

Cape Breton: Identity and Nostalgia

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Cape Breton: Identity and Nostalgia

DURING THE PAST TWO DECADES publications of material relating to the history of Cape Breton have greatly improved in their range of subjects and quality of scholarship. This development parallels the increased interest in local and regional history that has occurred throughout the rest of Canada during the same period. While this material reflects an increased interest it might also be due to the creation of various facilities and services for cultural activities, which have been financed largely by public funds, often for reasons quite unrelated to a concern for culture. In the case of Cape Breton these facilities would include the University College of Cape Breton and the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Park, as well as *Acadiensis*. The recent spate of works on Cape Breton history thus should not be automatically interpreted to be due solely to an increased interest in local heritage.

Cape Breton Island can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. But to consider Cape Breton a focus of study requires attention to the context in which it is placed. For instance, Cape Breton Island is seen to have features that set it apart from the rest of Canada. But what is the origin of this distinctiveness? If the emphasis is on social or economic themes then the Island can be presented as a separate entity — perhaps the joint product of geography and history. A claim for uniqueness can also be made by viewing Cape Breton Island as a component of a region. It is also possible to see the Island as being subject to broad historical processes and at the same time recognize the distinctive features of a specific place. If the emphasis is on politics, then the Island can be treated as an integral part of Nova Scotia. All of these approaches can be found in the recent literature on Cape Breton Island. The perspective from which events on the Island are viewed has an important bearing on the selection of events and their interpretation. This is particularly true of views that stress the uniqueness of Cape Breton Island, either as part of a region or as a separate entity. Both perspectives can lend themselves to a highly selective, ahistorical, even romantic approach — in other words, nostalgia. What remains significant, however, is the great extent to which recent publications bear on issues of current academic concern.

The high quality of recently published work on the history of Cape Breton is evident in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990* (Fredericton and Sydney, Acadiensis Press and the University College of Cape Breton Press, 1990). This is the fifth collection of historical papers on Cape Breton to be published in recent years. The first two,¹ both brief in length, consisted of papers presented to the Old Sydney Society and the third² included only one original article with the balance being reprints of articles that had been published

1 Brian D. Tennyson, ed., *Essays in Cape Breton History* (Windsor, N.S., 1977), and R.J. Morgan, ed., *More Essays in Cape Breton History* (Windsor, N.S., 1977).

2 Donald Macgillivray and Brian D. Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, N.S., 1980).

over a period of years and in a variety of sources. The fourth collection³ consisted entirely of original works. While some of the individual items were of value, the collection as a whole was not successful.

The themes and subjects dealt with in *The Island* are not new, but they are handled with a welcome authority and assurance. Christopher Moore in "Cape Breton and the North Atlantic World in the Eighteenth Century" reviews the familiar question of whether or not Louisbourg was successful during the French regime. In such an enquiry, he contends, Louisbourg must be considered a commercial centre rather than an agricultural settlement as proposed by Andrew Hill Clark. Canadian historiography has long emphasized the importance of commerce in colonial development, but H.A. Innis' influential view was that French commerce was inferior to that of the British. Innis applied this dictum to Louisbourg and not surprisingly found that the French colony had become a mere vassal of New England. Moore, however, argues that the British military action against Louisbourg was a result of its commercial success and that it was an important element in developing interchanges between the French colonies. The article is effective in part because it incorporates ongoing research, especially work relating to New France in the 18th century. Having explored the interrelationships and interdependencies of the English and French colonies, it might then be useful to clarify the author's contention that the success of Louisbourg was due to its ability to secure local control. An echo of the French period is found in Alex Storm's "Seaweed and Gold" which deals with the discovery in 1966 of the wreck of the *Chameau*, which sank in 1725. While of interest, the article has at best only a tenuous connection with the balance of the collection and might have been better placed in a journal.

The subject of agricultural development is the focus of two papers that deal with settlement in the early 19th century. In "Scottish Immigration and Settlement" Stephen Hornsby contends that apart from a few early and relatively prosperous groups of settlers, migrants to Cape Breton found little economic improvement in their condition. Rusty Bittermann examines the relationship between economic stratification and patterns of land settlement in Middle River in "Economic Stratification and Agrarian Settlement". He develops the theme, which is also found in Hornsby's paper, that the process of settlement was not only influenced by existing social differences, but that the process itself created persistent economic and social differences. Bittermann suggests that Canadian historians, overly influenced by the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, have failed to thoroughly analyse the early stages of frontier settlement. While there is no doubt that agricultural history has been relatively underdeveloped in Canada in favour of an emphasis on urbanization and industrialization, numerous variations of the agrarian myth do exist. To single out the interpretation developed by Turner is surely to oversimplify, and hence distort the interpretation.

