

Cape Breton Folk (with an introduction by Stephen F. Spencer)

Charles H. Farnham et Stephen F. Spencer

Volume 8, numéro 2, spring 1979

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad8_2doc01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Farnham, C. H. & Spencer, S. F. (1979). Cape Breton Folk (with an introduction by Stephen F. Spencer). *Acadiensis*, 8(2), 90–106.

Documents

Cape Breton Folk

The late 1880s saw Cape Breton Island on the verge of being transformed into an area dominated by manufacturing. Prior to the establishment of the Dominion Coal Company in 1893 and the related Dominion Iron and Steel Company, agriculture was the Island's major activity. The farming community, composed largely of Highland Scots, lived a predictably insular life. The fields of Cape Breton produced only small crop surpluses, most of which were shipped to Newfoundland. Since few learned to read or write and Gaelic was widely spoken, information on the lives of these people is rather scanty.

Although Cape Breton did not attract royal visitors, another sort of traveller did make his way there. Roving journalists, of whom Henry M. Stanley was the most famous, sought remote places and peoples to describe for the stimulation of staid, middle class readers. One of these writers, Charles H. Farnham, was something of a Canadian specialist. He produced articles on canoeing in Canada and Labrador, another on "The Canadian Habitant", and, of interest here, "Cape Breton Folk". As a professional writer, Farnham emphasized and probably embellished the divergent features of Cape Breton life. He explained that his purpose in writing on the subject was to provide a counterweight to urban America which was "so full of steam and electricity". If "Cape Breton Folk" is accurate, then Farnham's choice of places was well suited to his purpose.

The article which follows was originally published in 1886 in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in New York and is reprinted here with only minor omissions. It gives a colourful description of the customs and lifestyle of the rural people of Cape Breton Island in about 1885. Farnham treats everything from marriage to funerals and reveals a way of life which yielded few luxuries but a strong sense of community. While the simple life of Cape Breton's rural Scots was not an unqualified success, neither would industrial Cape Breton prove to be the promised land.

STEPHEN F. SPENCER

It is worth while to visit a civilized people that still grinds grain by hand between two stones; for doubtless we may find among them bread of the primeval flavor, and men and women that are racy and strong. I set out for Cape Breton to see such a people. We are so full of steam and electricity that a deal of fizz and flash blinds us to the charms of simple things. As I sped along on the Intercolonial Railway from Quebec past the watering-places on the St.

Lawrence, the beautiful scenery of the Matapedia, the Restigouche, the Bay of Chaleurs, and across New Brunswick, I kept wondering whether I could really enjoy a patriarchal sincerity in life, and I was eager to reach the place where I might test my honesty and sympathy. At last I arrived at Port Mulgrave, and beheld Cape Breton Island across the Strait of Canso. Our two canoes were soon taken from the train and launched on those Eastern waters, and we paddled away down the strait.

The map showed us that Cape Breton is a triangular island at the eastern end of Nova Scotia, about 115 miles long and 90 wide. The southern and central portions, comparatively low and undulating, are cut up by numerous bays, channels, and lakes of ocean water; the northern part is a peninsula, presenting a plateau from 500 to 1000 feet high, some ranges of hills on top of this, numerous streams cutting deep gorges, and bold picturesque shores along the Atlantic and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. As a rule the hill-tops and highlands are covered with forest, and the sloping shores at the water edge of the sea and the lakes are occupied by a strip of farms. The island is divided into two portions by its interior waters and a canal at St. Peter's giving access to the Bras d'Or lakes.

To get at once at the heart of the subject, we pushed on down the winding strait, a mile or two wide, with hilly shores sloping down to the water, and threaded our way through the canal at St. Peter's. Bras d'Or lakes won our admiration at once. We followed at first a narrow winding channel about wooded islands and between hilly shores. They are like mountain lakes, and yet the water is salt, and so deep (from 200 to 500 feet) that ships and great black ocean steamers thread their way through the forest. The sea lies at rest in the Bras d'Or; neither tide nor surf disturbs his sleep; only a strong wind can rouse him there to a suggestion of his boisterous life beyond the encircling wall of hills. Once a whale came in and lost his way, and a man soon captured the monster of the deep far inland among the hills. Great Bras d'Or Lake, with the West and the East bays, is about 40 miles long by 20 broad.

The cultivated shores of this warm sunny basin in a Northern sea present very graceful lines in sloping upward from the blue sea to the forest crowning the mountains, and the common houses and irregular fields are graced with many scattered trees and groves.

We felt everywhere the charm of an unusual beauty in these quiet scenes as we paddled in and out of bays and coves and channels innumerable. Now and then we got a glimpse of some of the people, but we kept on our journey to complete our geography before entering the social world of Cape Breton. After some days of canoeing we boarded at Baddeck the comfortable steamboat *Marion*, to take a hasty run to Sydney. The route was down the Great Bras d'Or, one of the inlets letting the sea into the lakes. Hills steep and high form a long, narrow passage like a river; woods generally cover the slopes, but here and there houses and irregular fields and snow-white cliffs break out of the dark foliage. When we sailed out on to the Atlantic, our northern horizon was the parapet of the high

plateau of Cape Breton, Cape Smoky, and other lofty heads along the shore, ranging off toward Cape North. Sydney presented some fine views of a large and excellent harbor, dotted with shipping; along the shores are villages struggling with domineering coal docks and volumes of smoke from the coal mines, and the two towns offer some quaint sights in their streets. But these more commonplace and commercial features of Cape Breton were not the object of my visit, so we returned with the steamboat to Baddeck, and prepared for our journey among the homes of the people.

