

Who Owns History Anyway? Reinventing Atlantic Canada for Pleasure and Profit

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

Who Owns History Anyway? Reinventing Atlantic Canada for Pleasure and Profit

HISTORY IS VERY MUCH TO THE fore these days. Even a casual perusal of Canadian newspapers demonstrates that interactions between scholars and all sorts of other creators of “usable pasts” are challenging for public attention. First Peoples’ rights in all areas of land-use and resource-gathering are constantly being argued and settled on historical terms. The Canadian War Museum’s delicate dance with a Holocaust Gallery during the fall and winter of 1997-98 was resolved in favour of keeping the museum a memorial to the veterans after yet another rancorous airing of military heritage politics before a Senate committee.¹ Clearly, historical relevance lies in wait behind every public policy bush, just waiting for the right players or political circumstances to come along.

The search for the appropriate celebratory “hooks” on which to hang tourist strategies appears all-powerful now as public history’s increasing decimalization since the great centennial clambake of 1967 produces endless celebrations of past accomplishments — or perhaps defeats, depending on one’s perspective. Re-enactment of the 1745 assault on Louisbourg — referred to as the Grand Encampment — on its 250th anniversary was just such an occasion, masking itself as authentic historical celebration but specifically designed to attract the vast numbers of American historical re-enactors to provide a focal point for tourist promotion. The quincentenary of John Cabot’s voyage and landfall provided 1997’s theme, treating us to a year of *faux* debate over his landfall’s purported location, though only in a jocular vein, since the federal government’s celebratory largesse opted so forcefully in favour of Bonavista over Cape Breton.

In all these and many other discussions the salient question remains *Who Owns History?* Certainly it is no longer — if indeed it ever was — the preserve of academic scholars, no matter how we might decry the insufficiencies of popularizers, or the spin given celebrations by politically or economically directed bureaucrats. Recently history/heritage has been invoked mostly for tourism. But at other times it was directed toward justification of various positions taken relative to the federal government. It started in earnest with the Maritime Rights movement but carries

1 This discussion reprised the tortuous twists over *The Valour and the Horror* series a few years back. That debate appears to have provoked an astounding series of television shows being aired during the spring and early summer of 1998 designed, apparently, to atone for the lapse of political judgement on CBC/NFB’s part in commissioning and airing *The Valour and the Horror*. On that earlier issue see David J. Bercuson and S. F. Wise, eds., *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994).

forward to the present. Indeed, every generation of Atlantic Canadians has been treated to contending versions of their prior experience. Public perceptions of conditions within Confederation, for instance, have been commonly debated within a historical frame of reference. And varied interpretations of history have been central to redefining our position there, aided along by public and quasi-public agencies that struggle constantly with the implications of differing versions of the past.

One striking example of the direct invocation of history provided a partial solution to the 1960s crisis of the Cape Breton coal industry, when the slumbering heritage riches of Louisbourg were brought to life to help redefine the post-industrial community as a world-class tourist destination.² Since about that time, discourse among supposedly disinterested, though frequently ideologically driven, scholars who contest and dissect regional underdevelopment, or the peculiarities of a regional “way of life” threatened by modernization, has been a staple of regional scholarship. The past’s public face, however, tends to be controlled not by the scholarly community but by existing power structures and tends to be utilized in ways that make systematic advancement of contesting perspectives somewhat problematic.

The age of cultural tourism has come into alignment with the parallel age of recreational democracy only during the final quarter of this century. Tourism as an engine of development was being invoked as long as a century ago, though its foregrounding as an economic strategy was experienced unevenly across the region and for a long time targeted very select audiences.³ In the Maritimes its origins were mostly articulated in depictions of the region as an adventure destination for those in pursuit of moose or salmon, preferably with a native guide to offer that sense of authenticity only the well-heeled could afford.⁴ Interestingly enough, active tourism development coincided with the industrial transformation sweeping across parts of the region between 1880 and 1910. Not surprising, it is now recognized as an integral part of modernization itself.