Both Hornsby and Bittermann make it clear that even in the hard times of the 1840s, some settlers did enjoy economic security. Such people played a very prominent role in their communities, and it would be useful to explore their part in

3 Kenneth Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985* (Sydney, N.S., 1985).

the spread of cultural institutions on the Island. Donovan, who in "May Learning Flourish" deals with the general subject with reference to the 1840s, follows the theme developed by D.C. Harvey in 1933, who argued that the leadership of a cultural awakening was provided by such persons as merchants, clergymen and teachers. The very term "cultural awakening" covers a variety of activities. It would seem to include the creation of rudimentary community institutions such as schools, which would attempt to provide an elementary level of literacy and discipline. It would also include the spread of knowledge, if not of self-awareness, of the local community. Cultural awakening could also include the diffusion of contemporary intellectual trends in such areas as literature, theology and science, trends which in the 19th century had a tremendous impact on the sense of community. These latter factors might receive further attention in future studies.

Certainly it would appear from the studies of class and ethnicity at the beginning of the 20th century that Cape Bretoners adhered to ideas that were commonplace throughout Canada. In "Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry, 1899-1904", Ron Crawley describes the problems that were encountered when the steel industry was established in Sydney. He describes a situation that was commonplace in Canada at that time. The presence of a large number of immigrants, according to Michael Owen in "Making Decent, Law-Abiding Canadian Citizens" led the Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia to develop evangelical and social welfare activities that mirrored those in cities in Central Canada. Using case studies to illustrate general trends is useful but, as in the case of the missions, the sense of place can be vague since it is sometimes unclear to what extent actions in Sydney actually reflected local attitudes. The same general time period is dealt with in "Into the Great War", A.J.B. Johnston's study of the impact of the First World War on the pampered and immature Katherine McLennan. The author concludes that McLennan's future contributions to the community in the form of heritage and charity work were influenced by her wartime experiences. If this conclusion is difficult to refute, it nonetheless lacks substance since her postwar activities are entirely predictable given her family and social position.

No publication about Cape Breton would be complete without a review of radicalism in the 1920s and 1930s. David Frank addresses the familiar issue from the perspective of the relationship between electoral politics and the labour radicalism of J.B. McLachlan. In "Working-Class Politics", Frank concludes that McLachlan's socialist views were entirely compatible with his standing for election to Parliament since in McLachlan's view an election campaign was a means of promoting his ultimate goal. He also argues that since the electoral system is only one of the means of participating in the political process, McLachlan's influence cannot be judged solely by tabulating the votes he received in various elections. While Frank makes a strong case for the existence of a marked level of class consciousness among the miners and the steel workers, we have perhaps yet to hear the last word on the subject.

It is apparent that this collection of articles touches on subjects of current historical interest in Canada and that several involve broad themes which are altering our perspective on Canadian history. While some of the papers strive to integrate events on the Island with a general perspective, there is at the same time a

preoccupation with the Cape Breton identity. In his introduction to the volume, entitled "Reflections on Cape Breton Culture", Kenneth Donovan explicitly argues in favour of a Cape Breton nationalism on the basis of a relatively homogeneous culture: the residents are largely descendants of Scottish emigrants, the Island has undergone a distinct historical experience and its people have shared hardship and adversity. Cape Bretoners, if not quite a chosen people, are at least a people who have chosen to remain together in order to share a bond of community. Those who have lusted after material possessions have had to go elsewhere. Such claims for a distinctive sense of identity, particularly on the basis of shared hardships, are not new and not restricted to Cape Breton. In this instance the argument is not enhanced by the suggestion that non-believers are either ignoramuses or cynics.

Donovan argues that since the 1950s the sense of community has resulted in a cultural revival. His survey of various developments includes an eclectic, wide-ranging mix of activities, in particular the arts and crafts, and an interest in the built heritage. Although the point is only partially established, Donovan notes that this revival is linked to the onset of a "North American cosmopolitan outlook". The argument is worth pursuing because it stands in contrast to those gurus of communication studies who assure us that our culture has become homogenized, universalized — in brief, Americanized. Issue might be taken with the claim that the process only began in the 1950s. Should the argument for a cultural revival be accepted, one might question whether it should be seen as a reaction against this homogenization or, in keeping with the spirit of nostalgia, another aspect of it.

While an upsurge in the arts was occurring in Cape Breton, similar developments were also taking place elsewhere in Canada. Discussion as to why this occurred when it did and to what extent it was a cultural revival and not cultural antiquarianism would be useful. A linkage with broader movements cannot be ignored, particularly since the objective of the projects cited by Donovan was not necessarily directed towards a cultural revival. The decision to develop a service industry around Louisbourg in order to exploit the tourist market, for example, reflected a cosmopolitan outlook rather than a sensitivity towards Cape Breton's heritage. Another aspect of Donovan's approach worth investigating is his contention that the production of crafts in response to a specific need represented a purer society than did that in which goods were produced for a market economy. In brief, this new volume of essays contains a strong strand of nostalgia and tends to romanticize the past.

In *A Yearning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis⁴ contends that nostalgia is usually constructed around a belief in the primacy of the family and the community. For Davis, the taste of nostalgia is bittersweet, as the romantic vision of the past is shaped by a rejection of or dissatisfaction with the present. There are certainly ample grounds for such an attitude in Cape Breton. In view of the decline of its traditional economic structure and the resultant extensive out-migration, a note of optimism does not come easily to writings about the history of the Island. It is thus not surprising to find the view that communities were once simpler and purer and that a

4 Fred Davis, *A Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia, Art, and Society* (New York, 1979).

means must be found of reasserting control over their own affairs. One means of doing so is by extolling a tradition that is based on the family and the community. Political and religious ideologies become subsumed as components of the community structure. While nostalgia may succeed in legitimating community control over events, it can be a dubious guide to the future and an unreliable means of understanding the past. Therefore, the question is not whether there *should* be a link with the past, but rather *what* past? and *what* link?

