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Monthly Newsletter
2024 Fulbright Project

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Scenes from the Highland Village Museum in Iona, NS, an outdoor living history museum dedicated to Nova Scotia's Gaelic folk-life, culture, and language..

A' Chèitean [May]

Monthly Recap

With Summer in sight and right around the corner, I'm gearing up for a whirlwind of activity over the next few months here on Cape Breton Island. Since arriving in January, I've heard the phrase "just wait till Summer's here!" for months on end. I can already tell it'll be hard to keep up with all of the goings-on, from regular square dance sets, sessions, ceilidhs and more. The oncoming warmer weather also marks the beginning of the tourism season here on the island, and sees an increase in folks visiting who come from away and the return of the seasonal snowbird moving back for the Summer.



Ceilidh with Gaelic language immersion students at An Drochaid in Mabou, NS

May was also Gaelic Nova Scotia Month! Nova Scotia's Office of Gaelic Affairs has designated this month as a time to celebrate and create awareness of the history, culture, language, contributions, and achievements of Gaels across the province. Many events and programs were held throughout May to recognize and celebrate the importance of the continuing cultural maintenance efforts of the Scottish Gaelic language in Nova Scotia.



A scene along the Celtic Shores Coastal Trail, a 57 mi multi-use trail along former rail bed on the west coast of Cape Breton Island.

What better way to participate than by attending a Gaelic language learning immersion course at The Gaelic College [Colaisde na Gàidhlig in St. Ann's, Nova Scotia. Toiseach-Tòiseachaidh, The First Step, was a newly created two week long Gaelic language learning course designed for beginner language learners and those looking to enhance their introductory Gaelic skills through total immersion. The Gaelic College also offers An Cùrsa Bogaidh, a month long total immersion course intended for intermediate to advanced Gaelic language learners designed for those seeking to enhance their skills on a personal level and for university credit. Students in this course are only permitted to speak English in their own rooms, all other spaces on campus including at meal times and outside of the classroom during the 4 week program are to be Gaelic-speaking only spaces. Being in the total beginner course, our class was designed with daily timed Gaelic speaking only sessions.





A square dance at the Baddeck Legion (left). Sunset at a lookoff point on Kelly's Mountain in St. Anns (right)

Having never learned another language, this experience has reminded me to have an open mindset when it comes to learning new things. Language learning is difficult, and letting the language 'wash over' you though the immersion method was a constant reminder by instructors. As an adult, it's easy to hold oneself to a high standard and wonder "why am I not getting this!?" Here's your daily reminder to be kind to yourself and try the new thing.





Performance by the Men of the Deeps, a group composed of retired coal miners from Cape Breton Island. Photo courtesy of 2024 Cape Breton Island Music Tourism Convention.

This month I was also able to attend the 2024 Cape Breton Music Tourism Convention in Sydney, Nova Scotia, an international conference where voices from the global music industry came together to discuss and share best tourism practices and ideas. This event was held at the Membertou Trade & Convention Centre in Membertou, an urban and progressive Mi'kmaq community and reserve located on Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island, which loosely translates to "land of the fog". The island of Cape Breton is the ancestral home to multiple indigenous Mi'Kmaq communities including Eskasoni, Membertou, Wagmatcook, We'koqma'q, and Potlotek First Nations. The traditional Mi'kma'ki territory is now known as Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and includes other surrounding areas and provinces in Canada. Land acknowledgments act as a way to recognize and honor the past and present histories of indigenous people of Mi'kma'ki are now a common practice by many organizations during events and cultural activities across Nova Scotia. You can learn more about the Mi'Kmaq communities and culture in Cape Breton here along with a brief history of the the Mi'kmaq people here. The Music Tourism conference featured several performances by Cape Breton artists, including the Sons of Membertou, The Men of the Deeps, and Morgan Toney Trio to name but a few.







(Top) A scene from the Highland Village Museum. Gaelic culture is represented on a 40 acre site with 11 historic buildings depicting life for Gaelic settlers in Nova Scotia. (Bottom Left)) A session at the Blue Mist Tavern. (Bottom Right) Cape Breton Music Tourism Conference goers in between sessions!

