

Private tape collections and socio-musical transmission in mid-century Cape Breton: The Gaelic song tapes of Peter MacLean

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The winter that I lived in Cape Breton I visited Peter MacLean, then 90 years old, at least once a week. He and his dogs would greet me boisterously at the doorway. After I had battled my way inside, past the barking and his bear hug we would settle in the kitchen by his beautiful “Modern Acorn” wood stove with our mugs of hot tea. Our chats usually began with my report of the road conditions on the 100 km drive south from St Ann’s Bay to his house in Christmas Island: Was the Little Narrows ferry running? Was there more snow Down North?¹ From there we would progress to news about the neighbours or perhaps something he had heard on CBC Radio. Inevitably, conversation would lead us to the living room and the reel-to-reel machine that sat in state beside a cabinet holding shelves and shelves of tapes (see Fig. 1). As we meandered through hours and hours of his recordings of Gaelic and English song, violin and piano I felt like a time traveler eavesdropping on house parties, quiet visits, concerts and radio shows. And once we had fallen down the rabbit hole where long-vanished sounds came to life we were not likely to surface for many hours.



Fig. 1 Peter MacLean with his tapes (on shelves in background). Photograph by the author.

Peter MacLean died on January 11th, 2013, the old Gaelic New Year's Eve and in his own 100th year. He was a singer of Gaelic songs and culture bearer, carpenter, enthusiast of local history, lover of dogs and Scotch whisky. Our friendship grew and deepened over the sixteen years I had been visiting Cape Breton to learn Gaelic songs. Peter was the best company there could be: a natural philosopher who was passionate about human relationships and sharing observations about everything including local culture, world-wide trends, and the process of growing older. He was also the most senior and one of the most respected Gaelic singers in Cape Breton, well-known for his knowledge of Gaelic language, song and local history. His legacy already reaches far beyond Cape Breton because of the mentorship he provided to those who sought out his help learning Gaelic language and song: many singers such as myself, Gaelic teachers and scholars of music and Cape Breton Gaelic culture. Perhaps someday he will also be remembered as the creator and curator of a superlative collection of amateur recordings; his best-kept secret for decades was a substantial collection of self-made live music tapes of Gaelic song and Cape Breton fiddle. Beginning in 1960s Boston and continuing into the 1970s when he returned to his family home in Christmas Island, Cape Breton, these beautifully recorded tapes are significant on several levels.

This paper is a preliminary survey of his tape collection, which I hope will lead to my further research into this and other private collections that capture the sounds and social milieu of Cape Bretoners' musical house parties, concerts and private gatherings from those decades in the relatively early era of home recording. These home tapes have become social texts that are part of the fabric of the musical life of tapers and their communities. This paper tells how Peter came to make the tapes, situating him within the existing tradition of record-keeping in Cape Breton, and discuss the significance the tapes held for Peter—that of sustaining his own musical practice when those whose voices and instruments are heard on the tapes had died, as well as helping him maintain a connection to those people and times. It also begins to explore what the tapes tell us but also what information they withhold about the practice and repertoire of Gaelic singing in Cape Breton. Listening to a homemade tape is like dropping into some long-ago house party. Although frequently the tapes omit much of the conversation they are still a vivid representation of Cape Breton musical culture in the mid-20th century and have a different usefulness than contemporaneous commercial recordings or those made by professional collectors. Finally, as we move into a time of greater access to archival recordings through digitization it seems important to consider the role that private tape collections like these play in the transmission and sustaining of the Gaelic singing and Cape Breton fiddling practices. In many traditions, the availability of consumer recording technology and the practice of tape-sharing and trading have both been invaluable to musicians for sharing aesthetics and solidifying repertoire, as Simon Keegan-Phipps has discussed in the context of English folk sessions (Keegan-Phipps, 2013)². In Cape Breton, the swapping and sharing of music tapes continues to be a vital way for Gaelic singers and fiddlers to maintain their musical community—and has significant impact on its performance style, aesthetic values, and repertoire. There is also a more philosophical but no less tangible aspect to the effects of sounds recordings being created, curated and circulated. As is discussed in the research project *In the Shadow of the Phonograph: Ritual, Remembrance and Recorded Sound* (Biddle *et al*, n.d.), “memory work (the ways

in which memory is put into the public domain, discursivised and shaped by the public and private domains) operates according to a logic of ritual in which strategies for marking and remembering the past are repeated according to a set of rhythms and cycles that anxiously mark the site of potential forgetting”.³ As we will see, Peter did seem to have an anxiety about forgetting, or about the songs and their singing being forgotten, and spoke of being ‘faithful to the songs’ in our singing of them.⁴

Audio documentation

Peter was openly mindful of the importance of collecting and preserving culture. Long before he began to make his own audio recordings, his mother Annie (Anna Mhicheal Nill Mhicheil— see Fig. 2), was cutting song texts out of newspapers and pamphlets and saving them in a large cardboard box, which he brought out to show me on many occasions. Peter’s compulsion to document on tape the songs and singers he experienced seemed to flow naturally from that precedent, building upon the long-established tendency of Gaels in general. The documenting of music and stories on audiotape stems naturally from a well-established tradition of record-keeping by Gaels in Cape Breton.⁵ Cultivating knowledge of personal and community history had been a long-established aspect of Gaelic oral culture in Scotland prior to emigration; family records were kept orally with the reciting of a *sloinneadh*, a list of patronymics that identify their familial lineage back several generations. Once established in their new homes in Canada, community members researched and published books of local history. One example is *The History of Christmas Island Parish*, first written by Archibald J. MacKenzie in 1926 (and later revised in 1987 by his son Archibald Alexander, or Archie Alex, MacKenzie), which includes genealogical sketches, stories and the texts to songs composed by his family members and others from his community. Other detailed local histories are *To the Hills of Boisdale: Pioneer Families of Boisdale, Cape Breton and Surrounding Areas* and the two-volume *Mabou Pioneers*.

