



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #22

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I've long been interested in Christmas literature so you can imagine my delight when Jocelyn presented me with a lovely little poem about Christmas in the Keppoch. While I was intrigued by the poem and its author, I was also curious about this mountainous region that was once a thriving community in Antigonish County but which has long since returned back to the wilds. Twice I had Ron drive up in the old pick-up truck so that I could see the Keppoch first hand. While old foundations and rock piles remain hidden in the undergrowth, some roads and four lonely stones in the deserted little cemetery are all that remain visible to today's passerby.

To appreciate Roderick D. MacDonald's poem, *Christmas in the Old Keppoch*, a little background history is necessary. Settlement on Keppoch Mountain started about 1820 when land was no longer available in the neighbouring communities of West River and Ohio. Recorded history speaks of the hardships that faced the early Scottish pioneers. Historian A. A. Johnston referred to it as a "beautiful but rugged Highland district" in his *History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia*. Ray MacLean's *History of Antigonish* claims that "the road to the Keppoch was steeper than the winding stairs that lead to the top of St. Peter's in Rome." The mountain was heavily forested and winters were severe. "In those days the snow . . . used to be seven feet deep" and it might stay until early June. The growing season was short and the soil was just marginal. On top of all of that, it appears that the early settlers were plagued by bears. One historian claims that "the Keppoch seemed to be the refuge of all the bears in the country." In spite of these obstacles, the Keppoch continued to grow. At its peak, it boasted a population of "sixty-four families, a school, a church, a cemetery, two post offices and a store." As the settlement expanded, folks began to refer to it as two districts -- Upper Keppoch and Lower Keppoch. In time, the Keppoch was divided into two postal districts known as Mayfield and Morvan. Still, the old name, "Keppoch", refused to go away.

Who were these people who inhabited this mountain region? In 1988, Joseph MacLean of Ottawa wrote a delightful little booklet about his memories of the Keppoch and this group of mainly Highland Scottish people who once lived there. Of the old generations he wrote: "Many of them were illiterate, but they were not ignorant. . . . They were sturdy, honest, simple and intelligent. They were kind, genial, and generous." With a "good pair of hands and a strong back" they cleared the land, built their shelters and grew their crops. At first, conditions were not easy but neighbours helped neighbours

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and soon they had a stable community. Farms animals provided much of their food and some field crops grew successfully and then, of course, Mother Nature provided wild game, berries and maple sap. At the same time, folks at the Keppoch were a resourceful group and they quickly learned how to “make do” and be content with their lot in life.

What these people may have lacked in material fortune, they certainly made up for in the richness of their culture. The Gaelic language provided a tie to the past; their strong faith and their little mission church sustained them in difficult times; and their ceilidhs brought them comradeship, entertainment, relaxation and happiness at the end of the day. A fiddle could be found in most homes and, usually, a fiddle player too. Storytellers entertained with old Celtic legends, family histories and the ever-popular ghost stories. Poets composed verse and sang in the old Gaelic language. What more could these people want?

One Keppoch poet was so inspired by his surroundings that he went on to write some of the best Gaelic poetry in the New World. Alexander MacDonald, or the Keppoch Bard as he was known, wrote laments, satires, songs of a political nature, songs of praise and poems about nature, amusing songs and simple drinking songs. Historians claim that Alexander would have been quite well recognized today had he been a little more proud of his abilities and had he actually taken greater pains to preserve his works. Thanks to the recent efforts of Trueman and Laurinda Matheson, we now have a collection of the bard’s poetry in *O Cheapaich Nan Craobh* or *From the Keppoch of the Trees*.

Our little poem, *Christmas in the Old Keppoch*, was written by the bard’s son, Roderick D. MacDonald, who left the Keppoch in the 1880s and moved to Springhill where he worked in the coal mines before eventually opening a small store. In later years, he contributed some of his father’s poems to *The Casket*, thus preserving some of his work. Rod also tried his hand at writing -- in both Gaelic and English. His stories, *Memories of the Keppoch Bard of Antigonish*, were written and published in Gaelic in *The Casket* in the early 1920s. Translated by Effie Rankin of Mabou and the St. F. X. Celtic Studies Department, they appeared in *The Casket* in 2005 – this time in English. *Christmas in the Old Keppoch* is one example of Rod’s poetry.