In his discussion of the culture of the Island, Donovan contends that its central core is formed by the Scottish heritage. A discussion of some aspects of this heritage is undertaken by Gilbert Foster in *Language and Poverty: The Persistence of Scottish Gaelic in Eastern Canada* (St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1989). The text of this work is but 115 pages, of which the first 52 are devoted to a discussion of the translation and promotion of the Bible into Gaelic for use first in Ireland and later more successfully in Scotland. Foster then devotes two chapters to an examination of the relative persistence of Gaelic among the Roman Catholic Highland Scots compared with its decline among the Presbyterians. The Scots in Newfoundland, who are dealt with in the last, brief chapter, are considered to be too few and too weak to have retained a separate identity.

Foster is by no means the first to try to explain why the Presbyterian Highland Scots tended to move away from Cape Breton while the Roman Catholic Scots remained and expanded their influence in the province. In reworking familiar material Foster attempts to add a different emphasis by linking the preservation of Gaelic with the maintenance of a subculture that, he contends, was more influential in Nova Scotia than it had been in Scotland. In his account, language is not so much a means of preventing communication with other groups as an indication of the degree of concern about preserving the culture of the subgroup. Foster places particular emphasis on the role of the clergy in promoting literacy. He thus devotes considerable attention to the roles played by St. Francis Xavier University and the Gaelic College at St. Ann's in preserving Gaelic. The latter college, he claims, with its attention focused on the tourist trade, adopted a superficial approach to Scottish culture. St. Francis Xavier, because of its relative degree of success in maintaining Gaelic, receives a generally favourable treatment. This does not, however, extend to the Reverend Moses M. Coady who, according to Foster, was impatient with cultural issues and, as an Irish priest, represented a tradition that was at odds with the Scottish Highlanders'. As a result, Foster maintains, Coady's approach found little support among the farming communities that made up the bulk of the Highland Catholic population on the Island, and ultimately represented a dead end for the Highland Catholics in the province.

Foster maintains that the Highland Catholics established themselves as a peripheral group in both cultural and spatial terms. In contrast, he maintains, the Presbyterians failed to do so because basic flaws in their culture led them to join the mainstream culture. Their refusal to remain a peripheral group was reflected in their lack of concern for Gaelic. The overall thesis touches on many different issues, but the work is far too brief for Foster to do them justice. Nor does he explain how developments on Cape Breton differed from those in Pictou or Antigonish. The few statistics on shifts in population were intended to show the dramatic increase in the

percentage of Catholic Scots in relation to the Presbyterians from 1871 to 1941. Foster regards these figures as self-explanatory but there are sufficient differences in the patterns of out-migration from Inverness County, as compared with those of Pictou, to deserve further explanation. Questionable too is the attribution of this out-migration to a Presbyterian tradition, without some consideration of the strength of that tradition, especially in the 20th century. It is one thing to propose a religious tradition that remains constant over several centuries, but quite another to ignore any changes in its influence over time and in different places. As for the differences in out-migration of Catholics and Presbyterians, it might be useful to compare those Highland Catholics who migrated with those Presbyterians who remained at home.

Throughout the text there are passing references to issues that are peripheral to Foster's main argument, but which nonetheless bear further comment. The cursory reference, for example, to the high birth rate amongst Catholics does not take into account rates of infant mortality, which differed between groups and over time. Nor does it recognize that during the 19th century the birth rate among Catholics and Protestants, whether in urban or in rural areas, steadily declined. With his focus on the influence of elites, Foster repeats a claim that has been made before — that the acceptance of charges in Upper Canada by a number of Presbyterian clergy provided an example for the rest of the Presbyterian community in Nova Scotia.

Suggestions can always be made as to further research but issue should be taken with aspects of Foster's principal argument. One key element is the contention that the Presbyterians were prepared to migrate in mass movements and join the mainstream society in order to escape the material hardships of Cape Breton. Presented as a prime example of this orientation is the well-known migration, led by Reverend Norman McLeod, of Scots (Foster estimates the number to be near 1,000) from Cape Breton to New Zealand in the 1850s. Foster contends that McLeod was led half-way around the globe in pursuit of those twin gods of the 19th century — progress and prosperity. Were this so, it might be noted that McLeod did not found his new community in the most attractive or the most suitable place or locale for settlement. Foster explains McLeod's move by arguing that the serious agricultural problems of the community, combined with McLeod's growing lack of confidence in his own abilities, convinced him that there was only a bleak future for those who remained on the Island.⁵