Our plan was to walk along the Atlantic shore, by St. Ann's Bay, over Cape Smoky to Ingonish, and on to Cape North; thence to return along the Gulf of St. Lawrence shore by way of Cheticamp, Margaree, and Lake Ainslie. This walk of about two hundred miles would take us through some of the most secluded as well as the most populous settlements of the peasantry. We carried in our knap-sacks a photographic camera and a little provision for luncheons in the wild regions.

On issuing from the woods at the head of St. Ann's Bay we saw before us a long stretch of the first part of our walk. The bay begins with a pretty complication of the blue sea with points, coves, and white plaster cliffs among trees. Before it widens to the ocean it runs on in a long narrow harbor between two walls of hills diversified with forests, fertile slopes, and rugged cliffs; on the left hand the wall ends in a bold headland, Cape Smoky, rising from the distant sea-line; on the right the ridge ends in a low point, set off with the hamlet of English Town and a snow-white light-house relieved against the deep blue sea. The region was first occupied by the French, who built some fortifications at English Town to protect their fisheries. When the island passed into the hands of the English, the place was abandoned.

By sundown we reached the neighborhood of English Town, and began to inquire for lodgings. Many a time the people of Cape Breton boasted to me of their hospitality. "Your people were very kind," I said to a good man in Baddeck. "Oh, ay, sir; I'm sure," said he, in perfect confidence; "we all are that." The tramp of the first day, with our heavy packs, had made us tired, and so I was interested in our first approach to these farmers' hearts. At the first house the woman said she was not able to receive us; at the second house, she was unprepared; at the third, she replied to us in Gaelic, and motioned us on our way. "Well, White, the fence-corner, at any rate, will not cast us out." And we discussed the merits of new-mown hay for a bed under the trees. At the fourth and fifth houses Gaelic was given us instead of bread, and we went off gleeful, if hungry, at having so good a story to tell of Cape Breton hospitality. But just at dusk a hay-maker, with his scythe over his shoulder, met us, and showed us to a hospitable house. The wife soon busied herself with our supper, and we passed a social evening to make amends for our many rebuffs. The house was a good example of these Cape Breton homes, having four or five rooms, with clean floors and bare walls. Here and there lay a thick mat made of strips of rags

hooked up through burlaps — transmogrified roses in rare raw colors. Order and neatness prevailed; but the dreariness that generally is felt in even the homes of the better class is quite oppressive in these peasant houses. There is nothing picturesque to lend a charm to simplicity. It was before supper that we noted this barrenness; afterward we felt the house to be somnolent rather than irritating.

As we strode away down the road again in the bright morning the air was clear and bracing, the birds sang, the mowers went afield, and the bay was rippled by breezes whisking down over the mountain-tops. The old ferryman in taking us across the bay had more than his hands full to discover our errand thus on foot, and likely so far from home. As we landed near the light-house he called out: "Ye're mineral men; I know ye; so ye may turn to the left hand up there by yon hill, and go down to the silver mines of St. Ann if ye like." We thanked him for a profession we had not before possessed. The road first leads for three or four miles along a very narrow spit of gravel that almost divides the bay by crossing nearly to English Town; then it runs on toward distant Cape Smoky, through the belt of farms sloping down from the forest-covered hills to the beach. The bay loses itself in the wide Atlantic past Bird Rocks; fishing-boats in the offing rose and fell on the ground-swell, surf boomed on the beach of pebbles, and the salt sea air blew upon us.

By noon-time we happened to meet two boys picking up shells; they said the shells were for burning to get lime for mending the chimney-corner. They invited us home to dinner, but we went on. Then came a troop of men and women from their hay field; none of them spoke to us at first, but after we had addressed them a few words, the father among them became more sociable, and he also asked us to dine. Still another group gave us an invitation, and at last we accepted it. Here was our first evidence of the Cape Breton hospitality we had missed the previous evening; here people came seeking on the highway who might devour. The men sat down first, and the women served us with bannocks and sour milk, potatoes and boiled salt mackerel, bread and butter. It was one of the best meals of our trip; for nine times out of ten we were given only the staple articles of diet — bread, butter, and bitter tea. The people spoke Gaelic to one another, and we got no hint of their talk; but the quiet and kindly spirit of the family sufficed to put us at ease. After dinner we dragged wearily onward, still toward Smoky, until at sundown we gladly entered a poor man's hut for the night. It was full of inhabitants, of which I can mention only the man and wife with nine small children, three dogs, a hen, and a pet pig. It was a shadowy little place, with a cavernous stone chimney, picturesque with pots and kettles hanging from a crane. The few dishes gleamed out of the dimness of a corner cupboard, and the table and chairs were unmistakably homemade. The woman had been in the hay field all day, but she cheerfully cooked our supper, and gave us the bed usually occupied by the children. The poor are always friendly with nature; the little pig regarded himself as one of the family; and whenever the woman went to get some milk from the pan kept in the bottom of the cupboard,

