

**Ian Brodie and Paul MacKinnon (illustrator). *Old Trout Funnies: The Comic Origins of the Cape Breton Liberation Army*. (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2015. Pp. viii +224, ISBN: 978-1-77206-041-6.)**

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It is tempting to pick up printed comics and assume that we can understand them. On the surface, this is possible as we make sense of what is “going on,” often without thinking much beyond what is in the frame, strip, or book. However, as analytical readers, we know that there is more that we can glean from an isolated page. This holds true for Paul MacKinnon’s Old Trout Funnies (OTF) comic art creations established in 1970s Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Ian Brodie’s book, *Old Trout Funnies: The Comic Origins of the Cape Breton Liberation Army*, does an admirable job in both presenting MacKinnon’s OTF collection and providing context and explication to allow readers to appreciate the comics and calendars while having information with which to consider the comics on a variety of analytical levels.

The book opens with Brodie providing context for the period in which MacKinnon created the OTF. He discusses the broader social context of Cape Breton in the mid-1970s, including economic factors, such as industrial downturns and unemployment, and cultural responses to these situations. Brodie also describes the origins of the Cape Breton Liberation Army (CBLA) and the OTF themselves, based, sometimes closely and sometimes loosely, on friends, people, and places from MacKinnon’s experience and the region in general. The CBLA itself has its roots in the political and pop cultural discourse of the period as well as MacKinnon’s own social circle. The OLF emerged from the CBLA and other sketches MacKinnon shared with his friends, which were developed into a comic book as part of a college project. The OTF and CBLA evolved over the course of three issues, a series of calendars, and other work. Along with laying out the context and timeline for the development of MacKinnon’s work, Brodie also outlines a few approaches readers can take to interpret the OTF. He succinctly touches upon thematic considerations; nevertheless, Brodie advises us, “Before trying to read too much into the work, it is good to remember that MacKinnon’s intent . . . was to provide something humorous for a particular audience” (13).

The central part of the book, which inhabits over half of the volume, is the reproduction of MacKinnon’s work itself. Beginning with the first issue, this section includes all the published issues, some shorter as well as unpublished materials, and the calendars. The content of the art is reproduced without modification or annotation, with the exception of

some page transpositions for the flow of the material. In this way, the reader has the opportunity to encounter the OTF as much on its own terms as possible in a book of this nature. This presentation allows us, if we wish, to immerse ourselves into the world of the OTF and to go on adventures with the CBLA, without focusing on the contextual and interpretive sections that are on either side of the comics collection. The rare and unpublished materials offer us shorter stories with recurring characters and glimpses into incomplete works. The calendars continue to show us the development of MacKinnon's work. Though less overtly narrative than the comic issues and strips, they provide insights into MacKinnon's perspective on Cape Breton culture over the period the calendars were in production (1979-2000, with some exceptions). The 2000 calendar rounds out the OTF collection.

A strength of the book is how it presents MacKinnon's work. As much as it can, the book allows the reader to interact with the material on its own, to try to understand it without marginal notes. In part, this helps us try to keep in mind what Brodie advises us to do in the opening section. However, it also helps to underscore to readers not familiar with the work, the time period, or the region (or any combination of those) how much we can learn in order to continue to unpack the material. We can appreciate the artwork and enjoy the stories and images without knowing all of the references and in-jokes, but seeing all of the material together makes us keenly aware of what we might not be getting out of our reading – it invites us to want to know more.

The third section of the book helps us in this undertaking. It provides us with a thorough list of notes, annotations, and explications regarding the content of the OTF. Notes are grouped by location in the collection to facilitate readers' being able to go back and forth between the notes and the original material. Brodie pulls together information collected from interviews with MacKinnon, archival sources, and other research to provide contextual and interpretive insights. For example, the cover of the first issue of OTF has six entries that range from providing background on General Peyton, the protagonist of the issue featured on the cover, to an entry explaining why the pricing information was left blank. The level of detail in the entries is impressive: not only do they provide insights into the components of MacKinnon's work, but they also allow us to see how his life and the world of the period fed into it.

Brodie's work balances providing scholarly discussion of MacKinnon's work and allowing the art to have the space to stand alone. This is not an easy balance to strike in book form, but Brodie has done it well. The

research about the context, content, and interpretation of the collection is notable and accessibly written. The reproductions of MacKinnon's original work and the corresponding information and discussion provided by Brodie help the reader explore how the OTF attempts to reach its audiences, including MacKinnon's friends as well as a larger general audience, and how the characters and material were adapted and developed over time. The calendar notes are especially helpful to readers less acquainted with the content and context. Some of the calendars contain dense collections of images, and the notations provide details that assist with the unpacking of these images.

An index to the book might have been a useful addition in order to help readers locate references to people, places, and topics across the whole of the book. However, the length of the first and third sections of the book is not so long as to make it unmanageable to find references by scanning through the text. Also, Brodie notes in the interpretation section when characters, topics, and terms recur throughout the comics, which helps to connect content across the various visual materials.

The collection of MacKinnon's artwork and Brodie's discussion provides a valuable glimpse into Cape Breton culture in the mid-1970s and beyond. Readers interested in this region and period would find this book a useful resource, especially if interested in youth culture, economy and unemployment, entertainment, and humour. The book would also be of interest to readers with a focus on mainstream or alternative comics as a form of folk expression.

By the end of *Old Trout Funnies: The Comic Origins of the Cape Breton Liberation Army*, one is left feeling as if one has gained a familiarity with the materials while still feeling that there is more to discuss about MacKinnon's work and how it provides insights into the tensions it plays with. Brodie's contextualization and interpretation sections serve to introduce us to the world that surrounds MacKinnon's art and guides us through the material, drawing our attention to people, places, and events relevant to having an understanding of the work. Nevertheless, Brodie does so without overworking the discussion, without seeming as though everything that can be said about the work has been said. In the end, there is a wealth of material in MacKinnon's work to unpack, and this book is successful in presenting its material in a way that promotes possible future study.

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