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Monthly Newsletter
2024 Fulbright Project

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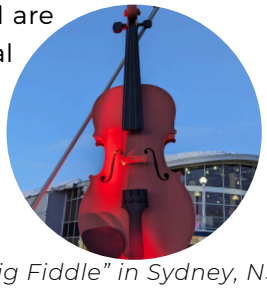
Arisaig Lighthouse. Antigonish, NS

An Gearran [February]

Monthly Recap

It's been a seriously snowy scene here on Cape Breton island during the month of February! The month kicked off with a multi-day winter storm dropping approximately 3-5 feet of snow in regions across Nova Scotia with many areas declaring a state of emergency. With high winds in the area it's difficult to accurately record how much snow fell locally. Across the province, roadways, businesses, and schools were shut down for safety during and after the storm for multiple days. This snowstorm was a historic event thought to have been brought on in part by climate change. Many locals mentioned they haven't experienced a winter storm of this degree since the category 2 hurricane Juan made landfall on September 29th, 2003. Otherwise, the winter has been pleasant.

Despite the storm, I decided to bundle up and embrace the winter wonderland all month long by taking part in some cold weather pastimes, like the Mabou Winter Festival which hosted guided snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and ice skating during a week long town festival. Mabou is a small and close knit community and it doesn't take long to start seeing familiar faces at town events and gatherings. There is one grocery store in town, the Mabou Freshmart, and no restaurants are open full time year-round as most businesses are seasonal and are only open June through October during the tourism season. The winter festival ended its week-long celebration with a square dance at the West Mabou Dance Hall, a venue that hosts square dances year round. These dances usually don't begin until 9pm or later following an older tradition of dances beginning late at night after the work for the day, usually farming or fishing, was done.



The "Big Fiddle" in Sydney, NS



A snowy scene in Mabou, NS during the February winter snowstorm

Dance is heavily intertwined with traditional music in Cape Breton. The combination of fiddle tunes often with piano accompaniment is upbeat and designed to be danced to. Square dancing here, like the music itself, has developed its own regional style. This in part is due to immigration patterns of the island during early settlement. Often whole communities would arrive together through immigration in waves, planting their roots down in a central area. Communities that are close to one another regionally across the island can have different music and dance customs to this day. Early dance traditions here have changed over time, from the quadrille dances that early immigrants brought with them during settlement, to the popularity and decline of the Scotch Four set, to the relatively new Cape Breton style of step dancing. The popular Inverness County square set is a regional dance style where couples dance three figures (or dances) consecutively while musicians play jigs and reels for the dancers. It's a common scene in between the square sets to see solo dancers taking their turn in the spotlight step dancing. In Cape Breton square dances, there is rarely a dance caller, rather the dancers know the formations for each style. If you don't know then dance, then just hang on, you'll get it soon enough!

Gaelic Foundations: Living Cultures at Beinn Mhàbu

Mentioned in the January newsletter, as part of my Fulbright experience, I've been invited to audit a few courses at Beinn Mhàbu, a renovated education center in partnership with Gaelic College in Cape Breton and Cape Breton University. Beinn Mhàbu offers a unique opportunity for undergraduate students to be immersed in rich and living culture while learning about the world through the viewpoint of the Gaels. I've had the opportunity to learn more about topics surrounding the history and culture of Cape Breton through two courses: Folklore of the Gael with instructor and Gaelic speaker Carmen MacArthur that just wrapped up this month and Literature of the Gael with instructor and author Oisin Curran that has just started and will go until early April.



A St. Brigid's Cross made from woven rushes, a grass like plant, made to celebrate St. Brigid's Day (Imbolc) on Feb 1st.



A traditional jam session at Island Folk Cider House, Feb 11th, 2024

What even is folklore? The Folklore of the Gael course shed light on this question and referred to a great book Folklore Rules by Lynne S. McNeill detailing the following:

"Folklore is informal, traditional culture. It's all the cultural stuff, customs, stories, jokes, art - that we learn from each other by word of mouth or observation, rather than through formal institutions like school or the media. Just as literature majors study novels and poems or art historians study classic works of art, folklore focuses on the informal and traditional stuff, like urban legends and latrinalia." - Folklore Rules by Lynne S. McNeill



The official Mabou Tartan, recognized by the Scottish Register of Tartans.

Folklorists observe and analyze how these informal cultural traditions - like stories and songs, recipes, customs and celebrations we take part in, even jokes - are changed when they're passed down. "Tradition" just means "passed on" and anything can be traditional. It's easy to think of folklore itself as just being old stories, myths and legends but the reality is any group can and likely does have their own living folklore customs and traditions. Think of the folk groups you are a part of like your colleagues at your workplace, that knitting circle group you're in, the acquaintances in your yoga class or that local birdwatching group you've been thinking about joining - all of these are folk groups with their own folklore customs! Everyone engages in folklore in some aspect in their lives. In short, folklore is always shared person to person, it must have a traditional element to it that stays the same each time it's passed down and the folklore also changes through its transmission. A folklorist also does not equal being a storyteller as folklorists don't necessarily perform the folklore they study, rather they observe, record and analyze.

The official tartan description states "Blue is for the beautiful sky and peaceful waters, green is for the trees so splendid, brown is for the fertile soil, yellow is for the glorious sun, and grey is for the mist over Cape Mabou".



Cow Bay Moose statue – Cow Bay, Nova Scotia

The Folklore of the Gael course looked at how Gaelic folklore compares in Scotland and in Nova Scotia, Canada over the course of 6 weeks and covered a lot of ground during a short timeframe. From the early collections of folklorist John Francis Campbell who in 1890 published "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" a four volume collection of Scottish Gaelic folklore to the 20th century collections and fieldwork of John Lorne Campbell who pioneered folklore collecting using modern recording technologies. I was particularly interested in learning about Canadian folklorist Helen Creighton, who traveled across Nova Scotia collecting folklore and published traditional music, stories and lore of Maritime Canada. In 2017 she was recognized by Folk Alliance International as a Lifetime Achievement Award Winner and is now known as one of the most important folklore collectors in the 20th century.

The Folklore class also ventured out of the classroom regularly to include ceilidh's [a social visit or gathering, often with music] at people's homes in the area who are native Gaelic speakers to give students opportunities to be exposed and learn the Gaelic language. Currently there is an ongoing effort to educate, promote, and preserve the Gaelic language in Cape Breton. Gaelic, and also the Mi'kmaq language, are offered in the provinces' school systems. There are currently initiatives in Cape Breton working to revitalize the Gaelic language, which has been on a steady decline over the past century. There are community Gaelic classes and since arriving in January I'm trying my best to learn while I'm here.

CHECK OUT THIS VIDEO *OF A FEW PHRASES FROM STUDENTS & STAFF AT BEINN MHÀBU FOR #SAYAGAELICPHRASEDAY* ***DURING WORLD GAELIC WEEK, FEB 19-25, 2024***



A group of snowshoers near Mabou, NS. Feb 18, 2024

Check out the video below - or click here to access

too see what I've been up too during the month of February!



Looking Ahead

March will be a busy month as I move forward with scheduling and recording interviews that will take place through this Spring. I've been invited to give a presentation as part of a speaker series at the Center for Cape Breton Studies at Cape Breton University on March 19th. The speaker series talk, Appalachia to Cape Breton, will feature information about my ongoing Fulbright project along with a brief overview of Appalachian musical styles so that participants can gain an understanding of musical traditions and stories from the Appalachian region of the United States.

Tapadh leibh! [Thank you!]

- Toni

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