Nova Scotia’s “Land of Evangeline” tourist era took off with arrival of effective steamship and rail communication from Boston through Yarmouth to the Annapolis Valley. It was an early parallel to the destination/attraction sort of tourism successful elsewhere and expanded upon later in this century. It emphasized a mix of salubrious sea air, Acadian myths and historic surroundings as elements in a strategy designed and executed by the Dominion Atlantic Railroad. The emergence of Yarmouth’s Grand Hotel as the launching-pad for this early tourism in the 1890s demonstrated local elites’ readiness to transfer resources to the industry at the same time they were transforming their community with cotton mills and iron foundries. There was no contradiction apparent in their simultaneous support for a modern community of their

2 Louisbourg’s story, including a discussion of the ramifications of a political agenda driving historical research, is carefully presented in Terry MacLean, *Louisbourg Heritage: From Ruins to Reconstruction* (Sydney, 1995).

3 An early attempt to depict the stages of tourism development, for Nova Scotia at least, occurred with a special issue of *New Maritimes*, suggestively titled “Bury My Heart At Peggy’s Cove” (July/August, 1987).

4 For a discussion of native people and early exploitation of tourist resources in the Maritimes, including a detailed discussion of the prior literature, see Bill Parenteau, “‘Care, Control and Supervision’: Native People in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon Fishery, 1867-1900”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 1 (March, 1998), pp. 1-35.

own while perpetrating a myth regarding the experience of Acadians and the nature of their rural communities that was increasingly driven by the need to attract tourists.

Identifying southern Nova Scotia with Longfellow's epic poem was strategically considered, though the way Acadian history was twisted to match expectations of the poem's readers was an early indication of how history would end up being recast to make the region palatable to "strangers." In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Barbara Leblanc shows how these depictions of Acadians were received by Acadians themselves, who were less inclined to accept such a simplistic interpretation of their pasts. The tourist industry's version of Acadian history would eventually produce a political reaction that mirrors much of what is occurring as present-day communities see their history twisted for profit.⁵ It was assumed that few tourists would come to Nova Scotia to see the same sort of people and material conditions characteristic of their (i.e. mainly New Englanders') own areas. In effect, potential tourists were promised a journey back in time, to experience a slower-paced lifestyle where people lived closer to nature. This was tied in to development of modern resort hotels catering to every need of the experienced traveller and would prove the start of a trend that, over the following century, helped define the entire region by selecting appropriate elements of its history to foreground. In the process, historical consciousness was refashioned to insulate tourists from the vagaries of regional underdevelopment and crisis.⁶

Peter Pope's *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997) presents an excellent entry into this kind of historical discourse of selective historical reconstruction. Stemming from a paper he gave at the 1994 Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, this tightly argued book offers an accessible account of the legitimate scholarship on Cabot's voyages and landfall. These interpretations of when, where and what was discovered are set in the context of the 19th- and early 20th-century cultural politics surrounding the Cabot voyages, as well as a historiographical assessment of the various probabilities. Pope's critique of cultural and political contexts for these debates crosses from Britain to Canada and Newfoundland, untangling the various protagonists in a brilliant assessment of their cultural politics. He weaves through debates concerning the landfall within a cultural model drawn from both British and American scholarship regarding notions of the expansion of Europe and the commemoration of discovery. In the process he gives a

5 Barbara Leblanc, "The Dynamic Relationship Between Historic Site and Identity Construction: Grand-Pré and The Acadians", Ph.D. thesis, Laval University, 1995; see as well the fascinating film treatment in *Evangeline's Quest*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada and released in 1997.

6 A survey of Central Canadian newspapers and magazines for the 1920s revealed how the region was being reinvented as a tourist destination in the decade following the Great War. Travellers were enjoined to visit the "place that history had left behind", there to encounter the varied history of the Maritimes, all the while travelling in modern comfort, etc. It was a theme that would become more commonplace as Central Canadians re-envisioned the region as something other than the dynamic industrial area portrayed at the turn of the century, when coal mines and steel mills were the everyday fare of Central Canadian commentary on the region. A summary of some aspects of that study is presented in The Carleton History Collaborative, *Central Canadian Perspectives on the Maritimes in Crisis, 1919-1927* (forthcoming).

measured account of the impact of so-called “discovery” on native people in Newfoundland and elsewhere.