Cape Bretoners began to see outsiders come to their communities to make audio⁶ recordings at least as early as 1932. John Lorne Campbell made trips to Cape Breton in 1932 and 1937 and filled forty-three cylinders, containing “ninety traditional songs, five traditional ballads ... two traditional games, seven local songs, and three original songs sung by their composer” (Campbell, 1990 pp. 2-3). Other collectors (who by then were using reel-to-reel machines) include Laura Boulton, Sydney Robertson Cowell, Helen Creighton, Charles Dunn, Diane Hamilton, MacEdward Leach, Kathleen MacKinnon, Liliias Toward, Ralph Rinzler, C.I.N. MacLeod, John Shaw and Ken Nilsen. Many of these sound recordings survive and are today housed at institutional sound archives in North America: in Canada the major collections include St. Francis Xavier University’s massive collection of recordings made by John Shaw; the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton; Memorial University’s recordings made by MacEdward Leach; and the archives of the Canadian Museum of Civilization which includes songs collected on tape by Helen Creighton in the 1950s and 60s, and a collection of recordings made by Cape Bretoner Liliias Toward. 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.⁷

It should not be surprising that around the same time that outsiders began to come to collect and record music with reel-to-reel machines, Cape Bretoners began to make their own audio documents of their music. Some of the most prized home tapes were made at *céilidhs* (a gathering or visit with music, storytelling, conversation, food and sometimes dance) or house parties, and these have become legendary among musicians and aficionados. Ostensibly, they have been valued because they captured singers, players and sometimes music that can no longer be heard, but they are just as valuable for the rich details and embedded cultural information they contain, which is indispensable to furthering our understanding of how this musical practice operated, and as learning tools.



Fig. 2 Peter with his mother, Annie MacLean, and sister Mary at the family home c. 1917. Estate of Peter MacLean.

Private tape collections have practical use and deep significance to a wider circle than those who tape or are taped, and provide us with the most comprehensive sampling of great singers and fiddlers from mid-century Cape Breton. While the twentieth century saw a significant amount of recording and collecting in Nova Scotia, until recently few of these tapes have been readily available to the general public⁸; early collectors were mostly outsiders who took the tapes home with them when they left Cape Breton (which seems to indicate another reason why home tapes were so valuable: you could more-or-less guarantee access to your circle of family, friends and enthusiasts). Some collectors transcribed their recordings for publication, and after 1950 they sometimes produced commercial recordings with selected tracks from their collections. Commercial recordings, however, are not necessarily representations of what would be heard in informal musical gatherings; practical factors contribute to which tracks make it onto a commercial recording and they might not be the ones that members of the fiddle or Gaelic song community deem to be the best or most interesting. As fiddler and scholar Kate Dunlay points out, “You might not find so much of the common repertoire on commercial recordings because the musicians were aiming to produce a product that was

distinctive” (Dunlay, 2013). It seems to me that, puzzlingly, the reverse is sometimes true of Gaelic singing albums, and you find the same songs and singers turning up on the few LPs that were made. Home tapes were more numerous, did not have the time constraints of commercial recordings, and therefore I believe they present a more accurate picture of what and how people would have sung when they were relaxing with friends and family. Dunlay has spoken of how important home tapes of fiddling were to her, especially at the beginning of her involvement in Cape Breton music, for this very reason:

‘Musically speaking, home tapes provide a better idea of the "real" tradition than do commercial recordings. Selections on commercial recordings tend to be shorter than most of the musical journeys in live Cape Breton music. On a home tape one can hear many medleys that are ten minutes long or more. Obviously there is more spontaneity involved, which can lead to some really exciting music. Home tapes reflect traditional practice more than commercial recordings, too. There are some great examples of old bowing and ornamentation techniques on home tapes’ (Dunlay, 2013).

Musical content, then — style as well as repertoire — was represented differently on home recordings than on commercial ones. In the opening to this article, I reflected on how my own experience of listening to tapes with Peter MacLean made me feel like a time traveler who could get to know singers virtually through recordings of not just their singing, but the snippets of chatter that occurred between the songs. I began to recognize voices and was able to discuss style with him, and also draw from many examples in developing my own style and repertoire. Dunlay too, speaks of the cultural context that can be gleaned from home tapes:

‘With home tapes, a copy of *The Cape Breton Fiddler* (MacGillvray, 1981) and shared stories about the musicians, I felt a strong connection even to musicians who had died before I was involved in the music. Sometimes their voices could be heard on the tapes as well, and little bits of conversation -- although those who made the recordings usually focused on the music alone. The rare recordings with announcements on them were great, since the tapes tended to be passed along with little written documentation. But people who had participated in many of the house parties and knew the music intimately could often identify the musicians and the settings, so listening to the tapes along with a knowledgeable person was a way to hear more stories and learn more about the tradition’ (Dunlay, 2013).

