GROUP IDENTITY IN SOCIAL GATHERINGS: TRADITIONS AND COMMUNITY ON THE IONA PENINSULA, CAPE BRETON

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Group Identity in Social Gatherings:

Traditions and Community on the Iona Peninsula, Cape Breton

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes the idea that social gatherings in a rural community of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, are a forum for displaying and reinforcing a group identity based on collective community values. Both present and past social gatherings on the Iona peninsula are discussed, using the contrasts between them to point out how these values and their manifestations have or have not changed.

The methodology for the study consisted largely of tape-recorded interviews and participant observation, carried out on the peninsula over a period of two months. Other sources of information included written material by folklorists and others on social gatherings of different types, on Gaelic language use and on such concepts as reciprocity, leadership and communication. After an introduction and a chapter describing the communities studied, three chapters are devoted to groups of gatherings divided according to function, with ethnographic descriptions of present-day gatherings included in each.

Where entertainment options are limited due to a diminishing population and geographical distance from major centres, people will construct their own entertainment and their own methods of gathering for what purposes they find.

The ways in which they set up these gatherings and the form they take depend on resources available, motives for gathering and gathering traditions already in place. The thesis posits that people of this area, because of their common heritage of Hebridean, Roman Catholic traditions, and because of the complete lack of commercial entertainment options, tend to maintain some of the forms or aspects of gathering which their ancestors imported from Scotland in the early nineteenth century. These traditions have been retained in a largely practical, unselfconscious way because they continue to fill a need felt by the community, and are the natural way of gathering because they have been in place for several generations.

At the same time a number of changes have come about in the patterns of gathering in order to fulfill the needs of the present day. Other changes, such as the decline in use of the Gaelic language, the rapidly shrinking population and the increase in the average age of the residents have brought about further adaptations in the gathering process. These consist of differences in dress, food use, narratives told, and even in the objectives of the group in holding the gathering.

I examine here the ideas of reciprocity, with food as the medium of exchange, the concept of hidden leadership in an ideally egalitarian community, and communication within social gatherings. All of these relate to the idea of the group identity which gives this community its distinctive character.

In conclusion, I consider the fate of this area and its group identity, when the population is diminishing to such an extent that the end of these particular traditions seems inevitable.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

This study describes and analyses the folkloric aspects of social gatherings which take place in a group of close communities on the Iona peninsula of Cape Breton, a small rural area with a homogeneous population of Roman Catholic faith and of Highland Scots descent. It is based on my research done during the summer of 1984.

The study of social gatherings as a distinct folklore genre has been seldom undertaken, although folklorists have long concerned themselves with the products of the act of gathering, including songs, stories, foodways and customary behaviour, among others. It is the object of this study to examine the processes of tradition inherent in social gatherings in these particular communities. This will enable us to establish the values underlying them and to better understand the consequent feelings of ethnic, rural and religious identity which seem to support these traditional forms of gathering.

The action of gathering is a declaration of group membership. The repeated and customary gathering event, once in place, is a framework or setting for communally performed actions and customs, and an incentive for the communal recreation of oral literature and music. Gatherings are also a force for establishing unspoken rules of conduct and values of various kinds, and assisting in reinforcing group identity.

Social gatherings are important to folklore research because they imply a study of community by definition, since in order to have a gathering there must exist a community of some kind. That is, a group as it gathers defines itself by its choice of people in attendance, its context, and its activities. Ultimately folklore is not created in a vacuum by an individual; there must be an interchange to produce the materials and a gathering is one of the best forums for sharing this cultural information. Gatherings are important to people's sense of community; there they act out the roles which constitute their societal obligations, including their performance identity and their ascribed or adopted duties as community members. Their communally created codes of ethics are also expressed within the context of the gathering. Each gathering, therefore, not only exists for practical purposes but also functions as a symbolic statement of group membership and collective identity.

In this study I have contrasted the gatherings I documented on the Iona peninsula of Cape Breton with their counterparts of the past. I used two methodologies: participant observation, and oral history from informants who deseribed aspects of events no longer in use.[1] Similar gatherings in other cultures, particularly the Italian and Irish, were investigated to supply comparative and contrasting material. I have also used ideas from sociology and anthropology to discover and discuss the thoughts and motivations behind practices of gathering. For each type I have tried to show how the gatherings have or have not changed, and the reasons for the retention or rejection of their various aspects. I have also

[1]This latter information is contained in a collection of 21 tapes, deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, under the accession number 86-089, no.'s C-8441 to C-8461

sought to demonstrate how the changes came about and why, and have suggested some of the values lying behind the gatherings, and some of the motivation for them.

Sometimes in multicultural studies there is a tendency to favour for study the smaller, more "exotic" groups of an area, both for the interest a researcher may have in that which is unusual, and also to bring attention to the existence of minority groups within a culture dominated by one particular ethnic group. However, for the purpose of comparison it is important to understand the dominant ethnic component of a province or region as well. The Scots of Nova Scotia have, perhaps more than any other group, stamped the character of the province with their own distinctive qualities, and along with the English, French, Black and native Indian populations, are numerically and culturally well-represented. Although the "Scottishness" of Nova Scotia is on occasion a spurious or at least exaggerated quality, stressed for the benefit of tourists or the sentimentality of residents, there is also a deep-rooted ethnic consciousness which is attributable to the fact that many people can trace their ancestry to a particular group, the Scots, both Highland and Lowland, who emigrated to Canada in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because of this heritage, many traces of that inheritance remain and continue to influence provincial identity through folklore.

I first became interested in the Scottish past of Nova Scotia as a child, when my grandfather in Cape Breton would regale us with tales of Bonnie Prince Charlie and other Scottish heroes of the past. Both my parents are of Scottish ancestry and knew enough about their family history to provide me with a sense

of belonging to a particular group. I had at that time a romantic perception of the noble immigrant in the harsh new world, and it took later and extensive reading to make me realize that the Scots and many of the immigrant groups in North America chose to establish themselves here to escape impossible living conditions in the places they had left.

While a student in Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University, I chose to write my honours thesis on a topic dealing with the Scots of Nova Scotia. At the suggestion of my advisor I undertook an historical study of the North British Society of Halifax, a group which was established in 1768 to provide assistance for new Scottish immigrants in Halifax, and which still exists today to encourage and promote Scottish culture in the area. Through reading the Annals of the Society and a large amount of manuscript material in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, as well as contemporary written history, I began to gain a clear picture of the Scot who has held power throughout Nova Scotia's history, the Lowland, Protestant Scot who occupied influential positions in government, education, law, industry, and the church. The members of the Society at the time of Highland emigration concerned themselves with the plight of the poverty-stricken immigrant Scot, but were themselves highly influential and well-off members of the colonial society of Halifax.

Knowing that my own family had arrived in a rural area from one of the islands in the Outer Hebrides, I was interested in extending my knowledge to that vastly different segment of the Scottish population, the Highlanders or Gaels, who have a different language tradition, in many cases a different religion, Roman Catholicism, and a distinct history and folklife. I had long been intrigued by the

Gaelic-language, which is still spoken in parts of Cape Breton, mostly by older people. My grandfather had often told me that his parents had spoken Gaelic as their first language and had only learned English on beginning school, which was always taught in English. He himself has only a limited knowledge of the language because his parents, as was common at that time, felt that Gaelic would hold back their children from advancing in an English-speaking environment. Knowledge of this phenomenon raised the question of language loss, and my interest was compounded by my own experience of learning French as a second language.

My original intent was to investigate language loss in a Gaelic-speaking community, using the techniques and methods of folklore studies to get personal experience narratives about the process and result of language loss. However, handicapped by my lack of knowledge of the discipline of linguistics, I decided to incorporate the search for information on language loss with a study of traditional social gatherings, an interest developed while reading background information on Gaelic and on the history of the Scots in Nova Scotia.

The geographical area investigated was a group of small communities on the Iona peninsula, each so small that in many ways they constitute one community. However, the inhabitants recognize the particular individuality of each because of its history and because of more noticeable differences, including local landmarks and characteristics which have disappeared since the marked decline in population.

These communities are described in detail in Chapter 2, so I will limit myself here to a few words on how the study area was chosen. I was looking for a

small place with a population mostly of Scottish descent and with a number of residents who still spoke Gaelic and remembered the earlier social gatherings. No doubt many communities would have been suitable, but I chose Iona because while at the Beaton Institute of the University College of Cape Breton, I met a student named Hector MacNeil, who informed me that he was doing a study of vernacular architecture in the area, established as a summer work project. He encouraged me to come to Iona because he felt people would be helpful and receptive to my interest, and because a Gaelic course was being offered to any interested persons at the Nova Scotia Highland Village in Iona. (This institution is a reconstructed village of the nineteenth century, which serves as a tourist attraction and also as a cultural centre of sorts for the people of the peninsula. Its operation and functions are more fully explained in Chapter 2.) I had hoped to pursue my study of the language, and the opportunity seemed excellent, so I decided to spend my summer there. With the assistance of folklorist Elizabeth Planetta I found a place to stay, and arrived on the July 1 weekend, tape recorder in hand.

With the invaluable assistance of my landlady, Mrs. Joan MacDonald, I met a number of very helpful people who agreed to let me tape-record them. Most felt they had little to offer but were willing to try, and proved to be extremely helpful. It is worth noting that people agreed to become informants in many cases because they knew I was doing something "for college"; there is a tremendous respect for education amongst this group and a large number of my informants' children have attended university, so they were willling to assist me for that purpose. I think that if I had been interviewing for radio or any other commercial objective I would have met with more resistance.

Interviews were of two types. In some instances I solicited straight information about Gaelic language use and past and present social gatherings, and conducted fairly directed interviews, set up after several preliminary visits. On other occasions my tape recorder by accident or design was present when performances of some type occurred, and I recorded singing and storytelling at scheduled ceilidhs or on impromptu visits. These events often took place at the instigation or suggestion of my landlady Joan, who on many occasions succeeded in convincing people to tell stories when I would have most certainly failed. In these cases, the interviews were more or less out of my hands, which was to my satisfaction as I was able to observe the manner in which one narrative or song led to another.

The extent to which I took part in participant-observation came as a surprise to me. I had not expected to be thoroughly included in the social life of the area, but as it happened I attended nearly every event which occurred, usually in the company of my landlady and her cousin, both women who lived alone and enjoyed getting out. I attended two weddings, several square dances, two concerts, a wake, one codfish dinner and one lobster dinner, a milling frolic, weekly bingo games and numerous ceilidhs and house visits. I made notes on these events afterwards and participated with great enjoyment and varying degrees of success. (I was good at bingo and square dances; noticeably silent at ceilidhs and Gaelic singing events.) In this way I was able to gather data about present-day events and make comparisons with the information gleaned from informants about past events.

My acceptance within the community has been a matter of much

interest to me. Although certainly not an insider, I was of a type more familiar to the residents than most folklore researchers would have been. My home is in an urban area of Nova Scotia which is naturally very familiar to the people; in addition my last name marked me as a member of the same culture and heritage as themselves, in spite of a difference in religion. In addition, a few people, including a local priest, were acquainted with my grandfather, giving me a recognized connection, and they were also familiar with my uncle who was a well-known political figure. In this way I was an insider of the culture, if not the community, to a certain degree, and I have no doubt that this was beneficial to my fieldwork and the rapport I developed with my informants, whom I will describe briefly here. Many were located through my landlady Joan and a friend, Helen MacNeil, who introduced me to several people she considered would be of assistance in the type of project I was undertaking. Others I interviewed on the advice of informants I had already met.

Stephen Rory MacNeil, a man of 87 who lives in Barra Glen, was one of my most helpful informants. He had farmed at Barra Glen in earlier days, and was also the local amateur vet and coffin-maker. He is known for his precise memory of local history and genealogy, and was for many years the curator of the museum at the Highland Village. This experience provided him with much of the material for his book *All Call Iona Home: 1800-1950.*

Stephen Rory's brother, John Rory, 80, also lives in Barra Glen and worked at the gypsum plant at Little Narrows. Like his brother, John Rory is known as a "Gaelic scholar"; they are two of the few people on the peninsula who can read and write Gaelic. John Rory is well-known as a singer of Gaelic songs and a storyteller, and he is always looked for at a ceilidh or a milling frolic.

Joe "Red Rory" MacLean is the brother of Betty, John Rory's wife, and lives in Washabuck. In his early sixties, Joe is a good square dancer and though fairly quiet has many stories to tell. He ran the ferry from Washabuck to Baddeck, the last person to do so before it was stopped due to lack of business several years ago.

A community character and a very kind and helpful person was Michael MacNeil, known locally as Mickey Bean Niellag. This name means in Gaelic "Michael, son of the wife of Neil." Mickey's father died young and he is identified by his mother's title rather than his father's, which is more usual. He is about 71, a bachelor famous for his "lies" about all the wives he has had. Mickey is a "good Gaelic man" who remembers some of the old *sgeulachan*, the Gaelic folktales which were once told at ceilidhs and formed a major part of the entertainment. He is constantly running errands for people and helping them out, and is always a popular visitor. He grew up in Barra Glen, but now lives in Iona.

Two women in their early eighties whom I frequently visited in Iona Rear are sisters named Sadie and Mungie (Margaret) MacNeil. Never married, they live together in an area which has become largely deserted and sadly overgrown since their young days. They are also good Gaelic speakers though they claim to be somewhat out of practice these days. Mungie worked in Boston as a young woman and returned to be housekeeper for a succession of priests. Sadie has always lived at home. The two have made several trips to Scotland, mostly to the Isle of Barra where their ancestors came from. At the time of this writing they had just returned from their fifth trip. Rod C. MacNeil, or "Roddy John Dan" is a farmer in his sixties in Barra Glen. He is one of two full-time

farmers left on the peninsula. He too is a Gaelic speaker and can read the language. He has a great interest in the history of the Scots and is an accomplished singer, particularly fond of soft Gaelic lullabies and sad songs.

My landlady Joan was also a helpful informant, giving me information on various beliefs and folk medicine practices. She is a widow in her late fifties with five children, all living away though they visit frequently. She is a member of the MacKenzie family of Washabuck, of which all the members are musically talented. (The entire family was featured on a CBC television programme with Ryan's Fancy some years ago.) Joan is best known in the community as a step-dancer. She knows no Gaelic but has extensive knowledge of the accompanying traditions. This means that although she does not understand Gaelic, she is familiar with songs in that language and can sing at least the chorus of them. Other traditions such as Scottish foodways, the use of macaronic speech and the step-dancing and square sets are all part of her own cultural knowledge, even though she lacks the language which is at the root of the culture. This is a fairly common situation for people of Joan's age group on the peninsula.

Joan's cousin, Evelyn MacNeil, is of roughly the same age. She has never married, and works as the housekeeper at the convent in Iona. Evelyn claims to know no Gaelic, but often uses phrases of it in her speech. Many years ago she was sent to Saskatchewan to care for an ailing relative and remained there, but was recalled, as often happened with unmarried daughters, to look after her dying mother and returned to live in Gillis Point, near Iona. Evelyn is a great bingo fan, and often accompanied Joan and me on visits and various outings.

Anna MacNeil, or "Anna Hector", is a woman of seventy or so who lives in Iona. She worked at the Highland Village in one of the houses, demonstrating weaving, and was a popular member of the Gaelic classes, due to her skill with the language.

Hector MacNeil, the young man I met at the College of Cape Breton, agreed to be my first informant and I profited by his reflections on the loss of Gaelic and functions of gatherings. Hector is thirty, and grew up in Portage, near Sydney, but spent summers in Castle Bay, a village on the other side of the lake from the peninsula. He is studying for a degree in Celtic Studies at the College of Cape Breton, and has a great interest in Scottish traditions.

Jim Watson, the Gaelic instructor at the Highland Village, gave me a valuable interview in which he provided me with information about the various dialects of Gaelic present in Cape Breton and approximate numbers of people still using the language. He is an American from Maine, a teacher by profession, who learned Gaelic by spending an extended time in River Denys, Cape Breton, and speaking the language on a daily basis with people there.

I also interviewed a man named Joe Neil MacNeil from Big Pond, who is a bachelor of eighty and known for his large collection of Gaelic proverbs and *sgeulachan*. Joe Neil's stories were the subject of a PhD. thesis by John Shaw, and because a book of them is in progress Joe Neil would not tell me any of his stories, but I found his comments on social gatherings, Gaelic, and other areas of my interest useful.

Near the beginning of my fieldwork I interviewed my grandfather, Archie MacDonald, who lives in the town of Florence, in Cape Breton County. It

was Grandpa's stories of the Scots which began my early interest in this subject, and I was anxious to interview him. He is not a Gaelic speaker, as mentioned previously, having been a victim of his parents' common misconception that learning Gaelic would hold back the children, and his account of the reasons for this was valuable in itself. He began employment in the coal mines at the age of thirteen and spent all his working life there. His stories of mine disasters and working conditions--though not connected to this thesis--were fascinating, and his accounts of social gatherings and the restraints experienced in Presbyterian communities on drinking and dancing, important aspects of social gatherings, were equally interesting.

Besides these people whom I interviewed individually, I gleaned information from a number of others in passing or long conversation. These were often women who did not wish to be taped but were quite willing to talk. Also, a number of people can be heard on my tapes at ceilidhs, singing and telling stories. The most outstanding of these were two elderly bachelors, Jimmie Calum MacNeil of St. Columba who is an excellent and enthusiastic singer, and Dan Rory MacNeil of Ottawa Brook, who, though in poor health, enjoyed his visit with Joan and myself and told stories for a couple of hours.

In researching the traditions of social gatherings in Cape Breton it became clear to me that this is a topic little explored as such. Although many aspects of the Celtic culture have been described through historical analysis, personal reminiscences and linguistic materials, the kind of study I wished to undertake obliged me to combine several approaches in order to present a full picture. Many of the books and articles I consulted in developing my approach

are referred to in subsequent chapters, but it will be helpful to discuss some of them here, in order to show how I have drawn from the related areas of study and the previous work by folklorists on this topic. This brief review of literature serves also to illustrate the need for expanding current knowledge of the phenomenon of social gatherings as an important area of folklore studies. Help has been enlisted from the areas of sociology, history, and linguistics. In many cases useful information was found in reference to certain very specific aspects of gatherings, either in the analysis of very particular events, or in related fields of information such as communication, reciprocity, and community relationships.

The literature dealing with social gatherings from the point of view of the folklorist is not extensive. However, valuable specific material on the analysis of social gatherings is provided by two folklorists. Wilfred Wareham's dissertation "Towards an Ethnography of 'Times': Newfoundland Party Traditions Past and Present" and his short article entitled "Aspects of Socializing and Partying in Outport Newfoundland", deal with social gatherings in Newfoundland, and Alessandro Falassi's book *Folklore by the Fireside*, explores similar traditions in Italy. Both discuss social gatherings in terms of function and social meaning. Dr. Wareham's work is on "times" in Newfoundland which take in a wide variety of partying activities, while Falassi deals mainly with the *veglia*, a house gathering which serves as the framework for folk narrative and as an opportunity for courting among the young people. Both these authors stress that their subject has been little touched, as Wilf Wareham comments in "Aspects of Socializing in Outport Newfoundland":

> It is probably true that no culture has been discovered which does not have some equivalent of what we in modern North American society loosely term the party. Partying in its many forms appears to be a cultural universal, yet virtually no studies of this important form of social interaction exist. What we do have is largely anecdotal and descriptive rather than analytical. ("Aspects of Socializing and Partying" 23)

Roger Abrahams, in his introduction to Falassi's book, makes the same point:

> Thus we know very little about the situation of creativity and community content in such public places of gathering, to say nothing of the more private occasions in which men and women, old and young, are brought together in any symbolic landscape to interact, play, perform, ceremonialize and make fun. Is this because folklorists have not taken the time to sit and observe in such places long enough to be able to write the rules for these occasions? (xi)

Both Wareham's article, already mentioned, and the two chapters of the dissertation I was able to read (it is indefinitely restricted) look at "times", an all-inclusive term for parties, and the social and socializing functions in homemade entertainment events. The tendency of such socializing events to break into performance is also discussed at some length. He draws on the traditions of several groups to make comparisons, and includes information on the Scots in this. Within the discussion of the Scottish tradition he comments on the difference in the tradition between dances and ceilidhs, the latter being a more intellectual pursuit, where ideas were formed and conduct and character molded.

Falassi describes several types of gatherings but concentrates on the *veglia*, which approximates to some degree the Scottish and Cape Breton ceilidh. Like "times" in Newfoundland, the veglia is an occasion for talk which may break into performance. It is also a crucial socializing and stabilizing force, which is

seen in the opportunites it affords for teaching children through riddles and stories, for supervising the courting conduct of young people and signifying approval of their choices, and for delivering moral lessons about life and the way it must be lived. Family values and official morality are stressed and redefined.

Dances in their various forms are also discussed by Falassi. A finely-tuned system of interpersonal relationships dictates who should be asked and what kind of relationship is indicated, as when the landlord invites farm workers to a dance. Especially in the past, intricate conventions dictating how often a man and woman could dance together assured proper progression of the courting process. This was a very important function in that the ritualized meetings created by a dance afforded couples a shortening of the courtship period, or provided opportunities to meet and select a partner. In short, Falassi shows the *veglia* to be an opportunity for education and reaffirmation of values.

Related material by other folklorists provided some insight into folklore research done in Cape Breton. Mary L. Fraser's book *The Folklore of Nova Scotia* was of valuable assistance in this study. The author concentrates on the lore of Eastern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, and thus includes many references to Gaelic and to the Scottish folklore of Nova Scotia. Many of the accounts of forerunners, witchcraft lore and devil legends which I collected on the Iona peninsula are versions of those which Fraser describes in her book, and it is interesting to note how little these and her descriptions of customs have changed since her collecting in the 1920's. Though her overview of Nova Scotian history is simplistic and her explanations for the derivation of beliefs subjective (largely a religious interpretation), the book does contribute much to a study of this sort,

particularly Chapter 16, which deals with "Customs observed at marriages, births and deaths." Her accounts of betrothal ceremonies, weddings and wakes correspond with those of my informants.

Other folklorists who have written about subjects touching the traditions of Cape Breton include MacEdward Leach, Helen Creighton and Charles Dunn. Like Mary Fraser, they deal with aspects of the Gaelic language. Leach writes about folktales in "Celtic Tales from Cape Breton" and Dunn deals with Gaelic proverbs in his "Gaelic Proverbs in Nova Scotia", published in the *Journal of American Folklore*. Helen Creighton and C. J. N. MacLeod collaborated on a book of Gaelic songs which provides some insight into their use at social gatherings. Dunn also provides historical and folklife material in *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia*. He suggests that many of the old Highland traditions flourished in isolation when transferred to the New World and may even have gained a new lease on life. His study covers many areas of folk belief and custom.

A work which offers studies of history, language and folklore of a parallel Scottish-Canadian settlement area is *Cultural Retention and Demographic Change: Studies of the Hebridean Scots in the Eastern Townships of Quebec*, edited by Laurel Doucette. This includes a history of that area, and a helpful article on the folklore of the group by Margaret Bennett. It is a well-written and comprehensive study of these traditions as found in that part of the country, and was of use to me, both as a comparative folklore resource and as a source of historical informaton on Scottish emigration.

In addition, Margaret Bennett has written a thesis which gives an

excellent parallel portrait to the folklife of the Iona Peninsula. She deals with the traditions of the Scots in the Codroy Valley of Newfoundland, and presents a community study of the area, taking in social gatherings, local history, language use, work processes and many other aspects of daily life in the area which makes her work of great use in comparative study.

Other folkloric research which can be applied to this study treats certain aspects of or certain specific types of gatherings. Colin Quigley's book *Close to the Floor: Folk Dance in Newfoundland* gives insight into that form of social gathering. As well as the contexts of and changes in dance events, he comments on courtship functions and the importance of proving "manliness" by drinking and fighting and swinging the girls around, thus demonstrating control of the situation.

Further information on dances is given in Bert Feintuch's article "Dancing to the Music: Domestic Square Dances and Community in South Central Kentucky (1880-1940)." Here again, courting and family fellowship were strong reasons for activity, and a further group, the neighbourhood, was celebrated and unified in the weekly events. He underlines the presence of many couples at such events; square dances were set up so that the couple was the basic element of the square. This format and the courting function indicated in many types of gatherings stress the acceptance and desirability of the existence of couples in the social order. Dances are also explored by Frank Rhodes in "Dancing in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia", where he deals with dance traditions in Cape Breton. As well as explaining the individual dances, Rhodes discusses the context of them and the type of gatherings where they took place.

Like Allister MacGillivray in *The Cape Breton Fiddler*, Rhodes alludes to the ban on fiddle music prescribed by the Roman Catholic church, and the effect of this action on the culture. He also details the origins of step-dancing and the term "round dancing".

Gary Butler writes about the wake, once a widespread practice, in his article "Sacred and Profane Space: The Newfoundland House Wake," a discussion of the use of space and the clear division between sociable behaviour in the kitchen and the reverence expected in the wake room. The wake is seen as a socializing device which reaffirms solidarity in the community by confining death to a finite time and space.

Some interesting comments about bingo appear in a review in *Ethnologia Scandinavica* of *Bingo as a Social and Cultural Activity*. (Fjellheim 181-183) The aim of the study out of which the book grew was to find the social profile of bingo players and discuss the function of the game in Sweden, where bingo is of recent popularity.

Reciprocity forms an important part of the examination of social gatherings as an aspect of community. This reciprocal system, and the role of food within that system as it exists on the Iona Peninsula, have been investigated with the assistance of a valuable body of material on reciprocity. Foremost among these is the seminal work by Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Alvin J. Gouldner also offers useful comments in his article "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Study."

John Szwed in *Private Cultures and Public Imagery: Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Peasant Society* cites the use of alcohol as the

bargaining chip in reciprocity. Louis Chiaramonte (*Client-Craftsman Contracts: Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Fishing Community*) sees the labour carried out by craftsmen as a bargaining tool. For the most part on the Iona peninsula food is the physical manifestation of the system of exchange. Some works on the use of food proved to be of assistance when considering this aspect of the theory

Mary Douglas has written extensively about food and foodways, and two of these articles are of particular utility: "Deciphering a Meal" and "Taking the Biscuit: The Structure of British Meals". This first article defines food as a code, determining what kind of structure culturally assures a person that the meal is a meal. In view of the attention given to social gatherings in this thesis, of particular value is her comment on who is offered a meal as opposed to a drink, and what this hierarchy defines in social relationships. Kay Cothran also devotes attention to food use in "Talking with Your Mouth Full: A Communications Approach to Food Rules." She defines for a certain area of the American South the context for certain food uses; i.e. situational food requirements. These exist equally on the Iona peninsula, and will be seen in descriptions of gatherings.

The structure of this thesis was established in part through a look at the works of Henry Glassie and Clement Harris. Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* deals largely with the Irish *ceili*, and his ethnographic treatment of this event and the narratives performed gave me much assistance in looking at the gathering as "a company of equals" and "a social system in miniature."

Clement Harris's book *Hennage: A Social System in Miniature* proposes an idealized "core group" villager, whose basic characteristics

approximate what I term group identity. He includes in this definition the idea of "competence" i.e., appropriate actions or behaviour further limiting the core group, and much of this behaviour is what comes across within the context of social gatherings. Harris also deals with the issue of leadership, which can never be overtly assumed by an individual lest the creed of absolute equality be upset. This naturally leads to covert or specialized leadership, particularly the development of special skills, and is a situation I discuss for Iona in Chapter 6. Harris also deals with reciprocity to a certain degree.

Many ideas in this thesis have been drawn from the work of Gwen Kennedy Neville, who has written about social gatherings both in Scotland and amongst a group of Scottish Southern Presbyterians in the United States. She presents two main ideas which are of utility in this study; the first, in "Community Forms and Ceremonial Life in Three Regions of Scotland", that highly ritualized gatherings of a "traditional" nature are necessary to reinforce ethnic identity in urban contexts where people have been removed from the culture.

The other article, "Kinfolks and the Covenant: Ethnic Community Among Southern Presbyterians" presents the idea that certain groups within the mainstream white Anglo-Saxon culture of the United States can be termed "ethnic" because of their collective cultural, religious and racial identity. She chooses a group from the American South to illustate how such groups define themselves as distinctive and how this separate identity is reinforced by the performance of ceremonial gatherings and rituals. This latter article is of utility in dealing with the Iona community because it also investigates a group of

Scottish descent amongst a population where the immigrant Scots are not generally seen as ethnic.

As another source for ethnicity I have consulted work done by Robert Klymasz, particularly the article "From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore: A Canadian View of Process and Transition." His view of ethnic folklore as a synthesis of forms of Old Country folklore (with particular reference to the Ukrainian population in Canada) into newly useful forms in the new world has particular application to the situation in Iona.

Turning to studies which do not make specific reference to social gatherings but rather to processes of communication and conversation, we find much that is relevant about the interaction going on in events organized to serve practical or entertainment purposes. Conversation provides the framework out of which performance comes, and it also serves its own purposes within a gathering as entertainment or to transmit social values.

Erving Goffman deals with situational improprieties and conversation in *Behaviour in Public Places: Notes on the Organization of Social Gatherings.* He points out that there is a dominant activity in each gathering and that this activity dictates the nature of the gathering, whether recreational or serious. Goffman is interested here in the acceptable social behaviour of gatherings, and the prescribed nature of conversation according to the practical purposes of the gathering.

Richard Bauman highlights conversation as a major activity in "The La Have Island General Store: Sociability and Verbal Art in a Nova Scotia Community." The use of conversation both as recreation and as an educational tool predetermined the style in which narratives were told in this context.

Divergent points of view on group identity are presented by Richard Bauman and William Hugh Jansen in articles entitled respectively "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore" and "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore."

Jansen's well-known article stresses the significance of "folk" rather than "lore", and his ideas depend upon the consciousness of a group seeing itself as a group. This is of importance in examining the social gatherings which came specifically out of the Highland traditions of this group, and for evaluating the extent to which they see themselves as a group. He sees esoteric knowledge as that special knowledge of a group, an element which is strongest in small groups. The exoteric is that knowledge or set of assumptions that one group has of another. The most interesting part of this set of concepts in examining the group studied through the medium of social gatherings is Jansen's three definitions of what makes a group liable to both exoteric and esoteric self-definition. These are isolation, the possession of peculiar knowledge or training, and a view of the group as particularly admirable, favoured or awesome. It may be that the communities on the Iona Peninsula are especially liable because of their knowledge or possession of the Gaelic language and the very particular traditions which accompany it.

Bauman challenges the idea implicit in many definitions of folklore that it is a function of shared identity. He contends that folklorists have written largely from an exoteric perspective, coloured by the ideology of romantic nationalism. Rather than seeing folklore as collective representation, Bauman suggests that it may also be a force used between groups, directed at each other

to engender conflict, rather than the prevailing view of folklore as maintaining the stability of a culture. Both these studies are valuable in considering intra- and inter-group relationships.

Identity as folklore study is further explored from several angles in the *Journal of Folklore Research* (21: 2/3 (1984)). This issue deals comprises the reports of a conference on "Culture, Tradition and Identity" at the Folklore Institute at Indiana University. Many of thge papers deal with the idea of ethnic identity, which combines a sense of belonging to a group, and overt symbols of that particular group. Folklore has been largely responsible for the creation of ethnic identity, as Alan Dundes explains in "Defining Identity through Folklore." The main bulk of the issue focusses on ethnic identity in Hungarian-Americans, but many useful parallels con be drawn between the different levels of identity (personal/group/national) present in this group and in the Iona Scots.

Dell Hymes in his work on language has revealed much that is important about social relationships. This is of interest in the communities on the Iona Peninsula where many inhabitants are still bilingual in Gaelic and English and where until recently a great percentage was. The function of these languages, especially within the framework of gatherings which may be the setting for a brief renewal and celebration of Gaelic, can be considered through application of some of Hymes' ideas. He is aware of the necessity for studying social life to determine the rules of selection for sociolinguistic features, and cites the party as a speech situation or communication event. In addition there exist many books on linguistics and sociolinguistics which explain or analyze the decline of ethnic minority languages.

The subject of the decline of the Gaelic language has been exhaustively covered in most works dealing with the history of this group, and forms an important part of the analysis of the use of language and the fostering of group identity. This material will be dealt with extensively in Chapter 2.[2]

Descriptive and historical works on the Scots of Nova Scotia and Scotland abound. Much of this literature gives an overly romantic view of the early settlers and the heroic life they led both in Scotland and in the New World. A clearer representation is given by the census reports for Nova Scotia, which inform us of the population figures and also of mother tongue, occupations, the literacy rate, and other statistics which provide a living image of daily life.

An informative thesis giving a parallel view of life in rural Nova Scotian Scottish settlements is Daniel MacInnes's "What Can Be Said of Those Who Remain Behind?: A Historic, Cultural and Situational Perspective on the Poplar Grove Scot." He looks at an area of Inverness County, Cape Breton, which is economically depressed so that those who stayed in the area when others left looking for affluence constitute a special group: those who valued the rural life

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[2]The *Cape Breton Highlander* has often included short articles on attempts at revivals of the language; the best is a series of essays by D.J.MacEachern on the future of Gaelic in which he traces its past, the attitudes towards it, and its present state. D.M. Sinclair's "Gaelic in Nova Scotia" offers a similar review with some comments on Gaelic prose and poetry and the publication history of the extremely popular Gaelic newspaper *Mac Talla*. Andrew Clark refers extensively to the language question in "Old World Origins and Religious Adherence in Nova Scotia." Kenneth MacKinnon is an expert on the Gaelic language who has done most of his work in Scotland but has comments to make on Cape Breton in "Cape Breton Gaeldom in Cross-Cultural Context: The Transmission of Ethnic Language and Culture." He gives a still more profound treatment of the entire language in *The Lion's Tongue* and points out that those who are working to revive the language are the people who have left the Gaelic areas to take up professions and are thus somewhat alienated from their origins. This is equally true for the Cape Breton situation. Nancy Dorion is an American linguist who has done many studies on Gaelic in Northeastern Scotland. She treats Gaelic as a folk language in "Tradition's End:A Threatened Language and Culture" and describes its present use.

over economic success. Outside occupation offered prestige, and the farm was gladly left to the siblings who chose to remain behind. MacInnes's view of the community as one which has chosen resistance to change and adherence to a particularly Scottish culture over increased economic security and status approximates the situation in the geographical area I studied and gives an interesting perspective on the way of life in that area as well.