Throughout this account we are treated to the spectacle of competing nationalisms pursuing Cabot as Britain’s own equivalent of Columbus. As well, a much less subtle attempt was made by English Canadians to appropriate his discoveries as a precedent for taking possession of the vast territory of Canada in the context of the imperialism so rampant in the closing decades of the 19th century.⁷ Both Canada and Newfoundland had political reasons for laying claim to Cabot. Pageantry and celebration had marked the centennial of the American Revolution and Christopher Columbus’ 400th as well, so the mania for centennializing was well underway in North America by the time Cabot’s 400th arrived. With Jacques Cartier well-ensconced as French Canada’s “Discoverer”, celebrated in Quebec on his 350th anniversary in 1884, English Canadians were in search of an alternate first-comer. That public figures and scholars of a variety of stripes could argue so strenuously and so long over interpreting such a small number of documents testifies to the hold history exerts if the political stakes are seen as important. While he sets a context for understanding politics surrounding debates over Bonavista or Cape Breton landfalls, in the end there is no absolute consensus on just where Cabot first saw North America.

Cultural geographer James Overton’s *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland* (St. John’s, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1997) collects together his critiques of Newfoundland’s cultural politics, published over the past 25 years. These trenchant essays address such topics as provincial parks, tourist strategies and, more broadly, the political economy of state planning. He contributes to ongoing debates concerning underdevelopment of the regional economy as well as the fate of that elusive Newfoundland “way of life”. The nine essays are organized within a broad Marxian framework and, taken together, offer a reassessment of Newfoundland’s culture in transition. Although the Cabot-500 celebrations of 1997 have eclipsed anything he might have predicted, he makes it clear that articulating Newfoundland’s distinctiveness as a tourist destination has been in the making for decades.

Following an introduction positioning his work within an international setting of cultural studies, Overton’s essays are organized around three broad subject areas: “perspectives” deal with definitions of that elusive Newfoundland “way of life”; “packaging” Newfoundland tourist promotion makes up a second section; and a final trio deal with economic development “policies” as they related to the tourist industry. A certain amount of overlap inevitably occurs across the essays, given that they were written with different audiences in mind over a rather long period. And some updating of references to more current material has been done; but no extensive revision was undertaken.

The essays detail how successive governments saw tourism as an alternative

7 For a parallel attempt at historical re-enactment see H. V. Nelles, “Historical Pageantry and the ‘Fusion of the Races’ at the Tercentenary of Quebec, 1908” *histoire sociale/Social History*, XXIX, 58 (novembre 1996), pp. 391-415. Nelles discusses how a celebration designed for tourist consumption and commemoration by the St Jean Baptiste Society was overtaken for political purposes by various levels of government, creating a historical spectacle awash in historical distortion.

engine of growth for the province. Entrepreneurs and the Newfoundland state had pursued alternatives to the cod fishery through any number of industrial strategies; tourism, in Overton's view, is simply the most recent. Alienation of resources to private capitalists is the theme that underlies these essays: the common property resources of nature and cultural distinctiveness of the people of Newfoundland had to be manipulated to maximize returns to associated businesses. In Newfoundland, as in the other three Atlantic Provinces, decision-making is driven by the calculation that resultant economic activity would generate significant revenue for the provincial state.

What Overton brings to this somewhat familiar territory is a geographer's concern for defining spaces appropriate for tourism and ways in which people's daily lives were affected by manipulation of their communities. He also tackles head-on the apparent contradiction between the anti-modern stances of sentimental tourist promotion and the self-professed progressivism of its most active supporters, a theme apparent both in Newfoundland and elsewhere. His discussion of Newfoundland's attempts to promote itself as a "therapeutic tourist space" is pursued in the work of many others in the field, particularly Patricia Jasen's recent work on Ontario, though her analysis is for a much earlier period.⁸

Particularly appropriate in the contemporary situation is Overton's identification of the provincial state and its post-Confederation tourism industry as an agent of class interests. How that image will be transformed in the post-TAGs era remains to be seen; but the politics surrounding the Cabot-500 celebrations indicate that appropriate celebratory occasions will be a part of that development. Meanwhile Newfoundland's struggles with the implications of nickel mining at Voisey's Bay and the off-shore oil of Hibernia reinforce the competing visions of traditional and modern Newfoundland that will continue to be part of the everyday experience of regional politics.