As discussed in “Memory and social interaction in Cape Breton Gaelic singing” (Conn, 2012a), many Gaelic singers and fiddlers keep private collections of tapes, Gaelic books, photos, and other souvenirs. The article argues that these are not only sentimental artifacts but rather tools in the transmission of repertoire and style that support memory on a personal, community, and cultural level and evoking the sense of previous performances and singers. Tapes have another even more practical use: As Keegan-Phipps discusses with regard to the English folk sessions, tapes are clearly useful as mnemonic tools for musicians, who can then work on new repertoire individually rather than depending on live exposure to performances (Keegan-Phipps, 2013).⁹

Peter's Tape Collection

The earliest and perhaps liveliest of Peter's Gaelic tapes were those recorded in 1960s Boston, where he and his wife Margaret lived and worked for 15 years.¹⁰ Upon his return to Christmas Island, Cape Breton in 1972 Peter continued to make recordings: of his mother, who was well-known in the community as a good Gaelic singer with a strong voice; Mrs. Catherine Patterson, a neighbor whose repertoire was special enough for her to be recorded in 1937 by the Scottish scholar and collector John Lorne Campbell; her daughter, Lucy; Hugh MacKenzie, a local bard; his friend and neighbour Joe MacKenzie (who had also been in Boston); Dan Neil MacNeil, and others who passed through the MacLean home. I asked Peter to tell me about the Boston Gaelic singing scene at that time he first decided to start recording:

Peter MacLean [PML]: There were all kinds of Cape Bretoners [in Boston]. 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[Stephanie Conn]: Where were they all from?

PML: They were from all over Cape Breton. Loch Lomond, North Shore, Inverness, Margaree, a mixture. 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 [from Mabou Ridge] was there (MacLean, 2004).¹¹

On one of those days spent listening to music at his house, Peter told me how he first began to record Gaelic singing in while living in Boston. Since he was, in all of his work and performance, a perfectionist who paid great attention to detail one can be sure that he chose a machine with a reputation for quality and that he was listening to its product critically. He bought his Sony tape machine in 1964, at Jordan's in Boston;¹² at the time it cost him \$425 which seems to be a significant expense, even for a substantial Sony reel-to-reel tape recorder, since the median family income that year was reported by the US Census as \$6,600 (US Census Bureau, 1965) and as a carpenter Peter's income did not likely fall into a much higher income bracket. Peter was proud of the quality of the machine over the years; as the sound of the tapes attest, it enabled him to capture the music with 'fidelity.' He used just one consumer, omni-directional microphone, and recorded onto quarter inch tapes, often recording on both sides. He told me that he bought it with the specific intent to document the great singers and songs he was hearing at the time in Boston, and so in many cases he has not left the tape running but rather, he stops and starts it to capture just the song, although there are a few tracks with some

conversation and chatter. Given the fact that he was taping at parties with a lot of ambient noise, he has managed to make good recordings with healthy audio levels that seldom over-peak or distort.

One tape in particular catches my interest. It features several tracks sung by John (Johnny) Beaton of Little Judique, a strong performer with an energetic verve and driving pulse—what might be called good timing, a phrase often used to praise singers or fiddlers alike in the Cape Breton tradition. On the chorus you can hear Peter and some of the other Cape Bretoners with whom he would sing at the Cape Breton Gaelic club evenings, where fiddler Bill Lamey often played host. I asked Peter about the origin of this particular tape:

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 living¹³. [Laughs] Aw, now I'm talking sad (MacLean, 2004).

[For a taste of the party at Johnny Beaton's that night listen to the **supplementary file** PJM_19B1_04-Johnny Beaton Ochoin a Righ.mp3]

Peter's account is notable in itself for its rhythm and rhetoric, which seems to echo the verve of the singing heard on the recordings, but also for the flourish with which he finishes: 'And that's how I got the tape'. This close kinship between Gaelic and English speech rhythms seems to persist in Cape Breton and is also echoed in the fiddle music, making the transitions from speech to song in a visit flow naturally.

Peter was acutely aware that as he and his peers pass away and his singing friends diminish in number, tapes are one of the ways to ensure that the songs will not 'go.' Since he was an audiophile who bought an expensive recording machine in 1964 and took great care of it throughout the almost five decades of its constant use, it should not be a surprise that for many years he worried openly about protecting his collection from future

degradation and disintegration. I was concerned about this not just because of the implications for Peter's own enjoyment of the tapes but also for their posterity, because they are just as important to the future of Gaelic culture as he must have known they would be when he made them. In 2011 Peter was admitted to hospital for a long-term stay made necessary by respiratory problems. He was not happy to leave behind his house and his independent lifestyle, but he also wondered what was to become of the tapes. Along with my fellow Gaelic singer and friend of Peter's, Lorrie MacKinnon, in the spring of 2012 I enlisted the expertise and enthusiasm of musician and recording engineer Paul MacDonald to make digital transfers of the tapes. After Peter's death in 2013, the tapes and their digital copies were donated to the Beaton Institute; these will be made available to the public in the future.

The immediate purpose of the tape-transfer project was to make sure the recordings would be safe for posterity, but also to render them in a format that would be more accessible and convenient to Peter himself in a hospital bed than his reel-to-reel setup could possibly be. The additional benefit was that, in transferring them, I had the opportunity to listen to every single track. I began to understand more fully just what the collection comprised and was able to make some new observations about the relationship between him and the tapes as a collector and as a listener.

The collection is fairly substantial. There are 18 five-inch reels, some of which are double-sided and double-tracked and 25 seven-inch reels, which are also recorded with multiple tracks. 15 of the tapes include Gaelic singing or storytelling. The collection also includes CDs given to him by singing friends or visiting performers (including myself) and cassette tapes; for the purposes of this study I am only considering the reel-to-reel tapes that Peter himself recorded. There are at least 26 singers on the tapes that I was able to positively identify from the labeling and their sound; there are several more singers who have not yet been identified as the tapes were not all clearly marked and the singers were not thus far recognizable.