McLeod's beliefs, while lacking an ideological consistency, did raise useful questions as to the actual religious practices of the period. McLeod, for example, accepted the reality of "forerunners", which may well have been derived from the doctrine of prophecy that existed within the Presbyterian tradition. A belief in forerunners also had a very strong connection with the type of folk tales that today are so often featured in *Cape Breton's Magazine*. However, McLeod took virulent exception to many other religious practices, such as the popular annual camp meetings, and by the late 1840s McLeod was facing a growing dissension within his

5 Foster's account is in strong contrast to the account by Laurie Stanley in *The Well-Watered Garden: The Presbyterian Church in Cape Breton, 1798-1860*, (Sydney, N.S., 1983). In this work, which is not cited by Foster, the position of the schismatic McLeod within the Presbyterian tradition is discussed at length.

community and opposition from without. Further examination of such issues might illuminate Foster's argument that the causes of McLeod's migration, which were economic and personal, reflected the basic thrust of the Highland Presbyterian tradition in Cape Breton. To deal with the matter in terms of a few simple categories, as Foster does, is to seriously oversimplify the issue. However, there is no mistaking the importance of the issues that he raised. Perhaps they will be pursued by others.

The degree of out-migration from Cape Breton in the 19th century might appear to be an anomaly, in light of the traditional emphasis on the settlement and formation of communities in British North America. Stephen J. Hornsby has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the development of the Island in *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography*, (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992). Hornsby indicates that, rather than being unique, the experience of Cape Breton was repeated throughout the Maritimes and to a lesser degree in regions elsewhere in Canada that were similarly marked by a dependency on staples.

According to Hornsby, by the 1890s the Islanders had reached the conclusion that their economic future lay with technologically based industries. It was true, Hornsby indicates, that the traditional foundations of the Cape Breton Island economy such as agriculture and fishing had reached their limits. What was lacking for a successful transition was available capital on the Island and a strong urban-based entrepreneurial class. Building on work in the area of Maritime economic growth, Hornsby contends that this would be unsuccessful because of the structure of the traditional economy in Cape Breton. He then undertakes a thorough examination of the Cape Breton economy in the 19th century.

Agriculture, as a major component of the traditional economy, receives considerable attention. Hornsby's article in *The Island* that explored the differences between farms on intervale land and those on the backlands provides a useful introduction to his analysis in *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton*. Without other sources of income, survival on the backlands was not possible. Following the potato famine of the late 1840s many farmers left the Island, while others found seasonal employment in the fisheries and in mining. The chief beneficiary of the subsistence farms was the staple industries, which were able to exploit a steady supply of labour. Farming along the intervalles did develop a limited export trade in livestock to Newfoundland and the sale of dairy products to Island towns, but this was insufficient to develop a capital base for further economic growth.

In discussing the staples industries, Hornsby argues that the various elements commonly considered necessary for growth were lacking in Cape Breton. This was the result of the complete integration of the staples trade in the North Atlantic economy, as opposed to the absence of interaction with or integration of the staples trade on the Island. For example, shipping facilities and railroads built for the coal mines proved to be of little benefit to other economic activities. Fishing did lead to the manufacture of some goods, especially of ships, but failure to adapt to new technologies meant that shipbuilding was in decline by the end of the century. This was still a better record than that of the coal companies which, according to the author, imported all their required materials. Another area of potential benefit to the Island economy was in the export of coal and fish, but as the author illustrates, local

merchants were only marginally involved because exports were handled by outside interests. It was also outside interests who received the profits from the various enterprises. The lack of economic growth could be measured by the small size of the towns on Cape Breton Island. Hornsby thus inverts the staple theory to illustrate why economic growth did not take place.

Hornsby's study provides a much-needed examination of the development of Cape Breton Island in the 19th century. A notable feature of this work is that while it is located in a specific place and time, it is also integrated into a broad Canadian context. The new material that Hornsby has presented on Cape Breton requires that further consideration be given to those familiar subjects of Maritime economic development and the staple theory. Less satisfactory are his attempts to relate cultural patterns to the economic structure. The contention, for example, that coal miners undertook union activity as a reaction to exploitation is rather too general to be informative. Again, while he stresses the obvious linkage between the exodus from Island farms and the poor soil conditions, he does not venture into the reasons for the different patterns of out-migration between the Presbyterians and the Roman Catholics. While the work may not always advance our understanding of developments in 19th century Cape Breton, it does provide us with the most comprehensive and competent study that has been written on the subject.

Following the period of time covered by Hornsby tremendous changes occurred in Cape Breton Island, not only in economic but also in social terms. Aspects of these changes are considered by Earle Peach in his work *Memories of a Cape Breton Childhood* (Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1990). Anecdotal in nature and nostalgic in tone, these memoirs of a retired teacher deal with his childhood in Black Creek. They close in 1929, when Peach reached the age of 19 and, having worked in the mines on and off for three years, left home for Acadia University. Central to these memoirs is the contention that the spirit of the community established by the pioneers at the close of the 18th century survived until the end of the 1920s. The voice of the narrator, however, is secular, and the author can only relate tales from his childhood without sharing the values that gave them substance. The result is to emphasize the degree of change while at the same time blurring both what came before and after. Also typical is the focus on family and the community. The church, given prominent billing, is dealt with primarily in terms of its role in the community, and politics is not discussed. This work is thus a good illustration of the contention that nostalgia has little to do with the true nature of the past.