there was a race between her, the pig squealing, and the hen with eager neck; the woman generally reached the door first, and then, with much shuffling, just managed to fence the others out with her legs, while they bobbed in and out under her skirts. From this excitement the pig would walk over to the hearth, and such was the comfort he took in the warmth of the fire that he would doze before he had time to lie down, and thus frequently fell asleep supported awhile on four legs and his nose. I noted his habits, because the pig is sometimes a member of the household here in regard to bed and board. A minister at a wedding remained all night, and was given a low cot bed in the living-room. In the night he was startled at finding some one getting into his bed, and soon felt it to be the pig nestling down against his back. He tried to drive it out, but the outraged animal would not go. The noise of the fight brought the householder, and he explained that it was the habit of the pig to come into bed with them on cold nights, and assured the reverend gentleman that it would do no harm.

We now began to be toughened by our walking; the fatigue was less irksome, and the distances were passed over with fewer speculations and inquiries. We reached at last the summit of Cape Smoky, the barrier that for two days had fenced us off from the northward. It was a pleasure to overlook now our route away back to St. Ann, along the strip of farms under the long wall of forest-topped hills, at the lower shore toward Sydney, and over the wide expanse of the ocean dotted with sail and fishing boats. We cooked our luncheon in the shade of a bridge on top of the mountain; and the road was so unfrequented that not a soul passed to take fright, flee to the valley, and report uncanny spirits haunting the gorge.

The foliage in that balmy, moist climate is luxuriant; the trees on a hill-side stand relieved one against another as solid forms. Under this rich canopy of verdure the streams coming down from the high plateau of the island have worn deep, winding, narrow gorges. Here and there an opening lets the sunlight pour its lustre into a tiny glade carpeted with grass under noble trees; but soon the gorge recovers its shadowy mysteries, ferns, moss, lichen-covered logs and rocks, and the laughing brook drowning the fainter voices of the woodland. When in the autumn I loitered through any one of these glens, gorgeous with October colors above the pools and the dank, sombre nooks, it seemed like a long elysian bower filled with a golden mist. We walked that afternoon over Cape Smoky and down such a glen to Ingonish, silent and satisfied, while one picture after another led the fancy riot in sylvan dreams.

A cold northeaster, with rain, met us at Ingonish, with great clouds of mist rolling in from the Atlantic. The bay lies within an amphitheatre of high rugged hills; at one end of them is the noble promontory Cape Smoky, 1100 feet high. A long, narrow, jagged point of rocks, Middle Head, divides the bay into two parts, and a long bar of gravel crossing this point forms a natural breakwater, and makes a pond of North Bay and a good harbor of South Bay. The mists rolling about set off well these bold hills and rocks, and the intricate forms of

bays and ponds; but they added little to the comfort of tourists. We watched for a while the life on the wharves and schooners, in the stores, at the fishing establishments, and then began hunting a place for shelter. Cape Breton hospitality seems to be in strata. At one of these bays we met the generous streak; we were taken even to a party, where reels and jigs helped to pass the night. During the festivities the host's gate was most effectually broken up by his nephew in revenge for not being invited; and the rest of the night was passed by the old man in hunting the pieces and the nephew, and imploring blessings on his head. At the other bay we had great difficulty in getting shelter on any terms. We addressed ourselves first to a man who keeps the only hotel in the place. "What are ye? — blacklegs?" "Well, I don't know. We look like them, don't we?" "Faith, ye do." He sent a lad to interview the wife, who manages the estate: she was in ill humor, and so the public-house was closed that day. Finally, after inquiring through the settlement, we found the good vein again, away down at the end of the point, just where we expected it to disappear under the Atlantic. The tedium of a rainy day was relieved by moping about the ruins of the place — traces of cellars, chimneys, and a battery or two — and in gleaning a few facts from a history of Cape Breton.

The civilization of Cape Breton seems to have been reserved for the Scotsman. The Spanish, Portuguese, Basques, Bretons, and Normans, who have visited the island to obtain fish and fur, made no colonies. Even the French, holding the island for over a century, did nothing but establish fishing villages at Arichat, St. Peter's, St. Ann's Bay, Ingonish, and build the costly fortress at Louisburg to protect them. Ingonish is said to have had at that time a population of 4000 souls. But although they did nothing to develop the agriculture of Cape Breton, the French attached great importance to it as a nursery for drilling hardy seamen.

When they lost the island, they obtained what consolation they could in possessions on the coast of Newfoundland, where they maintain to this day a large fleet of cod-fishers. The English in taking possession of Cape Breton seem to have continued the French policy. For twenty odd years after the conquest the government refused to grant lands to settlers, one of the motives being to keep those coasts as a nursery for seamen, and therefore to favor fishing and discourage agriculture. Even as late as 1800 there were only a thousand or two of population, chiefly coal-miners and fishermen.