There are 144 songs in the collection: Peter's mother, Annie MacLean, sings 14; his friend Johnny Beaton sings 17; the MacLeans' neighbour Mrs. (Catherine) Patterson sings 13; and the local composer and poet Hugh MacKenzie is heard three times singing his original compositions. Many of the songs that retain popularity today at milling frolics or ceilidhs were recorded two or three times such as "Mo chridhe trom 's tha neonach" (My Heart is heavy and it is no wonder) sung by Kenny Carmichael, Johnny Beaton); "A Mhairi bhoidheach" (Beautiful Mary) sung by Peter; "Air failirinn iu," sung by Peter's mother; "Fa lil éleadh ò ro (Ochoin nuair a dh'fhalbh sinn)¹⁴" (Oh woe when we departed) sung by Johnny Beaton and Mrs. Patterson and an unidentified male singer; and "Gur de ni mi mur faigh mi thu" (What will I do if I do not get you?) sung by Johnny Beaton. The song "Eilean mo chridhe," (Island of my Heart) is included four times from different singers. This surprised me since I have not heard sung in Cape Breton on my many visits and stays there but evidently it was very popular at some point, possibly because of the singing of Lauchie Gillis: on the 1960 Celtic Records album *Orain Cheap Breatainn, Songs of Cape Breton*, on his 1985 solo album *Gaelic Songs from Mira*, and in print, in Donald Fergusson's *Beyond the Hebrides* (Fergusson, 1977 p. 72), taken down from Gillis' singing. It should also be noted that Peter's tapes include a few English songs on Gaelic airs, such as a local song about Glace Bay, and "The Waters of Iona," an

English popular song from Cape Breton that appears on the 1961 LP *Songs of My Cape Breton Home*.

It should be noted that the ‘Gaelic songs’ discussed here are songs with Gaelic lyrics but which are diverse in style, provenance and genre; most of them are considered to be traditional even when the identities of the composers are known. Rod C. MacNeil, a Gaelic singer from Barra Glen, has said ‘you wouldn’t call it classical music but they were classics—the Gaelic songs that lasted for a hundred or 200 years passed along from generation to generation, and they are still being sung’ (MacNeil 2003). The age of the songs ranges from those composed in Peter’s lifetime, to those clearly of nineteenth-century origin, to those likely dating back to the eighteenth century or earlier. Some of the songs can be found in more than one printed collection, while others were chiefly passed orally and only recently published (such as those of Hugh MacKenzie, only recently brought together in print in *As It Was in the Glen: The Songs and Their Stories of The Bard Hugh F. MacKenzie*).

My older Gaelic singing friends, Cape Bretoners born in the first few decades of the twentieth century, have told me that great singers were more numerous in their youth than they are today, and that they remember many more Gaelic songs being sung then compared to the number of Gaelic songs being sung today. It is difficult to determine what discrepancy there is between these two statistics without analysis of more tape collections such as this, but it seems natural that in a time when there were more native speakers there were naturally also more Gaelic singers. Since the ability to remember and convey lengthy texts is a vital skill in singing this repertoire, a singer who is a native or fluent speaker is at a distinct advantage because this facilitates comprehension and verbatim memorization. One wonders, then, how many more songs were actually in the ‘active’ repertoire, regularly sung at house parties, céilidhs and milling frolics. Did so many more singers mean that a wider selection of songs was sung, or was there a core repertoire of songs that were popular like a sort of ‘Top Ten’ (or fifty)? It would be revealing to list and categorize all the songs that are sung, for example, at milling frolics recorded within a given time frame in one region of Cape Breton (many of which are housed in the Beaton Institute collection). In the meantime, even a smaller private collection such as that of Peter MacLean can unravel some of these mysteries for us, at least about the repertoire of songs that was actively sung in the decades during which he recorded— chiefly the 1960s and 70s amongst the members of the Boston Cape Breton Club, and then his family and neighbours in the Christmas Island area of Cape Breton. Peter himself has been recorded by many other collectors and appears on tapes at the Beaton Institute and St. Francis Xavier’s Gaelic Folklore collection,¹⁵ and on commercial recordings. On his own tapes he has included just eleven cuts of himself, singing some of the songs for which he was best known in his later years including “Ho ro ‘s toil leam fhin thu” (Ho ro, I do love you), and “A nigheanag a chuil duinn nach fhan thu?” (Brown-haired girl, won’t you stay?), “A Choille Ghruamach,” (The Gloomy Forest) and “Ged tha mi gun chrodh gun aigheann” (Although I be without cattle). I cannot ask Peter why he did not record himself more, but it cannot be an accident because he seems to have compiled the tapes with meticulous intention; with only one exception, he cannot have left the tape running or if he did he must have subsequently rolled back and dubbed over, because there is a disappointing dearth of chatter between tracks as is customary on many other house tapes.

Still, there is doubtless much hidden information to be teased out of the tapes, and further examination of this metadata is reserved for further analysis and publications. Collections such as Peter's might provide clues as to which repertoire and styles were typical in his social spheres, but several obstacles prevent our drawing concrete conclusions; the most significant is the fact that, as the collector, Peter was also an editor who chose who and what to record. He had an impeccable memory as well as taste and so surely it was intentional that he rarely captures the same song by the same singer. This seems to suggest that although Peter did seem interested in the performance practice of individual singers, he believed that the chief purpose of the tapes was the preservation of the songs themselves (and this idea is somewhat at odds with his demonstrable interest in singing style¹⁶). It is difficult, therefore, to make broad conclusions from the tapes about the living performance canon at the time of their recording. Initially, I had expected to hear a greater number of unfamiliar songs and singers on the tapes but this was seldom the case. Of course, in any musical practice including Gaelic singing there is a tendency to ask singers to perform songs for which they are particularly known (as various singers tend to have particular and slightly different, if overlapping, repertoire) or songs that are popular (thus facilitating participation in the group choruses), and so familiar songs are often sung for others at parties although the singer might know many others, or might prefer others. More importantly, however, I had not taken into account Peter's role as editor who recorded the songs that were familiar and valuable to him and even more significantly, that many of these would be the songs that made their way into his own repertoire. Listening to the songs that Peter chose to sing himself when in my company should have been a clue as to what could be heard on the tapes, as his tapes became a stand-in for the lost singing community and sustained him in his often-solitary practice at home.