When Earle Peach was first entering the coal mines, a 20-year-old runner from Sydney Mines named Johnny Miles had cemented his position as a celebrity by winning the Boston marathon in 1926 in record-breaking time. An account of his achievements can be found in Floyd Williston, *Johnny Miles: Nova Scotia's Marathon King* (Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1990). Sport history can be difficult to write because athletes may be uninteresting outside the one activity in which they are particularly well-skilled. Bruce Kidd in his introduction points out that Canadian athletes have few Canadian models; the same could be said for those who aspire to write the history of those athletes. What then should be expected of a sport history? Williston's own objective was to provide an example to today's emerging athletes. The way he interprets this goal is to stress Miles' hard work, dedication, modesty

and general conduct. He also tries to show the extent of Miles' achievements by tabulating all of his races, as well as the various honours that he received later in life in recognition of those achievements. Included in this list was the Johnny Miles Marathon in New Glasgow, which was inaugurated in 1975. In carrying out his objectives Williston has provided a comprehensive record that will be of undoubted benefit to others in the field.

Further examination of Miles' career might well explore such aspects as the significance of sport and athletes in the community. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s Miles received tremendous public acclaim not only in Cape Breton but in Nova Scotia as a whole. Many suggestions have been made to explain public enthusiasm for athletes and for sport in general. W. Gunther Plaunt, for example, has proposed that part of the appeal of baseball is that its structured, set ritual brings some of the same satisfactions that people find in religion.⁶ Interesting too would be an enquiry to whether the enthusiasm with which many Cape Bretoners embraced Miles was increased or diminished when at the age of 21 he moved out of the province and made a career elsewhere. Comments as to the significance of sport to a community, however, are commonplace, and some analysis of the actual relationship would be welcome. So too would be some discussion on the importance of athletics in an individual's life. Miles was only one of several athletes who gained prominence in Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton, during his racing career. Were more people involved in sport in Cape Breton at that time, in relative terms, than elsewhere in Canada? Others might now build on Williston's contribution by treating sport history as a field of social history.

Identifying Miles with Cape Breton would seem to touch on the issue of community identification and definitions of "we" and "they". Just what Miles' attitude towards his native area was is not clear, but Williston provides little evidence that Miles maintained links with his childhood home. From another perspective some commentators continue to define a Cape Bretoner as someone who resides there. Indeed the notion of the outsider can become both inclusive and threatening. Donovan, for example, complained that throughout much of its history the Island has been controlled by outside interests who have alternatively exploited or ignored it.

An opportunity to examine what some of these outside interests might be and how they have dealt with Cape Breton is provided by James P. Bickerton's *Nova Scotia and the Politics of Regional Development* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990). Many commentators, especially those espousing mainstream economic views, are often highly critical of the concept of regional development. In search of examples to support their opposition, they more often than not single out the financial support extended by the federal and provincial governments to the heavy industry of Cape Breton. Bickerton does not deny that the promotion of regional development has produced less than satisfactory results. Rather, his objective is to show, through a discussion of political and government processes, why regional inequalities have remained basically intact.

Bickerton's argument rests to a great extent on the contention that the traditional role of political parties and political leaders in Nova Scotia has been enhanced, rather than diminished, by the increasing centralization of decision-making and the bureaucratization of government. As one means of counterbalancing these developments there has been an increasing reliance on the concept of regionalism. Demands for assistance from Ottawa have been justified by arguments based on territorial representation. Thus the element of regionalism inherent in Canadian federalism has been re-enforced. The region being promoted, however, was that of the province as a whole and not its component parts. Bickerton, with his attention firmly fixed on political processes and government structure, does not deal with, or explicitly discuss, how Cape Breton fared in this process. He does emphasize, however, that within the province the campaign for regional development began as a protest by business people who were not sharing equitably in Canada's economic growth in the period following the Second World War. The campaign for regional development was commandeered by an alliance between business and government leaders. The result was that the interests of other groups were not so much ignored as considered subordinate to those of the key players. In that respect, the communities on Cape Breton may have fared as well as any others; they did gain some benefit, however brief, from a policy that favoured "corridors" or "poles" of development. Since the interests of provincial business groups were given priority, it would be of value to determine to what extent the steel and mining industries were integrated into the provincial network. This was particularly relevant, as Bickerton indicates, since the provincial civil service was quite lacking the expertise necessary to evaluate the various proposals being forwarded. Whether it ultimately made any difference was questionable because there was no basic change in the structure and policies of the government in Ottawa.

The creation of a variety of public programmes and services has undoubtedly created a number of changes since the 1940s. Some aspects of how local communities have dealt with these and other changes are examined in Constance P. deRoche and John E. deRoche, eds., *"Rock in a Stream": Living with the Political Economy of Underdevelopment in Cape Breton* (St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1987). A basic concern for the various authors is how to explain the manner in which Cape Bretoners have been marginalized and at the same time maintain some control over their lives. Building on the dependency theory, the authors utilize detailed case studies as a means of locating a basis for at least limited control by these communities of their own affairs. Thus, while the papers focus on communities located in Cape Breton, they are intended as examples of, and a justification for, regional studies.