Over the past decade Ian McKay has opened various new pathways to understanding the invention and dissemination of 20th-century Nova Scotia culture, a process he depicts as neither accidental nor as deeply imbedded as it was made to seem. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) examines the origins of the essentialist folk tradition informing much of that identity. Elaborating on earlier published essays, he develops an analysis of the origins of these "purer, simpler, and more idyllic people". Put simply, he explodes the central place of the "folk" in understanding Nova Scotia's culture and history, at least as depicted in those versions of provincial experience specially tailored for public consumption by heritage agencies.⁹

8 In some respects, the region's early tourist industry can be usefully compared with Ontario's, so skilfully depicted in Patricia Jasen's *Wild Things: Nature, Culture and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto, 1995). She delineates a number of distinct stages in Ontario's evolution as a tourist destination. Essentially, areas affected by tourism pushed farther and farther north over the course of the 19th century, as more and more disaffected Europeans and urban North Americans sought wilderness experiences denied them in their urban enclosures. The changing definition of what that salubrious space away from the cares of the city came to mean is dealt with through a critical reading of tour and travel books from literate visitors, or commissioned by the tourist industry itself.

9 Earlier writings on this theme by McKay include "Among the Fisherfolk: J. F. B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy's Cove", *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, 1-2 (Spring/Summer, 1988), pp. 23-45;

That this is such a vital topic is reflected in the public outcry that accompanied publication in the magazine *New Maritimes* of an earlier and truncated version of one of its chapters. There he dealt somewhat iconoclastically with Creighton's bending of provincial history to provide acceptable contexts for her song and story collections and questioned her selection of appropriate attributes to be highlighted in her publications. The article provoked defenders of Creighton's traditional methods of gathering folk wisdom and her central place in the iconography of the province to raise a cry against McKay's revisionist intrusion. Having the politics of Creighton's collection strategies defended by *Globe and Mail* pundits and being defended in turn by learned letter writers shows just how pervasive the mythologies she perpetrated were, as well as the central place she had come to occupy in peoples' sensitivities.¹⁰

The Quest of the Folk offers three case studies linked together by the central theme of various depictions of Nova Scotia's "Real People". McKay starts out examining Helen Creighton, a writer who achieved a public profile far beyond the confines of her published work over her 50-year career. Beginning as a private scholar, by the end of her long career Creighton had become the arbiter of appropriate cultural expression from the Nova Scotia "Folk". As a sometime consultant to the Nova Scotia government and part-time collector for the National Museum of Canada, she gathered a wide range of folk tales and songs representing the province. McKay walks us through her unpublished letters to expose her driving ambition and illuminates her public career with discussion of the somewhat narrowly defined — both geographically and ideologically — preconditions she held for accepting or rejecting what was worthy about cultural production/transmission by the "Folk".

What emerges is a progression from an innocence bred by unfamiliarity to a carefully modulated political agenda designed to feed into the enormous appetite of provincial government tourist bureaus for "authentic" characterizations of the province. Her commemoration by an annual folk-festival in her native Dartmouth places her at the centre of the very myths she helped create. That festival is now situated in an annual festival cycle covering the entire calendar of present-day Halifax and Nova Scotia, indeed the whole Maritimes for that matter. Her many books have remained in print — most have new editions — and revival of all things pertaining to the "Folk" is frequently attributed to Creighton.¹¹

"Tartanism Triumphant: The Construction of Scottishness in Nova Scotia, 1933-1954", *Acadiensis* XXI, 2 (Spring, 1992), pp. 5-47; "History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935-1964", *Acadiensis* XXII, 2 (Spring, 1993), pp. 102-138.

10 McKay, "'He is more picturesque in his oilskins': Helen Creighton and the Art of Being Nova Scotian". See also McKay, "Helen Creighton and the Politics of Anti-Modernism", in Gwendolyn Davies, ed., *Myth and Milieu: Atlantic Literature and Culture, 1918-1939* (Fredericton, 1993), pp. 1-16.

11 Such festivals become the great lure for tourists to visit and remain in communities, celebrating everything from casual associations with individuals, as in Canso's newly-minted Stan Rogers Festival, to specific attributes of a given community. My personal favourite is the Brussel Sprout Festival, held each August in Rogersville, N.B. Festivals serve an altogether different purpose from tourism's lead objective of promoting visitation and spending by outsiders. For local communities they provide a focal point for composing a nostalgic version of community experience reified by the mega-industry of come-home, family and school reunions that are so central to community development theorists throughout the region. For local communities it has become a way of filling the coffers left bare by government cutbacks in order to fund activities throughout the winter.