Peter knew his tapes would be important when he and his contemporaries had 'gone,' but while he was living he used his tapes not just for his own support but also as a source of transmission. When Peter taught a song, he would often play one of his tapes as a demonstration of correct style, pronunciation and text—even if he knew the song well himself—because he wanted us to hear it sung by someone else, someone who's singing he had admired.¹⁷ The tapes therefore not only help today's learners to get to know singers who are no longer living, but also broaden our understanding of what is considered to be a 'good' rendition of that song. His legacy is far-reaching because of the mentorship he provided to those who sought out his help learning Gaelic language and song; now, the digitized versions of his tapes might be shared in a way that will make his influence reach much further than he ever dreamed, when they are accessible as a digital resource through the Beaton Institute.

Tapes as social texts

Music in Cape Breton is widely shared; not only is there is a great openness on the part of singers to being recorded but as I have experienced and as is evident from the labeling of tapes, recorders and collectors do not hoard these audio treasures for themselves. Instead, homemade tapes are usually circulated informally when people make copies for each other. Some tapes have thus become as legendary as a commercial album might, with many singers or players adding it to their collection and discussing it with others. Just as

with Peter's story of recording Johnny Beaton in Boston, the occasion of making a home tape is sometimes memorable in itself. The pianist Janet Cameron of Boisdale grew up in what is known as a 'céilidh house', a home known for its parties and music,¹⁸ and the recording location of many of these historic tapes. She spoke to me of how her father, Gaelic singer Finlay Cameron, would preside over parties at her house when she was a child in the 1940s, when fiddlers and singers would sometimes drop in unannounced. Janet and her brothers Francis and Leo remember that people would bring their tape machines to record the music at the parties, and that these tapes then found their way into circulation. On a visit to their house in 2011, I asked them to tell me more about the legendary house parties they witnessed as children and which can be heard on some of these famous house tapes:

SC: Who used to come to your Father's parties?

Francis: His friends from the railroad. He was a railroader and he moved from Mabou to work in North Sydney then he moved up to a better position—he applied for one here [Boisdale] and he got it because he had sort of seniority.

Francis: And he wanted to live in a Gaelic community.

Janet: Yes. And in the families there was no fiddler. I believe that why it was all singing.

Francis: Yes, yes.

Janet: There's lots of fiddling in our Father's family. Margie and Dawn Beaton—their Grandmother is our Aunt. And Derrick Cameron, we're all from the same family. His Grandfather is our uncle. But with Mama's people, it was more singing Gaelic songs. Now, I don't know of anybody else in our Father's family that sang Gaelic songs, only him.

Francis: But they loved [the violin] and they danced a lot.

Leo: And Margaret Ann [Beaton, their Mother's sister] could jig¹⁹

Janet: But [our Mother's family] sang Gaelic songs all the time. The interest was fiddling [in our father's family] as if maybe they thought the Gaelic singing would last forever. But it didn't even come down to us. We couldn't sing any Gaelic songs, except a few choruses.

Leo: Papa really enjoyed fiddle players coming to the house.

SC: Who used to come?

Leo: Winston Fitzgerald, Bill Lamey.

Francis: Dan J Campbell.

Janet: And Sandy MacLean. And Angus Allan. And Angus Chisolm. How lucky we were to have all these fiddlers. We got a little carried away—we were more interested in fiddlers than in singers.

SC: Did people dance?

Janet: They'd dance on the board [she points behind the door where a board is standing upright]

Francis: But the major part of it was listening. We were listening to music and we wanted to hear that music.

Janet: You know, Francis is making an interesting point. We weren't dancing at all. We were *really* listening to the music.

Francis: We were so interested in what they were playing. We knew something about them, and we'd hear [the tunes] again and we'd hear it by somebody else. Sandy MacLean and Dan J [Campbell] himself. But we've more memories of Bill Lamey coming here, and Joe MacLean.

Leo: They would always have polished shoes!

Francis: Oh they were dressed to the nines, ha, yes.

Janet: That would have been in the middle to late forties, because that's when we met Bill Lamey.

Leo: And then the reel-to-reel tapes came, and they'd be on the floor here, all the tape recorders with the wires and stuff.

Janet: That was later, because there was no power until 1948.

Francis: Donald MacDonald has a tape—Donald [who's living in] New York. He turned his machine on here one afternoon, left it running all afternoon, and he went somewhere. [Winston] Fitzgerald is on that, bits and pieces, the whole conversation, everything is on it. (Cameron, Janet *et al*, 2011).

To me one of the key points made by the Camerons is their emphasis on *listening* ('We were really listening to the music') and observation. While céilidhs involve participation by host and visitors alike, for children it also involves careful listening as an introduction to and education in the musical style. For adults, listening to good players or singers is a way of gathering ideas and influence for your own playing or singing style. Just as importantly, it seems that they realized that although music was ubiquitous in their life it was also extraordinary; they noted the difference between players and tunes, and really

engaged with the performance practice— both in the live moment and also later when listening to the tapes.