John E. deRoche in "Class Politics of Management and Technology in Cape Breton Mines" focuses on the period up to 1947 to discuss the strategies used by mines for handling technological change and changes in the workplace that accompanied the new technology. "Taking Charge: Women in a Cape Breton Island Community" by Peter J. deVries and Georgina MacNab-deVries is the result of an extended study of a community, identified here as Earloch, which was founded by 1811 and settled principally by Gaelic-speaking Presbyterian Scots. The authors propose that this agricultural community developed successful strategies for family

survival because it developed a considerable intermixing of gender roles. In view of the extensive out-migration described by Hornsby, the claim of being successful would have to be understood in a very restricted sense. By the 1950s, however, the farm no longer had an economic role and the introduction of capitalist industries, which provided employment primarily for males, threatened to restrict women to an increasingly narrow domestic role. Despite some fragmentation, traditional gender roles in the community have persisted, however, in part because of the high failure rate of these new industries, and in part because of new possibilities for the employment of women in the public sector. The contention that new economic developments along the Strait of Canso had a limited impact on the lives of the inhabitants is also found in "Workworlds and Worldview: An Interpretation of Socioeconomic Strategies Among Cape Breton Acadians" by Constance P. deRoche. She carried out a case study of an Acadian community that showed the Acadian work ethic as distinct from the North American ideal and having survived changes in the material condition of the area.

The original objective, which was to show that the people of the Island had some control over their own lives, is creditable. So too is the use of detailed community studies. The question can never be entirely put aside, however, as to how representative a localized study can be of the whole. In view of Foster's insistence on distinctions between Presbyterians and Catholics, some comparison of Earloch with neighbouring Catholic communities would have been useful. Apart from such concerns, it is notable that the papers are presented in the context of a Maritime Region that is dependent on Central Canada. The various case studies are thus presented as illustrations of a distinctive Maritime Region. Yet many of the survival techniques described by the authors could be found outside of this region, and the resorting to the dependency theory is cumbersome as it is merely added on to the theme of the case studies. While concepts such as "production" and "reproduction" are currently fashionable, they can be used to refer to almost anything and can create overly rigid or sharp distinctions. This is quite evident in the paper by the deVrieses. What begins as a study thoroughly grounded in theory unfortunately results in an exercise in romanticism. Apparently, nostalgia can flourish in the wilds of the political left as well as it can in the thickets of the political right.

An entirely different approach is adopted in Craig Heron's intriguing and sophisticated study, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1988). In this monograph on the steel industry of Canada, Heron emphasizes that when the steel plant opened in Sydney it was a typical North American operation in that it was huge, highly mechanized and narrowly specialized. The work force was also typical in that the more skilled workers were mainly Anglo-Saxon, and craft union attitudes dominated. The unskilled workers were to a large extent migrants from Newfoundland, Europe and the United States, and their principal bond arose from their ethnicity. This situation began to change, particularly following the First World War. As the resident work force become more integrated into the region, reliance on workers from outside the region declined and a greater dependency developed on regional labour forces. Moreover, the presence of the militant coal miners helped create a working-class community that was quite different from that in other steel towns in Canada. Heron's

explanation as to why Cape Breton steel workers were more militant than were those in Sault Ste. Marie or Hamilton illustrates how he manages to combine general characteristics of the industry while recognizing the impact of local differences.

Except when engaging in forms of collective action, many of the responses of the worker, Heron emphasizes, were personal, private and informal. One means of examining some of the personal, as well as collective reactions, would be to focus on family strategies, since many of the workers' informal reactions concerned such. Included in this approach could be some consideration of ethnicity. Michael Owen's article in the Donovan collection, although dealing with community attitudes towards ethnic groups rather than with those groups themselves, is a move in the right direction. Heron notes that although he did not focus extensively on family strategies in his work, it is a field that holds considerable potential. It would be useful, for example, to determine to what extent demands on the shop floor were influenced by changes in the demographic profile of the workers. It is indeed to be hoped that Heron's suggestion will soon be developed.

While new possibilities for investigation are beginning to open up, the radical political tradition continues to receive attention. Of particular importance are questions concerning the nature and extent of that tradition and what happened to it in the 1940s and 1950s. One individual involved with developments of that period was Clarence Gillis, who was the only CCF member ever elected to Parliament from the Maritimes. His career was the subject of Gerry Harrop, *Clarie: Clarence Gillis, M.P. 1940-1957* (Hantsport, Lancelot Press, 1987), with a foreword by Alexa McDonough. This is a fond, friendly, and rather rambling memoir, although quite brief at only 81 pages. Harrop is sparing in his analysis of ideological issues, rarely venturing beyond such comments as his statement that there was a clear line between the policies of the CCF and those of J.B. McLachlan and the Cape Breton Labour Party. This comment, like a number of others in the biography, needs to be expanded and clarified. It is a measure of the work that the building of the Canso Causeway is presented as "the crown and climax" of Gillis' career. What Nova Scotia politician would have asked for a greater tribute?

