

**Vincent W MacLean. *These Were My People: Washabuck, An Anecdotal History*. The Cape Bretonia Research Series No. 2. (Sydney, NS: 2014, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. 416, ISBN 978-1-927492-90-1.)**

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## COMPTE-RENDUS/REVIEWS

Vincent W MacLean. *These Were My People: Washabuck, An Anecdotal History*. The Cape Bretonia Research Series No. 2. (Sydney, NS: 2014, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. 416, ISBN 978-1-927492-90-1.)

The story of rural Nova Scotia is the story of family and community, and this is particularly true in *These Were My People: Washabuck, An Anecdotal History*. Vincent MacLean, a retired community college instructor, has written a book that captures the stories and flavours of his home. Through his detailed histories of the communities, and his use of oral interviews with community and family members, MacLean has assembled a thoughtful and exhaustive commentary of many aspects of life on rural Cape Breton Island. His passion for his community and his exhaustive knowledge of the area are demonstratively present in this book.

The book engages readers with its honest depiction of life in rural communities. I enjoyed MacLean's narrative, despite its tendency to go from topic to disparate topic, often within the same chapter. In fact, the wandering nature of the narrative is part of its charm. The people and their stories are at the heart of the book and they often guide the narrative. MacLean talks about the people he knows, those he has heard stories about his whole life, and the people to whom he is related. Another aspect of the book that I particularly enjoy is the multitude of photographs. Each photograph is a unique narrative journey into a world or universe that no longer exists, and they allow the reader to immerse themselves in the realm of rural Cape Breton. By engaging with the photographs, we are able not only to gain an understanding of what life may have been like in Cape Breton in the past, but also get a sense of what people's concerns were, how they lived and worked, how they built their communities, and how they raised their families.

In one of my favourite chapters in the book, MacLean writes about the early stores, merchants, and shopping experiences of the people in these communities. He does an excellent job of creating a narrative that describes how difficult it was to purchase staple goods in the 19th and early 20th

centuries in rural Cape Breton. The life of the community appears to have centered on the waterfront, with boats constantly coming in and out of the harbour and lake steamers providing mail service to and from the different communities around Bras d'Or Lake. While many of the communities on the Washabuck Peninsula were very close to the water, there were many inland communities (Jubilee, Hazeldale, Washabuck Bridge, St. Columba) that were inaccessible by boat. Horses, and later roads and automobiles, were used extensively here.

MacLean constructs a narrative that moves from one aspect of the area's history to another. He has put an enormous amount of effort into outlining the family lineages of the areas, and he writes about the people and their work in the contexts of their own communities. MacLean dedicates much of the book to the stories that have been passed down from one person to another, and it is this aspect of the book that is the most interesting. For example, he recounts stories of driving horses and sleighs over frozen Bras d'Or Lake or transporting recalcitrant livestock by lake steamer.

MacLean explores the musical life of these communities through the examples of the "Fiddling MacKenzie Family" (and their slightly more famous relatives, the Barra MacNeils) and fiddler "Big" Archie MacKenzie. This glimpse of the musical life of the Washabuck Peninsula is tantalizing, but the reader is left wanting a more exhaustive discussion of it.

The book does a superlative job of explaining the complex naming system in the Gaelic tradition, and further, MacLean helps the reader understand the complex familial relationships as well. I would have liked to see more on the naming system, but because of the nature of the book, MacLean chooses to focus instead on how the family trees of the people that live on the Washabuck Peninsula interconnect with other families. I would have also liked to see a separate glossary of family names, something along the lines of E.R. Seary's work on the family names of Newfoundland, which would add to our understanding of the relationships of different families and communities.

The community history approach is fascinating because it allows an author to inject colour and texture into what might otherwise be a dry retelling of facts and dates by focusing on the stories that come directly from the people. I consider MacLean's work to be a community history for two key reasons. First, MacLean writes about how the region was settled and why the communities were settled the way they were, meticulously documenting their way of life. While he consulted books and other publications in the

research for this book, MacLean draws heavily on the first-hand accounts and recollections of the people who lived the experience. It is important to note that the word “anecdotal” is actually part of the title, suggesting that oral storytelling will be prominent in the narrative. Second, MacLean writes in a very accessible manner, in a way that allows the reader complete access to the history of the communities on the Washabuck Peninsula. The writing is non-academic, aimed at a non-specialist audience, and the book is constructed in an informal manner that allows the reader to browse through the community’s history in a non-linear way.

MacLean has delivered an impressive account of everyday life and work in rural Cape Breton over a hundred-year period. Through personal stories and photographic evidence, he contextualizes the history of this group of communities and offers the reader a unique perspective into a world that is as familiar as some of our own communities, yet infused with the unique influence of Gaelic culture.

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Heather Sparling. *Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music*. (Sydney, NS: 2014, Cape Breton University Press. Pp. xv + 356, index, ISBN 978-1-927492-98-7.)

*Reeling Roosters and Dancing Ducks: Celtic Mouth Music* is a recent book by Heather Sparling, an Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at Cape Breton University and Tier 2 Canada Research Chair (Musical Traditions). Published by Cape Breton University Press, the monograph represents many years of work; it is a reworking of her master’s thesis (2000) but is also clearly informed by her doctoral thesis and more recent research into Gaelic language and culture as well. While this is a book that is very clearly academic in nature, it is written for a general audience, a difficult balance that Sparling successfully maintains.

The book is a survey of “mouth music” in Scotland and Cape Breton, focusing more specifically on *puirt-à-beul*. While the term mouth music can be used to refer to many different styles of vocal performances of instrumental