gaelic singing, and through efforts to maintain the connections between Gaelic singing and all other aspects of life, that like hikers to that cairn in the Gaelic proverb of my title we may make souvenirs of small stones, but also place some of our own on top. In this way we will remain, as Peter urged us to be, “faithful to the song.”
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Appendix

Example 1: Ochòin a Righ

Transcribed from the singing of Peter MacLean, recorded November 2003. Words and melody, traditional. There are additional verses sung by Peter and printed in *An T-Óranaiche* but here I include only those that I have learned. Translation by Stephanie Conn\(^{320}\).

\[ O-\text{chòin a Righ, gur a mi thà muladach} \]
\[ Nach rohb mi thall an Loch Aills-a-fui-reachd leat. \]
\[ Gur na hòi-gear-ean g'ol-na buidealan ri ga'bhail ò-rain, ri stòp an urr' a-ca 'Nuair chaidh sinn sios bha goth'n iar-eus a-gain-ne'B'e sud ar miann, 'sa bhi triall mar chaith-eadh i; Togail cur-sa o's clionna ban-cuichean, a dh'ionn-saith Laoidh bu' neo-chinn-teach ca-dal dhuinn [etc...]. \]

\[ Ochòin a Righ, gur a mi tha muladach \]
\[ Nach rohb mi thall an Loch-Aills 'a fuireachd leat \]
\[ Far 'm bi na h-òigearan 'g òl nam buidealan, \]
\[ Ri gabhail ò-rain, ri stòp an urr' aca. \]

\(^{320}\) Thanks to Lorrie MacKinnon for assistance with some lines.
Oh, woe, I am sad
That I was not yonder at Loch Ailse with you
Where the young lads drink their pints
Singing songs, each with their tankard

‘N uair chaidh sin sios, bha gaoth ‘n iar-eas againne,
B ’e sud ar miann, ‘s a bhi triall mar chaitheadh i;
Bhi togail cùrsa o’s cionn nam bancichean
Dh’ionnsaidh ‘n Laoigh, bha neo-chinnteach cadal dhuinn

When we went down there was a south-west wind against us
It was our desire to sail by spending it
Making course over the banks
Towards Laoigh we had uncertain sleep.

Anns an oide che bu chruinn am baideal sinn
‘S gu ‘m b’fhad o cheile gach té ‘s a’ mhadainn diubh
Bha croinn ga rùsgadh a’s stùil g’ an sracadh ann
Gur iomadh té bha gun chèile leapaิดh ann.

At night we were gathered around the standard,
Each women was far from her spouse this morning
The masts were stripped of their sails
There was many a woman who was without her bed-companion.

Fhir a shiùbhlas a null thar bhealaichean,
Thoir soraidh bhuam-sa a dh’ionnsaidh Ealasaid,
Gur e ‘n aon rud ‘tha cumail maille orm,
A ghaoth ‘bhi tuath, an t-side fuar, ‘s clach-mheallain ann

Oh, men who travel over the gaps/gorges,
Take my greetings to Elizabeth
It’s the one thing that keeps me contented
With the north wind, cold weather and hailstones.

A’ s cha’n ‘eil àite nach bi mi bruidhinn ort,
‘S am measg nan ceud thug mi spéis mo chridhe dhuit
Na h-uile uair gur a truagh a bhitheas mi,
Mo cridhe bruite, ‘s mo shiùil a’s snidh’ oirre.

There is not a place I would not be speaking of you
Amid hundreds I sent the affection of my heart to you
All the time, though I be pitiful
My heart breaks and my eyes shed a tear
Example 2: O Gur Mise

Transcribed from the singing of Finlay Cameron with Joe Lawrence MacDonald. Words and melody, traditional but differ from printed versions. Translated by Stephanie Conn with much assistance in transcribing from Effie Rankin.

Chorus:

O gur mise tha fo mhìghean
'S iad 'gam dhìteadh 's mi 'nam ònar;
O gur mise tha fo mhìghean!

Verse 1

Thug i mi-se an tamh na h-oich-e Anns a choi-lle chur ri drobh-cairt O gur mise thá fo mhìghean 'S diom-bach mi d'an ni-gheann duibh a thog mi an taobh nach robh mi deò-nach

Verse 2

Thug i mi-se an tabh na h-oich-e Anns a choi-lle chur ri droh-bhairt 'S beag a gha-bhainn air a hao-dann, Gun robhan oillt ud aic' cho mòr dhomh. O gur...

CHORUS...

Chorus:

O gur mise tha fo mhìghean
'S iad 'gam dhìteadh 's mi 'nam ònar;
O gur mise tha fo mhìghean.

Oh I am sad (under sadness)
They accuse me, and I alone,
Oh I am sad.

'S diombach mi d'an nighean duibh
A thog mi a taobh nach robh mi deonach

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321 See J. L. Campbell, Songs Remembered in Exile, 76, and Bàrdachd a Albainn Nuaidh, 87.
322 Thanks also to Lorrie MacKinnon for help with translating problematic lines.
Thug i mise an tamh na h-oidhche
Anns a’ choille a chur ri droch bheart\textsuperscript{323}
I have no love for the dark girl
Who took me aside though I wasn’t willing
She took me in the still of the night
In the woods, to put to no good.