A work of an entirely different sort is David Frank and Don Macgillivray, eds., *George MacEachern: An Autobiography: The Story of a Cape Breton Labour Radical* (Sydney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1987). An outgrowth of research into labour history by the two editors, it is an excellent example of oral history as populist history. While many historians employ oral history as a supplement to the written record, this type of document is relatively rare in Canadian history. This work provides useful information at several different levels. In terms of actual events the discussion of the formation of the steel workers union and its affiliation with the CCF in the 1930s are of particular value. The context for the various events of the period is provided by several asides, such as those relating to the apprenticeship training at the steel plant. But this is above all MacEachern's own story, and his presence binds the various elements of the text.

Analysis that is more critical of the labour scene of the 1930s and the 1940s, however, is found in Michael Earle, ed., *Workers and the State in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1989). Relevant to Cape Breton is Kirby Abbott, "The Coal Miner and the Law in Nova Scotia: From the 1864 Combination

of Workmen Act to the 1947 Trade Union Act", an overview of legislation concerning mining in the province from 1864 to 1947. So too is Michael Earle's "'Down with Hitler and Silby Barrett': The Cape Breton Miners' Slowdown Strike of 1941", an examination of the 1941 slowdown strike in the Cape Breton mines. Of particular importance, however, is the paper by Earle and Herbert Gamberg, "The United Mine Workers and the Coming of the CCF to Cape Breton", on the affiliation of the United Mine Workers with the CCF in 1938. The authors argue that although the affiliation was in itself evidence of the decline of political radicalism among the miners, this decline was accelerated by the CCF in the coming years. This statement raises interesting questions as to the nature of the CCF, and the early relationship between the CCF and the Social Credit party in Alberta might well be re-examined.

Apart from recently published academic studies, there are a considerable number of publications that attempt to raise a general awareness of the history of the Island. One example, a collection of excerpts from visitors to the Island, is Brian Tennyson, ed., *Impressions of Cape Breton* (Sydney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1986). The time period covered ranges over some 300 years and there is an obvious shift in tone with a change in purpose and audience. The intent of Samuel Holland and T.C. Haliburton, for example, of attracting settlers gives way by the end of the 19th century to the all too familiar tourist literature with its superficial attention to the people and scenery. While some information can be gleaned from these excerpts, the most successful are those, such as the one by Dorothy Duncan, which evoke a sense of time and place.

A different type of perspective is provided by Owen Fitzgerald in *Cape Breton: A Changing Scene: A Collection of Cape Breton Photographs, 1860-1935* (Sydney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1986). Some of the photographs are by professional photographers but those taken by amateurs predominate. The images are evocative, but they tease the imagination since neither they nor the accompanying captions provide an adequate historical context.

An example of another type of work that currently enjoys considerable popularity is Debra McNab and Lewis Parker, *Old Sydney Town: Historic Buildings of the North End, 1785 to 1938* (Sydney, Old Sydney Society, 1986). The research into the historic residential architecture of Sydney was carried out by Debra McNab with illustrations by Lewis Parker. *Old Sydney Town* is a fine example of its type, but it is particularly remarkable because its type is widely replicated across the country by historical societies, museums and a variety of public bodies. This combination of local and architectural history which treats a community as an ecomuseum did not originally interest university-based historians. Instead it was developed by geographers and architectural historians, and they have had an impact on the subject and on the shape of related publications. So too has the intent to appeal to as broad a segment of the public as possible. Thus, while the proportion of local history to architectural history varies, neither is usually of a length to be intimidating to its intended audience. The appeal and charm of *Old Sydney Town* is apparent, but as an historical record it is incomplete. Whether the model can be altered without destroying the public appeal is problematical.

The impetus behind appeals to protect the built heritage is quite explicitly an attempt to shape public policy by changing the public's perception of the past. This

is a dominant theme of Donovan in his introduction to *The Island*, when he indicates that the loss of any historic structure severs another link with the past. Proposals to preserve all aspects of the built heritage can represent an appreciation for and a recognition of cultural and class differences. They can also be an assertion of communal unity and a denial of social divisions.

Interest in local history is well-established, and in recent years, often in conjunction with social history, local history has come into its own as a fascinating and rewarding area of study.⁷ The contribution by Arthur J. Stone, *Journey Through a Cape Breton County: Pioneer Roads in Richmond County* (Sydney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1991), reflects an earlier, and much different, approach. Dotted with anecdotes, animated by lively incidents and topped with a favourite quotation, the work clearly reflects many of the features that gave local history its popularity. Unfortunately, this work does not live up to its claim to be a social history of pioneer days. Moreover, although the book is about the building of roads (and St. Peter's Canal), there is little reference to construction techniques or those who built them.