Christmas in the Old Keppoch

*Christmas in the dear old Keppoch
Feign would this lone heart be
Back in the log house cottage
Beside my mother’s knee
Land where my young life flourished
Nourished by thoughts of God
The land where my sainted mother
Slumbers beneath the sod.*

*Christmas in the dear old Keppoch
Ah! T’was but yester year*

*That I roamed about among the folks
When there was no cause for tears
Where my sisters, parents, and brothers
would never allow to pass,
That holy night without a prayer
In lieu of Midnight Mass.*

*Christmas in the dear old Keppoch
As I have seen of yore
Would be to my soul like a gleam of light
With friends I'll see no more
With cherished friends who've gone to rest
Who moulder neath the sod
Who oft in thought knelt in the cave
And adored the new child God.*

Christmas in the Old Keppoch, sent off to a friend in 1923, was written in Rod's final years at Springhill where he spent the last thirty-five years of his life. His love for the Keppoch, the home of his youth, is clearly obvious in this short poem. His memories of life in the "log house cottage" are wistful



but clearly fond. He speaks of his "sainted mother" who died in 1880, about the time that Rod left the Keppoch and moved to Springhill. Mary was only fifty-two when she died. The life of the pioneer woman wasn't an easy one. Of her ten children, two died young. Buried in the little cemetery at the Keppoch, she now "slumbers" alone. Her husband, the Keppoch Bard, moved to Springhill to be with his children shortly after her death and that is where he lies buried.

Rod paints a picture of a happy childhood at the Keppoch, living in communion with family, friends and neighbours. Raised in a God-fearing family, he recalls how they would never allow "that holy night" of Christmas Eve to pass unrecognized. One source indicates that folks at the Keppoch would often walk the six miles to St. Joseph's Church for Midnight Mass, as there was never Midnight Mass at the Keppoch. St. Mary's Church was a little mission church and so it was served at the convenience of the priest at St. Joseph's.

Rod doesn't wish for the trappings and trimmings associated with the holiday season. Instead, he longs for just one more Christmas at the Keppoch – a very simple Christmas – one that includes home, his "cherished" friends and the birth of Christ. At the time that he wrote this poem, families had already started moving down off the Keppoch and so the old settlement, as he knew it, was gone, just as many of his old friends and neighbours were long gone too.

Four score years and ten have passed since Rod wrote his little Christmas poem. Since then, Christmas has become considerably more commercial. The hustle and bustle of the season has forced The Nativity into the background and replaced it with the glitter and glitz of materialism and the comings and goings of countless holiday activities. While I love some of the fuss associated with the holidays, I must admit that *Christmas in the Old Keppoch* is refreshing in that it reminds us of the true meaning of Christmas.

Have a wonderful Christmas!

Catherine MacGillivray



Reporting on the Museum's Christmas Party



There was a great turn-out for the museum's Christmas Party and Tea back in late November. Volunteers, donors and friends of the museum were treated to a short musical recital by Jo-anne Bouchard, Janet Becigneul and Mike and Rosemary Melchin. The old Acadian carols and the wonderful harmony of voices were a delightful treat for all those gathered that Sunday afternoon.



As part of the entertainment, Jocelyn performed a mock interview with May Bouchard of Pomquet. The interview gave the audience a little insight into what it was like to grow up in the Acadian village of Pomquet during the Depression. May reminisced about Christmas concerts at the schoolhouse when it cost only ten cents to attend, decorating the church with lion's paw collected from the beach, and singing in the choir at Midnight Mass. Ornaments for the tree were unheard of back then so folks decorated their tree with eggshells stained with beet juice and garland made from paper. Children spent countless hours dreaming about what they would order out of the catalogue but, in the end, they would order nothing because they had no money. May recalled the new recipes that the young women from their community brought home with them from

the Boston States – recipes for baked beans and mincemeat. Finally, she shared her favourite Christmas memory – the Christmas of 1931.

That year was, according to May, the worst of the Depression. Growing up in their grandmother's house, May and her siblings knew that it was going to be a lean Christmas. In fact, Grandmother had told the children that there would be no Santa Claus that year. Still, on Christmas morning, they tip-toed downstairs only to discover that Santa had come after all! Under the tree were oranges, crayons and clothes. Looking for an explanation, they ran to find their grandmother. "Yes, Santa has come and he's asleep upstairs in bed." The children had a couple of uncles who worked away and one of them had come home for Christmas. Arriving on the 2:30 a.m. train, he had walked the four miles to their home, thus creating a magical Christmas for a houseful of children who were expecting absolutely nothing at all for Christmas that year.

The musical performance and the storytelling were followed by a lovely Christmas tea and social. A wonderful time was had by one and all.

Recent Acquisitions

A special thank-you to Hugh Webb for the shinty stick (pictured on the left) and the hurley stick (pictured on the right).

Shinty, a team sport played with sticks and a ball and sometimes compared to field hockey, is played mainly in the Scottish Highlands today. Some believe that this sport could be one of the precursors of ice hockey.

Hurling, an Irish outdoor team sport, is played with sticks called hurleys and a ball called a sliotar. Research indicates that both sports derived from the same root but developed different rules and features.

The sticks date back to the 1940s and came from returning soldiers of the Second World War.