McKay's assessment of Creighton's influence is delivered within a new approach to cultural production that is becoming central to cultural historians everywhere. Acknowledging his own debt to American and British scholars such as David Whisnant and Raymond Williams, he advances the notion that cultural intervention on the scale practised by Creighton was not uncommon.¹² Creighton's work in Nova Scotia did not have the same sort of institutional bias so many American and British initiatives took (with the exception of the Gaelic College at St. Ann's). Clearly, when she discovered her "Folk" just outside Dartmouth on the eve of the Great Depression, she was working within a well-developed interventionist mode, though it took some time for the implications to become apparent even to her.

McKay's analysis carefully situates Creighton in the middle class socio/cultural milieu of Halifax/Dartmouth in which she seemed to thrive. He assesses her strategy for elaborating what turned into a rather derivative synthesis of Nova Scotia's folk experience. Emergence of her anti-modernist personifications of Nova Scotians coincided somewhat serendipitously with the arrival of Angus L. Macdonald's new Liberal government in the 1930s. When he hitched the provincial political and economic wagon to a new form of anti-modernism as a tourist image designed to restart the provincial economy, her place in Nova Scotia's cultural hierarchy was assured.

McKay carries her story through the war and post-war period to examine her participation — along with a number of other cultural producers — in the retelling of Nova Scotia's story. He attacks the ways in which modern Nova Scotians were edited out of these new narratives, which substituted a new essentialist characterization of simple folk for their complex lives. In the process, he argues, many Nova Scotians came to see their public history stripped of any social conscience, though it is problematic to find any public history that had one in an earlier period. As well, he critiques Creighton against the backdrop of other collectors and producers of folk traditions in North America and finds her definition of what was worthy in those areas she chose to emphasize somewhat narrow-minded. This is a long and involved analysis that bears re-reading for its systematic look at the centrality of one person's role in remaking the provincial character.

A second case study in this book deals with Mary Black, who came to post-war Nova Scotia with a mandate — however ineffectively implemented during her tenure — to reinvent the provincial handicraft sector as an instrument for tourist development. She was a precursor of today's cultural bureaucrats who continue to widen their role as intervenors in cultural production. Her insistence that producers be properly recognized as economic players within a coherent development strategy aimed at tourism was modelled on experiences elsewhere. What was interesting was the way she and some of her cohorts insisted on intervening directly to "improve" the product by introducing expert craftspersons from outside. This was a somewhat conflicted position, depending not so much on production and distribution of the crafts as on the tourist traffic they inspired. Out of this came two of the distinctive

12 David Wishnant, *All that is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill, 1983), traverses much the same ground in the Appalachians, interestingly enough with some of the same players in the early stages and some of the same outcomes as in Nova Scotia. See as well Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London 1973).

motifs of Nova Scotia's material representation, the hooked rugs of Cheticamp and the tartans of St. Ann's. In this context, craft production came to symbolize the province's new-found industrial heritage in one area at least. It helped redefine the provincial character to reflect the objectives of craft production in opposition to larger-scale industrialization with a variety of implications for the nature of the provincial working class. These outcomes were hardly achieved during Black's own career, but in various ways and with a host of different intervenors were accomplished during subsequent decades.

A third major case study examines a wider range of more conventional cultural producers, mostly literary, where insiders and outsiders helped define the Nova Scotia community, or at least the idealized rural "Folk" who came to be so important to the province's new identity. McKay re-reads the output of a group, which included the poetry circle surrounding the Song Fishermen in Halifax, novelists Frank Parker Day and Hugh McLennan and others. A somewhat eclectic group, they were carefully depicting rural Nova Scotians as slow, cautious and conservative individuals with little interest in the modern world. It was a characterization that robbed individuals of any role in their own lives and projected an image that has been a stock feature of much modern depiction of the region. His conclusion about their impact is very much like that of David Whisnant observing the American Appalachian experience: "By directing attention away from dominant structural realities, such as those associated with colonial subjugation or resource exploitation or class based inequalities, 'Culture' provides a convenient mask for other agendas of change and throws a warm glow upon the cold realities of social dislocation" (p. 260).