Descriptive material from Scotland is abundant and a few examples suffice to show that many of the traditions still seen in Cape Breton did derive from the land of the people's origin. *Life in Scotland a Hundred Years Ago* by James Murray gives a very early view and describes customs, festivals and foodways. *Carmina Gadelica* is one of the classics of Scottish folklore collecting. Its five volumes contain many songs, beliefs, rhymes and tales and also provide descriptions of milling frolics and ceilidhs. This work has long been considered of primary importance in the preservation of Scottish cultural materials, as pointed out by John Dunbar in his work on Highland dress:

> In matters of folklore Scotland probably owes her greatest debt to J. F. Campbell of Islay and Alexander Carmichael. Campbell published a number of Gaelic texts and is probably best known for his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, published between 1860 and 1862. Carmichael was a Celtic antiquarian who made an immense collection of oral literature throughout the Highlands. His *Carmina Gadelica* was published in four volumes in 1928, and is still an unrivalled source book. (16)

Margaret Fay Shaw gives an intricate picture of the folklife of South Uist and Anne Ross and I. F. Grant describe similar customs and traditions in their books. John Lorne Campbell has written extensively about the Highlands; useful works

are *Gaelic in Scottish Education and Life* and *The Book of Barra*. The latter is especially useful because it deals with the island of Barra, where the settlers of Iona came from.

Personal reminiscenes of people who grew up in Cape Breton and are nostalgically looking back afford a glimpse of details of such occasions as ceilidhs, milling frolics, and wakes. These works are numerous and a few examples will suffice to illustrate their utility. P. J. MacKenzie Campbell's book *Highland Community on the Bras d'Or* gives a fascinating account of the folklife of Red Islands, an area near Washabuck and similar to it in many respects. Campbell's comments on the education of his time, language use and religious values give a good indication of the setting in which social customs arose. The book is written from his own memory and relies very little on published material. He includes some history of the area and comments on Gaelic, including the narrative concerning the punishment of children in school for speaking the language, which is a standard legend in relation to minority languages.

Chopping and building frolics, with the parties which followed are described here, together with an explanation of the system of charity which prevailed in the community. Milling frolics and marriage customs also form part of his memories, as do wakes and ceilidhs, which he describes as entertaining for the ghost stories and forerunners told. The Hallowe'en custom of playing pranks and eating *fuarach*, a thick porridge containing such symbols as a wedding ring, thimble and coin, is also related.

Neil MacNeil's book of similar reminiscences entitled *The Highland Heart in Nova Scotia* is especially interesting as it is set in Washabuck, one of the

communities on the Iona peninsula where the fieldwork for this study was undertaken. Many of the characteristics of Washabuck he described in 1948 are still very much in evidence and the inhabitants of the area still have an ambivalent feeling about the book which they feel misrepresented their lives to a certain extent. MacNeil's book attempts to be humorous whereas Campbell's seeks to be informative; this is perhaps the difference in perception between a short-term resident and a true insider of the culture. MacNeil's accounts of ceilidhs and milling frolics give as true a picture of Gaelic Cape Breton as Campbell's, though with the romantic tone of one who has left it all behind. Of particular interest are the chapters explaining the history of the MacNeil and MacLean families who are still the most numerous residents of the area.

Other sources of information about the specific location chosen for the fieldwork for this study are the book *All Call Iona Home: 1800-1950* written by Stephen Rory MacNeil, who was curator of the museum at the Nova Scotia Highland Village and was also one of my most helpful informants, and a less formal work entitled *The Pioneers of Washabuck* by Vincent J. MacLean. Both of these deal with local history, geneology and custom.

Rural Cape Breton life is also informatively depicted in *God and the Devil at Seal Cove* by Angus Hector MacLean. Like the others, this is the account of a boy's youth in a Gaelic-speaking community. It incorporates folk belief, medicine and custom as well as information about foodways, religion and education. MacLean's lively descriptions of the despair his mother felt at receiving dirty visitors and being obliged by politeness to put them in the best sheets show the kind of hospitality that was expected and practiced in such a

community. The hospitality tradition is greatly stressed in this book and provides an interesting look at social gatherings from this point of view. He describes pie socials which were followed by a dance, as almost every kind of gathering was. He also touches on the non-social contexts of gathering: people would come to a house where there was serious illness and simply remain to support the family. The author also describes ceilidhs, which he defines as "a friendly visit." Kitchen rackets are another pastime he speaks of, stressing the fondness for dances in general:

> Any excuse at all, such as a birthday or a holiday would do for a dance; they would have danced at a funeral if someone had suggested it.(108)

One such "memorable shakedown" occurred after a milling frolic. The description of the frolic (109) resembles many others, but he adds details of the festivities afterwards, including the drinking of Scotch. Drinking was a highly ritualized process which formed a part of the intricate ongoing social process.

These collections of memories, mostly in manuscript form or in privately printed publications, are the closest written source to a fieldwork situation, and the information they provide approximates that obtained in an interview, with the added advantage of a considered point of view and an earlier era being covered. Conclusions similar to those I have made about social gatherings in Iona could be inferred from this source material.

There are many other relevant works on the folklife of Cape Breton and *Cape Breton's Magazine* is a good source for descriptions of gatherings of many kinds as well as tales and legends in Gaelic, French, English and Micmac.

Other descriptive material from Cape Breton on tales, riddles and belief include Stuart McCawley's *Cape Breton Come All Ye*, and Claribel Gesner's *Cape Breton Vignettes*.

I have divided this thesis into six parts: the introduction, called Chapter 1, and containing the methodology and review of the literature, and five other chapters. The material collected on gatherings can be loosely grouped into three categories: events for the exchange of news, events with an overt entertainment purpose, and gatherings with specific aims such as work frolics and fund raising events. These categories provide the basis for the three chapters.

Chapter 2 describes the communities of the Iona Peninsula, giving both local history and some of the history of the Scots in Nova Scotia and the reasons they emigrated to that part of the world. A discussion on Gaelic and its loss is included, using printed sources and transcribed material from informants.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5, as mentioned above, are thus divided by function. In each, I follow the example of Ginette Dunn in *The Fellowship of Song: Popular Singing Traditions in East Suffolk* and describe ethnographically a present-day example before going on to past data and analysis. Chapter 3 deals with the ceilidh, event for news exchange and performance, and describes similar events in Scotland, chronicles food use, and includes informants' reminiscences about such past events.

Chapter 4 treats the dance, the foremost entertainment event, in a similar way. Dances are highlighted because they are the most popular gathering in the view of nearly everyone spoken to. As with Chapters 3 and 5, clothing, food, courtship behaviour and the reciprocal system are examined.

Chapter 5 divides gatherings for specific purposes into a number of categories, including family, rites of passage, fund raising activities, community, and religious gatherings. These all illustrate certain values held by residents of the community, and the gatherings show how these values are manifested as group identity within the gatherings.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents my analysis and synthesis of the preceding chapters. I look at how these gatherings show a spirit of community and how the traditions manifest a group identity, a set of characteristics arising from a common heritage. Each of the value systems is examined: the religious, the rural, the ethnic and the family, and the sense of community issuing from this commonality is explored.

Issues discussed are leadership versus egalitarianism in the community, and the reciprocal system in place at gatherings and elsewhere. In this chapter gatherings are also looked at as speech events, including a discussion of Gaelic use and verbal art as performance.

Finally, the question of group identity and the validity of the concept is examined: the fate of the Iona Peninsula with its dying population depends on revival of some kind. How long group identity will remain unselfconscious is considered, with a brief mention of the questions that remain.

Chapter 2

The Community

The Iona peninsula of Victoria County, Cape Breton, is situated in the centre of the island, nearly surrounded by the waters of the Bras d'Or Lakes. I use the term "Iona peninsula" to denote the entire area, but it is not used generally by the residents of the area. The main community is Iona, where the post office, store, gas station and ferry terminal are located. This C. N. ferry travels by cable to Grand Narrows; there is a similar boat crossing from Little Narrows on the other side. These are the most commonly used means of access to the peninsula although there is a dirt road leading in from Orangedale as well. The roads on the Iona peninsula were paved in 1984.

The area is very beautiful, heavily wooded and rather hilly, offering a spectacular view. There is a large native bald eagle population and many other forms of wildlife to be seen as well. The peninsula is surrounded by the waters of the Bras d'Or Lakes, a body of salt water which is in effect an inland sea. The lakes are popular for sailing and many people have summer cottages on some part of the waterfront. Occasionally pulp boats and other large craft can be seen making their way through the lakes. There are also many other rural communities of permanent residence around the Bras d'Or Lakes on the opposite sides from the peninsula, including the Micmac Indian reserves of Whycocomagh and Wagmatcook.

The Highland Village complex is situated at Iona, and is the centre for many of the tourist activities and cultural events which take place on the peninsula. It is run by a manager who is a full-time employee, and is directed by the Highland Village Society, a non-profit organization made up mostly of community members. The village is situated on top of a hill overlooking the lake. Its buildings include a covered stage for performances, and an orientation building containing a small museum, a classroom for Gaelic lessons, and administration offices. The rest of the buildings are reconstructions of typical early Cape Breton houses and such outbuildings as a sawmill and blacksmith shop. A number of animals including pigs, cows and chickens are kept at the village. Several local people, mostly women, are employed during the summer months to dress in period costume and demonstrate weaving and spinning techniques. The Highland Village sponsors Scottish concerts and some other community activities, including Gaelic classes and "immersion evenings," which carry on throughout the winter months. It is an important centre for community life, undertaking the organization of dances, codfish dinners and the annual Highland Village Day concert, which is a popular occasion for people in the community as well as visitors.

The Highland Village is designed to attract tourists as well as to sustain the cultural inheritance of the residents, but tourism is neither extensive nor well-established, due probably to a lack of organization and the inconvenience of transportation. The village is a small-scale attraction and its organization is a source of occasional community conflict, but it provides some employment and a centre for community activity. It is interesting because it is one of the few signs of cultivated ethnicity in the area in that it consciously promotes and capitalizes on the Scottish past of the peninsula.

Besides Iona, the other communities are Washabuck, sometimes spelled "Washabuckt", Barra Glen, MacKinnon Harbour, Gillis Point, Estmere, Little Narrows and Ottawa Brook.[3] None of these is as large as Iona. The population has been steadily declining since its peak at the turn of the century. It declined by about 70% between 1900 and 1951, due to the Depression, World War II, and the general movement to urban centres. (Central Cape Breton Community Economic Development Study) It continues to decline, and the present residents are for the most part elderly. All over the peninsula residents can point to tracts of forest and name the people who once farmed there. Entire communities have returned to forest, and in fact only two farms are actually in operation. In February 1985 the population of the peninsula was 576. Iona has 120 people and Little Narrows 126. All others but Ottawa Brook (58) number less than fifty people. (Central Cape Breton Community Economic Development Study)

The people of the area are almost entirely of Scottish background, descendants of the settlers who came from the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides. Those who settled Iona were MacNeils, and the MacLeans were the first family in Washabuck. These names are predominant throughout the peninsula, together with MacKenzie and MacDonald. With the exception of Little Narrows, the entire area is Roman Catholic and constitutes the parish of St. Columba. There are churches at Iona, Washabuck and MacKinnon Harbour, all served by the same priest.

In spite of this obvious homogeneity, and the small population which

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[3]See maps at end of chapter.

necessitates interaction amongst the members of the communities, there is an individual identity to each one of which people are well aware. Such comments as "The Washabuckers keep to themselves" and "Barra Glen has the most Gaelic" made me aware that these places consider themselves very distinct. This would of course have been more evident in earlier days when each community had its own store, blacksmith shop, post office and school. In my research I concentrated on only a few of the communities: Iona, because I attended Gaelic classes at the Highland Village and therefore was in easy access to people there; Washabuck because I lived there, and Barra Glen because I could reach it by bicycle from Iona, and because people lived there who had been recommended to me as very knowledgeable about the area. Ottawa Brook I visited once with my landlady who knew a good storyteller there whom she wanted me to meet.

For all these places the "county seat" is Baddeck, just a couple of miles across the water from Washabuck. At one time a ferry made a regular crossing, but the declining population made it uneconomical to run, and now people working in Baddeck or visiting must drive to and take the ferry at Little Narrows, making it a trip of about forty miles. This is the closest place for such amenities as banks, doctors, a hospital and liquor store. The county council is also situated at Baddeck, and there is one representative for the Iona peninsula. This is the only form of municipal political organisation for the peninsula.

Unemployment in the area is increasing and is now over 25%. What employment there is is often seasonal or restricted, such as woodcutting and "grants", short-term projects funded by the government. Some people work on the two ferries, others at the gypsum plant in Little Narrows, a few at the

Highland Village in Iona, and others commute to Baddeck to work. Cutting pulp is an important, though part time activity; nearly everyone has a woodlot and can raise some extra money by cutting and selling wood. Farming and fishing, once the most important industries in the area, have become practically non-existent. (Central Cape Breton Community Economic Development Study)

It is an area very much living in the past, although a development committee has been formed to look into options for improving the economy and increasing the population. People talk of the old days, when there were more people, as "more fun". They attribute many changes, including in some cases the decline of the Gaelic language, to the fact that "people got so scarce around here". The recent marriages of two young couples who decided to build houses in the area were of great encouragement to local residents, who would like to see their communities thrive again.

The history of the settlement of the Iona peninsula is similar to that of much of Nova Scotia and the Maritime provinces. During the late eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century, a great many people left the Highlands and islands of Scotland for the New World. This exodus has traditionally been attributed to the Highland Clearances, when the landlords enclosed the common lands and took over the tenants' farms to breed sheep, who gave a greater monetary return than the rents from Highland croftsmen. The causes are obviously more complex and numerous than this or any other single historical factor, but the basic reason for emigration was that there were too many people in that region for the available land. As the plots were divided into smaller and smaller pieces to pass on, they became too small to be viable as

farmland. Thus a massive departure took place, in many instances accomplished by forced eviction. In 1801, 3000 people were evicted from Invernesshire and between 1800 and 1806 10,000 left from the western mainland and the islands. In 1811 Sleat was cleared altogether, and between 1811 and 1820 15,000 went in the Sutherland Clearances. (Cameron 102) This was against the will of the people, and the eviction was achieved through burning the houses and loading the hapless Highlanders onto ships. The form of housing was the *taigh dhu* or black house, a structure of stones with a thatch roof built on rafters. As the islands were for the most part barren of trees the rafters were precious possessions, built of driftwood and passed down in families for generations. Once these were destroyed new homes could not be built.

The evictions were often carried out by unscrupulous men who made glowing promises of the New World, and then dropped off their cargo at the first sight of land, leaving them to perish in winter on wooded shores. Conditions on board ship were appalling: in one instance a ship which had been rejected for carrying 500 slaves was used to transport 700 Highlanders. The loss of life was enormous. James Malcolm Cameron gives horrifying statistics: in one ship 400 sailed, and 15 arrived alive. In 1848 100,000 people left Scotland and Ireland, and their fate was as follows: 6100 died on the voyage out, 4100 died at ports of landing, 5200 died in hospital overseas, and 1900 died upon reaching their destinations. (106)

It was inevitable, however, that people would leave the Highlands. There was a keen desire to own land--so much so that a group of farmers on Prince Edward Island, offered a 999-year lease, pulled up stakes and moved on to

Cape Breton, where they could own their own land. Also, these people had been on the lowest rung of the clan system for centuries, and wanted to go where they felt all classes of people would be equal. In addition, after 1745 and the Battle of Culloden, the clan chiefs were no longer allowed to maintain private armies and their tenants therefore had to pay their rent in money rather than military service.

Still another factor was the collapse of the kelp industry, which had been extremely important to the Highland economy, so much so that for a time the lairds discouraged emigration in order to keep the labour force up. As Sharon Bohn Gmelch explains the downfall:

> Kelp was also an important cash crop during the summer months, and Lewis was once a great kelp district. Yet as early as 1810-11, kelp prices began to fall. From 1822 on, successive reductions in taxes on salt and barilla (carbonate of soda made from plant ashes) resulted in a further decline. The removal of the excise duty on salt in 1825 permanently restricted the whole kelp market. As the price of kelp fell from 10 to 2 a ton, many manufacturers gave up making it. By 1850, the kelp industry was all but dead. (Doucette 7)

As Barbara Kincaid wrote:

> So we can see that the basic Highland problem was something apart from sheep and landlords. It was too many people and too little land. In a situation such as that the only solution can be either an increase in land and its productivity or a decrease in population. Since the former was an immediate impossibility and would be a doubtful achievement over a long period of time, the latter, a decrease in population remained. Thus emigration became a necessity. (23)

Those who left before 1815 made a personal decision to do so, and went voluntarily, often with a cow or a little money to help them get started in the new

land. Later on there was little choice involved, and this was the time when people were herded like cattle onto ships, giving rise to many of the sad Gaelic songs about leaving the islands still sung in Cape Breton. However, though the Highlanders faced hardship they were used to it, and in many ways the emigration was a practical necessity and a positive action. Whole areas and extended families moved together, and settling in isolated areas of Cape Breton they were able to reconstruct the lives they had led in the Old Country. J.M.Bumstead makes this point in "Scottish Emigration to the Maritimes 1770-1815: A New Look at an Old Theme":

> The Highlanders were sensible enough to recognize that the more populated and organized jurisdictions of the New World would not encourage the maintenance of the old ways. They were a people well equipped to preserve their cultural identity, and predisposed to resist both urbanization and industrialization. And in the wilderness regions of the Maritimes they managed to replicate most of the features of the pastoral and independent existence they had long enjoyed, minus the worst problems of landlord oppression, military service, and religious persecution. (85)

The old ways became firmly established in the new land, and the Highland Catholics remained much the same as they had been in the old days, as R. MacLean notes:

> Their attitudes on education, their loyalty to the state, to institutions, to individuals, their conception of the role of religion, the maintenance of a folk culture and a strong attachment to their native soil--all these lived on with them and were reinforced in eastern Nova Scotia. (102)

The people who came to the Iona peninsula in the beginning were part of this early group, those who came with some prospects. In *The Book of Barra*

an essay by Rev. Mr. Edward MacQueen deplores the emigration of its people:[4]

> ...some emigrated to the island of St. John's, and Nova Scotia in North America, being inveigled thither by a Mr. F...upon promises of the undisturbed profession of their religion (being all Roman Catholics) and of free property for themselves, and their offspring for ever; but how soon they were landed he left them to their shifts, and returned back to his native country. These poor people were left in the most deplorable situation. If the inhabitants of the different places in which they landed, had not exerted themselves for their relief, many of them must have perished, for want of the common necessaries of life. They became sensible of their folly when it was too late...many more prepared themselves for emigration, but repented time enough to avoid the snare into which their friends have been inconsiderately led, by going to America...The spirit for emigration is now happily and totally suppressed.(74)

Alas for Rev. MacQueen, the spirit for emigration continued to flourish in Barra. The first settlers from the island arrived in 1799 and spent the first winter at Arisaig in Antigonish County, Nova Scotia. (S.R.MacNeil, "Early Settlers in Iona.") In 1800 Donald MacNeil, his sixteen-year-old son Rory, Jonathan MacNeil and his son Neil arrived in Cape Breton and settled on the peninsula, on the shores of what is known as the Barra Strait. They knew about this area from the accounts of Donald "Og" MacNeil, a Barraman who fought at Louisbourg in 1758 and sighted the land. On his return to Barra he enthused over the beauty of the place and the fine fishing grounds, and the four men remembered his words and sought out the land. Another account says these men were on a British frigate seeking fleeing Frenchmen and were put ashore to scout.

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[4]The "Island of St. John's" in the following quotation refers to Prince Edward Island. The name was given to the island by John Cabot, who discovered it on St. John's Day. In 1799 the island was renamed in honour of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, who was at that time commander-in-chief of the armed forces in British North America and made provision for new defences for Charlottetown. The prince never set foot in Prince Edward Island. (Duncan Campbell, 54)

In any case, the legend persists that the men were cooking a meal (either eels or herring and potatoes) when they had an encounter with a band of Micmac Indians who spared their lives upon finding out they were Roman Catholic. St. Columba's Church in Iona is said to stand on the spot where Jonathan knelt to pray for his life. ("St. Columba of Hallowed Iona" 4)

In 1802 a group of settlers arrived at Pictou and decided to seek the area the MacNeils had found. (They had since returned.) They arrived in 1803. Many settlers continued to join them , and they named the place "Saundrie" (Shieling of Joy) after a place in Scotland. The name was retained until 1873 when a visiting bishop noticed the likeness to the holy isle of Iona in Scotland, and renamed it Iona. To complement this name the church and parish were called St. Columba, after the monk who established a monastery on the island of Iona and brought Christianity to the barbarian Picts on the mainland of Scotland. The first church was built in 1857, prior to which the faithful travelled to Grand Narrows and Christmas Island in small overcrowded rowboats. The present church was built in 1927 after a fire destroyed the old one. ("St. Columba of Hallowed Iona" 4)

Washabuck is about ten miles from Iona, built along the Washabuck River and divided into Upper and Lower Washabuck. The first settlers arrived on that part of the peninsula in 1817 led by Lachlan MacLean; who was born in Barra in 1728. Lachlan was nearly ninety when he left for the New World, and he brought with him on the ship "Ann" five sons and three daughters. He lived for another twenty-five years and was buried in what is called *Cladh Lachlann*, "Lachlan's Graveyard" in Washabuck, for which he donated the land. In 1933 a

monument was erected there to the memory of Lachlan and the other pioneers of Washabuck. *The Pioneers of Washabuckt* supplies this information from 1938:

> Lachlan MacLean's descendants now comprise almost the total population of Lower and Centre Washabuckt, many of them are also to be found in the various sections of Cape Breton Island and Nova Scotia proper. Many more of his descendants are to be found in the United States, most of them in the New England section, but his name is also represented on the Pacific Coast. (Vincent MacLean 4)

Lachlan was accompanied from Barra in 1817 by three other settlers: Donald MacKinnon, whose name survives in the community of MacKinnon Harbour, John MacNeil, and finally George MacKay, a Presbyterian from Caithness who later moved to Baddeck, leaving the name MacKay's Point which is still current for an area near Washabuck. (Vincent MacLean 4)

In 1822 the first mass was said in Washabuck in a new barn, but no priest was steadily available until 1834. Until then couples who wished to be married were obliged to walk to Christmas Island, and there is one account of a couple who walked sixty miles to Sydney, lacking horse, carriage and road, to be married, and then walked back. (Vincent MacLean 6)

The name "Washabuck", sometimes spelt with a "t" at the end, means "shining water" and is of Indian origin. At one time the whole peninsula was termed "Washabuck" and appeared in the census under that title. (*Census of Nova Scotia 1861*) In the early times fishing was the main industry, as Barramen were not used to farming. Shipbuilding was carried on as well, and a local song composed by Peter MacLean mourns the loss of the "Alexander", a schooner built at Lower Washabuck in 1858 by Alexander MacLean. The ship was lost on her second voyage out, with the entire crew on board. (Vincent MacLean 71)

These families are still in evidence today, the MacLeans mostly in Washabuck. It is said of the MacNeils of Barra that "they had a boat of their own at the Flood," and they are strong all over the peninsula. (Goodrich Freer 113) There has been very little intrusion of permanent settlers or even summer residents from elsewhere so the Scottish element remains strong. One aspect of this is the Gaelic language which has been much threatened throughout its history, and is an important aspect of the material studied in the following chapters.

The Gaelic language exists still on the Iona peninsula, though it is not an everyday language and there are few people under the age of fifty able to speak it. All the same, it persists in conversation at ceilidhs among some old people, in the many Gaelic songs still sung, and in the macaronic speech and Gaelic accent even of those who do not fluently speak the language.

Gaelic has struggled to survive for centuries, both in Scotland and in the places to which the Gaels emigrated. The first official attempt to eradicate the language occurred in 1616 in the form of the Statutes of Iona, when the Highland chiefs were forced to agree to regulations which would bring about the end of Gaelic, including the establishment of English schools in the Highlands. (Dunn, *Highland Settler* 35) It was never a language of education and flourished only as an unofficial language used at home. Because of this Gaelic took on an identity as a second-class tongue, used by people who were backward and uneducated, and this stigma accompanied its migration to the New World. Though Gaelic is a descriptive language, noted for wit and elegance and a knack of expressing precisely what is to be conveyed, the stereotype persisted and was a primary cause of the breakdown of the language, as Dunn notes:

> To explain the growth of this fierce contempt for the mother tongue, amateur sociologists among the Gaels point out that the young people who grew up in the pioneering communities unwittingly tended to associate the Gaelic language which they heard at that time with the incessant toil, hardship, and scarcity peculiar to primitive conditions. When they went to the city, the universal language was English, while Gaelic was unknown; and the standard of living there was inconceivably superior to what they had known. Hence Gaelic came to be considered the language of poverty and ignorance and was therefore despised, while English was the language of refinement and culture and therefore cherished. (*Highland Settler* 134)

Once this state of affairs became widespread the Gaelic language began to die out in many of the areas where it had been common. Though it was spoken at one time in North Carolina, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Quebec and numerous other places, it is a living language today only in Cape Breton, and rapidly dying there. Societies devoted to its revival, usually led by people long removed from the culture, exist, but these attempts will probably have little success.

The decline occurred quickly, as Andrew Clark relates in "Old World Origins and Religious Adherence in Nova Scotia":

> The other two [besides French] widespread mother tongues in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were German and Gaelic. German has been a dead language in Nova Scotia for half a century or more. In 1871, Gaelic, the native language of most of the Scottish immigrants, was still the common speech of the countryside in Cape Breton, Antigonish and Pictou counties and in many districts of Prince Edward Island as well. Yet in 1931 fewer than 24,000 people, less than one-sixth of Nova Scotia's Scottish population, still claimed Gaelic as mother tongue. By 1941 the number had dwindled almost to 12,000, and today it is a mere handful. The Gaelic songs at the annual Mod at St. Ann's are scarcely more intelligible to their audiences than the Latin hymns in the churches. If, as some still maintain, there are more people on Cape

> Breton Island than in Scotland who have the Gaelic, we can only conclude that Scotland has finally ceased to be bilingual, as Nova Scotia has ceased to be trilingual. (344)

This last supposition of Gaelic's superiority of numbers in Cape Breton is patently false but has grown up as a common legend on the island. It is one of the common narratives told about the language which people repeat as part of the repertoire of language beliefs, which will be discussed below.

The church was one place where Gaelic was sustained for some time, as priests and ministers who spoke the language were actively recruited for service in Gaelic-speaking areas. The reading of the Bible also promoted Gaelic literacy among those people, especially Protestants, who were encouraged to read the Bible. Sometimes, in fact, the Gaelic predominated:

> Older residents of Mabou will remember having sermons read in English and having to sit through a Gaelic translation because it was suspected their command of English was not such as to comprehend the theological niceties. And that was in the late twenties and early thirties! (MacEachern 12)

In the conversation of informants about Gaelic language loss, and in the written reminiscences of Francis MacGregor, P. J. MacKenzie Campbell and others, a number of narrative "set pieces" appear and reappear. These are reasons given for the loss of the language, and these accounts or anecdotes have become traditional narratives in the repertoire of many Gaelic speakers. They are, in a sense, inherited explanations for a situation that violates the ideals of the culture, and these excuses for the loss of the language the Gaels profess to love have now become part of the narrative tradition.

In many minority-language situations one finds that the child of

immigrant parents is involved in dual language use: one for home and the other for elsewhere. The home language is associated with parents, family, and traditional lifestyle, while the majority culture language is the tongue of school, commerce, and perhaps the desired peer group. The situation with Gaelic was somewhat different: all the children would have spoken Gaelic at home, and could conceivably have retained it as a public language as well. The pressure to give up the language came from the parents and the school. Those children are now old people, and they make excuses for this change in their culture. It is not clear whether these reasoned explanations were collectively created and orally transmitted, but it is clear that the narratives are strongly believed and that they are the accepted explanations of the community for the linguistic reality.

They are conflicting stories in a sense. A very common one, which appears in other cultures where the language was being lost *en masse* (Acadian French, Alsacien) is the narrative of the child who is beaten in school by the teacher for speaking Gaelic. In some versions other children are assigned to report on him, and on occasion the teacher sets the children against each other by passing from one offender to another a wooden token. The last one holding it at the end of the day is beaten as the scapegoat for all the rest. This is told defensively--people are shocked at it now, but also like to point out that there were fearful odds against retaining the Gaelic, and that they did so in spite of adverse circumstances, a situation they are proud of.

MacEachern includes this common narrative found in accounts of the fate of many minority languages.

> For centuries it has been an uphill struggle for Gaelic to maintain a place among the living languages of Britain. Official encouragement is given in Eire, but in Scotland it has suffered greatly by severely restrictive laws. In the Highlands, children whose mother tongue it was were forbidden to speak it in school, and if caught speaking it were punished. This strange idea came over to Nova Scotia. Dr. Chisholm of Bridgeville, Pictou County, told me that in his early days children who spoke Gaelic were accompanied home from school by others who were to report to the teacher if they heard Gaelic spoken. If caught they were punished, just as in Scotland. Thus in about one generation Gaelic was killed in Pictou County. Many of the older folk reserved it as a sort of secret code to be used when children were about. (258)

This story is extremely widespread, in innumerable versions, and lends credence to the idea that the school system was responsible for negative attitudes about and eventual loss of Gaelic. Yet Gaelic speakers themselves attribute the loss of their language to a number of other factors, primarily the decision of Gaels not to teach their children the language because it was felt it would hold them back in making progress in the New World. As P. J. MacKenzie Campbell wrote in his account of early days in Red Islands:

> My parents always conversed with each other in Gaelic but they never used it with their children, and so we grew up with the ability to understand the language but minus the ability to speak it. I often regret that I didn't acquire this knowledge. The failure to use Gaelic in every-day conversation arose from the misconception that its use would retard the learning and use of proper English. There was also a feeling of self-consciousness, some years ago, on the part of those speaking Gaelic. (13)

All of my informants gave the same reasons for the loss of the Gaelic, showing that it has become traditional to attribute language death to a specific group at a specific time. S.R.MacNeil:

> One of the reasons was when they, when the people came from the

Old Country and down from there to our time--say about 1900, well there was hardly any English spoken around here. There was English spoken everywhere but it wasn't used in the families--they had the Gaelic then, the Gaelic they brought over from Scotland but then when they, they were so anxious then, and they got schools going--they were so anxious to teach the children the English. Of course the English had commercial value and that kept on--but in doing that they could have followed the English too far to the left and they lost the Gaelic. (C8453)

Sadie and Mungie MacNeil concur:

They thought it was better for them to forget it, I think, and just speak English. When they went to school they thought that if they spoke Gaelic it would kind of hold them back in their studying. Indeed they tried--wouldn't allow them to talk Gaelic. (C8447)

Hector MacNeil tells of his father's experience in losing Gaelic:

Well when he was growing up, about four or five he switched to English. Gaelic was declining in that community and the representative from the schools, the government representative come around to the house and told people that they should speak English in the house and that way their children would have a better chance at life and so on. And so for subsistence farmers of course, you know, that was quite a proposition: learn English and your children will prosper. Then he went to Sydney, working on the steel plant and just didn't use it. (C8441)

Mickey Bean Niellag also blames the loss of Gaelic on the parents, whom, he said, would "give you a backhand across the cheek" if it was heard. His explanation for that was:

Well, it was no working language. You weren't able to make business and writing with it, or put through business in banks with it--things were getting kind of--the steelworks came to Sydney, they were English-speaking people. Well it was hard for you to get work if you're Gaelic, maybe you'd go to a boarding house and the people there were English-speaking, the bosses English-speaking people, wherever you went, the higher class were English. Well the teachers then had English, you couldn't have a Gaelic-speaking teacher...the parents thought--anybody envied a child that could speak English, even a few words. (C8446)

So Gaelic was not felt to be of any use, and the practical people deliberately set out to give their children a good start by depriving them of their impractical unbusinesslike language.

The fear of ridicule was very strong as well; several informants told accounts of their parents being made fun of for their language and their Gaelic accents when they went to town. This fear of ridicule and the negative view on Gaelic it gave is strongly present in another typical Gaelic-language-loss narrative, that of the girls who went away to Boston to work at the turn of the century. Employment for domestics was readily available there and many Cape Bretoners, particularly the women, went looking for work. Many congregated with other Cape Bretoners there and kept up their language, but stories are numerous of young women who wanted to be assimilated into the American way of life, and pretended on their yearly visits home that they had forgotten the language. Dunn quotes Garret MacDonald of North River Meadow who wrote in Gaelic:

> I consider it foolishness for anyone to be so stuck-up, because he'd been in the States for a year, that he should forget his Gaelic. There are many in our land (I think it's a disgrace for them) without English enough to put the dog out who won't speak a word of Gaelic. (*Highland Settler* 119)

It is said time and time again that these women came back for a visit after perhaps a year away, and professed to have lost their Gaelic. People recounting these anecdotes stress that the girls were obviously pretending, that they could not possibly have lost the language. This narrative is the opposite of the one which says that children were beaten in school: it is a criticism of those who willfully abandoned the language rather than a defence of those who did so for reasons beyond their control.

There is a contrast here between those who lost the language passively, the children who were deprived of it by parents and teachers, and those adults who actively cut it out of their own and their children's lives. Gaelic can be viewed as a symbol of powerlessness; those who deliberately tried to destroy it were attempting to join the powerful majority culture and had to remove this outward manifestation of their own subordinate culture. Children, who traditionally have no rights in our society, were linguistically helpless as well as socially powerless because they spoke Gaelic but were forbidden to use it, and also lacked the English language for a time until they learned to speak it. The people who stayed behind often ridiculed those who went away and lost their Gaelic, but they themselves lacked the knowledge of English as well as the economic viability gained by those who had left. Today only old people speak it, again a passive and powerless group, and even they in their defence of Gaelic make little effort to retain it.