About the beginning of this century the advantages these colonies offered to settlers were much discussed in Scotland; for many of the tenantry there were compelled by the landlords to emigrate. "Many of the Highland chieftains, who had discovered that the raising of cattle and sheep afforded greater profits than the letting of their lands to miserable tenants, were dispossessing the latter of their farms and holdings." The peasants saw "their houses unroofed before their eyes, and they were made to go on board a ship bound for Canada." Some of the young men were glad to visit new scenes, but the most of the peasantry left

their country with the most bitter regret. The first ship loaded with emigrants for Cape Breton came in 1802. "From this time the tide of immigration gathered strength as it advanced, until it reached its highest point in 1817, when it began gradually to decline. The last immigrant ship arrived in 1828." And it may be added that almost all the settlers of Cape Breton, excepting the Acadians, came from the north of Scotland and the Hebrides, the islands of Skye, Barra, Lewis, Mull, Uist, etc. The population thus thrown upon the island, estimated at 25,000, made it a Scotch country. The total population now is about 84,500; 55,000 are Scotch or of Scotch descent, 12,500 Acadians, 15,000 English and mixed races, and about 1500 Indians.

A clear bracing morning sent us forward again with an elastic stride. For about twelve miles the route was a bridle-path, partly over swamps, partly up and down the beds of stony brooks. We were then on top of the barren plateau of Cape Breton, a mossy, burned, desolate region, where bare, bleached skeletons of trees shake in the wind, and the huckleberry alone straggles over the rocks. It is wearisome to pick your way for miles in such ground, jumping from bog to bog, stone to stone, or walking single poles laid as bridges over peat holes. The region, of course, is uninhabited, excepting at the half-way house — a comfortable inn kept open by the government to relieve the mail-carrier and others crossing the barrens, particularly in winter.

Aspy Bay, at the end of a long day's tramp through the wilderness, was doubly charming. It lies between two straight ranges of mountains that meet several miles inland. The western range, presenting to the valley a deeply cloven crest of rounded summits, ends in a lofty peak, Sugar Loaf, the Cape North of the maps, the northern limit of our excursion. From its summit you see a vast expanse of sea, the Magdalen Islands, Cape Ray of Newfoundland, Low Point, near Sydney, and the intricate forms of the adjoining coast. The bay itself is divided by points and transverse bars of sand into North, Middle, and South Ponds.

We entered the valley just as the last load of hay, attended by its group of men and women, entered the open barn; we passed through many cozy little nooks, where meadows lay like verdant lakes along the foot of the wooded mountains and about the base of white cliffs.

We had now reached Cape North, the northern limit of our journey, and having found again the good streak of Cape Breton hospitality at the North Pond, we passed very pleasantly a social, quiet Sabbath. Our course here turned westward, to begin the homestretch along the Gulf side of the island. But to reach that shore we had before us another of those jumping, scrambling trips on roots, stones, and poles across the swampy barrens. To make the tramp easier, we divided the distance in two, and went on Monday afternoon to the foot of the mountain.

As one of the farmers happened to be returning to his home in that direction, we put our knapsacks on his lumbering cart and walked along with him. He was

an intelligent, hearty youth of seventy years, enthusiastic, sympathetic, and chatty; a large, muscular man, in coarse homespun, with lively blue eyes dancing under his shaggy brows, and lighting up his symmetrical and benevolent features. His old cart, home-made, had great massive wheels without any tires — wabbling, poetic wheels, the wheels of no-fortune. The old man, swinging his legs from the front of the cart, talked both to us and the mare in a rhythmical way, to accompany his regular and frequent jerks of the lines and cuts of the switch. And his emphasis had reference to the driving, not to words of his discourse. “Me grandfather, sir, deserted *from a MAN* — go on, Dolly” — a cut of the whip — “-of-war in Portsmouth.” Here Dolly recognized an old story, doubtless, for she settled at once into a mortally slow walk, and dozed along with tranquil eye despite the lines and the switch. “And he got on first-rate in the Revolution, *he DID*” — jerk, jerk — “and got to be an aide-de-camp *to General* — Dolly, I say” — cut — “Gates, and he helped to Burgoyne’s surrender, he did. The States, that’s the *place, SIR.*” Jerk, jerk. “Ye get on there! Republics for me! They need ’em in Europe too.” Here the switch broke, the story and Dolly stopped short, and he jumped down to cut another. “She knows, sir. Ye see, I’m very forgetful, for I’m consider’ble of an arguin’ man, either on religion or politics, and when I get to talkin’ I go off and forget me whip. So I take only a switch — they’re handy along the road.” I thought him candid, for he had on three of his fingers a white, a red, and a blue string of yarn, as memoranda. “I’ve got the needles and the tea and the barrel of flour, so I’ll cut off these strings. It’s a good way to remember, that.” While he stopped to trim the gad, a pretty Scotch lass came up with us, carrying a carpet-bag; she exchanged a few words in Gaelic with the old man, who welcomed her cordially, and bade her put her bag on the cart. She did so, but refused to confide her new shoes and stockings to its smooth bottom; so Maggie — that was her name — walked on barefooted, free and unconscious in her short petticoat, and carried her shoes and stockings in her red handkerchief. Her dress was in the carpet-bag. She was going home from a wedding. We soon went on again, still more blithely, with a new gad, and a bright-eyed maid with us. Meanwhile the scenery was as charming as our companions. The straight line of mountains seemed like a gigantic wall of rich foliage, almost overhanging the fields of the valley. The sugar-loafed peaks were capped with dense masses of mist hurrying inland, and the amphitheatrical gorges high up, very dark, seemed like great caverns among the clouds. A roaring wind, strong and salt from the sea, tossed the trees along the heights, and bowed the grass and heavily laden raspberry bushes by the road-side. The walk had a rare charm; we journeyed with quiet and quaint and genial spirits, under the breath of a storm and the frown of a cloud-capped mountain.