McKay's analysis usefully delves into bureaucratic and political machinations of the cultural agencies who anxiously reinvented Nova Scotia as a land of happy peasants and hardy fisherfolk — or in the 1990s version, fiddlers and folk singers — to be positioned as backdrops for a centrally organized and carefully contrived tourist industry. This somewhat idyllic vision is now a mainstay of the province, reflecting an accommodation to the failure to redevelop a truly modern economy via ill-fated modernization programs which in one form or another were attempted by all four provinces in response to the structural problems of the post-1945 era. Much of our present preoccupation with the identity can be better understood if we have a firm sense of the contexts discussed in this volume.

In a long and somewhat discursive afterword entitled "The Folk under Conditions of Postmodernity", McKay teases meaning from this analysis of the historical experience for the contemporary situation. Firmly placing himself within a neo-marxist framework associated with the work of Antonio Gramsci and rejecting the nihilism of much post-modernist analysis, he argues for an extensive reinterpretation of the region's intellectual history with the objective of searching out the complex lives of ordinary people. His final answer: "the concept of the Folk was and remains a powerful obstacle to the formation of a counter-hegemonic cultural politics, without which a new, profoundly emancipatory politics of class, gender and racial equality is inconceivable" (p. 306).

By questioning the validity of the tourist gaze, McKay refuses to dismiss the eradication of alternative historical experiences as a harmless affectation merely put in place for the tourists. He deals critically and intelligently with the interactions between political power and the marketplace that have systematically reconstructed the collective

history not only of Nova Scotians, but of all Canadians during a period when our history has increasingly become a commodity manipulated for the profit of business and the state. The danger of heritage tourism for people living within its ambit is palpable. If they come to accept a history cleansed from any taint of social conflict, their own lived pasts will thus be neutralized, making it difficult if not impossible for their history to form a vital part of continuing political processes that redefine their lives.

History's presence in the lives of Nova Scotians and Atlantic Canadians generally, has never been more apparent than today. Debating the past is part of the daily fare of radio and television broadcasts. The central place of the folk idiom as a leitmotiv for the region is accepted as the norm. An examination of the tourist advertising that all four provinces pump into television markets throughout North America reveals that what is for sale is much more than physical beauty. Three examples of the place of tradition and stereotypes under discussion from the recent past reflect these issues.

The new municipality of Cape Breton, which encompasses all the coal towns surrounding Sydney as well as rural Cape Breton County, has lately developed an alternative strategy to its industrial past. This is an issue of particular importance as the remaining few mines teeter on the brink of closure and the steel mill, a shell of its former self, is on the market to any foreign buyer interested. The new strategy is to attract ex-Cape Bretoners to return for retirement to the area. A sophisticated publicity campaign featuring brochures and pamphlets as well as videos and web-sites emphasizes the financial attractions of cashing out from advanced economies and taking advantage of a "different pace" of life steeped in one's roots. The delicate balance between emphasizing traditional values and accessibility to all the appurtenances of modernity is closely cut. "Coming home" is portrayed as a logical choice for people yearning to reconnect to a living past — in Cape Breton's case the theme is "Out on the Mira" surrounded by friends and relatives singing all the old songs. Not surprisingly, little space is given to the area's industrial heritage. No mention of the distressing Tar Ponds, so much on the environmental agenda everywhere these days; and no mention at all of problems apparent in increasingly jobless coal and steel towns.

The cultural renaissance of the past decade, particularly in Celtic music, also thrusts debates over heritage/history to the fore, bringing into focus vital questions regarding proprietorship of the region's cultural capital. In the summer of 1996 a public debate occurred over the purity of various exponents of Scottish fiddle music. The tremendous success of Ashley MacIsaac and others on national and international stages, along with controversies over lifestyle choices, are less significant than ongoing discussions over where the music is going as a result of its extensive exposure and popularity. In July 1996 David Greenberg, a Toronto-based classical violinist with a decade long affinity for Cape Breton fiddle music, spent some time in Inverness County and offered a concert/talk in Mabou with his wife ethnomusicologist Kate Dunlay, to help launch their new book.¹³ The talk reviewed

13 Kate Dunlay and David Greenberg, *Traditional Celtic Violin Music of Cape Breton* (Toronto, 1996). Greenberg was instrumental in forming the classical/traditional trio Puirt a Baroque which has released two CDs containing combinations of Cape Breton traditional fiddling tunes and more classical Scottish baroque music. See Puirt a Baroque, *Bach Meets Cape Breton* (Marquis, 1996) and *Kinloch's Fantasy* (Marquis, 1998).

traditional exponents of the genre and compared various styles on a very intellectual plane.