The proverbial phrase "enough English to put the dog out" is very common and recurs often because there are so many instances of people who preferred to struggle with their broken English than speak Gaelic. All informants said that the broken English was a problem because some parents would attempt to teach their own poor English to their children so they had only a half-developed use of either language. Those who went to school and had no English learned it directly from the teacher and spoke it better. Many jokes are made about the wrong usage of English words by Gaelic speakers; these are told by other Gaelic speakers and indicate contempt for this attitude of English superiority.

Another such narrative is the story of Gaelic speakers using the language as a secret language in front of the children, on party line telephones or in other situations, including use of codes in the war, where the use of a secret language was desirable.

As mentioned above, another narrative is that of the statistic that more Gaelic is spoken in Cape Breton than in Scotland. This is untrue, but the belief persists among speakers and non-speakers of Gaelic alike. It perhaps indicates that people are anxious about the loss of Gaelic and see it as a desirable thing that it should be retained, even though they are not personally willing to make the effort. All the language-loss narratives indicate a concern with the linguistic situation, and this concern can be construed to fit with Jansen's view of an esoteric group, which feels it has something special and important to give or retain. In this sense the narratives can replace the speaking of the language as a part of identity.

The other problems related to the death of Gaelic were the declining population of the area, where there were scarcely enough people to speak anything to, and the sense of politeness that prevented two Gaelic speakers from conversing in their own language if a non-speaker could overhear. This caused the speakers to fall out of practice, especially if their children picked up English at school and therefore stopped using Gaelic. Even elderly people who speak Gaelic as their first language often no longer do so even with their wives, husbands or close friends who have Gaelic, and this is because the habit of speaking it has gone. And yet all these people claim to love the language and say that it is much better than English for expressing exact ideas, for telling a story or for swearing.

They love the language and would like to use it, yet make no attempt to revive it themselves, though they hope to see it come back.

With the possible exceptions of the "going to Boston" stories, all of these narratives can be and are recounted concerning members of other minority language groups in the situation of Gaelic, where the entire language group was encouraged by various ways and means to dispense with the language. The narratives have become part of the culture and are linked with or may even take the place of language possession in a culture. The stories become a defence for their abandonment of the language, and a criticism of those who did so at the same time. Although people are realistic about the lack of worldly use of their language, it is rare to find someone who will admit to having made a decision not to use it, or not to teach it to his or her children.

Robert Klymasz, in his work on Ukrainians in Canada, has made some similar observations in reference to ethnic joke cycles. He writes:

> The ethnic language joke, as outlined above, always reflects some aspect of language breakdown and the frustration which accompanies the immigrant's attempt to communicate with or seek help and information from a source outside his own group. Individually, these language jokes appear to serve as a humorous comment on the awkward situation in which the immigrant finds himself. Collectively, however, they amount to a vicious onslaught on the mother tongue and point to its impotency in the New World. Corroded from the inside and ridiculed from the outside, the language of the Old Country is forced to retreat, as it were, to its old position as a means for the transmission of the Old World's folk culture with only negligible serviceability as an entree into the mainstream culture of the New World. (*Folk Narrative Among Ukrainian-Canadians* 31)

As Klymasz has pointed out, lowering a language to the level at which it can be ridiculed shows it to be obsolete in a sense. Gaelic has been reduced to

a colourful, curious item in the Cape Breton culture and nothing can restore it. Revival attempts spell defeat by their very definition; after a certain point the appeal to safeguard a language becomes pathetic. Gaelic speakers are aware of this.

It is important to note that expressed language attitudes are coloured by the attitude of the seeker of information. As John Rory says, "Oh, the Gaelic is fashionable now!" and it is evident that collectors of narratives, students of Gaelic and devotees of the Highland Village Society have been able to revive some interest in Gaelic. Those who can still speak it have an increased community status, and it is therefore in their best interests to both defend their lack of use of it and strongly criticize those whom they felt were responsible. These narrative "set pieces" constitute a large part of linguistic identity, both for speakers and non-speakers of Gaelic.

It is difficult to say how many people in the area now speak Gaelic. In the census reports, Gaelic was not listed as one of the choices to be checked for "mother tongue" until 1941, though languages such as Icelandic and Serbo-Croation appeared. By 1941 the breakdown of population in the census had changed so that only the figures for the entire county appeared. Jim Watson, Gaelic teacher at the Highland Village, estimates that between one and five thousand people in Cape Breton speak Gaelic, and that there are five different dialects, originating from the various areas from which the ancestors of the people came. At present only the elderly and a few people in their fifties are able to speak it for the most part. I met one man of twenty-seven who spoke it as a first language, but that was rare and exceptional. There is not much hope that it will

revive as a living language, but many people are now taking the Gaelic courses offered at the Highland Village. There is also a programme of "semi-immersion" evenings where people sing Gaelic songs and those who have the language are encouraged to use it. People continue to carry the sound of it in their speech, and many use phrases or words in Gaelic. The possession of it and the awareness of its existence continue, so that even though Gaelic, "the language spoken in the Garden of Eden", is fast fading, it does form a part of past and present identity. Most of my informants said they felt Scottish, even those who had never been to the country. John Rory MacNeil was most vehement about it:

> Yes they do--I really think--you know there've been quite a few tours to Scotland and people go on their own to visit Scotland, and Scottish people come over here to visit,and I think--I don't know if it only exists here, I think it exists all over Cape Breton Island, the closeness and you just meet that person from Scotland--you just feel as if she's your sister, or if he's your brother. Oh yes. And right away the familiarity comes in. (C8451)

So the Iona peninsula in the summer of 1984 when I began this work was a beautiful place with a small, aging and diminishing population, people who were nearly all Roman Catholic and Scottish, and who keenly felt their identity to be that of "the Scottish people" with the Gaelic language and singing traditions still in place, if diminished.

If current trends continue, the population will continue to shrink and the area's traditions will disappear with their custodians. The other option is increased development and population, and the inhabitants of the area are making a strong effort to achieve this. All believe in the magic powers of a bridge to replace the ferry which crosses the Barra Strait. This is always the most

important election issue and has become something of a *cause celebre* in Iona. The report of the community economic development study stresses this as vital to the development of the area:

> *Permanent Crossing at Barra Strait*
>
> The principal roadway, Route 223, is interrupted by two waterways, and docking facilities and ferry services are poorly maintained and unreliable. The situation continues to get worse--however, the Minister responsible seems less informed or concerned about its operational difficulties as well as departmental decisions; both of which adversely affect not only the level of public service and information, but also many aspects of economic activity and community life.
>
> A permanent crossing is needed to help accelerate the development of Central Cape Breton. This has been recognized by the Premier of the province in his promise to construct such a crossing in 1979. However, outside of constructing ramps to coincide with provincial elections, there has only since been delays, studies and excuses from the government.
>
> It is important to note that of all transportation improvements made by survey respondents, the need to construct a permanent crossing was most often mentioned. (Central Cape Breton Community Economic Development Study)

A bridge built to Iona could open up all kinds of development in the area, because the peninsula would then be of easy access to the industrial centres. Both permanent and summer residences could be built and all kinds of industries could grow up to provide services for the area. Area residents see growth in primary industries as well, such as farming, fishing, mining and woodcutting, as well as new ventures in aquaculture and tourism. They anticipate revitalized communities with expanding populations, and jobs and homes for the young people who have been forced to leave to find work but want to come back. The people of the peninsula see hope for their survival embodied in the bridge across the Barra Strait.

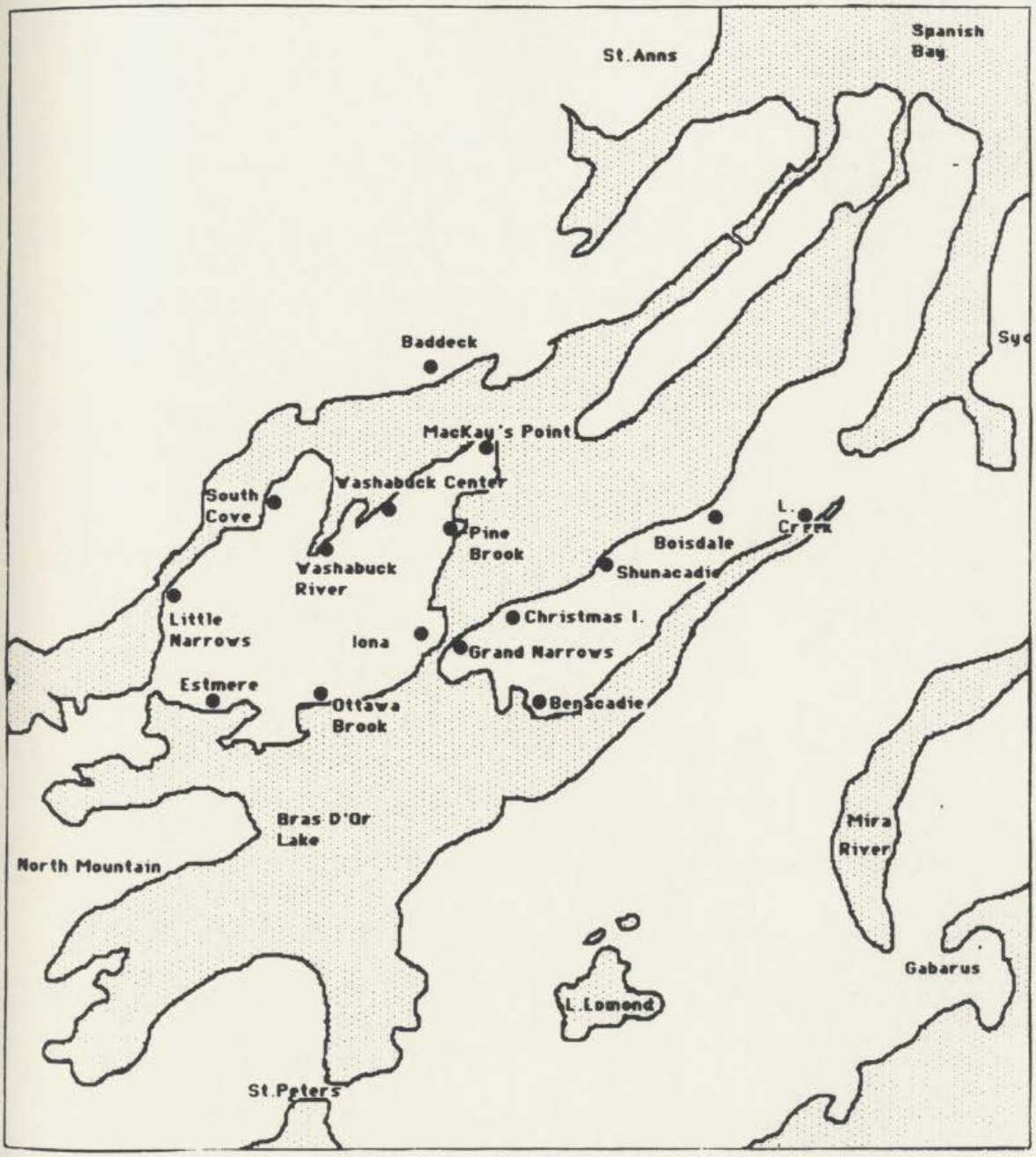
Less evident is speculation about negative results of this link with the

outside world. There is a strong possibility that on completion of the bridge the Iona school would be closed and the children bussed to North Sydney. This would certainly be detrimental to their sense of community and rural rootedness. And the burgeoning incoming population would alter forever the cultural landscape of the Iona peninsula. The homogeneous group would no longer exist, and without this uniformity of culture many of its attributes including Gaelic and its accompanying English dialect, the singing tradition, square dances and ceilidhs would most likely disappear. A larger population would demand other, commercial entertainment alternatives, which would equally erode the present traditional methods of gathering in use. This possibility seems not to have occurred to the people, or perhaps they consider it a worthwhile sacrifice. The alternative, of course, is to keep the bridge away and maintain the culture till the last person leaves or dies and the last farm grows over. Either way the way of life is certainly threatened. For now the Iona peninsula hovers in a kind of time warp between the memories of its past and the hope for a revitalized future. In this isolated state with much of traditional life intact, but fully aware of the outside alternatives, the Iona peninsula was the ideal place to study social gatherings of the past and present to determine the present identity and sense of community in a place facing certain change.

Map 1: Cape Breton Island

Iona Peninsula indicated by shaded area.

Map 2: Iona Peninsula



Chapter 3

The Ceilidh

The Gaelic word *ceilidh* is most accurately translated as "house visit". The kind of gathering which can be defined as a house visit or "friendly visit" takes place in many cultures and is known by many names: the ceilidh of the Scots and Cape Bretoners is paralleled by the *ceili* in Ireland, the *veglia* in Italy and the *veillee* in French communities. These gatherings vary and change in accordance with local traditions and the specifics of each culture, but this kind of informal gathering in a private home, designed to exchange news, incorporate stories and songs, and, less overtly, reinforce community values, is a feature of European rural societies both past and present.

In recent years the term "ceilidh" has been used for gatherings of a different nature, often to describe those commercial events organized to appeal to tourists who appreciate this evidence of the colourful Highland heritage of Nova Scotia. In this context "ceilidh" has come to mean a concert or dance featuring Scottish music of some kind. It has also been used as a title for radio and television programmes, so that the general impression of a ceilidh in Nova Scotia to tourists and most urban residents, is of a form of commercial entertainment with a Scottish theme.

On the Iona peninsula of Cape Breton, "ceilidh" retains its original

meaning: a visit at a house. Older residents speak of "going ceilidhing"; this generally means visiting in a group at a home where there is the expectation of self-made entertainment. Although not articulated as such, the feeling seems to be that one person dropping in on another for tea and chat is not exactly a ceilidh, though these activities form part of such a gathering; there is an expectation of some stories and songs. At the same time, this is not formally planned, as pointed out by Henry Glassie in his discussion of the Irish equivalent of the ceilidh:

> Ceilis are not planned. They happen. At night you sit to rest and perhaps a neighbour or two will lift the latch and join you at the hearth. Or perhaps you will rise to your feet after supper and go out along the black lanes to one of the local homes known as a "ceili house". If a "company" forms in a kitchen, and if strength remains to lift talk into chat, a ceili arises. Tea draws, chat turns, and the night gathers as a good one. In the past, special ceilis were prearranged to ascend swiftly to story and song. (71)

On the peninsula, as in the community studied by Glassie, the chances for a good ceilidh are improved by going to the house of, or bringing along, some well-known community singers or storytellers. The term "ceilidh" is still used for these gatherings, and they retain much of the flavour and character of the old-time ceilidhs, for reasons which will be discussed below.

Both the word and the custom as used on the Iona peninsula are a legacy of the early Scots settlers of the area. Ceilidhs as described in accounts of rural life in Highland Scotland have some points of resemblance to past and present ceilidhs on the peninsula, though no present-day ceilidhs are described in this literature and in fact a much-stressed point in accounts of Highland social life

is that of the Free Church ban on ceilidhs and songs leading to suppression and decay of the old traditions. I. F. Grant offers this description of a typical Highland ceilidh:

> The social life of the old Highland communities had its centre in the *ceilidh*. It was very different to what now often goes by that name—an informal concert in the village hall or school. In the Hebrides, till the turn of the century, the men and lads, and to a lesser extent the women, would gather during the winter evenings in a favoured house where they would be sure of a welcome. The *Fear an Tigh*(Man of the House) would be well able to take the lead and to tell the first tale and everyone else would be expected to contribute to the night's entertainment. There might be some singing or playing, but the time was generally mainly spent in the telling of stories and personal anecdotes, the asking of riddles and quoting of sayings (of which from ancient times the Highlanders have been fond) and in a great deal of discussion upon topics of all kinds from the supernatural to the practical. Ceilidhs now are no longer frequented. In Bernera the custom died out fifty years ago. At Tolsta, in Lewis, the last ceilidh house was burnt down by its owner's wish as the emigrant ship that was taking him from Lewis sailed past the township. In other parts of the Highlands as well as the Hebrides the oldest people can still remember how similar gatherings used once to be held. (139)

Alexander Carmichael also witnessed the suppression of the ceilidhs, branded by clergymen and schoolteachers as evil for fiddling and singing. He saw the institution as responsible for Gaelic hospitality as well as the retention of abundant oral literature. He refers to the ceilidh as a "literary entertainment, where stories and tales, poems and ballads, are rehearsed and recited, and songs are sung, conundrums are put, proverbs are quoted, and many other literary matters are related and discussed." (1:xxii) His description seems to indicate an intellectual purpose behind the ceilidh, a conscious exploration and use of traditions quite aside from the function of entertainment.

In J. F. Campbell's extensive introduction to *Popular Tales of the West*

Highlands, descriptions of Highland ceilidhs are provided through memories of some of his collectors, including one who reminisces about the custom on the Isle of Barra:

> In the Islands of Barra, the recitation of tales during the long winter nights is still very common. The people gather in crowds to the houses of those whom they consider good reciters to listen to their stories. (iv)

He goes on to mention a preference for tales of the giant-hero Fionn and his giant companions, the Fein, who defended their country from the Danes and Norwegians. These tales are still known by at least one Gaelic storyteller in Cape Breton.[5]

Another of Campbell's informants describes in 1860 the process by which tales circulated and reached the ceilidh:

> In my native place, Pool-Ewe, Ross-shire, when I was a boy, it was the custom for the young to assemble together on the long winter nights to hear the old people recite the tales or *sgeulachd*, which they had learned from their fathers before them. In these days tailors and shoemakers went from house to house, making our clothes and shoes. When one of them came to the village we were greatly delighted, whilst getting new kilts at the same time. I knew an old tailor who used to tell a new tale every night during his stay in the village; and another, an old shoemaker, who, with his large stock of stories about ghosts and fairies, used to frighten us so much that we scarcely dared pass the neighbouring churchyard on our way home. It was also the custom when an *aoidh* or stranger, celebrated for his store of tales, came on a visit to the village, for us, young and old, to make a rush to the house where he passed the night, and choose our seats, some on beds, some on forms, and others on three-legged stools, etc., and listen in silence to the new tales, just as I have myself seen since, when a far-famed actor came

[5] John Shaw's PhD thesis from the Department of Celtic Studies at Harvard University deals with the folktales of Joe Neil MacNeil of Big Pond, Cape Breton. Many of these tales are of the Fein.

> to perform in the Glasgow theatre. The goodman of the house usually opened with the tale of *Famhair Mor* (great giant) or some other favourite tale, and then the stranger carried on after that. It was a common saying, "The first tale by the goodman, and tales to daylight by the *aoidh*, or guest." (vi)

Though ceilidhs were obviously a form of entertainment it is evident from the words of many writers that they also served a more serious purpose. Campbell believes that the custom was responsible for cultivating an historical spirit and pride in the past. He stresses that this consciousness of ancestral times is retained only in rural areas.

Descriptions of the setting of a ceilidh in Highland Scotland are not numerous, though it is evident that some houses were favoured as good ceilidh houses, that a certain amount of knitting and spinning went on during the evening, and that the gatherings took place predominantly on long winter nights. Romantic descriptions such as MacGregor's show the ceilidh taking place around a peat fire, a form of fuel not commonly used in Nova Scotia. MacGregor sees the fire as central to the atmosphere of the ceilidh and even speculates on its indispensability for the continuation of the ceilidh:

> Closely associated with the circular fireplace of the old Hebridean homes are the *ceilidhs* or gatherings in the winter evenings for the telling of legends and stories, and the singing of songs. Round the peat fire a large number of people can be seated. But, through the building in recent years of houses with gables, in which fireplaces and chimneys may conveniently be placed, the old social circle has had an arc taken out of it, so to speak, and, since fewer can be comfortably accomodated round the fire, the average number attending the *ceilidh* is unavoidably smaller. (Alasdair Alpin MacGregor 201)

It appears that in Cape Breton the wood or coal stove eventually took the place of the fireplace, and people still managed to gather around that substitute.

The ceilidh was in some sense a solemn occasion of great responsibility, the keeping of the records of an ancient people, as expressed by Delargy:

> No single factor has contributed more to the preservation of oral literature and tradition than the social institution, so popular formerly all over the Gaelic world, the *ceilidhe* or *airnean*. (17)

This record-keeping aspect took on a new significance when the people of the Hebrides were forced to leave their homes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because of their extreme poverty. They brought with them their language and traditions:

> Culturally, theirs could best be described as an oral culture. They had produced few written records partly because so many of the pioneers had been illiterate. The folktales, the language, the ceists, the ceilidhs and the barn raisings still remained with them and kept them from being assimilated. (R. A. MacLean, 134)

The Highlanders wished to continue their way of life; this was a major reason for emigration and certainly their choice of remote unpopulated districts as a new homeland stemmed from a desire to own land, so that their lives could never again be disrupted as they had been in the Western Isles. Naturally, they were able to continue life as they had known it for a long time, since there were no other influences at work in the unpopulated areas they had chosen. This is expressed by H. M. MacDonald in terms of the cultural continuum at work:

> Nevertheless these simple Scottish progenitors not only survived what their offspring are wont to refer to as rigorous isolation, but they actually bequeathed to their heirs a rich cultural legacy, not least of which was by way of the then accepted means of social communication, the Celtic ceilidh. (15)

When the settlers first arrived their lot was a hard one, and the ceilidh

was their means of communication, their entertainment, and their way of retaining their cultural identity. This last was made easier because of the unifying force of the old clan system. Whole families or communities emigrated together and thus were able to preserve much of the social fabric of their former lives.

Ceilidhs still take place on the Iona peninsula. Now, as always, the term has a range of meaning. One person may say to another "Come around sometime for a little ceilidh", meaning a quiet visit. Others may say, "We had a real ceilidh over at Maxie's the other night." The usual feeling is, as mentioned above, that a ceilidh is a gathering for hearing songs and stories. Residents of the peninsula use the word to refer to all events of this type.

My landlady, Joan, knew that I was interested in such things and promised me "We'll have a ceilidh at the house before you go." Her selection of guests indicated to me her idea of the desired form of entertainment at a ceilidh.

On August 21, 1984 I attended the promised ceilidh in Washabuck at Joan's house. This will be described here in detail because I feel that this gathering was the one that best exposed me to the traditions and procedure of the ceilidh as it exists at present in this area of Cape Breton. I taped the entire event; this was, of course, with the consent of the group present. No one was made uncomfortable by the presence of the tape recorder; in fact, previous tapes had been made of ceilidhs in this house, either by Joan or by her son, with the intent of preserving the songs. Joan often replayed tapes of ceilidhs which had been held in her house for her own enjoyment, and many of the performers were the same people who were present at the ceilidh she arranged for me.

The context of the ceilidh was not entirely natural, because Joan had arranged it for my benefit so that I could see how a ceilidh progressed, and also to allow me to meet a well-known community singer, Jimmie Calum MacNeil. In a sense, however, it was natural because her kitchen is a familiar one to ceilidh goers, who often were present for an evening to entertain Joan's husband, who suffered from multiple sclerosis and thus was largely house-bound.

The ceilidh took place on a Tuesday evening, Joan having invited the guests the evening before. Weekends in the summer were very busy with dances, anniversary parties, weddings and other gatherings, so a week night was chosen for this less exuberant entertainment. Although she had not specified a time, everyone showed up nearly together, at about 8:00 p.m.

The guests gathered in the kitchen, the usual room for entertaining, due to tradition and also to size, it being the largest room in the house. The first to arrive were Mickey Bean Niellag amd Jimmie Calum, both bachelors in their seventies, and both officially surnamed MacNeil. Mickey is an affable outgoing man with a reputation for telling "lies", chiefly about his mythical wives, and at the same time is known to be a deeply religious man and a good neighbour, who is often kept busy running errands for other people.

Accompanying Mickey was Jimmie, whom I had not previously met, though I had spoken to him on the phone. Jimmie lives alone on a farm in St. Columba, up the mountain at some distance from the other communities on the peninsula. Because of this distance and because of his own gruff personality he does not visit often, and came with Mickey at Joan's special request. Like many older single men, he is a fluent Gaelic speaker and uses the language fairly often,

mostly with other elderly bachelors. Jimmie prides himself on his large repertoire of Gaelic songs and enjoys an opportunity to sing. Before his arrival Joan warned me that Jimmie was in the habit of monopolizing the singing and preferred to have an audience rather than participating in a group exchange of songs and stories.

Next to arrive was Joe MacLean, known as "Joe Red Rory", from Lower Washabuck, just down the road. Joe is in his sixties, a kind man who is very conversant with local history and stories. He was one of the first people I met in the area, and he taught me to dance square sets on several occasions.

Neil James MacNeil and his wife Margaret were the other invited guests, residents of Gillis Point, near Iona. Neil James has a meticulous memory for local history and the complicated geneology of the area. Many of his stories are about his ancestors, and even when a story has sufficient merit as a narrative to stand on its own, he introduces it by tracing the main character's familial relationship to himself. His wife Margaret added some stories of a religious nature, or commented on stories she was listening to.

Joan played the role of mistress of ceremonies, prompting people to tell stories she recalled, trying to draw Jimmie into the conversation once singing had stopped, singing and telling stories herself. Because I only saw her at ceilidhs when she was taking on this responsibility to help me, I am not aware whether she would assume such an active part in a ceilidh without that responsibility. Within the community she is known as rather quiet but with a good sense of humour, a woman who has had hard times and is respected for her courage, kindness and willingness to help out at community functions. In terms of performance she is better known as a stepdancer than as a singer or storyteller.

The others present were two young men aged about twenty-four, Joan's son Quentin, who had recently returned from a job in Alberta, and her niece's husband Sandy, a resident of nearby Boisdale now living in Toronto. They did not participate at all in storytelling, though in the family context Quentin is known for his jokes and funny stories. Sandy had come over to visit for a few minutes and became interested in the stories, remaining for the entire evening. We three young people told no stories, but laughed and applauded at appropriate times and probably contributed much by our enjoyment and our status as young people, who are becoming increasingly rare in the area.

This audience role was obviously very important. The traditional educational role of the ceilidh was much in evidence, as was the reinforcement of religious values. Whether or not this was deliberate, the presence of young people who had not heard all the stories and who obviously were enjoying themselves and learning lent a particular interest to the ceilidh for those people such as Neil James and Jimmie who have a high performance interest and thrive on attention.

The main participants in the storytelling and singing event were then the four elderly men. Jimmie's contribution was that of song, which he professed to be his specialty, though at Joan's request he told the story accompanying his first song with enthusiasm and considerable dramatic skill. For the most part Joe listened with enjoyment but he contributed to the discussion on forerunners and also participated by asking the others for details on specific songs or events to clarify his own knowledge of his area. The two who most often told the stories were Mickey and Neil James, narrators of different types. Neil James is devoted to the presentation of local history in exhaustive detail, established often within

the ceilidh through lengthy conferring with others present. Mickey is depended upon to tell "lies" of the harmless recognizable type, to amuse and entertain. Although the two men could and did exchange roles, there was an expectation that this combination of two basic narrative preferences would create a good ceilidh, and so it did. The major participants in this ceilidh and any others I attended or heard of were fluent Gaelic speakers, as were all the informants I was told were good storytellers. The retention of the language seems to be linked with retention of other traditions, and even if the stories are mainly told in English now, the Gaelic speakers retain the right to tell those also with more authority than the unilingual English speakers.

Alexander Carmichael in his introduction to *Carmina Gadelica* comments on the recognized specialties of storytellers in Scottish ceilidhs of the nineteenth century:

> In a crofting townland there are several story-tellers who recite the oral literature of their predecessors. The story-tellers of the Highlands are as varied in their subjects as are literary men and women elsewhere. One is a historian, narrating events simply and concisely; another is a historian with a bias, colouring his narrative according to his leanings. One is an inventor, building fiction upon fact, mingling his materials, and investing the whole with the charm of novelty and the halo of romance. Another is a reciter of heroic poems and ballads, bringing the different characters before the mind as clearly as the sculptor brings the figure before the eye. One gives the songs of the chief poets, with interesting accounts of their authors, while another, generally a woman, sings, to wierd airs, beautiful old songs, some of them Arthurian. There are various other narrators, singers, and speakers, but I have never heard aught that should not be said nor sung. (1: xxii)

With the addition of a few more notable community members, the ceilidh at Joan's could have presented nearly all these narrative roles that Carmichael remarked in the Highlands a hundred years ago.

The sequence of storytelling and singing began with general conversation about weather, the health of ailing community members, and news of people home for a visit from away. Joan, as hostess but probably more as my unofficial research assistant, urged Jimmie to sing, and he did so, a Gaelic song of twenty-four verses with a chorus. Mickey knew the song and joined in on the chorus, while everyone else stamped their feet in accompaniment. At the end of the song Jimmie told the story about it, a tale connected with the siege of Louisbourg. The main character of this song was a Scot, and the discussion about him led to mention of Donald Og, a man from the Isle of Barra who first spotted the Iona peninsula and urged his sons to settle there, which they did, establishing the MacNeils in that part of the world. Further stories of this man and his family were told, and from there a discussion on reading tea leaves began, with the prophecies of death held within, and almost everyone had a story to contribute to this.

When a lull occurred in the conversation Joan asked if anyone present was familiar with the *duain*, a rhyme used to gain entry to houses on New Year's Eve, and this provoked discussion on this rhyme and on New Year's customs in general. With the talk about making up rhymes a renewed discussion of songs began and Joe asked the others for information on a song written about his own family, the MacLeans of Washabuck. Mickey explained and then sang the song, one about a boat named the *Alexander*. This account of an historical local event led to further discussion of interesting local history, which always includes extensive exploration of family connections between participants in the stories and living descendants. One of these stories concerned a supernatural event, and its

narration led to a sharing of personal experiences of such happenings. Such stories are respected and believed, but after a certain time the supernatural belief was balanced by the narration of a number of anti-legends: one man began the story of a supernatural event which turned out to have a rational explanation. Several similar stories followed and led into tales of forerunners, the visions that indicate that a death is to come.

The conversation then took a turn as Joan asked the first singer to tell a story, as he had been quiet and had let his attention wander since his turn in the performance sequence. Though Jimmie refused, this interchange of request and refusal provided a break in the conversation so that at the instigation of Neil James and probably due to earlier accounts of local history, a new form of narrative arose. These were legends of a local strong man. Following this, Jimmie offered *The Skye Mountain Song*, describing a now-abandoned community in the area. An explanation by the singer followed, leading to discussion of local songs.

At this point in the ceilidh the telephone rang, and as it is situated in the kitchen, it caused a disturbance in the narrative events. The call was for me, long distance, and as I had to conduct a private conversation within a crowd of people, I began to speak in French, as was customary anyway for me with this friend. This caused some comment among the guests, who, though bilingual themselves in Gaelic and English, seemed to regard my proficiency in French as a greater accomplishment. As I could not tape stories while talking on the phone, Joan decided this would be a good time to serve the tea, and did so, setting everything out on the table. The food offered included bannock, which is tea-

biscuit dough formed into a large round loaf instead of individual biscuits and served in slices, homemade rolls, muffins, jam, cheese, and tea. Everyone took a plate and filled it. Accompanying the meal was conversation of a more general sort which did not require such intense concentration, local news of the kind which had opened up the ceilidh.

When the lunch had been consumed, Neil James resumed with tales of his great-grandfather's actions as a soldier and as a member of the community. As usual, the family connection was stressed, and these stories had a moral overtone of Christian charity which was often noticeable in Neil James' anecdotes, and was still more pronounced in those of his wife Margaret. Neil James greatly enjoyed telling the stories about his family and often completed an anecdote by once again stressing his own relationship to the protagonist. One of these stories involved an encounter with the Devil, and that one precipitated a number of others about local tangles with Satan. These legends were all localized and strongly believed, as the people involved were known at least at second hand. The stories showed a strong religious conviction with a literal belief in the powers of Satan and Hell; this was evident not only from the content and narrative style, but also from discussion of the Devil between the stories.

The ceilidh finally came to a close at about 12:30 a.m. after a few more songs by Jimmie, requested by the company partly because Jimmie felt that he had been invited to sing and had not been given as many opportunities to do so as he had wished. When he had sung three songs, all the guests rose together and left, thanking Joan and wishing me success, hoping "that tape will be of some use to you." Discussing the event with Joan the next day, I asked if the ceilidh was

like many others she had had, and she assured me that it was. I listened to other ceilidhs she had taped and they did seem similar to this one, except that they were weekend events and involved liquor which made them somewhat more lively. For the purpose of discussion of past and present ceilidhs, I will take this one at Joan's as that which seems to best express the atmosphere and objectives of a traditional ceilidh.

Ceilidhs held today on the Iona peninsula have naturally changed with the passage of time, but they retain elements of both the old Scottish ceilidhs and the early Cape Breton ones. Older informants recall the ceilidhs of their youth as somewhat different affairs in certain respects. They often stress that the population in the area was much larger at the time, so that more people would be available to visit, and that the Gaelic language was stronger, the prevalent language of the community and the one in which all storytelling and conversation would be carried out. At that time the area was a thriving agricultural community and thus the gatherings would take place in the winter months when there was less work to be done on the farms. The evenings would be longer because the dark came early, giving the right atmosphere for tales of the supernatural and for a feeling of camaraderie.