Jamie Grant of Guysborough and the Guysborough Historical Society brought in several interesting items:

- *A 1913 photo shows the schoolchildren at the James River Schoolhouse.*
- *"The Klondike Stampede" is an article by Tappan Adney on Robert Henderson, the man who discovered the Klondike gold which started the gold rush. Henderson was a Canadian by birth, his father being a lighthouse-keeper at Big Island, Pictou County.*
- *Jamie Grant also donated a couple of letters written in 1906 by a William Taylor to his aunt, Sarah Taylor-Fraser, at Lower South River. William's father, originally from Taylor's Road, had travelled the United States and worked in various mines there. Eventually, he made his way to Korea where he was greatly respected for his knowledge and made a minister in the Korean*



government. After his father's death, William wrote to his aunt, telling her that her brother's death had been peaceful and that the funeral had been largely attended by the Korean people. These letters are a fine example of folks who left Antigonish and made a mark in an unusual place in the world.

- Martha Brown of Lochaber donated two tatting shuttles once used by her grandmother, Grace Brown.
- Betty Cameron brought in a collection of photos of the Arisaig district, some historic and some current.

A Very Generous Donation!

We are very grateful to Angus MacGillivray, one of the Fatima Street MacGillivrays, for his very generous donation to the Heritage Association of Antigonish. (Tax receipts are available for donations made to the Heritage Association.)

A Letter from Santa as found in *The Casket*, December 1914

Some time ago, while scanning old copies of *The Casket* on microfilm, I came across this delightful old letter from Santa in a couple of the December 1914 editions of the newspaper. This correspondence from Jolly Old Saint Nick was, in fact, an advertisement placed by T. J. Bonner of Bonner's general merchandizing store. Located roughly where the Bank of Nova Scotia stands today, Bonner's store opened in the mid 1890s as a grocery store but it quickly developed into a large retail and wholesale business, selling groceries, flour, crockery, clothing, boots, shoes and novelties of all kinds. In 1898, Bonner advertised in the Christmas edition of *The Greetings*: "If you can't get it at Bonner's, then it can't be got in Antigonish." T. J. Bonner was certainly a marketing wizard. In earlier years, Bonner's slogan was "Antigonish's Leading Store". During the 1920s, the catch phrase "The Busy Store" was adopted. Thomas Bonner was a prominent merchant about town, president of the Retail Merchants Association in Antigonish and one of the founders of The Eastern Automobile Company on Main Street.

To fully appreciate this letter from Santa, we must remember that this was the first Christmas of World War One. These were fearful and uncertain times in Antigonish and the entire world. No one knew the outcome of the war. How long would it last? Santa, himself, expresses "hope for peace 'ere my next letter" but peace was a long way off. With Christmas just around the corner, parents were caught in quandary. Should they spend money on Christmas or should they save for tougher times? Merchants were, no doubt, feeling the pinch too. Bonner's letter to Santa is a clever marketing tool. Understanding the apprehension in the community and the concerns of his patrons, Bonner uses Santa's letter to try to normalize the times. At the same time, the letter was probably welcomed by many parents and children alike as it lightened the weight of events on the world's stage. Even in these early times, T. J. Bonner clearly understood the impact of advertising.



Santa Coming

Hurrah! Hurrah!

DEAR ANTIGONISH CHILDREN, *I've heard it all, they told you I wasn't coming, that I couldn't get the toys, that I couldn't get through Russia, Belgium and France with the war.*

I was surprised when I heard this, don't they know that everything ceases when they see my old white whisker in the distance, the soldiers cease firing to cheer me on, knowing that I am gathering toys from all the big factories to distribute to their dear ones at home.

Stop me! No never, nothing can stop me, my business will continue as long as there is a Christmas.

I filled your great-grandfathers' and grandmothers' stockings when children at the old log grate and I'll fill yours this Christmas and your grandchildren's a hundred years hence.

Knowing the future events and that the war was coming, I gathered my toys early and sent them out to my agents, so that the war don't effect me.

I got vexed because a lot of people said I wasn't coming and the children wouldn't get any toys this year. So I sent out larger quantities than ever, your old reindeer father will never go back on you.

I sent T. J. Bonner, my Antigonish agent, 2 cases more than last year, and although sugar is high I sent him an extra box of excellent Candy at the old price.

I thought(t) I was sending him too much, bit in a letter I had from him he said, fire it along, old man, good times in Antigonish, highest prices ever heard of for farm products. We must have happy homes and happy children and you can't have happy children without Toys and Candy at Christmas, happy children make homes and make the old forget their age, and he's right, so I loaded him up.

Now, make your fathers and mothers pick out all the stuff I sent to him and I'll distribute it as usual, I don't want a thing left over.

You know I have thousands of letters like this to write to my children and can't make them too long. So now rush your parents to my Agent's Emporium to pick out your list early. Make it long, there's plenty.

With my usual Xmas blessing to you and your parents, a hope for peace 'ere my next letter, a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year, I bid you another years good bye.

From your old, never-failing standby,

SANTA

The Casket, December 1914