Thug i mise an tamh na h-oidhche
Anns a’ choille a chur ri droch bheart
’S beag a ghabhainn air a h-aodan,
Gun robh an oillt ud aic’ cho mòr dhomh.
She took me in the peace of the night
In the woods, to put to no good.
There was little to be taken from her face
That she hated me so much.

’S beag a ghabhainn &c
Comhairle bheirinns’ le mo charaid’
Gun bhith tric ‘s na taighean òsda.
I would give advice to my friend
Not to frequent the pub.

Comairle bheirinns’ &c
Cum ‘s nach teid an snaoim daingean
Air na bonaibh anns an t-seòmbar.
The tight knots will hold and not go away
On my feet in the room.

Cum ‘s nach teid &c
Caiptein Iain ‘s Coirneil Caimbeul
Anns gach cainnt gur iad tha eòlach
Captain Ian and Captain Campbell
With every word, they know

Caiptein Iain &c.
Ach nan tigeadh Coirneil Grannda
‘S bheir e ’n t-sreang seo far mo dhòrn-sa.
But Colonel Grant does not come
to take these ropes from my wrists

\textsuperscript{323} Note that the song is ‘woven’, and thus each couplet is repeated in the following verse with a new couplet appended to make a 4-line verse.
Ach nan tigeadh &c.
‘S bheir e an t-sreang seo far mo ghualainn
‘S bidh mi fuasgailt’ mar is coir dhomh
To take these ropes from my shoulders
And I will be free as I should be

‘S bheir e an t-sreang seo &c.
Theid mi dhachaidh dh’ionnsaidh an dùthaich
Cha chum cul-chainnt mi gun pòsadh
I will go home towards my homeland
Gossip will not keep me from marrying

Theid mi dhachaidh &c.
Theid mi dhachaidh dh’ionnsaidh mhàthair
Bhon ‘s i fhéin a dh’àraich òg mi
I will go home towards my Mother,
From whom I was raised from youth

Theid mi dhachaidh &c.
Ged a bhiodh a reothadh cruaidh ann
Sneachda fuar a nuas air móine
Although there be hard frost,
Cold snow on the fields

Ged a bhiodh &c.
Theid mi dhachaidh air mo bhonnaibh
Ged a tholladh air mo bhrogan
I will go home by foot,
Though there be holes in my shoes

Theid mi dhachaidh &c.
Tha iad gam dhiteadh airson an gruaigach
‘S chionn gun gheall mi uair a posadh.
They accused me because of a girl
It is long since I vowed to marry

Tha iad gam dhiteadh &c.
Tha iad gam dhiteadh air bheag coire
Anns a’ choille an goir an smeòrach.
They accused me for a small offense
In the woods, [where is heard] the voice of the thrush.
Example 3: Tilleadh an Eilthirich

Text and melody by Archie Alex MacKenzie. Transcribed from his performance on *Air Bord*, broadcast on CHER in 1979. T1176, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University. Translation by the composer.

**Chorus:**

*Hi ho ro and ho ro ghealladh*

*Tha mi cho sunndach re balach*

*A deanaibh curs’ air eilean Bharraidh,*

*Bidh sinn ann am maireach*

Hi ho ro and ho ro ghealladh
I am as lighthearted as a youngster
Right on course to the island of Barra
We’ll be there tomorrow

*S’iomadh sgeul a rinn mi cluinntinn*

*Bhun a bha mi òg ‘nam naoidhein*

*Mu’n dùthaich agus na daoine*

*S’fhhearr anns a Roinn Eòrpa.*

Many a story was related
Since the time that I was cradled
Of the country and the people
The best in all of Europe\textsuperscript{324}

\’S ann an taobh an iar na h-Albainn
Thainig daoine mora calma,
A rinn gniomh a bha cho ainmeal
A dh’fhàg sinn an diugh proiseil.

From the Western Isles of Scotland
Came the men so strong and stalwart
Who by working hard accomplished
What we are now proud of.

Thainig a Uidhist ’s a Barraidh,
Eigge, Colla agus na Hearadh,
Maraichean a b’hèarr a luingis
Cho garbh ’s gam biodh an fhairge.

They came from Uist and from Barra,
Isle of Eigg, of Coll and Harris,
Seamen that were best in Sailing
Across the angry ocean.

Thainig as an eilean Sgitheanach,
Leodhas, Morar, Muideart ’s Croideart,
Tuathanaich nach faicte cearbach
An car no an gniomh a rinn iad.

