

The Old Train Station News

Newsletter # 103

May 2018

Dear Friends,

When I was a young child my mother was the housekeeper for “Big” Jim MacDonald and Mary Boyd who lived on Big Island. Mary, daughter of Angus A and Mary (MacIsaac), was of the Boyds of South River and was considered a “Gaelic scholar.” They spoke Gaelic to each other and to older folk in the neighborhood. My mother knew a few words, but she spent most of her youth in Boston from age three until she returned to Antigonish at age fourteen.

Big Jim was a character and loved to play games that the women thought very inappropriate. He would suddenly get a terrible cramp in his leg and call me to come quickly and pull on his leg. The result was a large noise followed by gales of laughter by both of us. Mary and my mother were not impressed. He would also sing a song that I cannot remember except for the refrain. “A chaora chrom, c’aite bheil thu” (O sheep with the crooked horn, where are you?). Later in life, I was to learn that this song was in reference to the spiral outlet from the Highlanders’ homemade and illicit whisky still, of which the area had plenty. So, this was the only bit of Gaelic that I ever learned.

The loss of Gaelic was disappointing to the families whose children went off to the Boston States or further afield. English was considered a proper language, and many tried very hard to lose the Gaelic lilt and cadence of the language. One man, after several years away, came home and was greeted by his family in Gaelic. He responded in English and his father rebuked him for forgetting who he was. Yet, for many there was regret in the loss of the life left behind. Time passed, the family dispersed or died off and the old family farm was left to ruin.

In the 1970s, I brought my family back to Antigonish to show them Big Island and other places where I lived and visited growing up. The old farm house at Big Island where I lived for four years had burned down and the barn was just a pile of rubble. The neighbour took us in for tea and reminisced about what they knew. In 2002, I brought my oldest daughter to Big Island and was completely lost. The road to the farm and to that neighbour was completely gone, replaced with a cul-de-sac of newer homes. Yet, in my mind, I could still imagine how it was supposed to be. The house facing out to sea with an orchard to the front and the fruit garden behind, the lilac hedge separating the house from the barn. But that is all obscured now and exists only in my memory.

After moving back here, I signed up to learn Gaelic on-line from St FX. I thought that somehow the memory of hearing Gaelic spoken would be of help in learning the language. Despite my earnest three-month effort, I packed it in as a lost cause.



L-R: Donald Boyd, “Me”, neighbour, my mother, Mary (Boyd) & Jim MacDonald

The Epistolarian

Beannachadh Leannain (Beloved Blessing) by Rev. Alexander Stewart

Beannaich a h-uchd 's broilleach fìor-gheal
Air an àille sìoda 'n sròl,
A gàirdean réidh 's a caol-mheòir calamh
Air gach inneal 's am bi ceòl,
Beannaich a calpa cruinn 's caol,
'Siubhal eutrom gun bhi fann,
Ceum nach froiseadh dealt thar feòirnean,
Finnealt' seòlt' air ùrlar danns.

Bless her snow-white breast and bosom,
On her beauty lie silk and lace,
Her smooth arms and her slender expert fingers
On every musical instrument,
Bless her narrow rounded calf,
Moving lightly, confidently,
A step that would not shake the dew from the
grass, elegant, methodical on the dance floor.

Gaelic is a Celtic language that includes the speech of ancient Ireland and the dialects that have developed from it, especially Irish (Gaeilge), Manx (Gailck) and Scottish (Gaidhlig) dialects, as well as the culture associated with the speakers and their descendants.

Gaelic was as much a part of the Scottish and Irish settlers as life itself. It encompassed not just the words but the very spirit of their work and play. Singing to the beat of their daily chores made life easier and less of a burden. Gathering together to accomplish larger important community tasks brought people together in shared realization of their dependence on one another. Their entertainment was singing and dancing to the music of the fiddle and telling stories. And naturally, dancing meant step-dancing! Music, song, dance, stories and language were all entwined in the soul of the Gael. They saw little need to read their language until an anthology of Gaelic poetry “Masterpieces of the Gaelic Bards” was published and “enticed the curious into reading their own language.” Anne McVicar Grant, wife of a Highland Presbyterian reverend, described the Gael as a war-like musical and poetic people, secretive and evasive a “concealed people” whose culture, language and manner was a barrier to understanding them.

Local Irish Place names

Afton – settled by mostly Irish farmers in 1864
Cloverville – settled mostly by Irish settlers from Guysborough County in mid-1800s
Condon Cove – named for John Condon from Ireland in 1821
Donny Brook/Little Ireland – large Irish settlement named it for Irish village known for its fight at a village fair “a donnybrook”.
Merland – previously known as Irish Back Settlement



Upcoming Events:

May 2 – June 4: “The Gaelic Bards: Their Poetry”; display of Gaelic poetry and items related to their contributions to our cultural heritage.

All are welcome to view the display until May 4th, 2018. Tea served at 3:00pm

June: Acadian Community TBA

Thank You!

We would like to extend our heartfelt appreciation to all those volunteers who lend their talent, time and efforts to make the Antigonish Heritage Museum a valuable part of our community.

It is your efforts that have helped beautify the exterior, provided our exhibits, cleaned and mounted donations, helped with displays, assisted with our database, scanned images, written and researched articles, provided refreshments, given talks, and many other valuable efforts to numerous to mention. So many things go on behind the scenes that, without your help, we would be lost.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the many monetary gifts that we have received which have assisted us in enhancing our displays and keeping our Museum up to modern archival standards. Your donations, no matter how small, help us protect and preserve the heritage of Antigonish Town and County.

We would like to say a special thank-you to Joan Phee for the loan of her angel collection for exhibit in February and to the Dutch Community for the loan of family items exhibited in March. It is our hope to continue special collections as we go forward.

We invite you to come by for a visit and hope you will become a member of the Antigonish Heritage Museum and assist us in our worthwhile endeavors.

We couldn't do it without you



Alan Marble & Martin Hubley of the **Nova Scotia Museum** are collecting stories of the **Spanish Flu** from across Nova Scotia. Several flu victim names have been identified from Antigonish County. We are looking for stories and pictures to contribute to this effort. Also looking for a picture of/or a placard used on the door to warn people away from an infected home.



We had a group of Adult Learners who are participating in the Nova Scotia Works 55+ Program stop in the Museum for a visit. Facilitator, Mary Somers indicated they are involved in a 10-week program to enhance their employment skills. The energy, enthusiasm, and the many questions they brought to the Museum were greatly appreciated.

Bidh cron duine cho mòr ri beinn mun lèir dha fhèin e.
A man's fault will be as big as a mountain before he sees it.

Special Events!

Come enjoy a **Gaelic Mother's Day** ecumenical service being held at St. FX Chapel Sunday May 13th, 3:00 pm. Traditional music and special massed Gaelic Choir – Guest preacher **Monsignor MacNeil** from Diocese of Argyll, Scotland. Refreshments to follow.
Join us at the Museum for **"History of Catholicism in Northeastern Nova Scotia"** with guest speaker **Peter Ludlow** - May 21st at 7:00pm. All are welcome.

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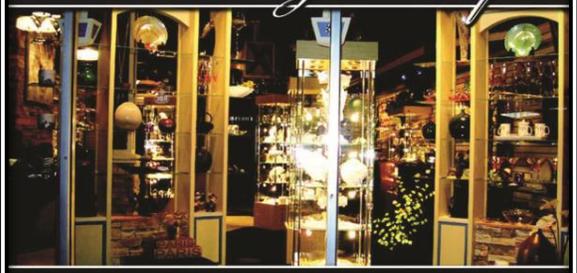
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