The stories too have changed, as will be seen in a later discussion of narratives told at ceilidhs. Many said that the "old people" recounted the *sgeulachan*, the long wonder tales, but that shorter anecdotes were enjoyed equally. Stephen Rory MacNeil expresses this preference:

> —Well the old people used to have the regular what they call *sgeulachan*, that's the story, the old stories, but we didn't care—we

> would be only talking about incidents that happened in the neighbourhood, what happened here, or what happened if I was up in Inverness or if Mickey was down in Castle Bay or something--all those stories that would happen, funny stories, just simple stories. I think they--I think there's just as much fun in the simplest thing as there is in the broadest. (C8445)

Although an oral culture in terms of creativity, there was a literary element present in the Cape Breton ceilidhs which was a change from the old Scottish gatherings. This was the custom of reading Gaelic newspapers and books that came from Scotland or perhaps from urban centres in Nova Scotia. Few people could read Gaelic, as what little education they had either in Scotland or Nova Scotia would be in English. Still, there was usually a person capable of reading Gaelic in the community who could inform the rest of news of interest. This was an important function of the ceilidh, the exchange of news in a time when letters from the Old Country arrived slowly if at all. The most popular paper was *Mac Talla* (The Echo), published weekly in Sydney by Jonathan G. MacKinnon from 1892 to 1904. (Dunn, *Highland Settler* 87) In spite of its short run it was extremely influential and is remembered by many of the older inhabitants of the peninsula. Charles Dunn writes of its effect:

> Although new subscribers did not clamour for copies, the paper was highly respected and loved. Perhaps only one copy went to a Gaelic settlement, but that is not to say that only one person read the paper there; young and old would gather around the local Gaelic scholars who could read the latest news and stories and songs from its pages. The copy would pass from household to household, and parents woud teach their children to spell out the words of their mother tongue from its pages. (87)

The paper was important not only as a vehicle for news, but also for assistance in the preservation and transmission of the old *sgeulachan*, which were

printed in the paper and read or told throughout the course of the ceilidh. Stephen Rory MacNeil was one of the children who, along with his brothers and sisters, learned to read Gaelic from the *MacTalla*, and is still known in the community as a "Gaelic scholar." He describes this kind of gathering:

> Well they would be--now for instance the MacTalla, that was the Gaelic paper, there'd be a lot of those old stories in the MacTalla, you know. You heard of the MacTalla?. And--well now anybody that could read the Gaelic like myself and his father (indicating Mickey sitting nearby) and my own father before me, now the gang would come down, that was a great story through what was in the paper. (C8445)

Stephen Rory went on to say that the paper always arrived on the same day of the week, so people would know when to gather to hear the stories and news, and that numbers in attendance might range from three or four to a dozen. The man in their community of Barra Glen who subscribed to the paper could not read Gaelic. However, as postmaster he received a higher salary than the farmers of the area and took the responsibility of paying for the paper.

Sadie and Mungie MacNeil gave accounts similar to Stephen Rory's of ceilidhs at their home, when the stories were of the Old Country and often came from a book:

> Old time stories and the stories of Scotland, the old people, the all--the people next door, their father and mother and our father and mother here, every two weeks my father and mother would go out to visit them with a lantern in their hand, and the next--well, they went like that nearly all the time. Week about, back and forth. "Oh it's time for us to go," my father would say, you know, in Gaelic, you know, they'd go up to visit. They'd go to visit at the MacKinnons', it was all MacKinnons on that side, MacNeils this side, and you'd watch and you'd see some of the MacKinnons coming over. In the wintertime, you know. Usually have a book or something. This Paul MacKinnon

> that lived away over at the other end, he'd come with a Gaelic book that he got from Scotland you know, well my father was good at reading, he was fairly good too and they'd come and ceilidh, and his wife would be a few yards afer him, and she'd have her knitting under her arm. (C8447)

Thus the Cape Breton ceilidh even in the earliest stages differed from the parallel gathering in Scotland, because of the written element, necessary for the preservation of the old stories and the link with Scotland. Part of its function was to reaffirm the connections with the Old Country in passing along news. The Gaelic reader or "scholar" was a highly respected man in this context where he was depended upon to relay news through his superior understanding of the printed word. He was a performer as much as any singer or storyteller at the gathering, and his role was the same as theirs, perhaps still more overt; he was to preserve the living traditions of the home the settlers had left behind.

The reading of the paper showed the expression of awareness of a culture; people were physically removed enough to realize they missed and valued much of what was in their collective past. This was the beginning of conscious ethnicity in the new context of a new country, a feeling of a shared past and a sense of peoplehood. (See Gwen Kennedy Neville, "Kinfolks and the Covenant")

In its workings as entertainment, the old Cape Breton ceilidh served as a survival tactic for people who felt isolated and lonely in their new environment. They had left a harsh existence behind, but had also left familiar surroundings and friends and family. Many of the songs sung by the new settlers were sad compositions expressing their feelings on abandoning their homes. The physical environment they faced on arrival was frightening and unfamiliar, with its dense forest and severe climate. In the face of this desolation the entertainment of a

ceilidh was what kept them from despair. Archie MacDonald recounts a story which shows this use of the ceilidh, told by one of the early settlers who came out to work as a miner:

> One of the people who came out here quite early when the colliery started, he was talking about they came out here with their families, just a young couple, he had married--head for Canada. The prospects in Canada were--prosperity was--they're opening up new collieries and they came from mining districts. So they came to Canada. There's nothing waiting for them in Canada except the chance to get a job--no place to live. In the wintertime, big banks of snow, so this fellow was telling me his--he'd be in my father's age bracket--and he's talking to another man, the same predicament as he was. "Well," he said, "I don't know. I don't know how I'm going to manage. I don't believe my wife is going to live to see the spring. After supper's over and the dishes done the same thing starts every night, she starts to cry. Says this winter is never going to end. The snowbanks are up, way up to the -- over the top of the doors, piled up. I never seen such snow. "Well," the other fellow said, he was talking to, said, "I have the same problem. I understand what your problem is--I don't know what we're going to do." "Well," he says, "Suppose we try an experiment. You sing quite a bit, good singing voice?" And the other fellow mentions first thing about a half a dozen plays the mouth organ, another fellow played the bones. So anyway they found somebody that could play the bones, a certain number of tunes, play the mouth organ, wasn't too bad and a violin, had a piano, and so let's start. "Once a week we'll go down, we'll go down to my house on Monday, Monday evening and you got the story to tell"--and some fellows could tell the stories all night--"Tell a few stories, make the people laugh instead of cry, and then, what do you call it there, Joe, good stepdancer and they had what they used to in the old days call *puirt a beul* in the Gaelic. Before they knew that they were conscious of it the winter had gone and the summer was here. Snowbanks melted--they had nice times...somebody would take a lunch and it would have to be tea and things but after a while they wouldn't have anything to keep away from it, come to see how you were doing, how the other one's doing--there'd be new babies and there'd be sick people to visit and "it's our turn down to the MacDonalds' tonight"... (C8442)

This description, which corresponds to those of ceilidhs at that time, was never called a ceilidh by my grandfather. Because of the way he was told the

story, he sees the gathering as serving a purely functional need. No mention is made of the preservation of old traditions, or of the intellectual or educational pursuits sometimes attributed to a ceilidh. Instead, it served much the same purpose it does today: to get the news, to get together and pass the time. The psychological health of the settlers depended on their mutual interdependence. This seems to show that the ceilidh had a practical non-ethnic function as well, and that it was not seen as a survival, a sentimental recreation of the life in Scotland, but was protection from the shock at a changed environment. This corresponds with the main idea in the discussion of social gatherings as part of present-day identity, which is that "traditions" are used where they are useful, and they are kept alive just because of that: where there are no alternatives available, existing practices will continue.

The ceilidh, then, became an important part of the settlers' lives in the New World, more than ever vital for the exchange of news, for entertainment to keep away loneliness, and to re-establish the daily order left behind in the disruption caused by the Highland Clearances, described in Chapter 2. Some houses became known as good ceilidh houses, with the fiddlers tending to congregate in other fiddlers' houses, and the same situation with singers. Some hosts would be more likely to welcome the "foolishness" that went on at a ceilidh, and these houses were the most popular. All informants stressed that there was no need to be invited to a ceilidh: two or three people would just show up and perhaps a few more would drop in after, and songs and stories would begin. At the same time, there seems to have been some prearranging in certain cases; the reading of the MacTalla on designated days and the week-about arrangement of

some visiting did at least prepare the hosts for the possibility of visitors. It is true, though, that no one would be made to feel uncomfortable if he dropped in during one of these visits; everyone was welcome.

Often a travelling peddler would have some new stories to add to the local repertoire, and the resident schoolteacher could be counted on to contribute something. In a small area, of a population where everyone knew each other, the star performers were known by reputation and their presence could draw others. John Rory MacNeil talks of the people and gives an interesting perspective on why stories and songs of worlds far removed from the area, including the supernatural, were so appealing:

> People went ceilidhing, and why sit down and talk about your neighbour, when you knew everything about him anyway, well, cheer up the party by singing songs, and it got to be just like that. (C8451)

After attending a few ceilidhs in the area, I asked local people if these were similar to the old ones. For the most part they said that the general pattern was the same, except that usually old-time ceilidhs were smaller than the prearranged "semi-immersion" nights at the Highland Village. There is always the question of spontaneity: all informants stressed that one was never invited to a ceilidh but just dropped in and thereby initiated one. Visiting still carries this code on the peninsula, as in many rural places in North America; telephoning to say you are coming is unusual. However, in these days of depleted population a gathering extensive enough to provide major entertainment takes a little organization. This is not to say that such gatherings are contrived, or correspond to the more commercial interpretation of the word *ceilidh*. Some of those I

attended were highly organized: these were arranged by the Highland Village Society of Iona, which provided the food and the location, which was an old house in the reconstructed Highland Village. The purpose of these "semi-immersion" evenings was to allow Gaelic speakers to speak their language and to give practice to the learners of the language. In the summer it also provided an opportunity for visitors home from Boston to sing the songs and speak the language they remembered from their young days. Even though somewhat staged, the entertainment was determined by the people present who had responded to the general invitation. There was a great deal of singing and some fiddling and stepdancing, and though this had been arranged rather than occurring spontaneously, the ceilidh had been set up for the people of the community to create an opportunity to enjoy their own songs and language. No advertisement was made, though the Highland Village Society tries to promote tourism and this activity would certainly have drawn interested observers from the hotel next door. In fact, the only visitors were these relatives of people in the area who had emigrated to Boston thirty years before. It is significant that these guests were amongst the leaders of the Gaelic singing.

My attendance at ceilidhs and my discussions with local inhabitants about earlier ones showed me the similarities and differences between the past and present ceilidhs, and the reason for the continuation of the gatherings. The most obvious difference is in the number of people available. While many areas of the world expand and experience the problems of increasing population, the occupants of the Iona peninsula lament their diminishing numbers. Again and again in speaking of ceilidhs people begin by talking of the larger number of people once

present in these communities, and of the many schools, post offices and stores which no longer exist due to depopulation. The change in ceilidhs came about not because in the early days the singers were better, the young people more enthusiastic, or the values stronger; rather, everything just diminished as the population did. Because of this situation the frequency of large-scale ceilidhs is less, and with the passage of time the narratives and language use may have changed. These aspects will be discussed below.

In terms of foodways and location, ceilidhs appear to have changed little. The kitchen continues to be the usual meeting place of every house, and these rooms retain the old wood or coal stoves and large comfortable armchairs and couches in addition to modern appliances. Entertainment traditionally went on in the kitchen, probably because it was the warmest room in the house in wintertime, but also because the woman of the house would like to be in earshot as she prepared the lunch or "struapach."

The offering of food, sometimes just referred to as "a cup of tea", although tea would never be offered alone, is an important part of every kind of gathering in this culture. In obtaining information on ceilidhs I asked about refreshments, and everyone had something to contribute. Scones, biscuits and bannock were standard fare, as well as oatcakes, and all these things still appear on the table at a ceilidh or any visit. Some informants mentioned that at a ceilidh you would be given the very best of what was available, and added that someone else's cooking would always taste better than your own, no matter what it was. However, even if nothing special was available, something was offered. As Mungie MacNeil said:

> Then my mother would make the tea. Whatever you had, even if it was just a piece of bread and butter, you made the tea anyway. You'd never think of going without making the tea, if you're from here anyway. (C8447)

Food was important as a symbol of hospitality and reciprocity to the Highland Scots; it was a way of welcoming and sharing friendship, and this custom remains. Charles Dunn writes of this facet of Highland life as transplanted to Cape Breton:

> ...the ancient tradition among the Highland people in the New World, and it is the woman of the house who dispenses this hospitality to the wanderer and the guest. As soon as a visitor appears, even though he may be only an Indian selling baskets, or a Syrian peddler, the housewife moves the kettle over the hot part of the stove to boil and warms the teapot. If the visitor arrives after the regular meal-time he is given a "lunch"; if he arrives, either unintentionally or intentionally, just before mealtime an extra place is set for him at the kitchen table. A visitor is automatically accepted just like another member of the family and fed. (*Highland Settler* 155)

At some gatherings liquor is offered, usually rum or whisky. It is difficult to determine when the decision is made to pass around the bottle, but certainly some ceilidhs feature drinking as part of the entertainment. When a singer who was asked to Joan's ceilidh suggested she invite several more people, she objected, saying that then they would want something to drink. When a larger crowd gathers, with perhaps some stepdancing and lively singing, liquor is likely to make an appearance. Sometimes, though, it will be offered in the course of a visit, and people speak of this as a "treat". In Protestant communities drinking was often frowned upon, but according to these informants, "The old people enjoyed a drink. It was rum they generally drank." (C8444)

It appears that a ceilidh that had a large attendance and was going well might merit a treat of whisky or rum. These would be precious and would have to be obtained from some distance, as is still the case today, so that to share one's liquor was a mark of hospitality indeed.

Many informants in talking about the old days would say, "We didn't have much, but we always had something to eat and we always had a good time." Communities in the early days were nearly self-sufficient, with people providing their own food, clothing and entertainment. It was important to the first generation of settlers who had lived landless and starving in Scotland to be able to offer food. Abundance of food to the point where it could be lavishly shared was spiritually rewarding to such people, and their concept of hospitality was connected always with food. The telling of tales and singing of songs is also a part of the give and take system in operation. In fact, a ceilidh shows the social system in miniature, with each member contributing and receiving in accordance with his needs and abilities.

These songs and stories are the essential element of the ceilidh. John Rory MacNeil feels that there were always better singers than storytellers in the Iona area, and that it was felt that storytelling was more of an art, more difficult than singing. This observation was made in reference to the *sgeulachan*, the old, long wonder tales once told in Gaelic at ceilidhs. He also mentioned that they were told, within his memory, to a small group rather than a large one:

> But it was all the *sgeulachan* that I heard told was just to a small bunch, you know, there'd be just a house with perhaps two or three came in and if there was a good storyteller there, the *sgeulachan* then he could just tell. But I, I never heard it, you know, I never heard a

> *sgeulach* told to, you know, a full house, I think they'd rather get doing something else, than listen to the *sgeulachan*. (C8451)

In response to a question about the stories and their resemblance to anything in English, he continued:

> No, I don't think it. They would be--oh, talking about giants and terrible creatures, you know, and what you went through, and those giants, and perhaps you were captured with them and you went under, they had you under a spell, and something happened them when you got clear and married the king's son or whatever it is. (C8451)

It seems that generally the art of telling *sgeulachan* has fallen away; along with other perils that threaten the maintenance of such tales, the number of people who comprehend enough Gaelic to understand a long tale is dwindling. Curiously, this language lack is not influential in the maintenance of songs, most of which are sung in Gaelic. I was told a few *sgeulachan* during my stay, and on each occasion the teller seemed doubtful that these were the kind of thing I was looking for. Twice the tellers insisted on recounting the tale once before I taped it to make sure they would not be "wasting" my tape. The *sgeulachan* are märchen; they are not meant to be believed and as such have no direct relationship to the community, as do the local legends more often told. The usual anecdotes are stories which are either humorous, often about someone living in the place, or are tales of supernatural events. In either event they are believed and as such have religious or cultural value for the hearers and tellers. The tellers of "those old stories", the *sgeulachan*, were respected, but there seems to be little indication that the passing of the stories is regretted. As Stephen Rory said, "There's as much fun in the simplest thing as in the broadest," and the

stories with the most appeal are those involving familiar characters, either living or dead. Perhaps a person's broken English would be ridiculed (see Dorson, "Jewish-American Dialect Stories"), or a pretentious person who came back from "the Boston states" with "not enough Gaelic to put the dog out" would be made the object of laughter. Community control is evident in the censure possible through ridicule, and the ceilidh is an admirable forum for it. The use of the dead to form an example for the living has been remarked by Glassie in Irish ceilis; this exists too on the peninsula where local memory is long and a person's foibles will be remembered long after he is no longer an active part of the community. Identification is the first step; when all family connections have been traced and the subject fixed in the proper place, a story may begin.

Henry Glassie in writing on the Irish ceili makes the following observation:

> During ceilis, one man gives a story, one woman gives tea, but the situation would be misrepresented as one of performers versus audiences. Roles shift gracefully and constantly through the evening; things begin and end in equality. (111)

The status of performance in an Iona ceilidh is similar to this web of shifting emphases, but it is important to remember that when one momentarily assumes pride of place as the performer, he is and expects to be the centre of attention. Individuals are recognized for their gifts and are pressed to perform. In storytelling there is no jockeying for position: those with the stories will tell them. Singing is perhaps more competitive in this area where command of a number of Gaelic songs is admired and where there is still a good number of people who can sing them. Storytelling is in a sense a debased art, no longer a craft to cherish,

but rather a knack that some people have for making things funny. In the particular ceilidh I describe, the two men who told narratives were of different types. One was devoted to local history and its careful detail, established often within the ceilidh through lengthy conferring with others present. The other man was depended upon to tell "lies" of the harmless recognizable sort, to amuse and entertain. Though the two men could and did exchange roles, there was an expectation that they would generally follow their ascribed performance style and thus ensure a good gathering. In a place where everyone knows each other the reputations have long since been set up, and each person is known and encouraged for what he can do. There are always those who wish to "show off"; they are allowed to have considerable say but will eventually be restrained in some tactful way, and later censured in their absence.

Since the stories have been heard before the way of telling them is important. Some people have taken upon themselves the community role of singer, taleteller or historian and their acquisiton of skills is more conscious than the person who has an anecdote to throw in. It appears that sometimes it is the community's bachelors who gain personal attention through this medium. Such a one is Joe Neil MacNeil, one of the few people who still has a good retention and active repertoire of *sgeulachan*. He lives the role of the storyteller and explains extensively how he acquired the tales he tells:

> I didn't solicit any...I was just going around and ...go to visit the neighbours and of course some of them were good storytellers. They might ask me to tell a story and I might tell them a little story and then that got them going and they'd end up with big stories--oh, I might find a good one some time and tell them that story, might be one that they

had heard years ago or maybe it was a new one that come out of nowhere, and they were always glad to hear stories. (C8449)

Joe Neil goes on to explain how he travelled about as a carpenter and picked up stories, giving an old one in exchange for two new ones, perhaps. There is a kind of commerce in stories and Joe Neil picked them up as the wares of the storyteller to improve and enhance his position in that role. Living alone, he may have done this out of loneliness, or perhaps to rectify the balance of his ambiguous status as a bachelor in the community. (See Szwed, "Paul E. Hall")

The use of language at a speech event is explored in Chapter 6, but the point should be made here that Gaelic is used at present day ceilidhs mostly for the punchlines of jokes, in conversation between two Gaelic speakers, and most predominantly in songs. People have great regard for the Gaelic songs, and because many of them are milling songs, knowledge of the chorus is sufficient to allow someone to follow a song through. Joe Neil speaks of Gaelic singing:

> And that was their entertainment. When the Gaelic was going at its best, of course, that was. They didn't need to have a milling frolic, the ceilidh was the place for Gaelic and for songs and what have you. (C8449)

The music reflects much of the people's feeling for their past and the Scottish background they share, as expressed by Mungie MacNeil:[6]

> You know the Gaelic songs seemed more musical and the--of course they, most of the Gaelic songs we know had their beginning in Scotland--our people--and they came over, and they were sadder, nearly all those songs they sang, they were sad songs because it was--the people were so lonesome coming across from Scotland. (C8447)

[6] At the ceilidh I attended at John MacDonald's, Jimmie Calum sang a song in Gaelic which he explained to me was about the people leaving Barra to come to Cape Breton. (C8457)

Still today, older men at gatherings will sit holding hands while singing, swinging their clasped hands together to the rhythm of the Gaelic music. It is emotional and memory-laden, and these songs remain as a celebration of the past in music.

Ceilidhs on the Iona peninsula have both practical and symbolic purposes. We have discussed what some of these purposes were in past times, and they can be equally ascertained for the present.

A ceilidh was an event for news, and this still occurs. Local news is certainly discussed at great length, including the health of community members who may be sick, especially if old, and the weather, important in a farming area for the progress of crops and well-being of animals. Even though very few people farm today, the habit of discussing the weather for these reasons continues. Upcoming events are discussed and in a sense advertised: this would include activites at the Highland Village and also in the parish church, a central part of the life of the people. Discussions on who is home from away, who has gone to visit someone, who has won lately at bingo; all the news which in a slightly larger area would be published in the "Social Column" of the local newspaper, is here passed by word of mouth. The gathering replaces the publication in this smaller community, and the exchange of news is one of its most important overt functions, as seen in the reading of the Gaelic newspaper in the old days. It also provides a framework for the stories and songs and may even give rise to them if names are mentioned which evoke a memory. The beginning, end, and teatime of a ceilidh are the places for current news, which becomes interwoven with that which is in part the news of the past.

In addition, an exchange of opinions may take place, which is both informative and educational. Politics has always been a topic of great interest in the area. Stories of election parties, election fights and fierce partisanship turn up in many of the humorous anecdotes quoted today. In former days people took their politics very seriously and kept to their party loyalty as they did to their religion. This is evident (in terms of the Liberal tendencies of the Washabuckers) in one verse of the locally-composed "Washabuck Song":

Election time was in the fall
All the Tories against the wall
It's all for one and one for all
Along the shores of Washabuck.
(C8461)

Mungie MacNeil recalls that stories at a ceilidh would be about "local people, and an awful lot of politics, the men." The ceilidh was an opportunity to express points of view and hopefully educate the neighbours on the most proper and profitable way to vote. Politics are still discussed, and still partisan to a large extent. My time there coincided with the advent of the federal election of September 1984, and visiting often involved a discussion on the possible results, more often depending on the party or the leader rather than stands on issues.

The ceilidh, as explained, is a gathering for the exchange of news, but this is neither an overtly expressed purpose, nor the only function which it carries out. Other reasons for its existence and for the enjoyment of it include entertainment value, education about moral and social values and also about local customs and history. Traditionally the young listened in order to hear the stories and learn them. Henry Glassie notes that folklorists always feel they have found the last ballad singer or storyteller because the young appear not to know these

aspects of their tradition. Glassie believes that in fact the young listen and wait until they are old and it is time for them to tell the stories. (63) This too is the case in Iona: young people such as Joan's son Quentin and Rod C. MacNeil's son Timmy listen, eventually offer an anecdote or two during the evening and finally, if they retain interest in the tradition, develop into full-fledged narrators. The ceilidh is their source of material and their training ground for style.

People in attendance also come to learn about their past. They learn items of local history, pick up new songs, or ask for clarification of a vague memory from earlier years. The older person at the ceilidh can provide this information. The ceilidh is also a forum for religious and political education through the stories told there, and this learning function is one recognized by the people in attendance. It is at a ceilidh that they will inquire about a song or fact of history about which they have been curious for some time, recognizing that the primary sources are likely to be found at this type of gathering, and that the setting is considered the appropriate one, where there is plenty of time for asking and the company has an unspoken agreement that all present are interested in the subject at hand. Furthermore, opinions put forward at a ceilidh about religious or political matters are taken seriously and are treated with some thought, much as they would be in a classroom context.

In addition to its overt purposes, the ceilidh, like all gatherings on the peninsula, has specialized meaning for the participants. Because it is a public tradition in a private home, in the sense that the event is open, and also that the traditions on display are those of a collective spirit, the ceilidh functions as an arena for social control. Daniel MacInnes has discussed this in his work on the Poplar Grove Scots:

> The ceilidh (the visit, social evening) was the social lifeline of the Poplar Grove communities. It was the usual place for interaction, taking place either at the end of the day, anytime Sunday and on holidays...The importance for social control that these visits once effected (and to a measure, still do) was beyond that afforded by the telephone or the television. The physical presence of relatives or friends in one's house was perceived of not only as a visit, but as an inspection and therefore an opportunity for criticism or subtle aggrandizement. The usual means for aggrandizement was conviviality and wit, but, it didn't hurt to display material artifacts as well. Some artifacts might indicate the host to be a good provider or the wife of singular ability in "making do." The status of "good provider" and "making do" were local indicators of familial success... The public telephone effectively removed this element of social control. By creating and efficient means of house to house communication it commenced a withdrawal from house visits. (58)

By dropping in without notice, a visitor could ensure that his hostess was always prepared for a visit, that she kept her home tidy and had food prepared at all times. The element of social control was still more evident, however, in the narratives told at ceilidhs, when moral examples might be drawn for the improvement of the company, or jokes made at the expense of those who held themselves superior, or rebelled against the community code in some other way. In the "company of equals" a ceilidh could function as a jury of peers for a person on trial either at the ceilidh or away.

As Glassie says, the people at a ceilidh are members of a group and it is often their community they celebrate as they tell tales of its history and its inhabitants and sing songs in its language, reinforcing and celebrating their community and its values. These take the form of religious, family, rural and heritage-related values.

The importance of the family is evident in the presence of all age

groups at social gatherings. Children and old people have a role and a respected place and both are much cherished; particularly the elderly show their importance in the ceilidh as the holders of information, songs and stories which younger people wish to learn. Stories which deal with ancestors and family connections, reminiscences of parents and their particular gifts, and the exchange of news about the activities of one's children show the family as immediate concern and source of pride.

Family and cultural heritage overlap when the exploits of the MacNeils or MacLeans are discussed. Nearly everyone is descended from Donald Og MacNeil or Lachlan MacLean, and these men are more than figures of history to the people who tell the stories. These tales are the source of ethnic consciousness for the Scots of Cape Breton and come about through a sense of ancestry: that which is developed through personal contact with those whose memories stretch far into the past.

When people in this part of Cape Breton speak of "the old people" or "the Scottish people", they are speaking of a part of themselves that is still connected by memory, by means of oral tradition, to the early settlers. The stories told of the Scots have real relevance to the people in Iona today, and a ceilidh gives the opportunity to celebrate this ethnic consciousness, which has been retained without self-conscious effort because it is still strong and meaningful.

Gwen Kennedy Neville has noticed a similar ancestor focus with her Scottish-American group, where one well-known past family member is known as the progenitor of the group. She also finds a strong consciousness of the mother's descent group, visible in naming patterns of children. ("Kinfolks" 267)

Further evidence for this ancestor linkage in Iona is the system of patronymic name use, where a person is identified by his own Christian name followed by that of his father. A woman will be known by her name and then that of either her father or her husband, if she is married. This system together with the dedication to the memory of Lachlan MacLean and Donald Og (to a lesser extent), shows that ethnic consciousness in this group is largely derived from an ancestor focus. In the Iona group, I believe, the concentration on the mother's line is less emphasized than with Neville's study group.

Religion is constantly in evidence. The Church is a daily presence in the lives of the people: as well as attending mass regularly they are present at social functions sponsored by the church, and many are members of such organizations as the Altar Society. Several people have made the pilgrimage to the shrine at Ste. Anne de Beaupre for their health or that of someone close to them, and belief continues in the medical efficacy of religious medals and relics. In many aspects of daily life this devotion is seen, such as saying grace before meals, and it also makes its appearance on special occasions, sprinkling holy water on the animals in May, or dipping one's feet in the water on the Feast of the Assumption for a cure. These religious values are evident in the ceilidh, when talk of church matters as well as tales of miracles appear. The large number of Devil narratives shows an awareness of the presence of evil in the world and the necessity to combat this with Christian faith, though at the same time it is possible to tell mild jokes at the expense of the Church. Whether it be narratives proving the awesome power of the Church or joking attempts to make light of it, it is evident that religion is very strong here and as a subject of primary importance it comes up often in the

conversation. This was evident at Joan's ceilidh, where the comments of Margaret Neil James clearly indicated a lack of understanding and a disapproval of the non-Catholic denominations.

The values that keep people on the Iona peninsula, tied to the rural way of life, are intricately connected with other values expressed at a ceilidh. For some, it is a sense of place. Those whose ancestors have farmed the land since 1815 may continue to farm it, for the sake of continuity and tradition. Others remain because they believe it is a healthy place to bring up children, where they will remain under the influence of the church and will be free from the corruptive effects of urban life. Others remain because of family obligations, or even perhaps because they are timid and uneasy about making a life elsewhere, but all remain because this is their home and they are attached to the scenery and to the history.

These values are the same as those that people bring in their stories to a ceilidh. Many have funny stories about their adventures living or working in the city, and others tell tales of people who went away and came to misfortune in the urban environment. There are a great many stories which ridicule people who tried to shake off their rural background, their language and rural identity; these people always come to grief through their pride and conceit. There are an equal number of stories about conceited people getting their comeuppance by a countryman, either in the city or the country. In all of these, the man who appreciates his tradition, his rural home and his language is the wise man.

Finally, community values emerge during the course of a ceilidh. All the above characteristics are part of community identity and thus the ceilidh reinforces this identity, but in addition the ceilidh exists as a socializing and

stabilizing force. John Szwed says of a comparable community in the Codroy that "social life in the parish is ordered by a series of supportive systems" (169), and this is paralleled in Iona. Reciprocity, discussed in detail in Chapter 6, is one aspect of the community responsibility necessary for the survival of the community. Goffman, in talking of the Shetland Islands, has pointed out that not to attend a gathering is as evasive of responsibility, and as deviant, as the behaviour of those who refused to shave, would not keep their properties tidy, or in other ways disobeyed the community code.

The gathering is important in this sense partly because community responsibility is carried out through the exchange of news about people who may be ill or old and shut in. A person who has assumed the responsibility for driving these people to church, painting their houses or performing some other small service is applauded for his good actions, thus reminding others that they must do their share. In an area where services are so limited, people help each other and help strangers to a degree unknown in the city, because alternatives are not present. News of such activity during the ceilidh will remind individuals of their duty. Satiric stories about defaulting individuals who deviate from the community code serve to reinforce belief in right and wrong. People are taught through ceilidh events what to value, how to respond to others, and how to function as a member of a small and interdependent society. Glassie shows how the ceili is an aspect of community spirit:

> As common occasion, the ceili is a locus for art and a force for social cohesion. Old men tell stories, but people of all ages and both sexes are present in the kitchen. Women, young men and the majority of old men who lack artistic pretension fill the role of follower, unifying with

> the teller and with one another during performance. Visitors to the ceili house join its inhabitants through reciprocal action, taking tea, giving chat, and they connect ceili houses to each other by varying their routines of nighttime travel. People ceili most often with people they like, who may live some distance away, but they also ceili with "near neighbours." (148)

The ceilidhs continue today as a living part of tradition, and as a protector of tradition. They do so because of the practical and symbolic purposes outlined above, but also because there is a lack of alternatives. Entertainment might easily be acquired from films, television, plays, concerts, or other recreation, but most of these are unavailable without the investment of the time and energy required to drive forty miles to the nearest town. Television is available, and in several homes I noticed colour televisions, often a gift to parents from children, but on many occasions the parents remarked that they themselves were not much interested in the programmes shown. In addition, some areas of the peninsula have poor television reception, making viewing still less appealing. Radio is popular, and a number of people have equipment to play tapes or records. Although these might be considered "commercial" forms of entertainment, it is significant that traditional Scottish or Cape Breton music is by far the most popular type for listening pleasure. This is echoed in the preference for other types of entertainment: when a concert, play or dance group comes to the area, it is most likely to draw a crowd if advertised as a "Scottish concert."

There is a real need for entertainment and the ceilidh can fill it as long as there are good singers and storytellers and good company. The needs for expressing religious and heritage-related values are perhaps peculiar to a

homogeneous community and require something like this kind of gathering to provide a focus for expressing these needs. As long as these values continue to be held there will be a need to express them. It is for these very practical reasons that ceilidhs continue to exist as natural and unselfconscious recreation on the Iona peninsula. These gatherings have adapted as the needs of the present population have changed, and the fact that the essence of them, the flavour, the feeling and the course of events are similar to the custom as it was imported some seven generations ago, is indeed significant. People value their traditions, but they also use them, because in a homogeneous community where, issuing from a common background, people have retained the same needs and values, it is most natural to use the material at hand, the existing traditions of ceilidhing.

The people who sit together at a ceilidh are those who have remained behind, who have chosen the limited way of life, diminishing population and restricted employment options over other opportunities in different areas. In this way they have selected consciously their traditional way of life and all that goes with it. On another level they use unselfconsciously the options this affords them for entertainment and for the maintenance of their other preferences, such as that of rural living over urban.

This particular gathering is representative of much of the way of life on the peninsula because it incorporates a number of elements of the culture: it serves as entertainment, information centre, source of social control and as sociable event, all drawn from a tradition going back centuries and adapted and changed to suit the needs of the present-day population. The ceilidh, perhaps more than any other social event taking place on the Iona peninsula, shows how this company of equals sustains itself with the inheritance from the past.

Chapter 4

The Dance

Although social gatherings are held for a variety of purposes, entertainment is an ostensible reason for or a result of most such events. In this chapter I consider dance events, which were and are organized on the Iona peninsula for the express purpose of amusement. Many dances form part of other events which had a dual purpose of, for example, fund raising and entertainment. These too will be discussed but will be more strongly emphasized in Chapter 5 under the subject of "gatherings with specific aims."

Dances are highlighted here as the main entertainment event devised purely as recreational activity because all informants, when asked about their special preference in terms of social gatherings, maintained that they enjoyed dances most. Wareham divides "times", parties in Newfoundland, into two major types: formal, or "hall" times, and informal times, known also as "kitchen", "store" or "boat" times. ("Aspects of Socializing" 24) Dance events in Iona correspond to these divisions, with a further necessary specification: some dances were held after such events as wedding anniversaries, work frolics, wedding showers, and at present, family reunions. This last group falls somewhere between formal and informal in that the dances are planned, rather than spontaneous, but are the added entertainment to a gathering for another, less

entertainment-oriented purpose. Dancing for entertainment is a universal and unlike the ceilidh is not a type of gathering specifically imported from Scotland. However, a Cape Breton rural dance has culture-specific elements that show particular aspects of identity as clearly as any other social event. These include the distinctive Cape Breton fiddle music, the use of step-dancing both within square sets and as individual performances, and the stereotypes of drinking and fighting.

Other events for entertainment purposes at present include card games and dart games in the winter, concerts and plays, and the events planned for the community and tourists by the Highland Village Society of Iona such as Highland Village Day and Pioneer Day. These events planned by the society have an underlying purpose of reinforcing ethnic identity, in the sense that they are constructed to stress "traditional" aspects of the culture in order to make people aware of their cultural heritage and to preserve the events of an earlier time. Although the objective of entertainment comprises part of their purpose as well, these gatherings are set up to promote the goal of preserving the past.