Fulbright Project Updates

As June draws near, I'm wrapping up recording interviews for my Fulbright project. Originally planning to complete 12-15 interviews, I've now spoken with 25 individuals and have a few more conversations planned through June. With each visit, these conversations have had unique perspectives, and I'm looking forward to the next phase of the project where I'll be going through these recordings and taking a deeper listen to make connections and weave these stories together. You can find out more about the individuals below by checking out full bios of the individuals with the embedded links.

Here's who I've spoken with this month:



Lucy MacNeil is a singer, multi instrumentalist and step dancer from Cape Breton Island. She plays Fiddle, Celtic Harp, and Bodhran. Lucy has been performing with the Barra MacNeils for the past 37 years. They come from a long tradition of Cape Breton music and dance that has been the foundation of their creative pursuits over their musical career.



Mac Morin is a step dancer and piano player from Troy, Cape Breton. He has gone on to tour around the world with Natalie MacMaster and Beòlach while continuing to travel widely to teach Cape Breton step dancing and has appeared on numerous artists' recordings including Beòlach, Natalie MacMaster, Yo Yo Ma, The Rankins, and Buddy MacMaster.



Adam Young is a pianist from French Road, Cape Breton. His solo album, Yearbook, won the 2022 East Coast Music Award for Roots/Traditional Recording of the Year. He has a Canadian Folk Music Award nomination under his belt, as well as several Music Nova Scotia nominations. He has released a tunebook featuring 189 of the 365 compositions created as a part of his Yearbook project, and can be found playing concerts, ceilidhs, square dances and sessions throughout Cape Breton.



Rodney McDonald is an accomplished recording artist, composer, and step dancer and comes from a family of musicians who are known for their traditional "Mabou Coal Mines" fiddle style, drive, compositions, and timing. A former Premier of Nova Scotia, Rodney is a passionate advocate for Gaelic language and culture creating such organizations as the Nova Scotia Office of Gaelic Affairs and Cape Breton's Kitchenfest! festival. He is the current President of Colaisde na Gaidhlig / The Gaelic College and its satellite campus, Beinn Mhàbu.



Vincent McDonald is a fiddler, Gaelic speaker and step dancer from Halifax, Nova Scotia and has family roots in Cape Breton. He later discovered the doors Cape Breton Island opened in his life including connections with music, the Gaelic and culture. Vincent can be seen across Nova Scotia fiddling, at square dances and speaking Gaelic. He is currently a student at Beinn Mhàbu's Gaelic Foundations Living Culture Program program in partnership with Cape Breton University.



Margie Beaton is from Mabou, Cape Breton and is the Marketing Director for Colaisde Na Gàidhlig, The Gaelic College. Alongside her sister Dawn, both were step dancing and playing fiddle at a very young age, and continue to be active within the cultural music industries. Over the years they have performed at concerts, ceilidhs and festivals all around Cape Breton Island and worldwide.



Minnie McMaster Minnie MacMaster was born in Mabou, Cape Breton Island and is the mother of fiddler and step dancer Natalie MacMaster. She is an accomplished step dancer and grew up steeped in the region's musical traditions surrounding dance, Gaelic song and fiddle tunes.



Emily MacDonald is an experienced Gaelic educator and speaker from Ainslie Glen, Cape Breton Island. She is a graduate of St. Francis Xavier University where she completed her Bachelor of Arts in Celtic Studies and Bachelor of Education Degree.



Stan Chapman is a retired educator residing in Antigonish and an accomplished fiddle player that has taught the Cape Breton style of fiddling for close to 40 years, both in private and group lessons to students like Natalie MacMaster and Ashley MacIsaac. He has also directed the Cape Breton Fiddler's Association and many youth groups in public performances. Stan has conducted fiddle workshops in Canada and the US.



Howie MacDonald is a well-respected fiddler from Westmount. Coming from a musical family, he has released 12 albums and a DVD, and spent many years touring and recording with the Rankin Family. An accomplished piano-player who has accompanied just about everyone on the Island, Howie is very much in demand for dances, concerts, ceilidhs and recording sessions. He takes great inspiration from the tunes and musicians from prior generations, like Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald and Jerry Holland.

Check out the video below - or click here to access

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











Scenes across the island from May 2024

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