As Paul MacDonald points out in his informative essay in the liner notes to the CD *Full Circle: From Cape Breton To Boston And Back: Classic House Sessions Of Traditional Cape Breton Music 1956-1977*, home recording became affordable and accessible to the public by the late 1940s with the marketing of portable reel-to-reel recording machines aimed at the consumer rather than the professional (MacDonald, 2000). As a result, individuals who were part of the Cape Breton musical scene began to record and collect; the collector was often also the host of the musical party, or could have been a regular who knew that good music would be there. Doug MacMaster and Herbie MacLeod of Boston were among those who hosted and recorded, and as we heard from Janet, Francis and Leo Cameron and her brothers, so was her father Finlay Cameron. Tapers traded tapes and made copies for each other and for musicians, first on reels but later on via cassettes, and the result is that many of the tapes that circulate are jumble of recordings made by the owner and also some made by others.

Personal tapes such as these find their way into public archives; in particular, the collection of Cape Breton music recordings in the Beaton Institute in Sydney might be thought of as a mosaic of collections made by both professionals and amateurs. Sister Margaret Beaton founded the archive in 1957 with the intention of preserving old documents, but its scope grew and it now contains over 2,500 sound recordings. While some recordings were commissioned, at other times the archive has depended on donations from personal collections. 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 Sister Margaret, recorded himself and other notable Gaelic singers from around his community in the 1960s and 70s. Some tapes were recorded specifically for the Beaton by singers and musicians such as Kay MacDonald and Doug McPhee. But just as often the Beaton has welcomed private donations, and one of its relatively newer collections is that of the late Donald John (D.J.) MacDermaid, himself a fine Gaelic singer but also a home tapper of Gaelic singing.²⁰ MacDermaid was originally from Framboise but also lived for years in Boston, where he met Peter MacLean. MacLean recalls that MacDermaid himself sang beautifully in Gaelic, so it would be useful to hear what he selected and valued.

Through the trading of both archival²¹ and home-made tapes among friends, community members and enthusiasts, performances that were divorced from the living practice become a dynamic part of it again. The singing of songs is inherently social, while listening can potentially be a solitary experience, but tapes become a kind of social text that furthers the musical social life of the community of practice, not just standing in for absent members but forging virtual socio-musical connections. Today's Gaelic singers of my generation sing songs they had discovered through an archival recording: examples include Hector MacNeil's revival of "Na h-Ighneagan donna, Bòidheach," (The pretty brown-haired girls), and Mary Jane Lamond's singing of "Ho rò mo nighean donn bhòidheach nan gorm-shùil meallach" (O my lovely girl of the alluring blue eyes), both gleaned from tapes made by John Shaw of the late Lauchie MacLellan. I myself inadvertently revived a song by Archie Alex MacKenzie of Christmas Island when I heard it on a Beaton Institute tape and began to sing it at milling frolics in that area,²² an

experience which illuminated for me not only the place of memory and association in the popularity of a song, but also the way in which archives might influence current practice.

Gaelic singers today turn to recordings as cultural storehouses, learning tools and representations of the Gaelic song repertoire. They invest them with authoritative power because they audibly demonstrate stylistic, textual or musically ‘correct’ versions of the songs.²³ Are Gaelic songs and their recordings also in some sense a way to keep the dead Gaelic singers alive, not just sentimentally but expressively? Recordings such as these are rich storehouses of cultural memory and hotwires to memory on several levels, but they are much more than that for they invoke the voices of those who can no longer speak and augment the diminished agency of today’s community by making the absent and dead manifest. Peter’s anxiety about the great singers of his day being ‘gone’ was somewhat alleviated by his access to the performances he had captured, just as I now turn to my own tapes to feel he is still with me as friend and mentor. It seems especially important to have recordings of local songs sung by singers with a first-hand connection to the people and events that are depicted; in the case of the song about Tommy Campbell in Lumber camps (on the air of “Ged tha mi gun chrodh gun aigheann”), Mrs. Patterson’s rendition on Peter’s tapes is imbued with the nuance of someone who knew Campbell—and was in fact the composer of the song. Peter told me about how Tommy Campbell came to the subject of a song:

There was this Campbell fellow from Hunter’s Mountain [near Baddeck], Tommy Campbell, a noted Gaidhlig singer. Now in those days, 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. They were part of the North Shore [singing] 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. (MacLean, 2004)

On another tape, Peter’s mother Annie MacLean sings the nine-verse song “Seacadh na Dùthcha” (“The Decline of the Countryside”) by Hugh MacKenzie; MacKenzie, too, was born and raised in Christmas Island, and his song on the air of “A Choille Gruamach” (The Gloomy Forest)²⁴ tells of the changes in the community during the lifetime of the bard and Annie MacLean. Peter clearly had a great respect for his mother as a singer.

I would say she was a good singer! She had a strong voice. Long winded, and a strong voice. There’d be a lot of people coming to the house in those days and they’d join in singing. Some people who’d come would have a certain song they’d want to hear her sing. She went a lot for Malcolm Gillis songs, the bard from Margaree. And some of the other songs we were talking about from the book [*An T-Oranaiche*]—“A Choille Ghruamach,” she used to sing that. “The Bard and the Colonel” (John MacLean’s song “Còmhradh eadar am Bard agus an Còirneal Friseal,” also known as “Am Bàrd ‘s an Còirneal”²⁵), some of that. She loved to sing, and whenever there was a party or wedding she’d be there singing. And she loved to get the old songs. In those days there were songs coming out in the Post and the Casket – people used to send in Gaelic songs—and she’d learn them and

took great pride in singing them (MacLean, 2004).