In terms of pure entertainment, a dance is what is and was most enjoyed, and when entertainment for the purpose of providing a break, celebrating a calendar or seasonal change, or rewarding oneself for hard work was required, a dance was what was held, and still is.

Those, briefly stated, are the overt and practical purposes of holding a dance, in addition to the very important function of raising funds, either for the building of a schoolhouse or a church, or as the source for a contribution to a community member unable for any reason to support himself.

Dances still take place on the Iona peninsula, both as organized events for entertainment and as follow-up festivities to anniversaries and weddings. Centres for social activity, including dances, in the communities are the Legion Hall in Iona, the Iona parish hall, the Highland Village complex, (also in Iona), and the community centre in Washabuck. These centres fulfill different needs and purposes in the communities and in part help to determine the scale and type of dance activity carried out.

During my research I attended a number of dances and will describe two of these below; one was a dance at the Legion Hall in Iona while the other one took place at the community centre in Washabuck. Both of these were formally organized events but significant differences were visible between the two in terms of the people in attendance, the type of dancing which took place, and the differing sense of community present.

The dance at the Legion was held on a Saturday night in July, and had been advertised for some time. Iona is the central community on the peninsula and people came from all the various communities around, including some from "the other side" (communities located on the opposite sides of the lake, necessitating taking a ferry). The Legion hall is fairly large and was on this occasion dark and smoky. A band was set up on a stage at one end of this large room, with a clear space for dancing next to a series of long tables extending to the other end, where people sat. I attended with Ann, the daughter of my landlady, and we arrived at about 10:30 p.m. The admission was $4.00, used to pay the band and to contribute to the costs of Legion activities. The band was called "the Newfies", a popular group in the area. There were four members of

the band, playing guitars, bass and drums. Their repertoire consisted of some well-known traditional tunes, some country and western songs and some popular numbers such as a Beatles medley. They also played the occasional very contemporary piece of the Top-40 variety. This mixture seemed to appeal to the audience, which was made up of people of varying ages. That is, there were no very elderly people there, who would have doubtless found the event noisy and tiring and not ideal for socializing, and there were no children or young teenagers due to liquor laws prohibiting entry to anyone under nineteen. The group in attendance was well distributed beween young and middle-aged people, and groups of a combination of ages were present. It was also noticed that parents often sat in a group with their grown-up children or other relatives. Dress was casual, and drinking was common. Several people were fairly intoxicated and there seemed to be the intention of getting drunk amongst the young people especially, this obviously being seen as part of the fun.

Dancing varied according to the music but was mostly of the variety to be observed in any city dance establishment; no square sets were danced, nor did the musicians attempt to initiate interest in that form of dancing, although at some Legion dances where a fiddler is present square sets will be danced. After each dance people sat down and waited for another invitation, or went in search of another partner; there seemed to be little impetus to the dancing and though people enjoyed the music, the components of drinking, talking and laughing with friends were evidently just as vital to the success of the gathering. Hector MacNeil gives his views on the Legion dances, saying that their pattern varies according to the band:

> Depends on who's playing. If you, like, have a square dance--I find dances at the Legion in Iona--and I hope you don't play this tape back to anybody who stages the dances--I find them awful stuffy. Yeah--like nobody wants to get up and dance. Well like, people will get up and dance, but then the floor clears real fast, and then people get up and dance, you know? And so--it's kind of a funny atmosphere. Let's say it's a square dance, you'd get just about everybody. If it's something like the Newfies and that, you get people who are more in tune with modern Irish music and that rah-rah, let's drink a whole bunch of beer sort of thing, you know...and dance to, and have a good time. But you wouldn't get some of the people who'll get out to a square dance. (C8441)

Legion dances are organized to be commercially profitable in order to raise money for Legion activities, and thus must appeal to a wide spectrum of people familiar with modern trends in dance entertainment. Dances held in the community centre in Washabuck display more traits associated with the traditional Cape Breton square dance, and draw a crowd which is mostly from the peninsula and which encompasses a larger age group. Such a dance was held in Washabuck on the evening preceding Highland Village Day.

Highland Village Day in Iona is a day-long concert of Cape Breton music and a barbecue followed by a square dance which is set up to draw tourists and also to provide entertainment for the community. It has become an unofficial Old Home Weekend for many people who have left the community, particularly people in their twenties who have left the peninsula recently to find work but are still deeply attached to the area and its traditions. It is also seen as a day of license for drinking amongst adults of all ages, and for eating take-out food and staying up late for children. To celebrate the beginning of this day it has become a tradition to hold a dance in Washabuck the night before, and it is this event which will be described below.

The dance took place in the community centre in Washabuck, which was once a one-room schoolhouse. The community raised money to have it renovated and enlarged, and it is used for all gatherings in that particular community, including the weekly card games and darts in the winter.

The dance began quite early, at about eight o'clock, and I attended with an older couple, sister of Joan's cousin Evelyn and her husband. We paid admission at the door, a cost of $3.00, again to pay the band and to support the community centre. The floor, a small area, was cleared for dancing, with the band in one corner. A raised section of the hall, the recent addition, held tables for drinking. At first the dancing and drinking were segregated by decree of those organizing the dance, but as the evening went on and the building became more crowded, people stood on the dance floor as well holding glasses and bottles.

The band playing was known as the Barra MacNeils, three brothers from Sydney Mines whose parents were residents of Washabuck and who have spent a great deal of time in that area. They are nephews of Joan MacDonald and are thus connected with the musical MacKenzie family of Washabuck. The band plays at bars in Halifax, has done some touring, and has appeared at folk festivals and other events. They play traditional Scottish and Cape Breton music and also write some of their own music. Their instruments include the violin, piano, mandolin, tin whistle and guitar. They are very popular in this area, not only because they are thought of as local boys, but also because they play familiar tunes with expertise and enthusiasm. Because they have formal training in music and because they have played fairly extensively outside the area, they regard themselves as professionals. Recently they have come under some criticism for

reneging on engagements to play at local events in order to take advantage of more profitable offers elsewhere.

The dancing consisted of what are known as "square sets" and "round dancing". A square set indicates four couples in a square, dancing a series of prescribed steps known as "figures". There is a short break of about five minutes between each figure of the dance, after which the same group reassembles to dance the next figure. The word "set" refers to the group of eight people and also to the entire dance, or group of three figures. In earlier times a caller at the dance was common to direct the steps; now square sets are not often called, but usually one person in the set will assume the responsibility of giving directions to the other dancers in order to keep the steps in time and in the correct form. Dancers alternated between these two types of dancing; there were four sets on the floor nearly all the time with a full complement of participants. Dancing square sets requires some knowledge of the figures and some organization, so that dancing here was a matter of skill and more of a performance than the dancing at the Legion. When the sets ended the musicians changed to popular and country music and allowed those who had not yet danced or did not feel competent in a square set to have an opportunity to participate. The round dancing was of course less controlled than the square sets, but it seemed that people continued to stay up between dances rather than clearing the floor. Although square sets are most familiar perhaps to those of middle age, many young people danced competently in them too, excepting teenagers who, perhaps more trend-conscious, preferred the more up-to-date tunes. Although the very elderly were not present there were people of a wide age range, including some teenagers, though no children.

Drinking went on both inside the hall and out, the outside drinking being a lingering custom of the not-so-distant past when there was no liquor license at the hall. This generally took place in cars or trucks parked just outside the community centre, and people frequently came into the hall to look for friends and invite them out for a beer, creating a smaller social gathering within the larger one for special friends. The dance was an occasion for great enjoyment because many people had just arrived home for Highland Village Day weekend, and there were often shouts of welcome as more people arrived. Although some had come from other communities, this was a dance mainly for people from Washabuck, Iona and Barra Glen, and everyone seemed to know each other, which was not the case at the Legion dance. From my standpoint as a comparative stranger the Washabuck dance was much more enjoyable because invitations to dance were more forthcoming, probably because I was recognizably a newcomer in the crowd.

The dance continued till about 3:30 a.m., as the band was quite willing to continue to play, and everyone left en masse, many people going on to parties in private houses which lasted until morning.

Older informants always assert that a dance was the best fun possible in their day, and many still enjoy going to a dance event either to dance or watch. They are most likely to be present at community dances held after weddings, anniversaries and such reunions, where community members gather as a community to celebrate the rites of passage of one of its members. In these situations there is much opportunity for conversation and catching up on news, seeing people who are home for a brief visit, enjoying refreshments provided by

the family hosting the party, and watching the dancing, which may be more restrained than at an "official" dance and may allow for more of a performance element, including stepdancing by individuals.

Dances seem to be the natural aftermath of nearly every type of social activity. The dances after weddings, anniversaries and clan gatherings are especially enjoyable because people are back "from away", there are many familiar faces, and the conversational element is stronger than at a dance planned solely as a dance, such as the Legion affairs. Also, a family organizing such an event is very often able to obtain a special liquor license which permits the admission of people under nineteen, including children as young as seven or eight years of age, so that a complete age range and resulting family feeling is possible. A feeling of festivity is in evidence because there is something to celebrate, a component missing in a commercially organized dance.

At some such dances the hired musicians may take a break and be replaced by a volunteer or two, usually a fiddler as that is the most commonly played instrument, and often a well-known fiddler such as one of the Barra MacNeils or Carl MacKenzie of Washabuck.

To the older people, the dances of "their day" are remembered as even longer, rowdier and more gala events in every way than organized dances of today. Questions put to people ranging in age from about fifty-eight to eighty-six yielded the same scenarios and some narrative set pieces that are part of the collective memory of dances in the old days, when there were more people around, and especially more young people, who were the ones looking forward to the dances.

It is evident that a dance was a grand occasion, partly due to infrequency. Though house dances, frolics and weddings were common enough, full-scale dances with dinner in the hall were infrequent, and this is one reason given for their popularity. It was the kind of occasion to look forward to, get a new dress for. Dancing was forbidden during Advent and Lent, so New Year's and Easter were always times to celebrate. There would be a dance in the spring after planting, and one in the fall after the harvest. Although dances in each community were held infrequently, there was the chance to go to another place for a dance, as Joan MacDonald tells:

> Ah well--not that often here. They used to have one in the--probably not every month or anything--used to be one at Barra Glen and there'd be one in Gillis Point and there'd be some in Iona, there'd be Ottawa Brook, and there'd be MacKinnon Harbour, be St. Columba, Upper Washabuck and Lower Washabuck. So they all had a dance. (C8458)

These communities are all situated on the Iona peninsula and the inhabitants would all be known to each other so that wedding dances and such would probably be made up from this local group. An organized dance, however, would draw crowds from many miles away, from communities on either side of the lake, and in the same way Iona inhabitants also ventured far afield to dances in other places. John Rory explains about the trains that brought people to Iona:

> There were so many passenger trains running then. There were five or six trains in the day that you could get to come to Iona, coming in and going out and there was a train coming up from the east at night about eleven o'clock, quarter to eleven I suppose and then it would the next--we call it "the fast" coming down, fast express. And then there was the fast in the morning going down about five o'clock. This was very suitable for the--for the city or the town coming to Iona on the fast at eleven o'clock--dance till five and go to the station. (C8447)

This was part of the reason the dances lasted all night, an element never missing from anyone's description of old-time dances. Sadie and Mungie said that dances started at half-past six or seven and went on until six in the morning:

> Well, I'll tell you why that was. Because they used to come up from Boisdale and those places you know and they couldn't get away. They didn't have cars, many of them then, they'd have to wait until the morning train going down to get back home. So they kept the hall open. (C8447)

Several other people told similar stories about dancers depending on trains, requiring the hall to be left open for them. Because of this the custom was to dance all night, and stamina in dancing as well as skill became a point of pride. This is evident in recollections of a hard day's work preceding and following a dance. Hector MacNeil gives this account of a dance as a further feat of strength:

> Well they'd go home and milk the cows. My uncle was telling me about the time--oh he was telling us about how they would do that, work all day. He gave me the example of the time they went, haymaking season, they went to a square dance at Christmas Island. It's about eight, ten miles from Castle Bay to Christmas Island. They walked to Christmas Island, went to the square dance, danced all night till the sun came up, walked back the eight miles or so, and then put in eleven loads of hay that day. And eleven loads of hay, loose hay, is a lot of hay to put in, you know, you put in four or five or six in a day, you've done a fair day's work, you know. But yeah, the stamina was just amazing. And it was nothing to walk, you know, to walk five or six miles or three miles just to go visit the neighbours. (C8441)

John Rory has the same accounts of dancing from daylight to daylight, but his stamina and that of others was really reckoned by the number of sets a person could dance:

I guess we were kind of strong. But I didn't dance that, I didn't dance that many. There was one night I think my record, my own record--although another fellow was telling me that we danced twenty-one, but my record--I'm sure that we didn't dance twenty-one sets at all--we danced sixteen. Sixteen sets. And they weren't three-figured sets either. There could be--there were all four, four figures and sometimes--sometimes a fifth figure would be added on. (C8452)

Mungie recalls her first dance:

You'd be so tired--I remember the first dance I went to--I was fourteen. And I danced, and my head the next day was going like that. It was haymaking time. And we were out in the field and I was sick, I felt sick, I felt dizzy you know because that was the first dance, and I wouldn't say a word. I'd go out, I'd go in the field because I was afraid if I said I felt sick they wouldn't let me go to the next dance. So I suffered in silence. (C8447)

Stephen Rory MacNeil also speaks of dancing sixteen sets, but this came about as part of his duties as the caller or "prompter" as it was termed in that area.

I remember one day, the day that there was a dance at Iona, and I was, I was on the committee. Well I suppose I'd be up eighteen or twenty then, between eighteen and twenty, well I ploughed all day and went to the dance and being on the floor I had to dance more because I'd be short a dancer. I'd be calling, calling and going through and getting dancers and I'd be ready to let it go, the other fellow may be ready, perhaps I'd have to dance, you know. Or perhaps pull somebody in to dance in this place. Then--I'd have to dance sixteen sets. There's others, there's others that can do it, they danced sixteen, fifteen sets and so on but--my God they'd have to work pretty hard to put that in. (C8445)

Not only physical stamina was required to make a person a good dancer; expertise was equally necessary. Old people recall their dancing days of

sixty years before and can still name the best dancers of their day. Dancing square sets is fast-paced and even with a caller requires some knowledge of the figures of the dance. Children were not allowed to attend dances and young people had to feel quite confident of their ability before getting into a set. The older people were the authority. Hector MacNeil recounts an anecdote to this effect:

> I just thought of a story that [my Aunt Jessie] told me. She was telling me one time they had a dance at the schoolhouse in Castle Bay and she was about twenty at the time, she's seventy-nine now. And the old people were there, who they considered old in their fifties and so, you know, and the young people were dancing around and they were stomping and going on, you know, and the old people got up and said, "Well listen," you know, "You're botching it all up and we'll show you how to dance properly." And they did a dance. And she was saying that every step was just in perfect time to the music and so much more graceful than what they were doing. (C8441)

John Rory recalls his first dance and the requirements for skill:

> Well. There weren't too many young people going. What I mean by young people, those who weren't dancing and you weren't--you didn't, you weren't dancing at ten or eleven like that. I danced--I danced where Maxie lives now, in that house, at the man's wedding there April 12, 1921--I was, I wasn't seventeen. That was my first dance. But I'd been to dances before that. You know, not dancing, not, not qualified. Didn't know the--ah, you felt at that time the dance was orderly. The prompter--the caller, as we called him, the prompter, he was particular about you know that you'd follow the call, you'd follow the prompting what was you're supposed to do and well--if you were a novice you didn't want to jump in there and feel that you were going to mix everything up. (C8452)

He went on to say that you learned just by looking on, and when you felt ready you could venture in. He remembers the exact date of his first dance, and the number of sets he did.

Some people learned to dance at home in the kitchen from parents or older siblings before they went to the dance so they would be prepared. Rhodes mentions this in his article on Cape Breton dancing:

> Moreover, they had to be danced properly--when there was dancing in the houses the young people practised in a back room until they were proficient enough to join in the sets in the front room. (274)

Stephen Rory however was of the opinion that people did not learn to dance ahead of time by practicing:

> We never practiced to learn to dance--well now when we were--I don't know when was it we started to dance. We would get on the floor and follow them. And we started to go to dances after say twelve years...The order of the floor was if you can't dance, you can't stay. You could go through it--but if you could go through it without breaking up the dance. (C8445)

Although "round dancing" was popular, a practice learned and brought home by those in the States, the square sets were by far the most common. Rhodes defines round dancing:

> In the village halls nowadays, this "square dancing" alternates with "round dancing", this latter term being used to describe a couple dance derived from the Waltz, the Polka, and the couple dances of the 1920's, danced to boisterous Canadian-Scottish tunes. (274)

The physical set-up of the dance was different in some respects than it is today. In those days an admission fee, ten or twenty-five cents was paid, and then the boys were required to pay ten cents a set for the privilege of dancing with the girls. The floor was treated to make it slippery, either with cornmeal, paraffin wax or dance-floor wax, though most averred that cornmeal was best,

being less sticky than wax. One informant said that the floor was slippery to the point of being dangerous, and that she had slipped twice in one evening. This seems to have been done to improve the appearance of the hall, and also to heighten the excitement of the dance and to force still greater expertise to come into play. Falassi describes a similar circumstance in the Italian *veglia*:

> The women sprinkled water on the kitchen floor. They then swept it and sprinkled salt over it. This last operation was a ritual one in that it created a ritual space. The rational explanations that I elicited were "to be able to dance better", "to be able to slide more easily" and "to prevent dust" but, as others told me, it was also done to keep away witches. (173)

Appearance was important, as befitted a ritual occasion. All informants stressed that it was necessary to put on your finest clothes and be presentable. As John Rory said:

> You were as dressed up going to the dance then as you would be going to church. Oh yes, the suit had to be pressed, the shoes had to be shined, and you had to have a--I'm talking about the boys now--the girls were just as dressed you know, in their own way, but--but now, oh yes, the suit pressed, and the shoes shined and the shirt clean--wore a white collar and tie, maybe before morning it got awfully warm. (C8452)

John Rory and the other men stressed that it was most unacceptable to remove one's jacket, no matter how hot it was, and Mickey averred that a woman would refuse to dance with a man without a coat. Sadie and Mungie spoke of the ladies' apparel:

> And they never, they never turned the lights down either. And everybody would want to have a new dress you know, a nice dress, and you wanted, you wanted to be seen, you didn't want to hide yourself away by turning off the lights. (C8447)

Everyone wore a Sunday suit and a nice pair of leather shoes; as Mickey said "You'd have to have leather for dancing." Stephen Rory says of the ladies' clothes that:

> Styles...styles in that time weren't too much the way they are now. Perhaps more valuable because they were going to more effort to dress up than they are today. (C8445)

All in all, older community members remember the more formal dances with approval, and think the present-day fashion of wearing jeans to a dance not entirely acceptable. It is possible that they feel there is not enough demarcation between the formal quality of a dance, including frequency and style of dress, and day-to-day life. In their time, a dance was a great occasion, a reward for hard work to be regarded as an event of some significance.

The music at a dance in former days does not differ markedly from the traditional dances of today, when a fiddler and piano player are the entertainment. John Rory says that there would always be two fiddlers in the hall, and that later on a piano was added. These fiddlers could last the whole night:

> Pretty well. They were the fiddlers that were hired for the dance. But if there was a fiddler, or were fiddlers in the hall, they might spell them off. (C8452)

In answer to my question about the fiddlers' pay, Mickey said:

> No, they--the musicians then, they were playing for free and then as the time--well when it came to pay them, the musicians would get--see the money isn't like it is today. Musicians would get for playing the whole night, two bucks, two dollars as we call it, that was okay--they'd play all night. (C8445)

Later on, rates were higher, as Stephen Rory relates:

> Yeah, but now about the, about the time now, oh we take after 1925 or so the music became more--because there were some people in Boisdale that had a, had a band. They'd charge about six dollars, that was like a million dollars. (C8445)

This band was apparently made up of fiddlers and piano players as well; there was as yet no departure from that kind of music. In fact, it appears that Cape Breton fiddle music remains much the same today; there has been a great revival in the last fifteen years in traditional fiddle music, including groups of young children. Allister MacGillivray recounts in *The Cape Breton Fiddler* that the style of fiddling was influenced by the sound of the bagpipes; others claim that there is a touch of the Gaelic language in the melodies. The fiddle was at one time threatened with the same fate as the language; this was due to the actions of a few clergymen, both Catholic and Protestant, who regarded both fiddles and pipes as influences for evil. Alistair MacGillivray mentions this in his work on Cape Breton fiddling:

> Some of the early Cape Breton clergy held to the ancient superstition that fiddles and pipes were "instruments of the Devil." As in Scotland, these zealous churchmen tried to stamp out the music and all activities that went with it. The most well-known case of this occurred during the pastorship of Father Kenneth MacDonald (1865-94), who gathered up all the violins in his Mabou-West Lake Ainslie parish, and destroyed them in the hope of banishing the demonical atmosphere which he felt centered around them. (2)

Rhodes mentions that the cause of this disfavour was in fact the dancing it inspired, notably a boisterous reel known as the "Wild Eight":

> At some time in the nineteenth century the 'Wild Eight' fell into disfavour with the priests, and this led, apparently on the instructions of the bishop of the time, to a temporary ban on all social dancing--in some parishes the priests even went so far as to collect and destroy all the fiddles. (271)

The source of fiddlers, however, never seems to have been seriouly threatened on the Iona peninsula, and with the recent revival of Cape Breton fiddling all over the island, the distinctive fiddling style seems in no danger of disappearing.

Community gatherings provided the musical education of most fiddlers, and pay was low--three or four dollars. A great many people were capable of playing the fiddle. Stephen Rory says that when the best fiddlers went away to the war he himself would take a hand; there was always someone who could play, and a fiddle in every house. The piano came later and is still regarded as the secondary instrument. Michael Anthony MacLean of Washabuck is quoted in *The Cape Breton Fiddler*:

> Here Michael Anthony adds a point which some experts on Cape Breton music will verify: "It seemed we had a different sound to our music (i.e. in the Iona area); there's no real way to explain it."(141)

A similar point is made by Carl MacKenzie when he talks about the "Washabuck sound" as distinctive from that of other areas. (C8460)

The dances recalled by my oldest informants had certain aspects which rendered them important, highly organized entertainment events on the peninsula. These included the use of food, formal clothing, the role of courtship and the presence of liquor at the events, demarcating these dances from the less formal dance events which took place spontaneously in people's homes.

Although the less formal dances on the peninsula today will feature sandwiches and sweets, it has been a long time since a full-course dinner was part of a dance. Although the dance itself was considered the main part of the entertainment, the dinner was a welcome addition to those who were hungry from all the physical activity, or who had come down early on the train and needed a meal. The dinner was held upstairs in the hall throughout a large part of the duration of the dance, until after midnight, with tea being served after that. It was organized, like the dance itself, by a committee. The profits from the dinner went to the organization sponsoring the dance:

> Fifty cents then for supper. It wasn't so much but it was a big help to the community. (C8445)

Reminiscences about the food include the fact that fish would never be served because it was too cheap. Part of the reason the supper invited such effort was because of an element of competition amongst the women responsible for setting up the meal:

> Oh, a whole system, yes. In the supper, we call it supper. And they'd have a full supper, there was mashed potatoes and there was--the best of table. There was everything on the table because the group would be, that would be putting up the tables...the women putting up the tables, not that one was challenging the other, but every group would want to see that the run of tables they were handling was handled perfect and it was presentable, no tea spilled, and if it were that cloth was rolled up and another one on, and everything would be just--it was--I'll tell you it was something worth. Not like the present-day, I'm not finding fault with the present day, present day it's nothing for you to see something spilled over the table and somebody else just going to come in--oh that couldn't go on. (C8445)

As well as eating, drinking was an important feature of dances. There

was no liquor served at the dances, but the men generally had a supply in the woods and it was part of the evening's entertainment to hide it so that it could not be found. The favoured beverage was moonshine, and as several of the men related, drinking was not a daily occurrence and therefore much overindulgence took place. This led to fighting, which was also a regular feature of dance entertainment in the area. As with every form of "sanctioned deviation", as James Faris expresses the kind of behaviour that went on at Newfoundland times, there were rules and limits. ("Validation in Ethnographic Description") Drinking right in the hall would have been a gesture of defiance, a pushing of the limits John Rory describes:

> No no no, not in the hall, unless you were, unless--and that would be considered a rowdy, you know, that if you started drinking in the hall, no, that wasn't--that wasn't manly at all. Outside--and you hid the bottle and you'd have to hide it quite a way from the hall--it meant quite a little walk--and you were in a hurry to get back because if you hid it there'd be people out especially in the summer and in the wintertime too, there'd be people out--you know, snoopers out--they saw you hiding the bottle, well they'd just go to it and take it and you're out of it. So that was the idea and you'd get far enough away from where snoopers would be and you hid the bottle there. (C8452)

Mickey Bean Niellag and Stephen Rory, when asked about drinking, immediately linked it up to fighting. They first claimed "overindulgence" as the sole reason for these conflicts, but a little more discussion showed the matter to be more complex. Partly it was the fact that people did not drink on such a regular basis as they do now, so as Mickey said when they drank, "they went into it kind of heavy."

In addition, there was the issue of territoriality. This was probably

excited by the alcohol, the presence of girls to impress and the important fact that dances, unlike many gatherings, did not take place in a private home and therefore aggresssion would not be taken as an insult to the host, or as potentially damaging to his property. Mickey comments on this feeling of loyalty to one's own area, noticeable in such songs as "Judique on the Floor", where dancers would perform individually to promote their communities and a challenge was issued to remove them from the floor:

> Yeah, too much liquor, and then there was another thing. The people of today all gets together, see, it's nothing for--just like that, we meet you or you may meet us--well, we meet people from Sydney, Bras d'Or, Sydney Mines, and all down from the other side of the ferry, up Little Narrows way, we know. At that time it was only...in our own area that we knew the crew. Well when outsiders would come in, well outsiders were claiming that they had the stronger people on their own side of the water than was on Victoria County side, and you'd get a few of the Victoria County would figure thay had able men, able-bodied men too. Well, so they wouldn't look at each other too often crossways when the coats would come off and [sound of fist hitting palm] into it. (C8445)

The men said that the fights never interfered much with the dancing, and that people would just go outside to settle their differences. However, Stephen Rory remembers fights of a different sort years before, when the miners would come on an excursion to Iona for a picnic. Picnics were also very popular locally, and were always followed by a dance. MacGillivray describes these gatherings:

> ...in the late 1800's a new social event came into prominence--the parish picnic. Sanctioned by the Church, this fund-raising event was usually held over a two-day period. It consisted of suppers, sporting events, fiddling and dancing. (2)

The miners, who lived in industrial towns, welcomed the chance to get out for a day in the country and to have a release from their work. In that case there would be fights, not between the local residents and the miners, but amongst the miners themselves. Those who lived in the industrial area of Cape Breton led a very different life from that of the rural inhabitants, and the miners had a reputation as being tough, hard-drinking and ready to fight, part of the stereotype that still persists in Nova Scotia about Cape Bretoners. However, the community was prepared and ordered a boxcar to be placed on the railway sidings at Iona which would be used as a prison. Several policemen were available to control any trouble, and that seemed to quell the fights.

Thus drinking and fighting, although present, were both confined to specified areas and amounts. This corresponds to Wareham's description of hall times:

> There was no singing at the formal times nor was there any open drinking. The men, however, had flasks or bottles (usually of dark rum) which they drank during breaks in the dancing when they went outside ostensibly to "cool off". The community was on its best, "proper" behaviour. ("Aspects of Socializing" 24)

Charles Dunn in his book *Highland Settler in Nova Scotia* reports on the overindulgence and intemperance of the Nova Scotia Scots, especially in connection with social gatherings:

> Any gathering, particularly a milling frolic or a wedding, was considered to be a reasonable excuse for a dance and a dance always called for liquor. As a consequence rural dances became traditionally associated with fights. Under the exciting influence of a lively fiddle and dancing feet, and the hazardous inspiration of rum and whisky, petty feuds burst into flame, bravado flourished, and some blood-thirsty

> youth would leap at his rival. Usually all that resulted from the fight was a few bruises and a cut or two, but sometimes such a fight did not end until one of the participants had been killed. (106)

The fight that Dunn goes on to describe, where one combatant killed the other with a knife, happened in Washabuck in 1878. This is described in detail in Vincent MacLean's book of his uncle's reminiscences, (52) and the author starts by mentioning that it took place in his grandfather's house. It is certainly a gruesome account, and gives the details of the wounds sustained by each participant, but MacLean stresses that bad feeling had previously existed between the parties concerned and the fight was not just the outcome of high spirits at a dance. Dunn also makes the point at the end of his description of the same incident:

> Late in the last century in one of the Highland communities in Cape Breton two rivals went to a ploughing frolic. After the ploughing was completed and the dancing had warmed up, Alec, one of the rivals, attacked John, the other. When it seemed that Alec was not likely to win the fight, Alec's brother, Hector, at the instigation of his father, joined in. John was then at a great disadvantage, but his brother Peter in turn came to his aid. Peter was a cripple and therefore not particularly powerful. When Hector began to worst him, in the fury of the fight he drew a knife and stabbed at his opponent and killed him. That the outcome of this trivial feud is not typical, however, is proved by the fact that the present members of the community still speak of it in tones of horror. (106)

Few stories of this extremity were heard on the Iona peninsula, and it seems that fighting in a serious way, in the opinion of the residents, was the preserve of the visiting miners, who presumably had grievances of their own which could best be settled away from their working place.

Finally, a dance was an occasion for courting to take place. Gatherings

have long had this purpose, as Falassi explains in great detail in *Folklore by the Fireside*. He suggests that dances shortened courtship time by providing ritualized meetings, and that the form of country dances, emphasizing the couple symbolized courtship. Similar views on the function of dances have been advanced by Bert Feintuch, who sees the form of the square set as symbolizing the dominant role of the couple in rural society.

Courtship in the Iona peninsula dances has not been overtly explained by the residents. Many of the older people in the community are unmarried, and this state has been attributed to the fact that everyone knew each other so well that there was room only for fraternal affection, and that those who married were often those who went away and found a mate elsewhere. Other reasons included economic circumstances, shyness on the part of the men, and religious differences. Within the structure of the dance, choosing a partner had more to do with a girl's ability to dance well than with prospective matrimonial chances. Still, the conventions were evident. The men paid the caller to dance with the girls, and chose the partners they preferred. Sadie and Mungie said that once in a while the dance was "ladies' choice", but generally they were too shy to take advantage of the opportunity. They also said that while it was possible to be escorted, they usually just went in a crowd, and preferred to dance with their own friends rather than the strangers from other areas. This in itself is indicative of a somewhat limited courtship role, as people were not taking advantage of the opportunities to meet strangers, who by community tradition might be more eligible as spouses than the local boys and girls. However, part of the excitement of the dance was the possibility of someone "seeing you home", as Mungie relates:

> Well, we used to just go the gang of ourselves, usually the ones from the other side, and we'd all go together, there'd be a bunch of us go together. But then you might have somebody else to see you home. If you were lucky. I always remember the trick I played on a poor guy. I won't tell you who it was--of course you wouldn't know him anyway. I didn't care for him, I didn't want him, and he was kind of hard to get rid of, you know, and I--he wanted to see me home anyway. But I was staying--was at a restaurant, there was a little restaurant at Iona at the time, and I was there for the summer to help out and I didn't have very far to go, up to the hall but anyway he was going to see me home...November, so it was getting cool, you know, it was kind of cold. And anyway he had to see me home and I said okay, walked down with him and when we got to the door of course he wanted to loiter for a while. "I said okay, I'll have to go in and get a sweater--I went in and closed the door and turned the key! (C8447)

Sadie ended the anecdote by chiming in, "No wonder she never got married!" The story was told for amusement, but it does show that girls in Iona had some control over their own actions and that they could feel free to keep company or not with a young man after the dance. In discussion of the betrothal ceremony and the custom of arranged marriages (see Chapter 5) male informants and writers give the impression that the women had little say in the choosing of a husband. (see Farnham, P. J. M. Campbell) However, the statements of both female informants and writers such as Margaret Shaw indicate that, as in many cultures, the passive role of women merely served to cover the considerable power of choice they did exercise.