The storm that followed the exposition proved a lightning rod for advocates of essentialism. Defendants and descendants of 1930s fiddlers, feeling slighted by the exposition, condemned “outsiders” for their temerity in even discussing icons of “the music”. The notion that outsiders somehow contaminate Cape Bretoners’ right to their own idiom was a wonderful reflection of the problems involved in establishing proprietorship with cultural heritage issues. It set off a firestorm of editorials and letters on both sides of the debate that bordered on nativism if not outright racism; it also seems to have spawned a never-ending series of commemorations of great moments and/or players in the history of the genre.¹⁴ At the centre of the discussion was the question of just who the appropriate cultural gatekeeper of traditional music would be. Taken in combination with ongoing discussions of the politics of Gaelic instruction and the inevitable pandering to accommodate tourist traffic, these issues reflect the commercialization of traditional musical forms and go to the centre of debates over identity.¹⁵

And finally, *Margaret’s Museum*, the much-decorated depiction of Cape Breton’s troubled coal towns, presented the tension between traditional and the modern. Leaving aside questions of the movie’s authenticity relative to the lived experience of coal miners in the troubled post-Second World War era, with its undertone of class struggle in the face of a declining industry, the subtext of the film is the conflict between the past and the present. In this case it is between modernity, reflected in the mine and its management, and traditionalism, represented by the rebellious culture of the coal miners.

The film is rife with discussion of the validity of the old ways, including a constant harkening back to old first-speakers who cannot seem to get into motion without a shot of moonshine. The central male protagonist, a bag-piping returned soldier of rural Cape Breton origin, finds himself in conflict with management over his insistence on maintaining Gaelic as a working language underground. The terrible resolution of the movie’s central theme addresses coal’s visible price in human terms, leaving aside the larger issue of the impact of modernity on the cultural norms of the Island’s people. While adhering to some extent to Sheldon Currie’s original short story, the movie’s subtext is a conflict pitting modern and traditional backdrops against the personal experience of Margaret, Ian and the other members of the family,

14 The talk took place in July 1996, and the subsequent discussion can be followed in the *Inverness Oran* during much of August of that year.

15 Cape Breton now has a publicly funded ongoing consultative process (The Culture & Heritage Advisory Group) to monitor the Island’s cultural health and discuss future directions. One of the outcomes has been development of the annual *Celtic Colours* Scottish music festival, designed to extend the tourist season into the autumn months. It is a heavily subsidized international festival featuring both local and international performers. In 1997 it included the famous Chieftains, who subsequently released a CD featuring many of the performers (*Fire in the Kitchen*, Unisphere Records, 1998). For a personal view of some of the same themes see Sheldon MacInnes, *A Journey in Celtic Music: Cape Breton Style* (Sydney, 1997).

who reflect various elements of the tragedy associated with mining life.¹⁶

Taken together these three anecdotal references drawn from my own experience in Cape Breton point out the central place that issues raised by the books looked at here pose for our consciousness of the region. In the way it is exercised the public realm of heritage/history is dominated by a tendency to assert domination over the past in the broad interest of the state. These books offer alternative readings of those narratives, challenging us to examine closely how we as scholars of the region are incorporating those notions into our work as historians, as well as how we are encountering them amongst our students. We are all cultural producers in our own way. It is important that we be sensitive to how the work we do is translated for public consumption outside the academic communities in which we mostly operate. An interesting example of the outcome of our lassitude is the recently published popular history of Nova Scotia by Lesley Choyce, which offers a highly personalized interpretive gloss of regional history. Reading carefully, we can see how the author has mined the scholarship that has so transformed our understanding of the region. But in the end, his depiction is that of a resilient, idiosyncratic and romantic people struggling with the sea, no more and no less than the latest example of the sort of essentialism that recent work in cultural history has so ably addressed.¹⁷

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16 The original story was published as part of a short story collection by Sheldon Currie, *The Glace Bay Miner's Museum* (Ste. Anne de Bellevue, 1979); with release of the movie, an expanded version was published as a short novel, *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum: The Novel* (Wreck Cove, 1996). Another treatment of the same story is found in Wendy Lill's stage play, *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum: A Stage Play based on the Novel by Sheldon Currie* (Burnaby, B.C., 1996).

17 Lesley Choyce, *Nova Scotia: Shaped by the Sea* (Toronto, 1997).