In his article “Can the Dead Speak to Us? De Man, Levinas and Agamben,” Colin Davis discusses de Man’s understanding of *prosopopoeia*, “the figure by which for example poets address and lend their voice to something or someone inanimate, such as an ancestor or literary precursor, so that a sort of dialogue with the dead can be established.” (Davis, 2004, p.78). To Davis and de Man this is not necessarily a positive thing: “As de Man puts it, *prosopopoeia* is ‘the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech’ (De Man, 1984 pp. 75-76). De Man states that the speech of the dead is fiction [...] However, as he demonstrates in his reading of Wordsworth’s Essays on Epitaphs, the fiction is a dangerous one. The threat inherent in *prosopopoeia* is that, by making the dead speak, the living are, as de Man puts it, ‘struck dumb, frozen in their own death’ (De Man in Davis, 2004, p.78). This does not have to be the case; archives and recordings need not stultify a practice by turning focus to the past and forcing the current practice into stagnation. This is possible but in this case the far more fruitful outcome is that for Peter and for many of us who use archives in our practice of Gaelic singing, the recordings instead provide a resource and an opportunity for to enter into dialogue with the past. Archives need not only be monuments to the past, what Pierre Nora has termed *lieux de mémoire* where ‘memory crystallizes and secretes itself’ (Nora, 1989 p.7), or privileging of the dead’s voices over those of the living (as de Man posits), but also dynamic sites of interaction. For Nora, these places include physical locations 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’ (Nora, 1989 p.19). At one time, many archival tapes were assembled for the main purpose of ‘preserving’, and indeed seemed sometimes to at least threaten to halt time, by asserting repetition rather than development, but new ways are being imagined of presenting the material collected on the tapes and they are more in keeping with the experience one actually could have in listening to the tapes with their original collector or someone who was familiar with the singers and players the tapes captured, thus virtually reintegrating them into their more natural place as part of a social process.

Peter’s tapes are significant for this one last reason then; they are a vital tool in the performance practice of Gaelic songs for current and future singers because they are a curated presentation of the styles and performances he valued most. In a culture that places great emphasis on accuracy of repetition and rendition, Peter is one who also places emphasis on musicality, the way that the words and text are conveyed. In his narrative about why he made the tapes, the important thing in my opinion is not his fleeting suggestion that the songs might be lost; throughout the history of Gaelic song scholarship there has been an assumption that the tradition was dying and must be preserved, even in a time which from our standpoint looks relatively more robust.²⁶ In fact they would not be lost after his death because all of the songs he recorded had already been notated in books, recorded elsewhere (‘preserved’) by Campbell and all the other collectors, professional and amateur, and stored in archives. What he actually said was ‘when we leave, they’re all gone. You know—and he’d leave’. Why did he like Malcolm MacLennan’s singing? ‘He has a different voice. It’s so distinct – you know?’

The emphasis he puts on the words'. And his mother, apart from sentimental attachment, was on tapes because she was 'A good singer!' Perhaps, then, he did want to keep the dead alive, in order for them to continue to be exemplars for the practice of good Gaelic singing.²⁷ Peter is straddling the worlds of orality and literacy in a new way, highlighting the contingent authority of both written texts and living transmission in the continuation of song performance style. He interacted with his books and tapes: sharing memories, questioning variants, and debating meaning; but here with the tapes he is also pointing out that we have choice in not just *what* we sing but *how*; personal taste always came into play.

Epilogue

In 2013, a symposium at Christmas Island's Féis paid tribute to Peter in the summer following his death. Community members, singers and Gaelic learners gathered to remember him as the eldest and one of the most respected Gaelic traditional singers in Cape Breton, honouring his knowledge of Gaelic language and song and local history. Despite this love for the culture of his far-off youth, however, clearly Peter was not a man reminiscing for the past but rather one who also looked to the future: he bought a fancy, modern tape recorder, he watched television, he performed at the Newport festival in the early 1960s and saw the first hippies. And he thought ahead to the impact of his efforts for future generations. The knowledge and skill that Peter shared taught us all a great deal, but through him I also learned that in carrying on a tradition we are linked to the past, but not tethered to it. Peter's tapes were a virtual extension of his musical practice, made manifest to us: his memories, his preferences, what he deemed important to remember and memorialize thorough his recording, editing, and curating. Listening to the tapes with Peter made it possible for his memories of his mother, his friends and neighbours such as Mrs. Patterson and Joe MacKenzie to come alive again. Now that Peter and his tapes have been parted they cannot have the same meaning for us as they once did for him, but through the tapes and our memories of him, he and all the singers he captured will live on. Singers and listeners of Gaelic song may enter into a dialogue with his lived past to carry it forth into our own cultural future.



Figure 3: Peter and his tape machine, 2004. Photograph by the author.

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Notes

¹ In Cape Breton, 'down' is used to indicate north, the opposite directional indication to what is used in other parts of Canada. The possible reasons for this usage are discussed in the *Dictionary of Cape Breton English*, which offers quotes using the phrase from printed

sources dating back to 1900. Several of these connect it to the idea of sailing down wind. See William Davey and Richard MacKinnon, *Dictionary of Cape Breton English* (Toronto, 2016), 52.

² See Peter Manuel's book on cassette culture in India; he explains how the advent of cassette technology in the 1980s democratized musical distribution and allowed musicians and music-lovers to share tape over geographic and temporal distance (Manuel, 1993).

³ "In the Shadow of the Phonograph: Ritual, Remembrance and Recorded Sound" is a research project and book-in-progress based at Newcastle University's *International Centre for Music and Studies*.

<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/icmus/projects/current#phonograph>

⁴ Peter's words recall Ricoeur's ideas about memory and forgetting: 'To memory is tied an ambition, a claim – that of being faithful to the past', (Ricoeur 2004, p. 21).

⁵ Discussed in Conn (2012a, 2012b).