The other kind of dances held as amusement were what is known as "kitchen rackets" or "kitchen parties", corresponding to the classification of "less formal times" used by Wilf Wareham. Although it was common for those to follow a wood-cutting or haymaking frolic and were part of the compensation for

the joint labour, they also grew out of the ceilidhs and were put on spontaneously just for the fun of it. Wareham describes them thus:

> The informal times were more or less spontaneous. They occurred during the spring and fall when outsiders were present, but also during the winter. The central room in a Newfoundland house was the kitchen, and this is where the entertaining was done. These parties were thus called "kitchen times" ...In contrast with the hall times, kitchen and store times were seldom planned more than a few hours in advance, and emphasis was on the informal. Open drinking, singing, reciting and yarning were important activities. People generally attended in casual or work clothes. The accordion was the chief musical instrument, but if one were not available someone would "sing a set" of tunes, a practice unheard of at the formal hall time. The lively square dance predominated and the slower Virginia Reel and American Eight were seldom danced. Food was seldom served and there was no admission fee. In the earlier period, wedding times were often held informally in a kitchen or sometimes a large store, and everyone in the community was invited. ("Aspects of Socializing" 24)

Rhodes offers a good description of such events in Cape Breton:

> In Cape Breton Island, as in the Scottish Highlands and the Western Isles, a good deal of dancing took place in the people's houses. The early Scottish settlers built for themselves quite large frame houses with three or four good-sized rooms on the ground floor, and thus had much more space in their homes for dancing than in their old croft houses in Scotland. The only alternative places for indoor dancing in the early days were barns and schoolrooms, for public halls were not built until the early years of this century—the first in Inverness County was built around 1900. Among the younger people outdoor dancing was also common, the wooden bridges being particularly popular as dancing-places; also, in the summer, whole districts would organize 'picnics', when large open-air dance floors would be built out in the forests for a day or two of merry-making. (269)

The kitchen racket in Cape Breton differed from that in Newfoundland in some respects, because it grew out of the ceilidh, which would already include the elements of songs and stories. The fiddle was the customary instrument

rather than the accordion, and food would always be served in any social gathering. Still, many points of similarity exist. Archie MacDonald recalls seeing people dance at parties to *puirt a beul* or mouth music, humming fiddle or pipe tunes when musical accompaniment was unavailable:

> But I've been at other places where a singer would get going and he'd --that's the jigging, the *puirt a beul*. And he'd get the people dancing. Just by modulating the tones of his voice up and down and get a start so you could step to it...I've seen fellows stepdancing and the only music they had was a *puirt a beul* man, mouth music. And he was good at it too. And the fellows'd be stepping down. Get a place--piece of an old door, something that your feet could sound. You'd have your shoes on, working boots. And--you got to hit them--you got to hit the time off with his, with his feet when they strike the floor. (C8442)

The furniture would be cleared out of the kitchen or perhaps the front room. Mungie describes one such event occurring after a frolic of some kind:

> In their front room of their house, in the kitchen, wherever, the best room they'd have. They'd get the violin players and they'd all be glad to come, you know. They'd put benches around the wall, so the people could sit. You know they'd be just the gang, there wouldn't be a large crowd. And there'd always be a lunch served, you know, tea. (C8447)

John Rory gave the impression that the ceilidh might be going on in the kitchen, and the dance would be in the front room, presumably to allow the ceilidh to continue in the kitchen, and the gathering would be known as a kitchen racket. He offered the suggestion that a kitchen party was more formal than a kitchen racket, but this seemed to be a thought of the moment. The dance itself was called the kitchen racket.

There were some objections to the kitchen rackets. Being informal, there was neither an official committee to restrain behaviour, nor assumed rules

that went along with the formal dinner and correct dress. Stephen Rory recalls that the priests were against kitchen dances:

> What it is about the priests then, they were working towards temperance more, and when there'd be a dance like that there'd be liquor sometimes. (C8445)

A kitchen racket was a good opportunity for people to practice dancing before a formal time, or to dance under less formalized circumstances. A dance being regarded as the highest form of entertainment, it is natural that it would be seen as a reward for work, whether specified as in a frolic, or more generally as a break in the routine of farm work.

Dances as we can see from this discussion of present and past occasions have changed not only in custom but in emphasis. Though still a favoured form of entertainment, there is no longer the formality that once distinguished the dance as the great entertainment of the season. Population depletion is at work here, as in every aspect of life on the peninsula; to have enough people for a large dance it is necessary to go outside the area or for people to come in from elsewhere, thereby changing the structure of the community-oriented event. In a smaller dance like the one which took place in Washabuck, there was a smaller proportion of young people than that which would be found in an earlier day.

The formality of dress and the large dinner have disappeared. Drinking outside will still go on, but women as well as men are free to take a drink and drinking is common and acceptable enough that it no longer leads to extreme behaviour of the type described in earlier days.

Some of the changes have come about from the decreased population,

from other musical styles intruding from outside, and also from changed liquor laws which segregate age groups. In addition, the focus of events has changed somewhat. The Legion puts on dances for a large group which includes outsiders, while the community centre and the parish hall have other, more local aims for their dances. The Highland Village puts on events which are meant to appeal to tourists and which exploit Highland traditions to some extent, but which are also designed for participation by community members. Availability of cars allows people to travel to other areas for entertainment, much as they did by train years ago, but the festive spirit and group sense is obviously less when the dance occurs in another locale.

Dancing still takes place at private parties, but is more likely to be stepdancing than square sets, and is performed by an individual to display his expertise and to attract attention. Still, people in the area probably have more interest in and more opportunity to attend organized dances than people of comparable age in the city, where there is litle else offered beside school dances and those sponsored by private clubs.

Group identity is as visible in this kind of gathering as any other, but perhaps highlights different aspects of that identity than the ceilidh or milling frolic. First of all, dancing is a group activity and from the outset reinforces the positive features of group existence. The manner of dancing in square sets, which require co-operation and co-ordination of individuals, is a metaphor for a smoothly-run society. In addition, the square set form, which is still popular on the peninsula, is one constructed around the concept of couples. The reunion of the couple at the end of the dance is a symbolic act which shows people where

they should be: in twos, in the proper place with the proper partner. It is not long since arranged marriages were still a fact of life on the peninsula, when young farmers who needed a helpmate would be provided by interested neighbours with a life partner. This practice, and the ambiguous status of bachelors and spinsters, shows that the society we are discussing is marriage- and family-oriented, and the core of that, the couple unit, is celebrated in the dance.

Family values too are evident in the practice of inviting people of all ages to dances. The single family identity in dances, however, is less pronounced than the community identity at work. The cohesiveness of the peninsula communities is evidenced in the ambiguous feelings the locals had towards strangers from other area who came to dances. The young people preferred to dance with their own crowd, and strangers, although welcomed when adding to the general festivity, were also a source of tension. The community's honour might have to be defended to the extent of fist-fighting.

This community insularity extends into the range of rural values when the relationship between urban industrial Cape Breton and the rural districts is examined in terms of the visiting miners. This group raised mixed feelings because, partly, there was a feeling that these people left the land and gave up their birthright of the Gaelic and the farm to work in the mines. At the same time, as Daniel MacInnes has suggested, those who were left behind were left behind also in terms of material advantage and "getting ahead"; rural people may have felt inferior or defensive about those working in the city. Also, the miners were a kind of glamorous outcast breed with their life-threatening occupation, tough reputation and reputed drinking and fighting. A dance was a forum for

observing this newer breed of Cape Bretoner and for reinforcing the rural values by censuring the miners' behaviour and values.

Religious values in this Roman Catholic community as reflected in dances are of interest. Archie MacDonald reminisces about entertainment in a Protestant community where dancing was frowned upon by many older members. Dances never took place in the church hall, and when such an amusement was planned it would be entitled "a supper and dance" with emphasis on the supper, merely a pleasurable incidental at an Iona dance. The Roman Catholic church put no such controls on the parishioners, who were in fact encouraged to participate, since dances were often held with the aim of raising money for church or school. Thus there was no guilt involved in having a good time, as long as one could work the next day. Everyone who boasted of staying up all night included the important fact that they worked the next day, showing both their stamina and their devotion to duty, being well aware of what role in their life amusement and enjoyment could take. It is a balanced existence they present, with work and play proportionately distributed.

Many of the values here presented remain today in a diluted form, wherever the changes have left untouched the basic feelings about community spirit, the ethnic pride in a particular type of music, in the sense that Cape Breton fiddle music is a blend of the inherited Scottish tradition and new elements making it distinctive to the island, and the rural values. In part these have dissipated, as one might expect. However, the dance remains interesting as an entertainment form because it was designed for that purpose, because it was and is the form closest to commercial entertainment venues, and for a third reason.

The system of reciprocity does not come into play in a dance setting, when these take place on neutral ground such as a hall or a beach. Because the event does not take place in a private home there is less of a sense of responsibility toward others, and this allows for what Faris calls "sanctioned deviation", behaviour more unlicensed and extreme than would take place elsewhere. This is a release from daily life which allows that life and those values to carry on, less threatened than they would be if never challenged. Therefore, though other entertainment events such as card games and concerts may amuse people for a short while, it is the festivity and ritualized and sanctioned deviation of the dance which is not only the most memorable, but the most useful and profitable as an entertainment event.

Chapter 5

Gatherings for Specific Purposes

5.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I describe a number of gatherings which take place for particular purposes, and discuss the events to determine how these purposes fit the community values. Each gathering is a response to an unspoken need, and serves both an overt, or practical, and a symbolic purpose for the community.

Community values and collective identity are the mainspring of these events: they span a large variety of activities but central to each is the group participation and community utility so important in the small area which must be self-reliant in terms of entertainment as well as other services. The activities are separated below into groups by use, but lines are not clearly drawn and activities may serve more than one purpose.

The gatherings which I will discuss in the chapter include weddings, wakes, *reitach* (betrothal ceremony), wedding anniversaries, clan gatherings, pie socials, milling frolics, cod and lobster suppers, and bingo. Some mention is also made of calendar customs. Although I have loosely grouped these into categories according to their most generally recognized uses, there is a problem of overlap because activities often are seen to serve more than one purpose. For example, an event which may be used to raise funds may also be appealing for its ethnic

component and for its entertainment value. I group these into family gatherings, ethnic or heritage gatherings, rites of passage, fund raising events and calendar customs. Each group is elaborated below, and then followed by descriptions of examples.

5.2. ACTIVITY TYPES:

5.2.1. Ethnic identification gatherings:

Certain gatherings which take place are designed to celebrate and reinforce the heritage or ethnic identity of the community, and one of the favourite of these is the milling frolic. It has undergone a number of changes since its original purpose of processing homespun cloth, and now is the favoured forum for the performance of the Gaelic song repertoire still current in many parts of rural Cape Breton.

The milling frolic has evolved from a utilitarian activity for the processing of cloth, to a competition event for good singers, to the present-day state of fund raising and entertainment event. Perhaps most importantly, the milling frolic can be included in a group of the above-mentioned ethnic or heritage-related activities. These are occasions which celebrate the Scottish past of the group, and reinforce its ethnic background and the values which stress that the past and ancestry are important. Such heritage-related events include Scottish concerts, and activities at the Highland Village such as Highland Village Day and Pioneer Day when traditional farming and homemaking practices are demonstrated. I term these "ethnic" events in the sense of Klymasz, who demonstrates the new use old folklore forms have when transferred to the New World culture. ("From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore". See Chapter 6)

5.2.2. Family gatherings:

Some activities are centred around the family, which is closely connected to the community as so many people are related. Events which celebrate the family or clan as an entity, worthy of recognition, are a celebration of the existence and maintenance of the family group and exist for that purpose, and are thus different from rites of passage occurring *within* the family, celebrating links or changes between individuals. The former include clan gatherings and family reunions, and often anniversary parties, while the latter take in weddings, baptisms, showers, wakes and funerals.

5.2.3. Rites of passage:

As mentioned above, the celebrations of the family or clan as a unit are closely linked to rites of passage, especially the anniversary parties which mark a milestone in married life, the approved state of family on the peninsula. Rites of passage in the small community are vitally important because the whole community is involved in the sense that the change for one affects all. By contrast, individual achievements, although also rites of passage, are not highlighted: celebrations of birthdays, new jobs, graduations are not especially significant and the individual is only feasted in death. Only those rites which compound the individual's participation in the community by forming new links appear to be worthy of a gathering. These include weddings and anniversaries and in former days, wedding showers and the *reitach*, the old betrothal ceremony. At the other end of life are wakes and funerals which are rites of separation, not only from life but also from the community which was a person's life. The

weddings, showers, anniversaries and *reitach* are all marked by food, special dress and dancing; in other words a festive entertainment aspect is present, adding to the initial purpose of the gathering. For many, a wedding is distinctive for its entertainment value above all else, but it is never forgotten that the occasion is held to rejoice in the change in life state of two community members. Receptions may still be held in the home of the bride's parents, giving emphasis to the personally-offered hospitality of the family. Even today a wedding may last three days, carrying on after the reception at someone's home with perhaps the bride and groom in attendance.

5.2.4. fund raising activities:

fund raising activities are of special interest, related as they are to the idea of work frolics. Support for a needy individual or for a project of benefit to the community, or for such institutions as school or church have long provided the overt purpose for an entertainment event such as a dance. In former days chopping and milling frolics provided sizeable manpower resources to aid an individual. Nowadays an entertainment event such as bingo will generate the money required for the maintenance of the fire hall. In both cases a worthy cause is upheld through an event which also provides entertainment. These activities once included dances, pie socials and milling frolics, and now include cod or lobster suppers as well as dances, and milling frolics in a modified form.

5.2.5. Calendar customs:

Finally, there are gatherings which celebrate calendar events such as Hallowe'en, Christmas and most particularly New Year's, which has distinctly culturally-based characteristics in its former celebration pattern.

The distinctions between these groupings are necessarily blurred, not least because of the crossover in purpose of many, taking them from practical gatherings to symbolic events. Descriptions of selected gatherings with community commentary should serve to show how the gatherings are used and what their past and present importance is.

5.3. DESCRIPTIONS OF TYPES OF GATHERINGS:

5.3.1. Heritage events: Milling frolic

Perhaps more than any other event, the milling frolic serves to demonstrate how a gathering can change function. Here I describe the evolution of the milling frolic from collective work project, now non-existent, to a gathering which helps to reinforce ethnic identity and preserve Gaelic songs.

The old frolics, not only milling, the best-remembered, but also spinning, chopping or haying frolics, had the universal purpose of accomplishing work and making a large task possible to fulfill in a minimum amount of time. In addition there was an excuse provided for entertainment, a characteristic common to all gatherings discussed in this chapter; a more fundamental, worthy purpose given for a gathering than that of "having fun." The community's solidarity was reinforced by showing publicly that work was the responsibility of the group as a whole, and that those less fortunate were to be provided for by everyone.

Milling frolics are gatherings very often referred to by community members, and are much present in literature on old Scottish customs. Both in Scotland and in the areas in which emigrant Scots settled, the milling frolic was in its first phase a collective work effort to shrink hand-woven cloth before making it into blankets or clothing. The cloth would be sewn together at the ends to make a large band, and would be dipped in soapy water or cow urine. Then a group of people (both men and women) sitting around a long improvised table made of boards or a door would begin pounding the cloth on the table and passing it between beats from hand to hand. In order to make the work progress more pleasantly and to ensure a regular rhythm in the pounding process, Gaelic songs at a certain tempo were sung. When the cloth had shrunk sufficiently, judged by a woman who would measure it before and after and specify the number of songs required to finish, the cloth would be rolled up with perhaps a prayer offered at the end. Following this a meal would be served and dancing and drinking would take place to add an entertainment aspect to the affair. This process is also known as "waulking" or "fulling".

In descriptions of these events in Scotland, it is often noted that the gathering was for women, and the men would arrive later on for the dancing and drinking. The milling itself was a competition arena for women noted for their repertoires of songs, and in fact one writer noted that certain women could not be invited together for milling because the competitive spirit was so strong. Carmichael reports in *Carmina Gadelica* that no waulking song could be repeated, or the "cloth mother" would send the cloth back to its original state. (88) Anne Ross has noted that waulking songs preserved much of the most ancient

historical and mythological material of the Scots within their verses. (14) The last song would be sung while clapping the roll in 2/4 time to finish and this was the time, Margaret Shaw has observed, when the women might extemporize verses, teasing others present about their love affairs. (53) When the men arrived, after the work was finished, singing and dancing began, with courtship stressed as one of the prime reasons for having a milling.

Early Cape Breton millings followed the same technical and musical process, but men were always present at millings. Now they tend to be the strongest singers at social functions and are generally better known than women for their repertoires of Gaelic songs up to the present day. In my conversations with informants even the oldest men recalled no "real" millings where cloth was actually processed. From their earliest memory cloth was sent away. Yet women of twenty or thirty years younger do recall small millings in their childhood. It seems perhaps that the occasional small gathering for the processing [redacted] take place in more recent years, and possibly only women gathered for it, leaving the larger milling frolic with all its accompanying ceremony and entertainment, and with the presence of men, to the simulated millings of later years. The smaller milling appears to have been a private tradition of women, not recognized by the older male informants.

Later on the function of the milling frolic changed. It remained an entertainment event, but it took on heritage-related values and commercial value as its role within the group changed. Informants rather than written sources have provided the clues to this metamorphosis of an important event.

John Rory MacNeil recalls how milling changed from a work activity

into an event which highlighted singing. Everyone is aware that singing is the important part of the activity, and that only certain songs are considered milling songs. This is because of their rhythm and the brevity of the verses and emphasis on the chorus, necessary because the strenuous activity of pounding the cloth could leave a singer breathless if the lines were too long. The singing is now the focus of the gathering with the milling actions existing both as part of a presentation, and because Gaelic singers are so used to the action of milling as part of their singing. John Rory describes how this newer form of milling frolic came about:

> ...Mr. MacLeod started up a--just the revival, he had the foresight to see that the Gaelic was dying and he revived the milling you know by setting up one of his son's silver cups--his son was a runner and he had won many, many trophies and silver cups and he took one of these cups--his son had died and those cups were in the house and he put up one of them for a competition and six people to a milling team and there was a milling team in this community and in the next community and that wasn't far apart, perhaps they'd be as close together as a mile or two miles, you know...I don't know if it was in the last of the twenties or the early thirties that this went on. And the cup--the cup would be won by a team--then there was the competition, all teams going together and there was the competition. There were judges, and the judges decide who should have the cup. And the cup would--was only won this year and kept in the custody of that team when it went up next winter again. And if the same team won it three times it became their possession. But otherwise it went around, you know. (C8451)

At that point the prime function of milling frolics became the retention of songs, the self-conscious revival of the Gaelic language, using an event which was already a part of the cultural heritage. Entertainment value was still inherent in the milling, but its most important purpose now was the competition which sustained the community's memory and use of traditional song.

Present-day milling frolics are both occasions to gather, where people travel from their community quite far afield to attend gatherings where they can meet the other Gaelic singers they know, and fairly commercialized events designed to attract tourists and raise money. A travel book of 1936, *Away to Cape Breton*, describes a milling frolic in Baddeck where admission was charged, songs were sung in English translated from Gaelic, and knitting competitions and spinning and carding displays were held. (Brinley 199) Though actual homespun was used in that milling frolic, its commercial and tourist appeal aspects are very much in evidence, and this is largely the way milling frolics function today. At one I attended in Mabou, admission was charged and chairs were set up for viewers, but anyone was welcome to sit in with the millers, who changed often as the work was tiring. The milling frolic was part of a larger event including fiddling and stepdancing exhibitions as well as the universal fairground rides. The price of admission to the milling frolic also included food: homemade cheese, oatcakes, tea and other traditional Scottish fare.

There is, however, a not entirely "commercial" flavour about the milling frolics. Though they are put on in the hope of raising funds, they are appreciated for their entertainment value and cultural significance to the community. Actual cloth may be bought and milled and made into blankets later, or a regular at frolics may bring his own "milling cloth", a blanket cut and sewn into the right shape. Milling may have changed its function but as an event it is still a possession, and a highly culturally-specific one, of people of Scottish descent. For the most part my informants regard milling frolics as an opportunity to sing Gaelic songs and to meet people they know, often those from other

communities who make a practice of going to milling frolics wherever they are held. In this way the network of Gaelic singers of the entire island maintains contact and exchanges songs, in the process reinforcing for themselves the worth of preserving their way of life and their songs. In no way do informants regard the present-day milling frolics as a direct survival from their ancestors' time; nor, however, do they think of them as purely revivalistic. Instead, they are thought of as a fairly new tradition which incorporates much of the past and represents a new use of tradition, much in the manner Klymasz has observed in Canadian ethnic folklore. ("From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore") Though one informant said that the milling frolics of today are "only a sham" and insisted that the ceilidh was always the event for songs, for the most part they are considered the appropriate forum for Gaelic singing, especially when several good singers from various communities are gathered together and the performance element is heightened.

The people of Iona have personally little sense of reviving their traditions; such aims are carried out in part by the organizers of the Highland Village, who are outsiders in various ways. Although groups may arrange millings for the purpose of fund raising, they promote the gatherings for this commercial goal and not primarily to sustain the Gaelic song tradition.

Other events taking place on the peninsula exist for the primary purpose of promoting ethnicity. There is a heritage component in many gatherings which is not esoterically recognized, but there are certain events in which this is a conscious factor, understandable when it is remembered that the Iona Peninsula is not Scotland and that therefore that ethnic identity is only part

of the greater whole of being a Maritime Canadian. Besides clan gatherings and organized ceilidhs at the Highland Village, the most notable of these gatherings is Highland Village Day, an annual day-long Scottish concert followed by a square dance. The performers are pipers, stepdancers and, most numerous, Cape Breton fiddlers. In view of this majority it is in fact Cape Breton music which is most emphasized, the piper being somewhat less common and more "Scottish." This is still more pronounced with Highland dancers, who are rather a novelty, as this form of dancing has not been part of the traditional culture for generations, though Rhodes explains that it was at one time. (271) None of my informants remember Highland dancing being performed in their youth, nor had they heard from older relatives about its existence in earlier days. Highland Village Day, as mentioned, is something of an Old Home Weekend, and appeals to many outside the area, but it does show local talent within the structure of a "Scottish" concert and indicates definite group membership.

5.3.2. Family gatherings: wedding anniversaries, clan gatherings

In terms of family-related gatherings, as mentioned before, there are many which would also fit into the group of rites of passage. The wedding anniversary is a fine example, as it is not only a celebratory rite, commemorating a lasting marriage, but is a time for families and community members to reunite. The twenty-fifth anniversary of a marriage calls for all the children to come home from wherever they may be. The couple and their immediate family and the witnesses from the wedding go through the ceremony once again to renew their marriage vows; and then a dinner is held, catered by the Altar Society in the

community centre or parish hall. (This is a Catholic women's group which raises funds through their catering to maintain the graveyard and church building in Washabuck.) Afterwards, the entire community is welcome to come for a dance where sweets and sandwiches will be served and a cash bar is offered. A speech will be made, offering congratulations to the couple, and gifts are given, often very large amounts of cash or elaborate presents. Wedding anniversaries are of course celebrated in the urban context as well, but for the most part with less fanfare and elaboration than in this rural situation.

These anniversary gatherings constitute a real family reunion in the sense that people come from away to celebrate the genesis of their own particular family group. Like weddings, anniversary parties are said to last about three days. At one I attended, a dinner for seventy-five people was given, followed by a dance in the community centre which was open to everyone. People attended from other communities as well. At 11:30 p.m. tea and sandwiches and sweets were served, and there was a cash bar all evening.

In her thesis on family folklore Amanda Dargan draws a distinction between "family gatherings" and family reunions, pointing out that a family which lives year-round in close proximity must be said to gather rather than to reunite. (188) This is the case in Iona to some extent, where many family members may live within walking distance and see each other daily. What many families might term a "family reunion", a large annual summer party where relatives get together after perhaps years apart, is approximated in this area by the "clan gathering."

A "clan gathering" is an event which takes place when MacNeils or

MacLeans from far afield join in this area where their ancestors first landed, and have a ceremony often involving religious and cultural badges such as prayers or piping, to pay tribute to their ancestors. These ceremonies are followed by a meal and dance. The latter as usual is open to other people in the area. Ethnic identification is stressed, but family is the membership requirement for these gatherings, and the prime reason for them. These may also take place in areas away from the peninsula and be attended by clan members; the MacKenzies for instance have their reunion in a different community and those from Washabuck attend.

5.3.3. Rites of passage: weddings, wakes, reitach

Gatherings which celebrate rites of passage are of course still important, though they have changed in character and, as all gatherings, are much diminished by smaller population numbers. Weddings and wakes, still existent but much changed, will be emphasized here, and the reitach will also be explained and discussed.

Weddings, of course, continue to be celebrated in all cultures, and Washabuck is no exception. There are adaptations in the present day to the widespread North American customs of the white dress and veil, the wedding cake, diamond engagement rings and large reception parties. Attendance is by invitation, though a wedding will tend to be large as there are far-reaching family connections.

Receptions are generally held in the parish hall or community centre, the only facilities available, and the food is catered by the women of the Altar

Society, who arrange all such events. As mentioned, the weddings are of several days' duration. These last aspects are characteristic probably of rural weddings in general rather than being specific to that culture. The only evidence I saw of an ethnic dimension was at one wedding where the bride, after signing the register, returned wearing a sash of her husband's family tartan, and I do not know how widespread this practice is. Music for the reception may include fiddlers and probably a square set will be danced.

In former days, weddings were open to all community residents, and the major entertainment as with many gatherings was the dance. The bride would often wear a white dress if it was a summer wedding, and the dress would be made locally or ordered from the Simpson's or Eaton's catalogue. One informant recalls that at her wedding (1940's) the bridesmaid also wore a white wedding dress, and that in earlier days female guests might come dressed in their own wedding gowns. This may have been due to the limited possession of "good clothes": a woman's wedding dress would continue to be her best dress for several years. As is often the case in present-day weddings, the groom seemed to have little involvement in the arrangement of wedding details, and most information about weddings both past and present was transmitted to me by female informants.

Receptions were always in the home of the bride, and food, as always, was an important part of the festivities. Joan MacDonald recalls her sister's wedding of the thirties:

> I know that when Helen got married we had it up home and they got married in the morning--I guess at 8:30 and they came up and they

served a meal all day long, setting the table and washing dishes and setting the table--and all night long. And oh, they served potatoes and meat there for quite a few--that were invited to the dinner, that's right, there was some invited to the dinner. But after that, they set the table after table all evening and all night--and then have cold meat and rolls and biscuits and sweets and that on the table. And they used to have a stage outside for dancing--it was out beside our house and they danced there, a fiddler and so that was--that was about it. (C8458)

Stories about weddings in the past resemble those about dances; endurance was the admired quality and everyone stayed till it was time to go home and milk the cows:

Evelyn: Remember when Kathleen got married? They pulled--the light was coming in--they pulled down the blinds in the house so it would be dark enough to keep the wedding going.

Joan: Well the blinds were down--they raised the blinds up and the sun was shining in. (C8458)

Wedding festivities also included singing. A large room downstairs would be reserved for dancing square sets, and the singers might go upstairs to another room. These festivities were for those asked, as John Rory explains:

Oh yes there was--in the early times there was the invitation. You were invited and it was--I think it was considered rude for you to go if you weren't invited. But then it went--the rudeness was let go but perhaps by the abuse of the wedding invitation that it wasn't, you know, some went and at last it got to be some would go, but the wedding in the house was generally those who were invited. (C8452)

The festivities of a wedding took place for the most part when Catholic married Catholic, the most common occurence in an area where most people were of that faith. "Mixed marriages" were not approved and meet with disfavour even today amongst older people. John Rory describes situations where the couple was of different religions:

> Catholics always got married in the church and they get marrried in the church today. Except you know there are certain mixed marriages, I remember when mixed marriages weren't performed in the church body, they would be performed in the vestry, what we call the vestry. Yes yes, no they weren't--that was prohibited. And they could be married in the glebe house, you know, the rectory, the priest's house. (C8452)

Diamond engagement rings and wedding bands for men are a recent innovation, and in fact women sometimes lent their wedding bands to be used in marriages where the couple could not yet afford one of their own. A community spirit prevailed in a wedding and the trappings seem to have been less important than in many marriages today. As a rite of passage and a Christian celebration, the group/community aspect seems as usual to have matched the importance of the individuals involved.

Marriages in earlier time, at the turn of the century and sometimes even later, were often arranged by the parents of the bride, and it might be that the couple had never met before the day of the wedding. In this case there would be a gathering or a ceremony known as the *reitach*, a Gaelic word whose literal meaning is "clearing away." John Rory, 80, explains the situation calling for such action:

> I know of instances when the man perhaps never saw the girl till he went and asked her father, her parents, for her hand in marriage... Well, he was a fellow that perhaps never went out to dances, never went with girls, wasn't interested in that but just what you call a stay-at-home boy, and then it was time for him to get married and he wasn't getting married, and you knew that--somebody in the community knew that it was just because he didn't go out...Somebody would say, I know of a girl here, somewheres, or there, and she's a good girl and why don't

you ask her to marry you. The process would be that he'd consent, he didn't know her, but took the person on his word, he was kind of relying that it's a good character person that was—well, recommending this woman to him as a bride, for a wife. And then—okay, send the word then if he agreed perhaps a woman, maybe it was a man who spoke to the, this prospect, the male prospect and the—it could be a man who approached the girl and ask, you know, just make a note of the father and mother that there was this young man in need of a wife and that he was a good man, he was sober and he was a hard worker and he was a good provider and all these qualities, good qualities—I'm sure that they wouldn't say that he was a drunkard or that he was only a good-for-nothing because it was going to spoil the deal...Yes the parents decided a lot for the girl. Yes they did and before my time the girl had damn little to say about it, you know. The parents thought he was suitable and say a good catch for the girl, well—there it was and she'd go through. But—and this fellow, perhaps he'd take the fellow that did the recommending first to him of this girl, they'd go and it was called the *reitach*, in Gaelic, reitach, matchmaking. *Reitach*'s clearing, you know, you'd clear everything away from the house, you'd put the house in order, neaten it, and *reitach* was just preparing the way for the marriage, you know, it was matchmaking they call it. Maybe the whole thing was settled that night and there was a little dance or a little frolic in that house in token of what was going to come up. Next Sunday they were published, the banns were published in church for three Sundays and they got married then. (C8452)

P. J. MacKenzie Campbell also refers to this method of arranging a marriage, stressing that it was the father's permission the would-be husband would have to get, with the mother having no say in the matter. (42)

Sometimes the situation would be that a bachelor getting on in years would be taken around to house after house in search of a marriageable female until one was found who consented. C. H. Farnham in his 1886 account of "Cape Breton Folk" gives a lively description of a courtship he witnessed, where a man, John, went in search of a wife, having finished building a house. The woman, Mary, agreed and the banns were published, when along came another suitor, Sandy, whom she preferred, and his name was substituted for John's. A third

man, Malcolm, came into the picture and he and his brother abducted the girl and kept her guarded in the house until they were married a few days later. (615)

Says Farnham:

> A man is all the more highly esteemed for such a feat. The rejected fellow does not lose heart; he generally keeps on with his negotiation, day after day, house after house, until he finds a partner. An intelligent woman, while admitting the general predominance of worldly interests in these matters, and the suddenness with which marriages were very often made, said that unhappy families are nevertheless rare among this people. (616)

Margaret Fay Shaw gives a description of the same ritual as it was carried out in South Uist:

> One old custom still kept up was the *reitach* or formal betrothal. The young man took an older friend with him to call on the parents of the young woman. After conversation about many things, the friend would begin to extoll the young man's character, and his qualities for making a good husband for their daughter, while she would make her feelings known by staying in their presence with obvious pleasure or by leaving the room. Whatever the opinion of the parents, unless there was some serious reason for their refusal, the daughter made her own decision. If she stayed, she would seat herself at the table opposite the young man. Her father would say, "Ma tha ise deonach, tha mise rodheonach, agus mura bi sin mar sin, cha bhi so mar so." (If she is willing, I am very willing, and if that weren't so, this wouldn't be so.) The young man would catch the girl's hand and they would divide a dram between them, drinking from the same glass. (15)

Shaw clearly shows in contrast to Campbell and to the reminiscences of John Rory MacNeil that the reitach and the arrangement of the marriage were not always run according to the wishes of the men; this also becomes apparent in reference to courtship in the dance, as seen in Chapter 4. Although male authority was tacitly recognized, women had a considerable amount of power of their own.

At the other end of life another rite of passage was important to the community; the wake and funeral. This was a rite of separation rather than integration but as it involved and affected the community as a whole it was celebrated with equivalent ceremony.

Wake activities, both now and in the past, were somewhat subdued, with none of the spirited singing or drinking often associated with wakes in other cultures. However, they are often pleasantly remembered as social events, times for meeting friends, telling old stories and paying respects to the family of the deceased. This is one of the occasions where Gaelic is still spoken frequently, as Jim Watson reports:

> Well if you go to an older person's funeral or whatnot there's people of that generation there and once again it's one of these things that evokes childhood memories and a sense of community and hearth and home and that sort of thing and so I suppose a lot of people feel perfectly natural speaking Gaelic in that sort of situation. (C8443)

Wakes in the past were always held in the home of the deceased, with the coffin, generally homemade, placed on boards with candles burning at head and foot. This practice still continues under certain circumstances, but more generally wakes are held today in the church, which is locked at night and thus does not allow for the customary all-night vigil.

When asked the purpose of such an event, informants provided different views. Sadie and Mungie were of the opinion that wakes were held to make sure the person didn't come back to life, or "wake up", though they conceded that also it was just "the thing to do," the custom. John Rory said it was to show respect for the dead, to keep vigil, and that it was called a "wake"

because the people stayed awake. Stephen Rory, too, saw it as a way to honour the dead:

> When you go to a wake you were going honouring the dead, as if you were going on guard, you know that--let's say, you know, a premier had died, there'd be somebody on guard like Mounties or something--did you ever see that? Well there, that's the idea of a wake. (C8453)

Hector MacNeil in response to my question about a religious reason for holding a wake answered:

> I don't think so, I think it's more of a chance to say goodbye to the person. Uh--sort of a testimonial dinner, you know, where people can have a time and a place to--where they can say this and that about the person and talk to each other and things like that. And it's a way for people to gather too, you know. (C8441)

Though people still attend wakes, say prayers and pay their respects to the bereaved family, the social gathering aspect in terms of food and entertainment is no longer present in the wakes which are held in the funeral home or, more often, the church. A wake in the past had a definite pattern, and although the ritual of greeting, viewing the body and saying a prayer continues, the social gathering aspect is no longer in place. Generally people use the set phrase "I'm sorry for your trouble" to indicate condolence to the family, as Hector explains:

> Well that's the one I use 'cause it's easiest, you know. It's hard to think of something to say during that time. How do you--it's a time when consolation or attempt at consolation I think doesn't work, you know, makes the sadness more intense. And the person doesn't want to be emotional in front of you and other people. So it's a good way to get by it. (C8441)

Wakes included stories to help the time pass, especially when people were planning to stay all night. In earlier times *sgeulachan* were told, and there might also be anecdotes about the deceased and just general conversation, as Mungie said, "Just the regular ceilidh." There might be some mild humour to make every one feel comfortable, but nothing loud or unseemly.