A feature that has become standard in local history is the use of oral history. For some years this has been the mainstay of *Cape Breton's Magazine*, edited since 1972 by Ronald Caplan. This is an eclectic, not to say eccentric, magazine. Ten by 14 inches in size, printed on newsprint but stapled like a periodical, an issue usually runs from 90 to 110 pages, and there are three issues a year. The print is large, as are the numerous photographs. Conspicuous too are the advertisements, which helps explain the survival of the magazine. A list of articles is found on the front cover but without any pagination. Each issue is prominently numbered but anyone wanting the actual date or information on how to order the magazine has something of a search, since such data are found in a different place each issue. In brief, the magazine is carefully packaged in order to seem prepared by neighbours working out of their kitchen. Considering the magazine has been published since 1972, the formula is obviously very successful. At the same time it apparently has little appeal to academics, as it appears that only three university libraries outside of Atlantic Canada subscribed to the magazine in 1991.

The various issues carry material that can range from extracts in Gaelic to musical scores for the violin or bagpipe, as well as excerpts from a number of sources. Some, such as the English translation of an account written in 1859 by M. Arthur deGobineau (No. 53, January 1990 and No. 54, June 1990), bring forward material otherwise unavailable. Other excerpts, such as the item by S.G.W. Benjamin (No. 51, June 1989), deliberately complement material that appears in *Impressions of Cape Breton*. These can be useful, but the core of the magazine undoubtedly consists of excerpts from oral interviews — Caplan prefers the term “conversations”. A sampling of these will be found in Ronald Caplan, ed., *Cape Breton Lives: A Book from Cape Breton's Magazine* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1988). The interviews are conducted primarily with people who are elderly, which raises a question concerning the likely audience since the elderly may benefit the least from the

7 W.H. Graham, *Greenbanks: Country Matters in 19th Century Ontario*, (Peterborough, Ont., 1988) fully illustrates the potential of local history.

techniques of nostalgia. The selected interviews are of people who farmed, fished or, like Rose Grant Young, operated a crane in the steel mill. The only professional included is a doctor who in 1942, in co-operation with his wife, established the first cottage hospital north of Cape Smokey. One minister makes the list, but only because of his reputation for shoeing intractable horses. The impact on the reader of the interviews is as varied as the subjects discussed. This of course applies equally to the interviews that appear in the regular magazine.

Many of the interviews turn up details that invite further enquiry. In a two-part interview by Ruth Whitehead, for example, Max Basque (No. 51, June 1989 and No. 52, August 1989) recounts details of his childhood, as well as his wartime service in the merchant marine. In the course of this account he indicates that despite several attempts, he was not allowed to join the Royal Canadian Navy because Canada's senior service, until June 1942, refused to accept Native peoples. A closer look at the recruiting policies of the three services would appear to be in order. Further attention might also be given to the account by an Italian shoemaker who was interned at Camp Petawawa from June 1940 until March 1942 (No. 53, January 1990). Since history is more than a collage of biographies, however, the use of these interviews, which basically remain as discrete items, is limited. From time to time, however, the magazine has carried collective interviews, such as the two-part series on former employees of the defunct General Instruments (No. 49, August 1988 and No. 50, January 1989). The potential value in this type of project might well be further developed.

Many of the interviews are obviously selected because they contain interesting or amusing anecdotes. Tales of ghosts and forerunners, well-seasoned fish stories and accounts of folk musicians form a popular combination, but they only constitute one small aspect of Cape Breton life. The issue of how subjects are selected must be addressed, as does the matter of how the interviews are conducted. The complete transcripts of each interview are stored at the Beaton Institute but are of limited use to the readers of the magazine, who have to rely on the published excerpts, which do not always clarify how certain subjects and views emerged in the course of the conversation. The occasional self-conscious analysis of the approach adopted by those carrying out the interview would assist researchers interested in building on the material presented.

Cape Breton's Magazine has received well-deserved recognition from a number of organizations, including the Canadian Historical Association, for its contributions to regional history. It might also be noted that the magazine's focus on folk culture and its occasional articles on Gaelic are major factors in promoting the theme of nostalgia, which appears in several of the recent publications relating to Cape Breton. The widespread popularity of this theme throughout Canada in the past few years is itself a matter of considerable interest. Thus, the magazine is establishing, in several senses of the term, a useful historical record.

The theme of nostalgia is often associated with an assumption — sometimes overt, sometimes implicit — that Cape Breton constitutes an entity separate unto itself. The notion that Cape Breton is a separate geographical unit, and therefore is a separate cultural unit, scarcely disposes of the question as to the nature and origin of that separate identity. A second method of dealing with identity is to treat Cape

Breton as a component of a region. That approach denies any uniqueness to Cape Breton but it does provide an explanation as to the source of its identity, especially if the approach is couched in terms of the dependency theory. This approach too can lapse into nostalgia and remains questionable in terms both of theory and conclusions. A third approach emphasizes the political boundaries by recognizing the validity of such boundaries and dealing with Cape Breton as a part of Nova Scotia. This touches on aspects, particularly in terms of political culture, which deserve treatment, but it remains incomplete. A fourth and final approach found in the recent literature deals with an aspect of Cape Breton life as an element of Canadian society. While at the present time there are complaints as to the divisive effects of limited identities and regionalism on Canadian history, such an approach has the potential both to recognize the validity of locality and to admit the influence of broad social, economic and political factors. The issue of marginalization thus is placed firmly in a national context. While there is no doubt that the writings on Cape Breton will continue to increase in both volume and depth, the question of identity should receive further attention.

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