Came from Isles of Skye and Lewis,
Came from Morar, Moidart, Knoydart,
Who knew the way to till the land
And never were found wanting

Siud a dh’fhag againn an dileab
Tha an diugh a fas cho priseil
Ceòl na fidhle agus na pioba,
A’ seinn nan òran Ghàidhlig

They left us a legacy
Of which today we’ve grown so proud
Music of the fiddle and the pipes,
Singing the Gaelic songs.\textsuperscript{325}

\textsuperscript{324} Translation by the composer
\textsuperscript{325} Translation of this verse only by Stephanie Conn. The composer wrote instead here in the English translation “The legacy they left behind them people all are now admiring, presumably so that it fit the tune more closely.
All my life I kept on praying  
To the Lord I loved so dearly  
That some day he’d clear the way  
For me to Bonnie Scotland

I hope now that in the morning  
I will find myself among them,  
that I will be among my people  
Where my ancestors were raised\textsuperscript{326}

\textsuperscript{326} Last two line of this verse translated by Stephanie Conn.
Example 4: Bu Deònach Leam Tilleadh


Bu deònach leam tilleadh, bhith tilleadh, a’ tilleadh,
Bu deònach leam tilleadh a rithist do’n Chùl;
Dhol a shealltainn na cruinneig a dh’fhàg mi fo mhulad,
Bu taitneach leam fuireach an cuideachd mo rèin.

I would willingly return, be returning,
I would willingly return to the “cul” 327
To visit the maiden whom I left in sadness,
I would be happy to stay in the compay of my beloved.

Ged tha mi am bliadhna iomadh mile an iar uaih,
Ri ànradh is riasladh, chan fhìach mi na’s féarr;
Cha do leig mi air diochuimhn’ an comunn bha ciatach,
B’e m’aighear ’s mo mhiann a bhi shios leibh an dràsd.

Although I am this year many a mile to the west of you
Wandering and sorely distressed, I am not worth anything better;
I did not forget the pleasant company,
It would be my joy and desire to be with you down there just now.

327The the “cul” means the ‘Rear’, or backwoods community (as opposed to those on the main highway, by the water, which would have been settled first).
Gur muladach tha mi gach là o'n a dh'fhàg mi,
Chan eil sunnd orm an dràsda làmh thoirt air ceòl;
Chan eil agam de bhàrdachd a dh'innseas an dàn dhuibh,
Gach buaidh th'air an àit' 's an deach m’ràrach gle òg.

I have been dejected every day since I departed,
I do not feel the urge, at the moment, to turn my hand to music;
I have not sufficient bardic facility to compose verses for you to extol (to extol you)
Every virtue of the location where I was reared when I was very young

’S e Ceap Breaòinn an t-àite bu mhiann leam bhith támhachd,
An t-eilean as àille tha fo na neòil;
Le thulaichean àrd thoirt dhuinn sealladh thar sàile,
Air an lìonmhòr bheil bàta air a càradh fo sheòl.

Cape Breton is the place where I want to live,
The most beautiful under the firmament;
Its high knolls provide us with vistas over the sea
On which there are numerous boats to sail.
Example 5: Recording activity by region

Data used to compile Graph in Plate 18:
Singers recorded by the Collectors in the 1950s-1960s

This list shows the singers who were recorded by multiple collectors in the 1950s-60s. This is not meant to be comprehensive. It is my wish to demonstrate that the North Shore area is over-represented in recorded archives from this time period, in comparison to the rest of the island.

Apologies for errors and omissions as in some cases the singers are not identified clearly on tapes or in indices. I have omitted John Shaw as his collecting was so comprehensive and in general was conducted in a later period.


NORTH SHORE / ST. ANN’S BAY AREA
Hector Carmichael - HC
Kenneth Carmichael – CD
James Fraser – LB
Alex Kerr - LB, ML, RR
Cindy Lawson – SRC
Margaret Lyle - SRC
D. MacAskill – LB
Murdoch MacAskill – RR
Malcom MacAuley – SRC
Angus MacDonald – SRC
Annie MacDonald – LB
John A. MacDonald – SRC
Tommi Peigi MacDonald– SRC, DH, RR
John Malcolm MacInnes (JM?)– SRC, RR
Mrs J.M. MacInnes – SR
Malcolm A MacLeod – LB, SRC, DH, ML, RR, HC
Dan Kenny MacLeod – RR
Dan J. Morrison – SRC, DH, ML, RR
John Seogan Shaw – RR
N. Smith – LB

GRAND NARROWS REGION*
Hugh MacKenzie (Christmas Island/Iona) – KM, HC (recorded by Calum MacLeod)
Stephen Rory MacNeil – DH
Mrs John Dan (Rory?) MacNeil – DH
Mrs. Patterson (Benacadie) – JLC, KM

**EAST OF BRAS D’OR LAKES REGION**

Lauchie Gillis (Grad Mira) – KM

**INDUSTRIAL CAPE BRETON**

John Campbell and Mrs. N (Mae?) Cameron (Sydney) – LT
M. MacLeod (Sydney) – LB

**MISC COMMUNITIES**

Mrs. Sandy Gillis (Gillisdale)** – KM, HC, ML
A MacDonald – LB
Lauchie MacLellan (Dunvegan)** – ML, KM
Mr. MacKay (Baddeck) – LB
Alex MacLean (Big Baddeck) SRC

* Represented in Plate 18 as SW Margaree region
** Represented in Plate 18 as Iona region