To my great regret we came at last to a fork in the road, and the lass took her bag to go down to the river.

“Where,” I asked, “does that road go to, Maggie?”

“It goes to the Strait of Canso, sir, and on to Montana — that’s where my

brother John is workin' on a ranch — and I don't know where else it goes.”

“But I see no boat on the river; how will you cross?”

“I'll walk, sir.”

“But you'll get wet, or perhaps drowned.”

“Ach, no, sir! I'll not get wet at all; I'll go over on stilts.”

And sure enough, taking her bag in one hand, she mounted the stilts, gave us a parting smile from the water's edge, and went safely across.

When we arrived at the old man's house we could not refuse to visit his thrifty little orchard, only a few years old, although he has had the farm all his life; then we must take some bread and tea, though it was only three o'clock. And finally the kind old man walked two miles with us to put us on a shortcut. As twilight came we entered the angle where the two ranges of mountains meet, so confined that the river can scarcely pass; the wind still roared in the forest, and pressed against our temples; but the clouds broke away, so that strong lights mingled with the shadows at sunset all along that high, straight wall of peaks and gorges.

We now had arrived on the northwestern or Gulf side of the island, and turned our heads homeward toward Baddeck. We had not seen the extreme end of Cape Breton, Lowland Cove, a place actually beyond the reach of the tax-collector, partly because the route is too long and difficult, and partly because the untutored folk are too tall and difficult for him to overcome, nor the island of St. Paul, much dreaded by all vessels passing between Cape Breton and Newfoundland. The path soon led us up from the beach and across more barrens, and at last came out on the shoulder of Cap Rouge. All at once the light of a ruddy sunset filled the Gulf with great splendor, and we stood on a pinnacle in the midst of it; it illuminated the sea, blue and flecked with white-caps, the surf and flying spray leaping at the long jagged coast-line of crags and rocks far below us, the little farm-houses and the narrow strip of fields running along the top of the bluffs, and back of this the range of dark bold peaks and gorges leading away to a far-off headland, Cape Mabou. As the day ended we found shelter with one of the Acadian fishing farmers; but as this peculiar people is not the subject of this paper, I pass on through Cheticamp and Friar's Head to the Scotch settlements. The Margaree, a charming pastoral valley, is considered the garden of Cape Breton; in freshets the stream overflows its banks, and thus keeps up the virgin fertility of the soil. You feel here that the farmer is not on the edge of want, and that his life may be easy and happy. The long narrow valley winding along with the river down to the harbor, between two ranges of wooded hills, was alive with hay-making; the click of mowing-machines seemed a familiar voice to us; carts passed to and fro between the fields and the barns, or the “barracks,” and men and women alike worked busily while the sun shone. We happened to arrive just after a wedding that was the topic of talk, and we soon gathered some notions of the unique scenes connected with marriage.

Courtship is by no means a necessary preliminary to marriage. The wedding

just then under discussion was a little more eventful than common in the number, but not in the kind of incidents. To begin at the beginning: When a young man decides that he will marry, he often first builds a house; and it is no trivial matter here, where most of the lumber is sawn by hand in a pit. A man may be said to be in earnest when he begins his suit with months of such hard labor — and that, too, from a disinterested motive, not having the faintest idea, perhaps, as to who will be the mistress of the house. We saw a number of such expectant buildings, in all states and of many ages; for some, failing to get a tenant, stood without windows or doors, the image of desolate and empty heart. John —, a young man duly prepared and determined to marry, had set out the previous week with his spokesman to get a wife. He had no particular preference for any one, but they decided to go first to the house of Mary —, one of the brightest girls of the parish, whom he had often noted, but with whom he had never spoken. When they entered the house, a hint of their object was given to Mary, and she retired from the sitting-room. The spokesman then delivered his speech, in which he praised the personal qualities, the fortune, the social position, of his friend, and asked the hand of Mary for him. As the father had no objection to the offer, he at once consented to leave the matter to his daughter. She was called in, and the spokesman conferred quietly a while with her in a corner, and she consented to the marriage. The spokesman then led her out to the middle of the floor, and John came from his corner and took her by the hand; thus the “contract” was accepted, under the usual penalty of forfeiting twenty dollars in case the engagement was broken. The evening was spent in dancing; but if any of the deacons had had wind of the affair, it is probable that they would have come and changed the festivity into a prayer-meeting.

The young man afterward engaged the priest to publish the banns for the first and last time on the following Sabbath. But Mary had her own plans in all this: she knew that the affair would reach the ears of Sandy —, for whom she had a strong preference, and perhaps bring him promptly to a proposal. Sandy did come, and the upshot of it was that he and his father went late on Saturday night, roused the priest, and had Sandy’s name substituted in the banns for that of applicant number one.