As always, food preparation and consumption was an important part of the gathering, allowing the family of the deceased to celebrate in his honour and offer his hospitality for the last time. Hector explains the set-up at his grandfather's wake:

> Oh, all the women would make the food. My aunt was there and just women you hadn't seen before would be walking with big plates of this and that. And then they'd have tables, like, like the priest, when it came, say, time for dinner, the priest was there--well, he'd sit at the first table, there was two tables, the dining room table and the kitchen table, the priest, of course, would sit at the dining table. And they also set the kitchen table, and the older people and the priest and everybody would sit down at the first table. And then it would kind of go down the pecking order. I wasn't really socially conscious enough to figure out everybody else but I know as kids we were at the last of things, you know. So that would go on, people would get up and there'd be a bunch at the dishes...Besides lunch in their hand, there'd be lunch in your hand other times, but say it was dinnertime or supper time, everybody who was there would have their dinner or supper there. (C8441)

There can be no doubt that a wake was a social event. Some people attended wakes as a regular thing, as Hector recounted in a story of an elderly man who travelled round the countryside, dropping in at all the wakes. It was a less formal, more comfortable occasion than the actual funeral because people were in their own homes and were carrying out the same kind of activities they were used to in a ceilidh. The narratives and food aspects are present to qualify

this as a social gathering, one designed to mourn the loss of a community member but at the same time showing Christian values and community solidarity within the action of gathering for a wake. Farnham gives a description of wakes as they were in the heyday of the culture in Cape Breton:[7]

> The last scenes of life also present some interest. A wake, whether among the Presbyterians or among the Catholics, gathers a great crowd in the house of the deceased; during two days the family is constantly at hard work, night and day, serving successive meals to those who arrive. It is considered a marked offense not to come to a wake, and when there, not to eat and drink abundantly. Two or three funerals near together have actually ruined a family. The pious and aged in the room where the corpse lies generally occupy their time in reading and praying while the young, in another room, solace their grief by eating, drinking, and flirting. Many are more or less drunk when the procession moves on or collects about the grave, and generally it is then that the fight occurs which seems a part of every good funeral. (618)

Mary Fraser stresses particularly the necessity of eating lunch at a wake:

> All during the day, lunch was served to everyone who went to the house. It would be very discourteous for anyone to leave without eating. In fact, one trusty friend was charged with the office of seeing that no one overlooked this point, for it was believed that every bite that was served during the wake went towards the release of the soul if it were suffering in Purgatory. (111)

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[7] Similar to the situation in the following quotation, Sean O'Suilleabhain, in *Irish Wake Amusements* (72) observes that fighting at a funeral in Ireland was very commonplace, and was indeed expected and looked forward to by the relatives of the deceased. This behaviour, along with a whole range of activities at wakes, was condemned by the Irish clergy, who eventually succeeded in ending the practice.

5.3.4. fund raising activites: pie socials, cod and lobster suppers, bingo

fund raising activites are the modern equivalent of the old work frolics. In former days as well money was raised for the church or school, or perhaps for a needy individual, and gatherings still fulfill these purposes in different forms. Dances, as explained in Chapter 4, were the main source of revenue at one time. Another such event was the pie social or box social, held in the schoolhouse until perhaps forty years ago. At this event the young women of the community would fill a box with food and then decorate the box with ribbons and flowers. These boxes would then be auctioned off to the men at the gathering who would eat the contents with the girl who had prepared the box. A skillful auctioneer could often persuade the men to bid quite sizeable amounts, especially with the assistance of a "plant" in the crowd who would toss in a bid now and then to put up the price. One fellow was said to have paid ten dollars for his pie; the average price was about $1.50. Often a girl would forewarn the young man of her choice to look for a certain ribbon which would indicate her box. To win the privilege of her company, and to impress her with his willingness to part with money on her behalf, a young man might go quite far in his bidding. The schoolteacher's pie was said to go for an especially high price. There was an obvious courtship role in this type of gathering, and when a dance followed it must have progressed rapidly. If either the boy or girl was displeased with the recipient of the box, it might go up for auction again.

In addition to entertainment and courtship, the pie social also helped to establish community leadership in terms of cooking for the women; the men were aware of who could make a good pie and would bid on those boxes, perhaps

buying more than one, for that reason as well. These gatherings no longer exist, partly because they were oriented towards the younger generation of whom few remain, and because this kind of courtship behaviour is no longer necessary or customary.

Instead, money is raised today by codfish or lobster dinners where a fee is charged for cooking done by the Altar Society, the women's group at the church. A dance may follow later on. These are gatherings to meet friends and, for the women, to enjoy the luxury of a traditional dinner prepared by someone else. Such dinners, especially the lobster dinners, attract a large crowd from neighbouring areas through extensive advertising. These events are common all over the Maritimes, and may take the form of blueberry or strawberry festivals, oyster dinners or whatever is in season or is a specialty of that area. The codfish dinners take place at the Highland Village and are more of a community event. Salt cod, potatoes, bannock, curds and squares are served.

The other immensely popular fund raising activity is bingo. This is popular all over North America and has long been used by the Catholic church to raise funds for the church and for various community activities. In Protestant communities gambling in any form is frowned upon by certain churches, including bingo. In such circumstances, when the only community building is the church hall, bingo may not be played to raise money for any purpose. As it is by far the most lucrative means of acquiring funds, not only the church but also such groups as hockey teams and Girl Guides must do without.

On the Iona peninsula, largely Roman Catholic, this stricture does not apply. Bingo is held there on Wednesday nights at the Legion and is in aid of the

fire hall, and is run by members of the volunteer fire brigade. The cost is quite high; a standard price ($5.00) is set for a book of cards, and then additional cards are purchased at a price of $1.00 apiece to support other groups within the community. The minimum expenditure is about twelve dollars for an evening for an individual. Many bingo enthusiasts travel several evenings a week to other communities to play as well. The standard prize is $75.00 or $100.00, with occasional prizes of free books. A jackpot is available as well and this mounts up sometimes to $2000.00. News in the community often includes "who won at bingo" and there is a certain amount of resentment towards the Indians from the nearby reserves who start to come when the jackpot gets large. It is felt that those who have contributed to that sum of money by attending the weekly games should receive the large sum at the end. In this way the fund raising and communal aspects of the game are expressed: it is thought that if people put in their money for a good cause they should get whatever rewards are available. There is considerable entertainment value in bingo; the excitement of possibly winning is what brings out the crowds. Often people will say "I see people I'd never see if I didn't go to bingo," but there is little social interaction; everyone is intent on the numbers being called, though people travel to bingo together and sit together. One suspects that the excuse of raising money and fulfilling social obligations is given to justify spending what is a considerable sum of money.

Ake Daun's *Bingo as a Social and Cultural Activity* investigates bingo as a leisure activity of the working class and suggests that certain aspects of the game make it appealing, such as the lack of necessty for special skills or equipment. (Fjellheim 182) The only star status available in bingo is to the person

known for luck; this may increase as the person becomes known for winning, which of course is most likely to happen with players who participate frequently.

Other social gatherings require expertise at singing, dancing or storytelling, and bingo must be a welcome egalitarian activity for those without special skills in these areas. Bingo fulfills a need for company and provides an atmosphere of solidarity, even if interplay is severely limited at best. The mutual presence and involvement in the game is enough to provide a sense of group for people who often gather in more intimate or interactive situations.

5.3.5. Calendar customs: Hallowe'en, New Year's

Finally, calendar customs are, or rather were, occasions for gathering. Hallowe'en has certain traditional customs attached to it such as the eating of *fuarach*, a mixture of oatmeal and cream into which small tokens have been dropped, indicating the future of the children who received them. More important was New Year's, when people would gather at a house and circle around it demanding admittance. The host would demand a certain rhyme, the *duain*, and it varied from one area to another whether this was a set rhyme, usually one penned by the Bard MacLean of Barney's River, or an impromptu composition. The emphasis on New Year's probably reflects the situation in Scotland where New Year's, or Hogmanay, was more of a festive occasion than Christmas. Farnham describes both these customs in Cape Breton a hundred years ago:

> Although amusements are being suppressed as much as possible by the pious, yet now and then at Hallowe'en the *fouerach* is still eaten--a mixture of raw oat-meal stirred in cream in which is a ring to be found.

> New-Year's Eve is rarely noticed; the young, armed with sticks, sometimes collect in silence about a house, and then all at once fall to beating it on all sides. The noise seldom fails to arouse the host; when he comes to the door he asks what they wish, and demands that they make a rhyme in their reply before he will admit them for a treat. (618)

Margaret Shaw observes the same custom in South Uist:

> Of the celebrat[illegible] feast days in Glendale, the ritual performed on New Year's Eve [illegible]he lads of the township was of great antiquity and possibly pre-Christian. Known as Hogmanay to the Scots and A-Challuinn to the Gaels, it began as soon as darkness fell. The sound of boys' voices calling "A'Challaig seo! A'Challaig seo! Chall O! Chall O!" was heard in the distance, and when they reached the house they walked round it sunwise, chanting Hogmany ballads or *duain*...(13)

5.4. DISCUSSION ON GATHERINGS.

These, then, are the present and latter-day gatherings of the Scots of the Iona peninsula, all designed to fulfill needs felt by individuals and by the group. In looking at which of these gatherings have remained and which have disappeared or been replaced, there will perhaps be revealed something of the values and identity of the group.

Rites of passage are deep-rooted customs which do not change rapidly. Accompanying traditions such as wedding showers no longer exist, but this is due to a smaller population in the area. The *reitach*, too, has passed away with the era of arranged marriages. Weddings remain most similar, probably because they sometimes have little to do with religion and more to do with law, and are not affected by changes in religious feeling. Wakes, however, are more affected by this change, and also by the aging and declining population. It is now more convenient and even perhaps considered more "civilized" to have a wake in the church or funeral home rather than in a house.

Gary Butler has explained the function of the wake in his article "The Newfoundland House Wake: Sacred and Profane Space" as a restoration of the disturbed social order:

> If one regards the wake as an institution designed to reaffirm societal values, the necessity for the three-day waking period seems clear. It allows the community as a whole the opportunity to express its solidarity with regard to things sacred, and permits the gradual separation of the deceased from the world of the living. In addition the bereaved, who are themselves separated by this grief from normal activity, are gradually reintegrated into the community. By restricting the period of grief and formalizing it into a three-day ritual, the community becomes whole again in a relatively short period of time. (36)

Because the lessening of religious feeling is widespread, its influence has caused the wake to become less common even in such devout places as the Iona peninsula, following a present-day trend. However, people are still free to hold such wakes if they choose, and a few do. That most do not perhaps indicates a changed attitude toward death, one also present in the diminishing number of forerunners now seen. Death is better understood and more certainly anticipated now that medical science can often determine the cause and even the coming time of death. It is no longer necessary to keep a wake in case the corpse might not really be dead. The sacred and profane space spoken of by Gary Butler are no longer contained in the one house: living room as wake room, kitchen as centre for food and visiting. Instead the church is, as always, the sacred space, and the home is entirely devoted to the practical functions viewed as profane. This separation of religion and daily life is paralleled in the attitudes of many towards religion in their lives in the present day.

Family reunions become increasingly important as the younger people of the area leave to look for work and establish homes and families in other parts of the country. In such a small place, cousins may often be each other's closest friends, and a gathering has much more to it than obligation. The maintenance of strong family ties is still strongly upheld, though perhaps less so than in the days when unmarried women might be sent from one end of the country to the other to look after ailing relatives. Coming to a family gathering reaffirms membership in that group, and communal recreation of the family's legends and history takes place at such events. The family gathering is still common in terms of daily visiting; the family reunion whether at an anniversary or a clan gathering has become still more important as people have left.

The clan gatherings, official groupings of the people of one surname, planned to honour ancestral links, are part of the new self-consciousness of ethnic heritage which is more of an urban than a rural phenomenon and certainly does not reach back into the past in the way more "traditional" gatherings do. Gwen Kennedy Neville has explored these newly-made traditions in her work "Community Form and Ceremonial Life in Three Regions of Scotland." She holds that "within dispersed industrial populations, regional diversity is expressed through the periodic assembly of individuals for the celebration of ceremonies and communal life events." (93) These gatherings, whether clan gatherings or Highland Games, are cultural performances by conscious tradition bearers who see themselves as members of an ongoing social group sharing in an exclusive historical tradition. To show membership in the group people equip themselves with the trappings: tartans, pipe music, Highland sports and dancing. These

gatherings are very common in urban Nova Scotia in groups like the North British Society, the St. Andrew's Society, and other Highland groups. Neville has suggested that these gatherings help urbanites to retain identity and are unnecessary for rural people still in the tradition. It is evident that those gatherings were not always necessary for identity and may not be yet for those still resident on the peninsula; however, the gatherings take place on the peninsula, in order for the urban dwellers to return at least partially to the ancestral teritory, if they cannot get to Scotland, and also because they may have relatives in the area or at the very least can recreate a feeling of the past more successfully in the rural surroundings than in the city. It is natural that those in the area will join in, as much in the spirit of family as that of clan. The presence of the Highland Village in Iona already lends an awareness of an actively cultivated Scottish identity, and though events like Highland Village Day may not be necessary to make people "feel Scottish", they have already entered the folklore of that group and serve as a focus for their gathering, feelings of Scottishness, and coming back home.

Milling frolics, growing out of a genuine tradition, have adapted themselves to modern technology (cloth is milled in a factory), to a modern aesthetic (retention of Gaelic songs), and to a modern usage and form (fund raising, and the presence of a bar to appeal to that aspect of gathering and entertainment). This adaptation of the milling frolic is similar to the changes Martha Ellen Davis notes in the Puerto Rican Feast of the Holy Cross of Mary, a religious ritual and musical event which once was used politically to support the power of the church, and which provided entertainment and a forum for courtship

for the people. Now, with changes in courtship behaviour and other entertainment options as well as a lessening of religious fervour, the Feast acts as a performance arena for younger musicians and as a reinforcement for a sense of local identity, as well as a profit-making venture. A gathering is no less authentic or traditional because of changes in function; this is a common process in the transformation and recurring use of folklore. The milling frolic would have no place today in its original form; it exists as entertainment, as a retention of Scottish heritage, and as a method of raising money.

In this way things that are no longer of use pass out of active tradition, such as pie socials, reitach, and long house wakes. Included in this list are the *sgeulachan* and indeed the Gaelic language itself. This rational attitude towards the diminuation of traditions seems to indicate that those which remain do have a certain utility and defined purpose. They indicate a sense of community, they define the need for raising money for worthy purposes and point out ways to acquire these funds, they stress heritage or family identity, they affirm loyalty to the Church. In short, the same rural, religious, community and family values are in place as are found in the ceilidh or dance; the difference is that the smaller gatherings perhaps each point to a very specific need.

Daniel MacInnes summarizes in his thesis the old and new forms of gathering as he sees them in Poplar Grove, where activities such as weddings and wakes have tended to become professionally organized and no longer take place in the home, removing them from complete community participation:

> The trend is away from the collective "all there together" gatherings and toward a shorter "putting in an appearance" occasion. As the

> wakes, weddings and charity frolics of the past demanded personal commitment to grief, happiness and unselfishness of others, those today are lacking in both personal commitment to others and in collective character... Pig and whistles, bingo and Scottish concerts seem to be the replacements for the traditional communal activities. The focus of these are decidedly individualistic; they are "come and go, as you wish" events that celebrate neither status passage of community members, nor exercise a communal function of the latency maintenance variety. This movement from the organic response of traditional community functions to fragmented individual associations parallels earlier mention of the breakdown of community control by the change from social visits to telephone communication. (60)

I suggest that this breakdown is not as complete as MacInnes supposes, and that where changes have occurred in the form of social gatherings, these are responses to an altered population, new trends and preferences and a developing sense of ethnic awareness rather than any lessening of community spirit. The functions remain the same, and the values expressed are those which have sustained the very existence of economic and social upheaval. Surely the strength of such gatherings as the milling frolic, wake and wedding is seen in their continued existence and adaptability to the changing needs of the community, while retaining the deep-rooted community values in a newly useful form.

Chapter 6

Theoretical Analyses

In my introduction and in the subsequent chapters I have shown through examples and explanation that each type of social gathering used both in the past and at present on the Iona peninsula has a deeper level of symbolic statement underlying its practical purpose. The continuation or transformation of old forms of gathering and the substitution of new types to fit the symbolic meaning of the old serve as a statement of very specific identity for the homogeneous group.

In looking at group identity in social gatherings through an examination of traditions and community it is useful to begin by examining the group, and how it sees itself. Though naturally each person has specific personal characteristics, personal identity is also shaped by those group characteristics assumed to be present in each individual who belongs in the community.

Clement Harris, in *Hennage: A Social System in Miniature*, proposes an idealized "core group" villager, whose basic shared characteristics approximate the morphology of what I term group identity. He includes in this definition the idea of "competence", meaning appropriate actions or behaviour further limiting the core group. Out of this definition he derives a model for what he terms "the ideal villager." (12)

The same could be said for those who are "real Washabuck people"; in fact social gatherings are often the forum for advertising who is a group member. These characteristics on the Iona peninsula include birth there of an established family, continued residence in the area, membership in the Catholic church, and Scottish ancestry. In addition the person will preferably be married and have children, and probably has little education though his or her children may. The person should have some specialized skill but should not be overly "pushy" with it. The ideal villager is highly reciprocal, preferably has some musical ability or at least appreciates music and dancing, and ideally understands or speaks the Gaelic language, though that requirement has lessened with the decline of the generally older Gaelic-speaking population. This, then, is a core group person on the Iona peninsula and it is within the context of social gatherings that these characteristics are observed, promoted and approved. As noted, Harris sees a requirement of what he calls "competence" to be included in the group:

> The word 'competence' implies a mixture of ascribed and achieved status, but in no way implies superiority...It is difficult to convey the exact flavor of the concept. There is a vague feeling that fate ought to be controlled and that it is slightly incompetent not to be able to control it. (19)

A somewhat similar feeling exists on the peninsula; while all are ideally treated equally there is a certain percentage of people who are not considered entirely successful in their chosen paths. This will become more clear as we discuss below the question of unspoken leadership in an egalitarian community.

Gwen Kennedy Neville has written about Southern Scottish Presbyterians, a group having some characteristics in common with the

inhabitants of the Iona peninsula. This is a group of immigrant Scots, long-established in the USA, who preserve their ethnicity through the practice of certain social gatherings and rituals. The re-enactment of shared meanings and values takes place in specified and somewhat self-conscious rituals, but has at the same time preserved the feeling of being part of a very particular group. The church, reverence for ancestors, and endogamous marriage patterns are the elements which have forged a social structural isolation among the Southern Presbyterians, and help to define them as an ethnic group. Neville is here following the definition of Milton Gordon (260), who sees an ethnic group as one which has become structurally isolated over time through its endogamous marriage patterns, and one which possess a "shared meaning system, or world view, that unites a people into an ideological entity and provides values for the shared sense of peoplehood." (260) Finally Gordon suggests that a person belonging to such a group is encapsulated from birth to death in a protective covering of relationships based on his group membership. This is true for the Iona peninsula as well, if a person makes the choice to remain in the area, which is a requirement of true group membership.

Thus we see that when a social gathering begins, a number of attitudes and expectations based on group characteristics are already in place. In Jansen's terms, this small group has a strong esoteric element, which in the social gatherings breaks down easily into the separate components of identity: specialized values. Standards of behaviour are based on regulations determined by the qualities held to be most admirable or desirable by the people of the peninsula, established by their common traditions of Roman Catholicism and Hebridean ancestry.

I suggest that what Harris has called core-group attitudes, which I see as also existent on the peninsula though dissimilar in type from those in Hennage, equate with values, concepts which are of lasting importance to the members of that society. The possession of shared values, or core-group attitudes, leads to a collective identity, the quality which we are attempting to trace the presence of in the many types of social gatherings used on the peninsula. As mentioned in previous chapters describing gatherings, these values fall into four distinct groups: rural, religious, family and ethnic or heritage-related values. Core members of this miniature social system subscribe to all four groups, and to be present at a social gathering indicates acceptance of these values.

6.1. VALUES OF THE GROUP: FAMILY, RURAL, RELIGIOUS, ETHNIC

6.1.1. Family values

The family is the basic social unit on the peninsula, and the value placed on its continued closeness is extremely high. Parents believe a large number of children is desirable to provide companionship and support for each other. Children remain in the home long after they reach adult years, and it is not uncommon for young married couples to live in the parents' home for an extended period of time until they can become established. Although they may be forced to leave home to attend school or find work, the children leave with reluctance, suffer homesickness and return as often as possible to visit. In recent years many have gone far afield to "the West" to get work; nearly everyone has long-term plans to come back, and many buy a piece of land in the area as soon

as they are able, to establish at least a summer home. The extended family too is important, because so many people living in the area are related. Daily visits between brothers and sisters, cousins and grandparents take place, and everyone expects to be invited to a kinsman's wedding no matter how large the family may be.

The family is a highly developed and interdependent system where one has the right to demand assistance, lodging, nursing or indeed aid of any kind from a relative and will receive it, with the expectation that the same will be given in return. Family responsibilities especially in the past were assumed without question; one woman recalls postponing her own marriage for years because she was obliged to look after her grandmother. There was also a high incidence of adopted children, taken in when unfortunate circumstances befell. Marriage is therefore seen as the most appropriate of systems, sustaining as it does the family structure. It is quite common for people to remarry soon after the death of a spouse, and this action is met with approval by the community. This respect for family is also seen in the custom of naming children after relatives, to the extent of having a great many people in the community with similar names.

The value placed on the family as an institution is apparent first in the gatherings which specifically celebrate it, for example weddings and wedding anniversaries, celebrating new family units and commemorating existing ones. In gatherings such as dances family participation is notable in that brothers and sisters and parents all attend together and sit together, enjoying each other's company even in the context of a large community gathering.

Support for family values is also seen in the courtship function of

gatherings which Falassi regards as one of the most important functions of such events. In the rural Italian society he describes, the *veglia* redefines for its participants the standards of official morality, establishing what the correct conduct between young people should be. In part this is achieved through examples given in folk narrative, and partly through the approval or disapproval shown towards the action of young people. Courtship is a preliminary stage to marriage and thus an important aspect of the statement of family values inherent in many of the gatherings.

6.1.2. Rural values

Rural values constitute another integral part of the identity of this group. These include not only a stated feeling of love for the land and the original homesteads of forefathers, but also a conscious rejection of the urban life which may appear to offer more. Although only two people on the peninsula can be considered full-time farmers at present, all the inhabitants of the peninsula grew up on farms and many still keep pigs and chickens and cultivate large gardens. There is an awareness, though not often verbally expressed, of the beauty of the land "just as our Lord made it", and frequently expressed assertion that country life is better. This is manifest in the fact that people may commute to a distance of forty to sixty miles to work, preferring to retain their rural homes in the area they know. Mothers often express the opinion that children are better brought up in the country where they learn respect for hard work and are away from the kinds of influences they might be exposed to in urban schools. Indeed, as each small community school has closed there has been a sense of loss, and the

one negative effect expected of the long-awaited bridge is the closing of the Iona school, which would necessitate bussing the children to a larger community.

When speaking of the old days it is common to hear people say, "We didn't have much, but we always had something to eat and we always had a good time." In deciding on their priorities they took into account pride and poverty and decided that rural living was best in spite of hardships. In his MA thesis Daniel MacInnes has explored the personality/mentality of a group of rural Cape Breton people, very similar in circumstance to those on the Iona peninsula. These are the people who were left behind when others followed the trend to abandon the farms and seek work in urban areas, usually in the mines or more recently in the steel and heavy water plants of industrial Cape Breton. They have an ambivalent feeling towards those urban people, probably in the beginning because these migrants left their homes and the gruelling work of the farms for the instant cash in the mines. Those people were seen as betraying the culture, abandoning not only the physical space their fathers had emigrated to obtain and laboured to cultivate, but also, in moving to a more heterogeneous area, abandoning the Gaelic language and accompanying cultural traits. These mixed feelings are seen in the stories told of the miners who came to Iona for picnics and fought and drank in a legendary manner. During the Depression years many people returned to the farms and rural living received a boost, with a slight revival in traditional lifestyle, but a permanent change had been made, and rural and urban Cape Bretoners now are different types of people, in terms of their remaining cultural attitudes and even the accent with which they speak. There is sometimes a feeling among both groups that those who left were more successful than those

who stayed behind. There may have been those who simply lacked the courage to go and make a new life, or those who had obligations at home, but it is also true that for many others it has been a conscious choice to stay in the rural area. This rural ethic, the cherishing of a rural way of life, is implicit in every kind of gathering because the traditional gatherings have simply ceased to exist outside areas like this. Every time people gather they reaffirm their belief in this way of life. During a ceilidh stories often come up of people from the country going to the city, triumphing over the city people and returning home reaffirmed in their way of life. Family reunions, anniversaries, and clan gatherings all show a desire for a return to the home place, where the family continues to exist. The nature of a rural community is a long-lasting, sedentary lifestyle, one representing comfort and security to those who leave and return to visit or to participate in celebratory gatherings.

6.1.3. Religious values

Religious values are probably the most overtly expressed in these communities, particularly in the public testimony of regular attendance at mass. The Iona peninsula, with the exception of Little Narrows at the extreme end of the land mass, is uniformly Roman Catholic and has been termed a "Catholic stronghold." The people are known to be devout and to give substantially to the Church in a financial sense. Although priests are acknowledged to have personal faults--often excessive drinking--they are respected for their community status and for their special standing in the institution so dear to the people. Younger people may cease to attend church when they leave the area, but at home on visits they are again, and willingly, part of the united front.

Religious values obtain in two senses: Christian values and Roman Catholic characteristics. People are often heard to approve behaviour or censure it on the basis of "what our Lord taught" and the primary virtue consists of serving one's neighbour well. In ceilidh stories there are often morals pointed out in tales of people who treated well those less fortunate than themselves. Other, probably more popular because more interesting, legends recount struggles with the Devil, where the Christian is victorious through his faith.

Where particularly Catholic values are observed, these are articles of custom rather than faith, as no very elaborate theology is presented by the priest in the homily delivered at the weekly mass. Instead, it is observable in the common custom of naming children after popes, or after St. Columba, to whose memory the parish is dedicated. Respect for the priest comes into this category as well, as does respect for nuns and their way of life. Indeed for many people religious identity forms a large part of personal identity, especially for those such as nuns and priests who renounce some of the other expressed values to forge that identity. "Mixed marriages" are still frowned upon by older people, and there is a general lack of knowledge about other faiths. It is common in many areas of Nova Scotia to define geographic area by religion; one half of a county may be Protestant and the other Catholic, and names and home communities easily identify a person's religion. It is well-known that in many small towns people could grow up together without ever coming into contact, if they were of different faiths, and this sharp division has lent identification meaning to these geographical areas.

In terms of social gatherings, many incorporate or embody religious

belief. A large gathering such as one of the "clan" gatherings where members of either the MacLeans or MacNeils come from away usually begins with a mass, which everyone attends before starting festivities. Many gatherings are implicitly religious, of course, such as weddings and wakes, and wedding anniversaries include the theme by re-enacting the marriage vows in the presence of the priest before the dinner and dance which follow. Verbal lore in gatherings may include jokes or anecdotes about priests and frequent references to the Church in stories of forerunners. Religious identity is so strong that it is present in all aspects of life, and in former times prescribed when some entertainments could and should be held (Christmas, New Year's) and when these were inappropriate.

Religion also extends into other notions of identity, as Elizabeth Planetta has recognized:

> For many Cape Bretoners, religion has given regularity and continuity to the expression of ethnicity. In a surprising number of ethnic communities, the traditional language is used during church services, by the choir and by friends and neighbours for their greetings and gossip after the service. ("Ethnicity in Cape Breton" 16)

Sermons were preached in Gaelic until recent times, and the church, unlike the school, was one place where the language was respected and used. By linking religion to ethnic heritage, the sense of identity was doubly reinforced.

6.1.4. Ethnic values

This brings us to the fourth category of values-as-identity, that of ethnic or heritage identification. As mentioned frequently, the people of this area all belong to a distinct ethnic group, the Hebridean Scots of Barra. The sense of "ethnic" here is taken in part from Klymasz's definition of ethnicity as seen in his article "From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore." He sees the present form of ethnic folklore as a kind of synthesis of selected Old Country forms, put to new use. In writing of the process of choosing the items and processes which are retained or transformed he has said:

> In the cause of this process, many of the old folkways are abandoned without any massive resistance; others linger on; still others are reexamined, revamped, and reactivated in an effort to depict, validate and perpetuate the community's sense of ethnic loyalty and identity. (138)

Although many aspects of tradition have lingered on without any kind of self-conscious revival, there is an alternate sense in which the people of Iona take pride in being the descendants of the Barra settlers, and this ethnic awareness constitutes one of their most cherished value systems. The idea of *using* folklore in a new way rather than simply "preserving" these ethnic characteristics shows that the process of creating and recreating folklore continues.

Neville makes two important points about the use of the word "ethnicity" which would certainly allow this group to be considered and to consider themselves an ethnic group:

1. Ethnic as a label should not be reserved only for categories of the population who define themselves as "ethnic" or for segments who are forced into cultural separation by economic or social deprivation. Instead, the label must be reapplied to all *groups* (within white America as well as other segments) as interacting networks which retain a shared sense of cultural past, shared meanings, and a sense of peoplehood.
3. The ritual gatherings of a group may provide the significant key to finding and studying the true expressions of cultural identity, if in fact it is within the seasonal assemblages that the core values and basic kin and religious loyalties are restated symbolically. ("Kinfolks" 272)

Using both Klymasz's view of the new use of ethnic folklore and Neville's ideas of a shared cultural identity, we can see how the sense of being Scottish persists and is an easily identifiable characteristic.

The residents of the peninsula sometimes speak of themselves as "the Scottish people" and assign culture-specific traits to that group, such as generosity with food. The connections with the Old Country are seen in the use of that very phrase, and in the number of people who have visited Barra several times, proclaiming that the speech and even physical appearance of the Barramen resemble their own. Older residents refer to themselves as "Scottish-Canadians" or even "Scotsmen", and some go so far as to explain how the Scots are different from and superior in some ways to other people.

Even today foodways, choice of music and to a limited extent language proclaim the ethnic heritage of the group. At ceilidhs the stories are often of the ancestors and the Old Country and the songs at least will certainly be sung in Gaelic. Clan meetings are organized essentially to celebrate the family and its roots in Scotland. The ritual gatherings and the entertainment gatherings in Washabuck are a focus for ethnic identity, because so many gatherings, notably the ceilidh and milling frolic, and the dance in terms of the actual steps and

music, are culture-specific and define themselves as Scottish and Cape Breton by their form and content. Every time one of these takes place, people demonstrate by their knowledge of the form that they are members of this ethnic group, with the esoteric knowledge that membership implies.

6.2. THE COMMUNITY

The group here defined is not only an ethnic group in Neville's terms, as she studies a group which is widely dispersed except for ritual occasions, but also a community, both physically and in the sense of a group with mutual goals and interests. The community proclaims itself as such when it meets in any way, and that social event provides the ground for an expression of what unites and divides the community, as Falassi phrases it: "an expressive organization of community diversity, contrasts, and contentions." (xi)

He describes the veglia as a ritual of community integration, where behaviour was prescribed to a certain extent. The world view of the community was put forward in a veglia, and those who attended showed that they subscribed to this collective point of view. Szwed has observed for the Codroy the importance of avoiding dissension in the community (*Private Cultures* 104), and this sense of actively closing ranks as a community in spite of internal censure is typical of small groups such as families.

This takes the form of supporting other individuals because they are part of the community; unwed mothers may be criticized but are sustained from within; people with drinking problems who may be considered failures in the outside world are recognized here as part of the community who are treated with

respect and encouraged to join in on gatherings, however much their behaviour may be deplored at home by friends or relatives.

There is as part of the sense of community a feeling of territoriality, most apparent and heightened at dances where challenges and fights occurred between the residents of different areas, but also evident in the identification of people with communities in phrases like "She belongs to MacKinnon Harbour", "He was an Iona man," and particular characteristics attributed to each community, as in "The best musicians live in Washabuck" or "The Gaelic stayed longest in Barra Glen."

Collective work, present in many social gatherings, constitutes another base for a sense of community. People raising money for the church, community centre or fire hall are working as a community to improve that place. There is an element of competition with other places, as seen in John Rory's account of the milling competition, and a sharper edge is shown in the resentment towards the Indians who come to bingo from outside when the stakes are high and may take the money from the community that built it up.

A community gathering is a forum for expressing needs, but also for conferring approval and giving support. People are accompanied through their rites of passage with the full attendance and support of the community because so often these events affect the life of the community in a way which would not apply to a larger area. A small and steadily diminishing community literally gains a new lease on life when a couple decides to marry and establish a home there, or when a new child is born. Likewise, the entire place is diminished when a community member dies, because he was known to everyone and one of their number is gone.

This concept of the community as an entire world allows in one way a larger world view for these people than is available for city dwellers. As they know everyone in the place they are aware of the full balance of good and bad, the entire spectrum of behaviour, and have a heightened sense of history and tragedy. Obviously it is easier to have a grasp of and feel closer to Washabuck history than that of Halifax or Toronto. And because a small community allows people to observe everyone closely, there is an awareness of the hardships and tragedy of life which become evident in many sad stories told at ceilidhs or within songs, and presented as true events from life on the peninsula.

6.3. THE GATHERINGS

The gatherings themselves have of course already been described in detail in previous chapters. When viewed as cultural performances, we see that they are distinguished by the food, the music, style of dress, form of dancing, and narratives used. Yet gatherings are common to every society, whether rural or urban. The reasons for gathering differ from one context to another and yet fulfill the same basic human needs for entertainment and company, as well as to establish and reinforce the identity of the group and the individual's particpation in it. This is seen by Goffman in the small community (Shetland Islands of Scotland) which he investigates, by Chiaramonte in his study of client-craftsman contracts in a Newfoundland outport, and just as clearly though in a radically different context in Seeley's study of a Central Canadian suburb.

We will briefly review the gatherings important on the peninsula: A dance is seen by local participants as a highly profiled gathering, firstly because it

is rare, and scheduled; it requires preparation, both to put it on and to attend it; the food and the music are of high quality (best clothes, best fiddlers); money is asked, and finally, some drinking and fighting are permitted. Dances were always known as the favourite gatherings: they were a treat or a reward and were highly esteemed and regarded as events to remember. My oldest informants could recall the age they were when they attended their first dance; some even recall the exact date.