⁶ And film— see *New Scotland*, directed by Laura Boulton (National Film Board, 1943), and *Peoples of the Maritimes: The Gaels of Cape Breton* (National Film Board, 1947), both part of the NFB's efforts in the 1940s to make films on different cultural communities in Canada.

⁷ For a lengthy discussion of Gaelic song collectors in Cape Breton see Conn (2012b). This is also documented in Richard MacKinnon, 'A Brief History of Cape Breton Folksong Collecting', in *Discovering Cape Breton Folklore* (Sydney, 2009), 19-29; and Carole Carpenter, *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and their Role in Canadian Culture* (Ottawa, 1979), 346-352. In addition, Anna Kearney Guigne's *Folksongs and Folk Revival: The Cultural Politics of Kenneth Peacock's Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* (St. John's, 2008), while focusing on Kenneth Peacock's collecting and recording in Newfoundland, touches on the Canadian National Museum's interest in folk music and in specific, the work of significant collectors sponsored by the Museum including Helen Creighton, who collected from Cape Breton Gaelic singers.

⁸ For a thorough discussion of collecting in Cape Breton see Conn, (2012).

⁹ Since 1996, I, too, have amassed my own personal archive of Gaelic singing, containing about seventy recordings. These 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 collections of my fellow Gaelic enthusiasts; I also made my own tapes since 1998 at milling frolics and Gaelic song workshops, and conducted interviews. For those of us who live away from Cape Breton, such tapes provide a sort of virtual Gaelic community during the months between visits, supporting memory of millings and home visits and also enabling us to expand repertoire. Peter encouraged me to record such tapes of our visit to help me learn during the months when we were apart.

¹⁰ Cape Bretoners would refer to all of New England and sometimes Boston in particular as 'The Boston States'; William Davey and Richard MacKinnon's *Dictionary of Cape Breton English* lists several printed sources of this usage from between 1927 and 2007 (p. 19). Peter went to Boston, which throughout the twentieth century was one of several destinations for Cape Bretoners seeking employment; others included Detroit and Toronto. As early as 1880 it was recorded that the Boston area housed more Nova Scotians than the cities of Sydney, Yarmouth and Pictou combined, and a notice in the December 12, 1887 issue of *The Scottish-American Journal*, stated that there were

‘between three and four thousand people in the city who speak the Gaelic language’ (Newton, 2003 p. 72). In the 1950s many more migrated south, and it is estimated that their numbers might have reached several thousand (Nilsen, 1986, p. 88).

¹¹ All interviews quoted here were conducted in English.

¹² The Jordan-Marsh department store company was founded in Boston in 1941.

¹³ Kay MacDonald has since died, as has Peter.

¹⁴ Not the local words but the old country ones, similar to those printed in *Brìgh an Òrain* (Shaw, Ornstein, and MacLellan, 2000 p. 170).

¹⁵ <http://gaelstream.stfx.ca/>

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of this see Conn, forthcoming, *A Cairn of Stones: Memory and Community in Cape Breton Gaelic Singing*.

¹⁷ It seems that the use of tapes to augment in-person transmission was taken up by many others in nearby communities. Joe Peter MacLean, who was born in 1945 in MacAdam’s Lake (a small community far from the main road) was primarily a fiddler but was also a Gaelic speaker who was familiar with the songs. He recalled that he used home tapes to learn tunes and songs from beyond his home and community. ‘We used to go to this neighbour’s house and they used to make tapes. This guy came home [to Cape Breton from away] with the tape recorder, and there were lots of parties. His brothers got married— more parties. They’d last for days, of course, as they usually do. So I learned some tunes from different people through the tapes’. (MacLean, interview with the author, August 2004).

¹⁸ For a definition and some English printed sources, most of which are relatively recent, see the *Dictionary of Cape Breton English* (Davey and MacKinnon, 34). In *Brìgh an Òrain*, a collection of songs and stories of Lauchie MacLellan, John Shaw states that “in each Gaelic settlement the *céilidh* houses (*taighean céilidh*), though not formally designated, were known to all. A particular *céilidh* house could be regarded as excelling in a certain form of entertainment, and was often the home of a highly regarded performer (Shaw, Ornstein, and MacLellan, 2000 p. 34).

¹⁹ In this context ‘jigging’ means mouth music, also called liltin, a practice of singing a melody to nonsense syllables. For an in-depth discussion of this and related genres, see Heather Sparling, *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music* (Sydney, 2014).

²⁰ See <https://beatoninstitute.com/macdermaid-d-j-massachusetts> and

<https://beatoninstitute.com/macdermaid-d-j-cape-breton>

²¹ It is important to note that formerly it was awkward to gain access to the audio collections housed in archives; however, “bootleg” tapes were often circulated informally. All it required was for one person to order copies of some Helen Creighton tapes from the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, or to know someone who knew someone who had some Beaton Institute tapes, and they became accessible to a small circle of enthusiasts.

²² For more on this see Conn (2012b, p. 218-).

²³ See Conn (2012a) for further discussion on correctness, as some Gaelic singers in Cape Breton understand it.

²⁴ The original air is “Coire a’ Cheathaich”.

²⁵ See *Clarsach na coille: A collection of Gaelic poetry* (Glasgow, 1881 p. 103), for the text of this and other songs by the bard John MacLean.

²⁶ In his letter of March 19, 1937 to Scottish collector John Lorne Campbell, Monsignor P. J. Nicholson of St. Francis Xavier University 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’ (Monsignor P.J. Nicholson, letter to John Lorne Campbell, March 19, 1937. Archives, St. Francis Xavier University).

²⁷ Peter’s interaction with printed sources, and his mentorship of Gaelic singers, is discussed in Conn (2012a). Discussion of style and performance is also the subject of a future study, which will involve further analysis of these and other contemporary tapes.