This new shuffling of the cards was common enough, so that it caused but a passing smile among the friends of the parties most interested. But a certain young man who heard the banns went home in such depression that he asked his father for ten dollars. When questioned he explained that the girl whom he had always intended to marry was to become the bride of Sandy —, and he was going away to the States. “Well, and why don’t ye carry her off and marry her yersel, Malcolm? I’ll give ye the upper farm this minute. Go, get yer brother, see the girl, and bring her home here. We’ll keep her safe.” Now it happened that Malcolm was the richest of the three applicants, besides being, I will suppose for charity’s sake, a good fellow. Suffice it to say that they brought the girl home, bag and baggage, by stealth, that Sunday night, and mounted a guard that

prevented the success of any stratagem on either her part or the part of others, and they were married on the following Tuesday.

These persons were by no means of the lower ranks: the girl was described to me by an old fisherman as a "noble-minded-lookin' girl, sir; a fine specimen of the Highland craft." 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 negotiations, 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.

The domestic life of the couple even today in most of the peasants' homes will be exceedingly primitive; the woman will do the spinning, weaving, and knitting required by the family; and the man will make nearly everything needed in the house and on the farm. A farm and a family will require about two hundred dollars' worth of feed, food, and sundries, and this amount represents the average production of the little farms of Cape Breton, together with the fishing that many do at odd times. In the spring, actual want is sometimes felt by many families until fishing begins and the cows give milk once more. But the island is generally free from paupers.

We were off again early in the morning over the hills. The valley of northeast Margaree was a lake of snow-white mists, half in the shadow of the eastern hills; the Sugar Loaf Mountain rose above it all as a dark blue island. The freshness of the morning seemed to have entered the people, for the road was alive with advancing groups, all decked in their sombre best, some on horseback, many walking with elastic steps. They all talked in Gaelic, in rather low but cheerful voices; and a certain dignity prevailed even among the boys. It seemed that the country folk were on their way to the "Gathering of the Clans," a rare national picnic. When we arrived on the shores of beautiful Lake Ainslie, a large concourse of people had already met in an open field marked by two flags, a space inclosed by a rope for athletic games, two small platforms for dancing, and a booth for the sale of sprucebeer, crackers, and cheese. The average picnic here offers this programme:

1. 8 o'clock A.M. — Drive along the road to the ground.
2. 9 o'clock. — Talking, swinging, and waiting to swing.
3. 12 M. — Cold temperance lunch.
4. 1 P.M. — Second part of talking, swinging, and waiting to swing.
5. 8 P.M. — Drive along the road homeward.

But this "Gathering of the Clans," although a private speculation for collecting money wherewith to build a house, was a more important event. It was advertised that a noted professional wrestler would contend with an equally able young man of the lake, and that the affair would present many other attractions. From 9 A.M. until 3 P.M. the entertainment consisted of dancing and waiting for the professional wrestler. Each of the platforms had about it a

large crowd looking at the reels and jigs and the piper. The dancing went on all day vigorously.

The most impressive figure of all was the piper. The pipes go well with the national emblem: they are a very thistle in your ear. Their weird, barbaric strains are certainly inspiriting and martial, but you must be a Scotchman to love them. One of the pipers, a very tall, very dark, very shaggy man, sat straight up with a rigid neck, stiff figure, puffed-out cheeks, and looked like the presiding genius of some awful heathen rite. But he was one of the gentlest of men. I afterward spent a day with him noting some of the native airs of Cape Breton. . . .

We enjoyed a drive about Cape Mabou with some gentlemen of the lake, and on the way we not only had some fine views, but also some account of the manners and customs of the people. I have already described the ceremonies connected with courtship and marriage. The last scenes of life also present some interest. A wake, whether among the Presbyterians or 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 acutally 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.

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. Christmas generally passes without merriment or sentiment; to quote one of the most liberal-minded of the ministers, "We find no countenance given to it in the Bible, either by precept or example, and we are very much of the opinion that it is of popish, if not of heathen, origin."

At last the road brought us once more on to the Gulf shore of the island, north of Cape Mabou. The coast here rises very abruptly almost to the legal height of mountains. Here and there a deep gorge cleaves the ragged rocky shores down at the water, runs upward in a wooded glen, and at last expands in an amphitheatre of knolls, vales, fields, and forest high up on the mountain-top. The grass-grown road over the bald capes between the gorges is a mere groove, whence the wagon seems always to be slipping. You walk, and observe the stones it loosens roll away down to the sea; they seem to lure your feet to follow

102 *Acadiensis*

them. The surf sounds far below; the Gulf stretches away northward even beyond the pale blue line of Prince Edward Island, and westward along the rugged bluffs. You look straight into the arctic cave of the Northeaster; he rushes over these sheer bleak heights with demoniac roarings, and everything must cower before his rage. The life of the region seemed to be personated by a withered old man, whose ragged homespun hung on him as on a skeleton, and whose unkempt locks flew about with the wind. He bent low over his scythe, and with tragic eagerness tried to mow the few spears of wiry grass sticking up out of the barren earth. A little more steepness, and he had rolled into the sea as the stones did; a little more wind, and he had been whirled away as the leaves in November.