By contrast the ceilidh or kitchen rackets, being spontaneous and without plan, were less memorable. Though they involved the sharing of food, this consisted of whatever the hostess had available, and dress was everyday clothing. The hours kept were earlier, and drinking, if it occurred at all, did so in a more restrained way.

A wedding corresponds to a dance as a grand occasion, while a concert is something less, and an activity like bingo still less of a formal event for celebration and entertainment. Milling frolics today are highly ritualized and therefore "occasions" and in the past would have been considered so if including all the festive aftermath, but otherwise not.

Although we have seen that gatherings fulfill needs and are a forum for identity and reaffirmation of values, the folk categories would quite simply term something an "occasion", a high-profile event, in terms of how much fun it was. (See Faris, "Validation in Ethnographic Description".) And that, in turn, would be determined by how much removed from ordinary living it was in terms of food, dress, drink, late hours, courtship. Naturally all types of gathering are or were necessary or they would not have taken place, but, though tradition was taught in

the ceilidh, rites of passage were observed in wake or funeral and work was pleasurably accomplished in the frolic it was clearly recognized that a social gathering was for fun. This explains John Rory's reaction to my questions about *sgeulachan* in his young days: "Yes, there were some told, but who'd want to be listening to those old stories? We'd rather be up having a dance!"

We have seen the forms, the purposes and the folk estimation of gatherings so far. We will now look at some of the background of the events and the community motivation for using and retaining them.

6.4. UNDERLYING VALUES

6.4.1. Egalitarianism

First there is a conflict between the very real sense of egalitarianism in the community and the inevitable leadership that must crop up in some areas of life.

The anxiety to maintain the illusion of equality is partly historical; it has often been said that the Scots preferred to have authority imposed from above than have it emerge from within. Daniel MacInnes makes this point when writing about his study group, very similar in background and lifestyle to the people of the peninsula:

> Community relationships in Poplar Grove appear to have been equalitarian. The effects of the disbanded clan system, migration to North America and subsequent experience of non-feudal settlements left the Poplar Grove Scot ambivalent toward leadership. For the first time in history the Scottish peasantry were their own masters. They were subject to neither laird nor tacksman. Not only were they free, but they were equal, all being of the same social class in their native

> Scotland and freemen in the New Land. They felt it important to prevent one another from the assumption of local leadership. Such was their vigilance of one another that it might be said that they were not so much equalitarian toward one another as they were suspicious of each other's intentions. (62)

The same historic conditions prevailed in Washabuck and even still it can be fairly said to be a one-class society. Some inhabitants have education and may be employed as professional people in outside communities, but as their parents were of the usual class and economic group and as this group expects children to go away and become educated, this does not put them in a position of seniority, especially when respect for the old is added to the equation. A young person with education could not expect to rise above an old person with acquired wisdom in the matter of leadership.

Clement Harris found the same situation prevailing in Hennage when he attempted to determine community leadership by setting up a village fete.[1] (11) He found that no one was willing to make a decision on the others' behalf, and that events in the fete which invited competition amongst members of the community were not at all patronized. By contrast, competition which pitted community against community was encouraged, and one sees an element of this on the peninsula: Washabuck people claim their parties, weddings, and festivities are much better than those in Iona. This is competition not in terms of individuals, which would be presumptuous, but in terms of communities, which reinforces the idea of equality amongst equals. This is further stressed in that societies, like the Altar Society, organize events in Washabuck. A group may take leadership because it is a company of equals where an individual may not. Bingo, as mentioned previously, is a favoured recreation because it is non-

performance-oriented and requires no special skills, except that of luck which is seen as a mystical and inexplicable gift.

Leadership, of course, invariably emerges in some spheres of life, and the forms it takes correspond to personal identity in individuals. As Harris says of Hennage:

> Every person in the core group seems to possess some special little skill which, while it can be carried out by every other member, reflects on his or her individuality within the group. (70)

Thus Stephen Rory was known as the amateur vet, the square dance caller and coffin-maker, while his brother John Rory is remembered as a good dancer and singer. Joan MacDonald is known as a stepdancer. Evelyn MacNeil makes good "sweets", John MacDonald is "good to fix things", Ronald MacDonald has success with pigs, Josie MacLean puts on a fine lunch. A general level of acquired expertise is required in some spheres, like dancing, where a person is forbidden the floor if he has not achieved some level of competence. In addition, some amount of leadership may be approved as a compensatory attribute; a bachelor may be excused for putting himself forward in singing or storytelling. Apart from the wake and funeral at a death, which in part is to honour the family, individual achievements and rites of passage are not made much of. Gatherings are designed to celebrate group aims and ideals, even within the festivities of a marriage or anniversary.

There are a number of people resident in the area who are not core-group members, and they sometimes take the role of mediator in the community. These people, such as the parish priest, the director of the Highland Village, the

Gaelic teacher at the Highland Village, and a woman married to a Barra Glen man but formerly from Ontario, are in a position to make suggestions and start programmes for local improvement. Although not accepted as "one of us", they are respected and admired for their initiative. In other areas of life, such as the Central Cape Breton Development Committee, recently organized to promote growth and development in the area, local people formed the committee, attended meetings and completed surveys, but the co-ordinator and management consultant were people from outside the area. The belief is maintained that it was a result of local co-operation:

> The key to the planning process was that this study was community-based-- reflects bottom up and not top down generation of ideas and points of view. It is the product of a community initiative. (Central Cape Breton Community Economic Development Study)

The illusion is maintained that the communities in an egalitarian way worked this out together. In fact the chairman is a local leader of sorts, and the other key people were not from within. Szwed comments on egalitarianism as translated into the economic system of reciprocity:

> It will be seen that in the parish interpersonal relations within the section are ruled by attempts at balance and equality between individuals. To "take advantage" consciously and manipulate others is viewed with great repugnance. Instead all social relationships are viewed as requiring balance and reciprocity. As all social units in the section (individuals and nuclear families) are seen as equal, symmetry is thus implied. At the same time, all transactions of goods and services within this sphere of social organization are seen as a part of social life in general: the "economic is embedded in the social." The pattern of socio-economic integration thus characterizing this level of parish society is that of reciprocity. (*Private Cultures* 46)

6.4.2. Reciprocity

The public image of equality requires reciprocity, and a close examination of the dynamics of Iona life shows that reciprocity is more important than the illusion of equality because it touches on many more issues. Reciprocity is a key part of social gatherings and underlies many of the customs established by long use on the peninsula.

Reciprocity can be seen to take place in many forms, depending on circumstances. Favours are exchanged: one person feeds the chickens for someone else, and in return the first person looks after the second's children for an afternoon. It may be less tangible: one man drives an elderly couple somewhere, and in return he is welcome to visit at any time and is offered companionship. In Newfoundland Louis Chiaramonte has noted a pattern of dyadic ties which determine client-contract relations: an agreement is made to do work which will be paid for and the sum determined is fixed by a low offer from the craftsman and a fair offer from the client. This method of establishing business within the bounds of friendship is less known in Washabuck because less business takes place. But favours are done with the expectation that eventually there will be a balance in assistance offered and required. Reciprocity is seen in the exchange of news and gossip, and in the exchange of songs and stories, especially if one is relinquishing "ownership" of a song by passing it on. More than anything, however, and especially in reference to social gatherings, food is the source of reciprocal action.

On an ordinary visit to a household, a person is offered tea, or more often the hostess will simply serve it without asking whether someone wishes to

have it. John Szwed describes an incident which took place in the Codroy Valley when visitors refused to stay for tea and some hard feelings resulted; (*Private Cultures* 88) this might well be paralleled on the Iona peninsula. It is significant that within this "lunch" ritual each person is given a filled plate, rather than selecting something from a common plate. The lunch is treated as a meal within its formality; it is a ritual hospitality which must not be refused. Several times I mentioned to people that I had been given a very large tea at someone's house and was unable to finish; more than one answered, "Yes, the Scottish people like to see you eat." This statement shows not only, interestingly enough, that the present generation will still call themselves "the Scottish people," but that they recognize their generosity with food as a culture-specific trait. There is an element of pride in being able to set a good tea; a chance to show off one's cooking does not often occur in a rural society where formal dinner parties do not take place. Pride in one's cooking and the ability to produce a meal at short notice is a rural value of a farming community. There are certain conventions to be observed: people always accept the lunch, and always eat something even if they have just finished a meal. At the end of the repast, a compliment is always offered on the food, usually praise for one particular item. Certain women are known for special delicacies and these reputations are maintained and enhanced within the tea ritual, when another person's cooking may be mentioned. A slipshod cook would not be criticized in her presence, but sometimes comments are made concerning the housekeeping abilities of a woman, including her cooking.

A person is expected to eat heartily at a visit or a ceilidh, but of course

is excused if he cannot finish. The meal is not provided only for sustenance: that it is, in fact, a ritual is seen in this anecdote told by Hector MacNeil:

> Now I remember an interesting story--I never ran into this myself, but I was going to Halifax on the train one time and I was sitting with this older woman, about fifty-five or sixty. And she had been adopted by a family out in...Rear Mira or something. And the first time she went visiting with this family she was, you know, fairly old, old enough to be conscious of what was going on, and they passed around the lunch, you know--it was an older couple who had adopted her--people they were visiting passed around lunch and she ate everything on her plate. And 'cause--that was the polite thing to do, to eat everything on your plate. And they, they got outside and the woman said, "Now, don't you ever eat everything on the plate," she said, "You leave one piece on the plate," she said, "You don't want people to think you're coming hungry." And the funny part is that she was making lunch for people, right? and so she put on a piece of bannock and a piece of bread, a cookie, what she thought was a regular lunch and the woman in the house came out and said, "Well now, put on another piece of bannock so they can leave something on the plate and still have a full lunch." (C8441)

The line between charity and hospitality is evident here: although people were and are always ready to assist someone in need, their sharing of food at a gathering is sustenance not only for the body but also for friendship and community fellowship. It is an exchange, and there should be no indication that a person comes out of need, in this context, even if he does.

That "lunch" is an obligation to give and to receive is evident in P. J. MacKenzie Campbell's reminiscences of growing up in Cape Breton. In describing a ceilidh he talks about his father playing the violin, while his mother carried out the other essential part of the gathering:

> In the meantime my mother attended to another chore which was regarded as an obligation never to be neglected: the serving of tea and

> the best that could be provided in the form of eats. The serving of tea was a deeply ingrained institution with our forefathers. The time of day didn't matter. If anyone, neighbour or stranger, visited one of the homes, even on business, tea would perforce be indulged in before any departure would be allowed. (27)

Campbell goes on to explain the reasons for this almost involuntary hospitality in a chapter entitled "Traits of Highland Character":

> Our ancestors had certain traits which, in any assessment of values pertaining to human relationships, would give them a high rating. They had other traits which could be deemed less worthy. Perhaps the trait that would place them highest was their adherence to the godly principle of hospitality. They weren't hospitable just because they regarded it as a duty. Rather, they were impelled by something deeply ingrained in their natures--something that came down to them through many generations--and it was just as natural for them to be hospitable as it was to go to sleep and wake up again in the normal routine of their lives. Perhaps it was the hardships they had encountered through the centuries of conflict and oppression and the realization that only through mutually assisting each other could they survive that brought about this feeling; but this seems strange and out of place when we consider the fact that the various clans from which they descended fought one another murderously down the years. The reason for this aberration seems to be that the people placed loyalty to their chiefs above every other consideration, even above the laws of hospitality. It was a mistaken loyalty, for many of the chiefs were less than worthy of such devotion. (27)

Mary Fraser's account of food being consumed at a wake in order to free a soul from Purgatory shows also the tremendous symbolic significance of food to the Scots in Nova Scotia. (11)

The chiefs and clans having long since passed, devotion to hospitality has regained ascendancy as the primary virtue on the peninsula. This has practical as well as symbolic application because in an area so limited as to services, people could not survive without each other's help. There is no taxi or

bus service and no low-cost accomodation, the doctor visits only once every two weeks, there is no banking facility except a credit union, retail services are limited, and as noted before for our purposes here, there are no entertainment options. It is natural to offer food, lodging, transportation and anything else to people, even strangers, because there is no other choice. Reciprocity is largely based on practicality; it is an economic system of sorts, where a mental ledger is kept of favours given and repaid. It also sets the groundwork for relationships: a rejection of favours is a refusal to enter into a relationship, and effectively is a rejection of the giver.

Reciprocity is important as identity in Washabuck because people see themselves as helpful, ordered by religious feeling and the past actions of their ancestors whom they perceive as noble and generous people, setting an example for present-day behaviour. To be part of the reciprocal system indicates membership in the community and group, which makes it difficult for people like bachelors who do not receive visitors in their homes and thus seek alternate ways of contributing to community life. The system of ordered obligations establishes relationships which are both friendly and businesslike in that they imply friendship, a relationship voluntarily entered into, as well as obligation.

People on the peninsula are most likely to be closely reciprocal with their own extended families which are certainly extensive. The sense of family obligation has an element about it not of choice which complicates the reciprocal system.

James Faris gives a different interpretation to the offering of food:

> Consideration should be devoted to the symbolic significance of food in Cat Harbour life, for it plays an indispensable part in the times. Food is, in the local view, the only proper idiom in which to express hospitality. Any special guest or any stranger must be fed, and if for some reason this is not effected, those involved worry over what is to them, a serious breach of the ethics of hospitality...But hospitality, as with respect, is often more akin to fear: by feeding a stranger one learns more about him and his purpose, and one also puts oneself in good stead with him. The point here is that food means hospitality. (*Cat Harbour* 163)

And again:

> First, the stranger knocks, something outport people rarely do, and secondly, he is given food, again something not normally extended to local people casually visiting. (*Cat Harbour* 163)

The stranger is not feared on the peninsula; strangers are common enough that greeted on home territory they are no threat. They are not disarmed with food, but welcomed with it. And the casual visitor will always be given food no matter when the visit takes place. It is part of the ritual and responsibility assumed by passing through the door of a neighbour's place. Food is a kind of status symbol in Iona; to the first generation settlers who arrived landless and starving from Scotland there must have been considerable prestige in having enough food to offer it to guests. This attitude is still prevalent in the oft-heard proverbial expression, "We didn't have much, but we always had something to eat." A family that can provide enough for its members to eat has achieved pride and independance, and can show it on the casual visit, the display of food at a wedding, or the provisions for a stranger.

Food in this sense is both communication and recreation. Eating is an enjoyable activity; part of the reason to look forward to a visit was to eat

someone's cooking other than your own. Food is a central part of any entertainment and the basis for some, like cod or lobster suppers.

There are a limited variety of foods eaten on the peninsula, and preparation is limited as well. No commercial fast food is available, and there are no restaurants except a canteen at the ferry which offers home-cooked hamburgers and the like. Meals consist of beef, pork or fish for the most part, with vegetables and meat always thoroughly cooked. A meal is accompanied by bread and butter, and finishes with pie or fruit and tea. People are rarely invited for meals, except close relatives if one knows they will be eating alone. Anyone dropping in at a meal time will automatically join the family; an invitation is not even issued. At any other time of day, whether morning or night, tea is prepared, and with it will appear rolls, biscuits, bannock, butter, jam, perhaps strawberries, cheese, ice cream, pie, or occasionally cold meat or curds. These things will appear in abundance, and in any combination.

Food communicates when it is brought to a house in times of trouble (a wake, funeral or illness) or in times of joy (wedding and childbirth). People eat to sustain life, and the community is responsible to see that those involved in these events eat, because these are not private matters but events in the group's social life. At a wake, emotional support is offered in the form of physical support, and eating to sustain life in the presence of death reintegrates the grieving members of the group back into the group by accepting life in the form of food. Offering food replaces the words that are difficult to give in times of heightened emotion; the cup of tea expresses sympathy, friendship, welcome and celebration.

Under the system of hospitality, anyone is welcome for any meal. In

one elderly couple's home, another man, a bachelor visits each day and receives a meal. While doing fieldwork I was dependent on a drive each day from one community to the next and always arrived at the time of the mid-day meal at this same home, which caused me some embarassment until I realized that it was a state of affairs of which every housewife was in constant anticipation. No resentment is ever seen of this system because it is a system and reciprocal action is always expected.

The divisions that Mary Douglas finds in hospitality in her middle-class selected area do not exist in Iona. (Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal") There is no division between the people who come for meals, those who come for drinks and those who come to tea. It is, rather, a division of context: if one arrives at a mealtime one gets a meal. On most occasions it is tea. If liquor is available, a festive feeling prevails or if musicians have dropped in and begun some music, a drink will be served, with tea to follow.

Constant movement and visiting is the norm in the area. In the two months I spent on the peninsula there might have been three evenings when my landlady and I did not go out visiting or receive visitors. And it is the responsibility of being a host which prevails over that of being a guest, as seen in the following incident: While staying at Joan MacDonald's house, she and I planned one evening to visit some people and called to tell them so. Just before we were to leave another couple dropped in and remained until midnight. There was no question of telling them we had plans; nor could we phone the first couple and tell them we would not be arriving as the phone was in the same room as the visitors. This was quite acceptable behaviour though, and when we next saw the

first couple an explanation was given but there was obviously no call for an apology.

Marcel Mauss has said that reciprocity serves a moral purpose rather than a practical one. (18) We have seen how reciprocity functions as part of the economic system in Iona; we may now look at it as a symbolic system. Mauss sees an obligation to receive as well as to give: this is less a graciousness and a conformation to this system than a necessary part of the balance. Generosity is necessary to avert jealousy, the sops offered in the lunch ceremony being often a token offered to someone less fortunate.

As Levi-Strauss has written, the destruction of wealth is a way to gain prestige, and this is part of the appealing quality of generosity. (56) As one destroys one's wealth, equality is maintained. This is part of the appeal of ceremonial mutual destructions of wealth, at Christmas time for example. By agreeing to collectively reduce possessions, everyone maintains his place in the hierarchy.

With food there is perhaps an association still more intimate than with other types of material goods. Food plays a symbolic role in many rituals, including Holy Communion. In many cultures a man does not eat with his enemy; if he breaks bread with another he must consider him a friend. Food has in a sense a life of its own , as Mauss exemplifies from Indian culture:

> It is in the nature of food to be shared; to fail to give others a part is to "kill its essence", to destroy it for oneself and for others. Such is the interpretation at once materialistic and idealistic, that Brahminism gave to charity and hospitality.(56)

There is of course a materialistic side to reciprocity in that people need

the services of others and effectively pay for them by other favours. This is not done in a straightforward manner, using cash-on-delivery, because the illusion of group membership, providing security and identity, requires free exchange amongst individuals. Thus, as Mauss says, gifts (or food exchanges) are voluntary in theory but are actually given and repaid under obligation.

While the lunch ritual is the most frequent and smallest of such exchanges, in less frequent, more highly ritualized gatherings the exchange, the gifts, grow larger. In order to celebrate the wedding or funeral of a friend or relative, sacrifice is necessary. Equality is unbalanced because a family is thrust into the limelight with a ritual celebrating one of their own. They right this imbalance by sacrificing a part of their wealth. This can grow to inordinate amounts, especially in the case of weddings. Mauss recalls an example which illustrates this constantly shifting balance in the hierarchy, requiring endless giving and receiving:

> In the distinctive sphere of our social life we can never remain at rest. We must always return more than we receive; the return is always bigger and more costly. A family of my childhood in Lorraine, which was forced to a most frugal existence, would face ruin for the sake of its guests on Saints' Days, weddings, first communions and funerals. You had to be a grand seigneur on these occasions. (63)

In playing the "Grand Seigneur" one person forces another to take up that role at a later date and ensures a continuing imbalance which requires group members to constantly seek each other out to give and receive favours. This effectively guarantees continued community interaction, constant social gatherings, and a strengthening of group membership.

Alvin J. Gouldner deals with some of the same issues in his article "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Study." Relations which do not involve reciprocity are relationships of unequal power; therefore, a reciprocal relationship is one presumed equal and an assurance of social stability. Gouldner sees the reciprocal system less as a form of moral code than as a type of mutual dependence, complementary to and a fulfillment of the division of labour. In his view, this can only exist between people who are able to reciprocate, thus causing neglect of the old and the handicapped, or the replacement of motivations for the care and assistance of these people. Though Gouldner stops there, his comments required me to re-examine the reciprocal system in that light and to discover these "normative orientations" which obviously exist to provide benefits for the needy.

Gouldner identifies reciprocity as that which ensures social stability, an important function indeed. If one does not have equal exchanges and reciprocity, one has unequal exchange which amounts to exploitation and violates the value system. Gouldner explains that reciprocity implies that each individual has both rights and duties, and extends this hypothesis to cover the reasons why rules of conduct are obeyed. When people owe obligations to each other, the social machinery enforces conformity because of the mutual dependence in existence. It is perhaps no wonder that crime is so much higher in cities, where anonymity frees the individual of any reciprocal obligations and the ensuing "collective conscience" or moral code. This is Gouldner's view of the practical versus symbolic aspects of reciprocity: the mutual benefit and the moral norm:

> Specifically, I suggest that a norm of reciprocity, in its universal form, makes two interrelated, minimal demands: 1) People should help those who have helped them and 2) people should not injure those who have helped them. (171)

This is so solidly built into the moral code of people in Iona that it does indeed form part of their identity as generous, welcoming Christian people, without any need to discern the practicality underlying the concept. Reciprocity in urban middle-class life is institutionalized by etiquette or "good manners", where an invitation to dinner is returned by a similar invitation. The return expected is not vocalized in rural society and thus is more complex: the expectation could conceivably be of almost anything, so the party under obligation (and everyone is, to someone, all the time) must be constantly aware of the delicate balance in the relationship.

Why are people reciprocal? Out of practical need, to maintain status, to carry out family responsibility and to take out a kind of insurance in case of need. It is a self-perpetuating system because it works, and it is rare that a person will seek benefits without paying them back, or take the opposite course, conveying too many benefits, which is a show of excessive and therefore threatening power.

Reciprocity implies and reinforces equality. Equality is an implicit element of group identity, since to attribute a *group* identity implies a high level of homogeneity and equality within the group. Within the realm of direct exchange, or food exchange, the system may break down, as Gouldner contends:

> Moreover, the norm may lead individuals to establish relations only or primarily with those who can reciprocate, thus inducing neglect of the

> needs of those unable to do so. Clearly, the norm of reciprocity cannot apply with full force in relations with children, old people, or those who are mentally or physically handicapped, and it is theoretically inferable that other, fundamentally different kinds of normative orientations will develop in moral codes. (178)

This implies that reciprocity is essentially economic in scope, and as such eliminates those incapable of participation by dealing with them in terms of charity. But on the Iona Peninsula reciprocity is more complex than this because the contribution of a person does not have to take the form of labour, food or gifts. Old people give their knowledge of history, their stories and their songs. Bachelors, who do not entertain, also contribute "cultural goods", or repay with extra labour. A person who has given in the past is respected and cared for, and his family will "pay" his share when he is no longer able. All the ways which single out each individual as a leader among equals ensure that the person's contribution is recognized as a factor in the reciprocal system, entitling him to draw out equivalent benefits. Thus an egalitarian state does not mean to signify that everyone is equal, but rather that all are entitled to give what they can and receive what they need, when the system is working as it should.

6.4.3. Communication

The other area of high significance as a contribution to the understanding of the symbolic meaning of social gatherings is the use of language and what could be called speech events within a gathering. Because all gatherings involve conversation, each and every one is a communicative event, but in some types of gathering the speech may become the central part and major entertainment of the gathering. Abrahams comments on this process in his foreword to Falassi's book on gatherings in Italy:

> The *veglia* described here is an expressive organization of community diversity, contrasts and contentions. It is an occasion for talk, indeed for the entire range of social actions; but as so often happens when so many familiars are brought together, the *veglia* constantly threatens to break into performance. (xi)

This is not an awkward transition in a culture like that of Iona, where storytelling and singing are performed largely with self-consciousness. Many people have as part of their identity a reputation as performer and naturally such people look for openings in the conversational context to bolster this reputation. This sometimes results in a person monopolizing the speech event in enthusiasm to hear his own voice, especially if he feels this may be his only contribution to the group of which he is a part.

Speech events at ceilidhs, especially, may also include conversation, which is also the source of subjects which may lead to stories. Storytellers like Neil James MacNeil (See Chapter 3) present their personal identity as well as reinforcing the group identity through their stories. Bauman highlights conversation as a major activity in "The La Have Island General Store: Sociability and Verbal Art in a Nova Scotia Community." The use of conversation both as recreation and as an educational tool predetermined the style in which narratives were told in the general store. The narratives were essential to the establishment of a man's social identity, his membership and status within the group. He talks about the personal identity element in storytelling in terms of image-building:

> ...the true focus of the gatherings at the store was the presentation of

> personal experiences and individualized points of view. That is, the gatherings at the store represented an occasion in which the display, maintenance, and development of personal identity was of paramount importance, through the exploitation of a conversational resource in personal terms.("The La Have Island General Store" 334)

The storytellers in the La Have Islands context were concerned with showing themselves as part of the group, possessors of esoteric knowledge and thus their "yarns" dealt with specific subjects of interest to that group. These subjects of special interest in Iona would include local history, possession of Gaelic stories and songs and knowledge of local heroes, and a storyteller conversant with all of these forges a personal identity as a transmitter of the group identity. Conversation is the framework for the emergence of such skills and provides an opening for their performance. In Iona as in the Italian veglia, the opportunity for the conversational context to turn into a performance arena is quite likely to occur. We see that speech events allow for a personal identity to be developed at the same time as the group identity is being reinforced.

In speech events there is room for everyone to contribute. As explained in the chapter on the ceilidh, it is the older people who take part because, due to their advanced years, they are more established in the group and have a stronger sense of what narratives to select in order to advance the values and identity of the group as well as of themselves.

It is at social gatherings that Gaelic becomes an issue as part of a speech event, with its macaronic use and its function as a secret password into at least part of the communicative events taking place. The function of the language, especially within the framework of gatherings which may be the setting for a brief renewal and celebration of Gaelic, can be considered through

application of some of Dell Hymes' ideas. He is aware of the necessity for studying social life to determine the rules of selection for sociolinguistic features, and cites the party as a speech situation or communicative event.

Hymes refers to such situations in his article "Models of the Interaction" when he advises "the inseparability of sociolinguistic analysis from the full-scale analysis of social life itself." He gives some indication of the function of language choice:

> Relationships of social intimacy or of social distance may be signalled by switching between dictinct languages (Spanish:Guarani in Paraguay), between varieties of a single language (Standard German:dialect), or between a pair of pronouns within a single variety (tu:vous). (9)

The choice of when to use Gaelic (it is not a case of either language being equally suitable) is determined by several factors. If the entire group present understands it, it may be used. If the situation is one which calls up memories of early times (ie a wake) it may be used between some people. Most importantly for our purposes, Gaelic may be used during a social event to make a strong point, to make the punchline of a joke, to describe something out of the ordinary, or in songs. In all these contexts the Gaelic words used will have some significance through familiarity even for those who are not fluent in the language. It creates a situation where identifying with Gaelic signals a link to that culture, the possession of special knowledge making the group distinctive. It is a kind of in-group secret language, the understanding of any part of which signals membership, and the full possession of which signifies full and venerable membership and the attainment of many of the group's values, or ideal characteristics.

Another speech event, or aspect thereof, signalling membership and partaking of group values is knowledge of local history and local heroes. These figures are introduced at ceilidhs and serve to reinforce identity. Harris describes a similar situation in *Hennagg*:

> Just as core-group members use their social life as ritual, so they seem to treat events that have taken place in the recent past which are part of their lives, yet outside, as forming a mythology. For a person to be included in the mythology he has to belong within the hierarchical structure of the system, yet by his behaviour to have put himself outside the system. He is "larger than life" and therefore a myth figure. Myth figures reiterate the social values held by members of the core group by having overreacted toward these values themselves, either positively or negatively. (60)

He goes on to say that "normal behaviour" is not the raw material of myths (62), and it is true that there are plenty of local figures to illustrate the virtues and vices of Iona, people like Lachlan MacLean, Dohmnaill Gorm, Dohmnaill Og, and the Little Soldier. There are incidents of real tragedy in the past history, examples of deviant behaviour made the more compelling because they concern local people or their ancestors. A speech event is a performance. It is also a time to build images of the past and use that to contribute to group identity.

6.5. CONCLUSIONS

Having considered now at length the idea that a group has a collective identity and that this is presented within social gatherings, it remains to challenge the idea. How far does the idea of group identity go?

Certainly great changes have taken place on the peninsula, with the

introduction of television and with cars and trucks available to take people places they would never have gone years before. Education has had its effect, taking away young people who do not come back, and the new phenomenon of summer residents, though limited as yet, is having an influence on the area.

The sharp decline in population which caused the closure of schools, stores and post offices has reduced the autonomy and individual identity of communities. The demise of the Gaelic language has caused a change in identity, and accompanying traditions have suffered, or have become confined to a smaller number of people.

Nothing can ever make this area what it was. The dearest hope of the inhabitants is to have a bridge built across the Barra Strait and to bring in new industry and new residents. The fact that as a result traditional culture may die, or that the area will no longer be predominantly Scottish does not disturb people; they are at present concerned with an almost physical death of their communities and changes must be brought about to combat this fate. How are changes reconciled with the past? Szwed comments on possibilities:

> When private cultures become affected by changes in the surrounding phenomenal world, there are two courses of action available: the individual can rearrage and reorder the elements of his private culture to accord with external changes (a common recourse); or he can take in new elements. In most cases of change, the public culture will remain intact much longer than the original private culture which make it up, the lag itself often being a source of frustration and disturbance...New demands on both individual and group have created new contexts which cannot be met by traditional customs and routines. Pressures brought to bear from without the cultural system of the parish have reduced the scope of the traditional public culture to the point where former means of ordering and controlling human relationships no longer apply in the same manner. But this does not stop its participants from trying to use it. (178)

Traditions and community are always changing. If the pressures are greater today than ever before to join a mass culture spanning much of the world, it is equally true that the draw on traditional means of coping continues. Success is limited, especially when people leave that community and become only part-time members of their own culture. This leads to a self-consciousness about the traditions left behind, and they are sometimes revived in a manner which is not precisely true to the past. This is most common in urban settings, as described by Gwen Kennedy Neville:

> This study presents data from three regions of Scotland in support of the position that within dispersed industrial populations, regional diversity is expressed through the periodic assembly of individuals for the celebration of ceremonies and communal life events. ("Community Form" 93)

The Highland Games and Gaelic Societies in urban areas of Nova Scotia and elsewhere are a self-conscious celebration and subjective interpretation of a group's past. These retain identity for that group, but it is a simplified and incomplete identity. This is more necesssary to urban groups so far removed from that culture, but such events exist on the peninsula as well. These include clan gatherings and Scottish concerts, as well as the very existence of the Nova Scotia Highland Village. The Scottish culture is now a saleable commodity and the people are extending their view of their own folk heritage to include elements it never had, or at least not within the history of the community in Nova Scotia, which is all most of them have ever known.

At the same time, it must be admitted that those urban dwellers involved in this form of revivalism are fully aware that their methods of gathering

are not the way in which their ancestors lived. Their form of celebrating the Scottish heritage takes a symbolic approach to what was good and valuable in that culture. Like the rural people with their newer forms of milling frolic, they are using their cultural relics without attempting to institutionalize the idea that they are reliving the past. It is ironic that revivalism, an upper-class phenomenon whether it concerns minority languages, historical preservation of buildings, or cultural self-expression, often makes use of the humble artifacts of the past and glorifies them, such as the kilt and haggis. Both of these items are now only available at considerable expense and trouble. This is by no means a new phenomenon: Dunbar on writing of the invention of tradition in terms of Highland clan tartans, reports that by 1822 there was already revivalism of the tartan with a "Celtic Club" formed to promote its use and preservation. (11) In a sense the descendants of the early Scots, long removed from Scotland and almost equally from their rural roots in Cape Breton, are involved in formulating new traditions which may hint at manufactured culture but have over the years come to constitute traditional social gatherings in a new sense.

The changing function of events is a two-edged sword. Martha Ellen Davis writes of the Feast of the Holy Cross of Mary, a religious event now revived to appeal to national and regional identity. Its functions: courtship, entertainment, political power of the church and forum for cathartic emotional expression, have all changed, and its new identity is "folklore": regional identity of the people. In Washabuck, milling frolics have undergone similar changes until they are two or three times removed from the original intent.

There have always been options for those who rejected the group

identity. Many left without trace, got new employment in other areas, forgot their Gaelic, dropped their double names. Others within the area rejected the trappings of the identity by refusing to participate in the communal recreation of the social events. Like Falassi's counter-veglia, there was the alternative for outcasts to gather, perhaps at the Legion, and drink, use prohibited language and reject the values of the culture. Perhaps such an outlet was always necessary and provided for as a safety valve in the culture.

It is true that many folk practices have become ceremonial and occasional rather than necessary. Daniel MacInnes believes the old ways to be dying out in Poplar Grove due to lack of interest and a change in feelings. And yet the spirit that motivates a bingo game is the same collective work effort that brought about a chopping frolic. If a milling frolic no longer produces cloth, it still maintains the repertoire of Gaelic songs. Dances follow the same music and the same steps. Ceilidhs occur spontaneously and provide the same reinforcement of cultural values in terms of family, rurality, religion and ethnic heritage.

This thesis is not an attempt to present the Iona Peninsula as an island of surviving folklife, with purity of tradition. If movies were available visiting would be lessened. If a bridge is built the community will change and be glad to. The old Gaelic speakers do not call for a revival. Instead they point out that the old language was "not a language of business"; they are aware of its limited use. Kay Cothran writes about participation in tradition:

> Forgetting or rejecting a given folklore genre is itself folklore behaviour, and abandoning a particular folklife tradition is itself folklore behaviour. It takes a long time to stop participating in a given tradition, probably much longer in most cases than any individual's lifetime. (33)

In terms of social gatherings, where there are no entertainment options a people will use what they have and what they know, which, because of isolation and homogeneity, is in this case the Hebridean traditions of their ancestors. To reject is a stronger action than to accept, and the people will go on using their traditions until something new is offered, or until no one is left. That is a real possibility, and perhaps the one which causes people to gather more often than they might in an urban context. In the pioneer days, they gathered to survive. In the dying age of rural living, they are gathering to survive once again.

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