Night seemed more in harmony with such bleak poverty than the glory of sunset; it enshrouded us all as we threaded our way homeward, inland, up one of the glens. Finally the moon arose, broke through the trees, and lit up here and there an ethereal picture hung against the background of night in the forest — a pool of the brook, overhung with dewy ferns and silvered cobwebs. Then we came out on the high, wide, open barrens under the stars, and later followed down another shadowy glen, and regained Lake Ainslie.

We set out now on the last stretch of our walk to Whycocomah, on the Bras d'Or lakes.

Whycocomah was doubly charming after the bleakness of the sea-coast and the fatigue of travel. White here left me, but I settled down in the comfortable inn to continue my rambles in Cape Breton throughout the Indian summer. It is one of the prettiest places on the island. Paddling into the little bay one stormy day, I saw that clouds covered the summits of the hills close about, so that the upper forests were all in very dark shadow against the white mists, while the sloping fields and the village below seemed thus to be shut into a verdant cavern; the bay, of a leaden gloom, gleamed with seething white-caps; the place seemed a Highland lake in a storm, a place fit for these Scotchmen banished to the New World.

From Salt Mountain you look over Great Bras d'Or Lake, with its intricate intermingling of land and water, and its horizon of distant hills; but a more perfect picture is seen from the hill north of the village. Islands, long thin points, channels, bays, hills and valleys come together in a charming composition. When you return to the village you relish the more limited picture, the quiet street straggling along one of the many coves, the blacksmith's door alive with this quaint people. It has the charm of seclusion, and of the lack of anything very striking. When a great sea-going vessel comes into this cove among the hills to load with birch timber, you feel surprised by the outside world, where something may be going on.

The open air sacrament is probably the most impressive ceremony to be seen among these Scotch Prebyterians, and I was glad to set off for English Town and the north shore of St. Ann's Bay once more to witness one of these

characteristic scenes. Some years ago these sacraments were held on successive Sundays in adjoining parishes, and entire congregations attended them, but now they are held at the same date in distant localities, to prevent them drawing such large and disorderly companies. The sacraments are very much cherished by the old people, who enjoy the devotions, as well as the yearly occasion it gives for social intercourse; by very many wordly-minded, for making horse trades and the preliminaries of more important transactions; and by the young people for the fun they afford. The services, in both Gaelic and English, were held on opposite sides of a little meadow inclosed by trees and the road, and divided by a merry brook. In the centre was the "tent" for the ministers — a sentry-box with a wide window. In front of this were a very narrow long table, a bench on each side of it, and several benches near the tent. There were also three posts, each bearing on top a little box for the reception of contributions, and many who passed dropped coppers into them. The crowd was in sombre black, with now and then the pin-back dress and the bonnet of a servant-girl returned from the States for a summer visit among her people. The older women wore a plain white cap under a black sun-bonnet or black kerchief. Thus the crowd was a gathering of austere and simple homespun folk. For a while they walked about greeting friends whom they had not seen perhaps for a year. But the greeting was sober; sisters even did not kiss; many met at first in silence, with teeth set and eyes fixed, and shook hands vigorously a long time with the motion of sawing wood.

The sacrament in the open air originated with the Covenanters, when they met by stealth in the fields or woods for their forbidden worship. It was thus established in the Lowlands with the organization of Protestantism, and it still continues to be a characteristic feature of the Highlands after its discontinuation in the Lowlands. The sacrament begins always at eleven on Thursday. This day is regarded as one of preparation; the spirit of it is that of fasting and humiliation, expressed in the usual services; the singing of the psalms of David, prayers, and a sermon — all in Gaelic. The singing is what first impressed me as perfectly unique. The tunes have well-known names, such as "Elgin," "St. Paul," "Bangor," "London," "Martyrs"; but the actual compositions and the rendering are unlike any other music on earth. Three prompters or precentors stood under the window of the tent, and took their turns at leading the singing; that is to say, one of them sang rapidly as an improvised recitative each line of the psalm, and the congregation then repeated each line after him, singing in unison the successive phrases of the tune. Here are the words and music of "Martyrs." But the effect of this singing can not be imagined from seeing the score, or from a rendering of it according to the usual musical expression. The precentor sings in a low and exceedingly plaintive voice, a soft pronunciation, and a timid expression; his recitatives are as austere as Gregorian chants, but full of little notes and slurs and by contrast his phrases are rendered still more touching after the mass of sound coming from the people. The congregation also

sings with softness; but as individuals have their own time, discords prevail, the long syllables are drawn out beyond measure, with a nasal drawl, and the shorter ones are clipped off and swallowed. But the ordinary irritation produced by these defects is not felt. In the complete absence of rhythm you feel less the defects of time; in fact, so drawing is the execution that you just abandon all requirements of time, and accept the effects on intonation alone. These Gaelic psalms often have an extraordinary effect; when the people at times happen to unite their plaintive voices on certain long notes and slurs, the multitude sends up a subdued wail that is wonderfully touching. The preaching was not less interesting than the singing. One of the worthy ministers seemed to me of a type perfectly suited to the scene. He was a patriarch in years, in fatherly kindness, in serenity and simplicity. His cherubic face, set in a frame of gray hair and beard, seemed to be made for smiling; but some interior power had won half of him over to severity — at least it seemed so at times when one brow, one eye, one side of the mouth, all contracted with an expression of gloom. Standing up in the little sentry-box with his hands clasped over his rotundity, he waited in silence for some moments, until he had established himself in a slow swaying motion from side to side: this swinging seemed essential to all these Cape Breton speakers and singers. Soon he started, in a very low voice, a hemming, a word, and a hesitation all together, and the hesitation often triumphed, made him wait again until more swinging had evolved a suggestion. The great silver-bowed spectacles finally came up from the depths of a pocket, and after two or three attempts scaled the heights, and planted themselves astride his nose. The discourse was then pursued in its regular form; the voice continued to the end very low, confidential, winning. Judging him by his English sermons, ideas were as rare as the angels' visits that seemed reflected from time to time on the old man's benevolent face; so, to fill in, the last words or phrase of a sentence may be sometimes repeated three, even four times; the connections were made by these lapped joints. The pauses were frequently longer than his short phrases; but the swing, the driving power, held out; the majestic slowness did not fail, even though, as I saw, it should rain during the entire day. He preached eternity.

The people, meanwhile, filled the few benches, and sat and lay about on the ground in groups without much order; some in the shade of umbrellas, the men all bare-headed. It was, indeed, a day of fasting and prayer; the services lasted from eleven till five o'clock, when we all went to dinner at the farm-houses in the neighborhood.

The sacrament puts a serious burden on the households near the grounds. Hundreds of visitors live at these homes during four or five days, from fifty to seventy-five being quartered in each small house. The garret floor is turned into two great beds, one for the men and another for the women; the barn also is sometimes occupied. The family is busy for many days baking and preparing for the arrival of such a company; the cost is a serious embarrassment to many, and yet the traditions and hospitality of the race prevent them from accepting pay

for the entertainment. The house to which I was invited was thronged; the tables were served abundantly all the remainder of the afternoon with potatoes, salt fish, butter, bread, milk, bannocks, tea. There were none of the graces of politeness; intercourse went on in a hap-hazard way, and took care of itself as it might among a very primitive peasantry. But in spite of crudeness, the mood of the company was attractive to me; they seemed to be subdued with religious sentiment, and yet warmed by strong social feeling.

Communion Sabbath is the most important day of the sacrament in both a religious and a social point of view. At an early hour the roads were thronged with men and women on foot, on horseback, in open buggies; and by ten o'clock the grounds were well filled with people shaking hands, passing salutations; some were arranging quietly the preliminaries of horse trades and other transactions, and all were enjoying the one unfailing public gathering of the year. The enjoyment, however, had to be detected beneath a very grave mien and low-voiced talk. The crowd that day, having a larger proportion of the young and worldly people, was more mixed in its composition, but the elements kept pretty distinct, for the devout and the elderly formed the group nearest the "tent", while those of lesser degrees of piety made concentric circles there-about. While the usual services went on, many groups of lads and lasses on the outskirts exchanged notes, threw one another motto candies, and even kept up conversations in under-tones. I was told that at a sacrament some young men once established themselves in a wagon near by, and burlesqued the communion service with crackers and the whiskey bottle. Now and then an elder walked about the ground and called for order. The arrival of a wagon aroused every dozer, and turned every head toward the road. A glance at the assembly, even at the most solemn moments of the service, left one ignorant of the fact that anything of interest was going on in the central point, for all classes had the singular habit of sitting or lying or standing with their faces turned in any direction. It seemed in this respect to be a picnic of deaf-mutes. The occasion showed in a striking way the hardihood of this people, their indifference to discomfort, the force of tradition among them, and, in some cases, the absorbing sincerity of their piety. All day long it rained, a cold east wind from the Banks of Newfoundland swept up the valley in gusts, and the chill was well-nigh unendurable to me. And yet the good patriarch preached on in his eternal way; the services kept their usual proportions; for nearly six hours men and women of three generations sat on the wet ground, the men all bare-headed, most of the people without the shelter of even an umbrella or a water-proof. Even when bad weather prevails during all five days of the sacrament it does not shorten the sermons. After the customary services of prayers, psalms, and sermon, the minister "fenced the table"; that is, he spoke to the effect of excluding those who were not communicants, and encouraging those who held "tokens" to come forward. When the communicants had taken their seats and the "elements" had been placed on the table, the minister came down from the "tent" and read

before them the institution of the sacrament, 1st Corinthians, chapter xi., verses 23 to 29. Meanwhile a deacon collected the "tokens" from those at the table. After a prayer and an address, the minister broke bread and gave it to those nearest him, and passed them wine, and then three deacons or elders served the bread and wine along the rest of the tables. Externally it was a company of distressed, abject mourners soaked in the gusts of cold rain, the men's heads covered by handkerchiefs, the women's by black shawls. But they seemed entirely absorbed by their interior experiences, the tortures of conscience, the hopes and terrors of their faith. The sacrament closed with the usual services on Monday, and the crowds then dispersed to their homes.