
John Ashton
Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia
By Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod

This reprint of an earlier (1964) National Museum publication represents only a
minor departure from the original format. The book is more attractively bound that
its forebearer with a rather pleasing cover illustration — a reproduction of a 19th-
century painting of a Nova Scotian schooner. It also contains a short new pre-
face written by Helen Creighton, in part to honour her late co-editor who passed
away in 1977. Major Calum MacLeod was a linguist, historian, and professor of
Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier University.

The preface informs us that the milling
or fulling of cloth has been largely respon-
sible for the perpetuation of many of the
songs presented in this collection. There
are, in all, ninety-three Gaelic folksongs
from Cape Breton, many of them locally
composed. Each item is accompanied by
an English translation and brief notes.
Most of the songs were collected by
Creighton between 1933 and the time of
publication Gaelic material; she tells us,
is scattered throughout her recorded
collection from Prince Edward Island, the
mainland of Nova Scotia and, primarily,
the Cape Breton region. At no time did she
make a field-trip in pursuit of Gaelic songs
alone. Major MacLeod also contributed a
few items to the collection, but was prin-
cipally responsible for transcribing the
Gaelic and providing the English transla-
tions. A number of musicologists furnished
the editors with musical transcriptions.
The notes accompanying the songs vary in
detail, consisting in some cases of no
more than one or two lines, in others of
several paragraphs. Explanations are
given, where necessary, of aspects of the
transcription and translation of Gaelic
words and phrases. For the comparatist,
reference is made to other extant versions
and parallels in available published works.

A brief bibliography is provided and, for
obvious reasons, most of the works cited
are of Scots origin.

Despite the editors’ careful attention to
detail and the overall soundness of the
organization and presentation of this vol-
ume, there are one or two things in the
book which strike the reader as being
somewhat out of place. Several of the
photographs, for example, seem to have
no logical connection whatsoever with the
text. (For instance, one shot shows two
young children in unbearable pain, shield-
ing their ears from the haunting sounds of
the bagpipes which are being manipulated
by a nearby piper who is clad in full Scots
regalia. The accompanying caption runs,
“It isn’t everybody likes the bagpipes.”)

More seriously, perhaps, we find towards
the end of the book that the editors have
chosen to provide a single text of the
Gaelic legend “An Gardheal Agus An T-
Innseanach,” (The Gael and the Indian).
They offer no explanation for the inclusion
of this one narrative in the middle of a
book of folksongs. While most of the
items in this collection are entirely in the
Gaelic language, two or three of the songs
offer evidence for the existence of some
mixed or macaronic speech element with-
in the tradition. This point, rather surpris-
ingly, I thought, also goes unremarked by
both of the editors.

Beyond these somewhat technical
points, the main criticisms that can be
made of this work pertain to the overall
tone of the book and perhaps, in the final
analysis, to the theoretical persuasions of
the editors themselves. Carole Henderson
Carpenter’s research has demonstrated
that Calum MacLeod adjusted or modified
the texts of songs in this collection to
make them more “suitable” for publica-
tion.1 This problem is aggrivated by
the fact that while MacLeod freely admitted
tampering with the material, at no point

1Carole Henderson Carpenter, Many Voices: A
Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and Their
Role in Canadian Culture (Ottawa: National
did he indicate where, in what ways or to what extent, these modifications were undertaken. In similar fashion, Kenneth Peacock's musical transcriptions cannot be entirely trusted for their accuracy. While the songs in this book obviously represent a unified body of material because of their interconnectedness in both regional and linguistic terms, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* provides the reader with very little insight into the Gaelic singing tradition in that part of the world. The editors reveal practically nothing (the introduction is barely three pages long) about the region itself, the currency of the Gaelic language and the Gaelic song tradition, the repertory of the Gaelic community in Nova Scotia and of individuals within that community. One is left to seek for oneself the contextual and stylistic details that are sparsely scattered through the notes to individual songs, although it should be mentioned that the National Museum did publish a recording of some of the material in 1964.

There can be little doubt that this is an important folksong collection. It deals with the folk tradition of one of the most significant cultural groups in Eastern Canada and is also one of the few studies of Gaelic folklore in this country that involved a scholar who was, first and foremost, a folklorist. It is, however, a collection from start to finish. It would appear that the editors were concerned not so much with understanding and explaining this body of tradition as they were with the more restricted ambitions of preserving and perpetuating it. While one cannot deny the laudability of these aims, one is left with the impression that the editors of *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* were unduly constrained by them, to the detriment of a more detailed consideration of Gaelic singing in Nova Scotia.

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**Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker**
By Edward D. Ives

In a shift in focus during the past quarter century or so away from "text" and towards "context," "process," and "performance," folklorists are concentrating more and more on individual performers of folklore genres, so-called "tradition bearers," and their "relation to tradition." The cry seems to be not only to "put the folk (back) into folklore," but to do it one person at a time. The models for these studies are the psychosocial novel and the biography. The result is a sort of folklore-and-personality approach to the definition, analysis, and presentation of data. A noteworthy example of a study with this individual focus is Edward D. Ives's *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker*.

Joe Scott was a New Brunswickman who lived most of his itinerant life in turn-of-the-century New England. He worked in the lumber camps and was something of a local character, with a reputation as a magician, joker, and hypnotist. Most important for Ives, Scott was a songmaker. He composed ballads based on locally or personally significant events, which he printed on broadsheets and peddled from camp to camp, demonstrating them himself. Scott died penniless and insane in 1917. He left in print and in people's memories all over the northeastern U.S. and Canada (except Newfoundland) some 13 ballads he had written. These ballads, and Scott's biography, form the core of Ives's study.

Joe Scott is Ives's third book that focuses on a long-dead northeastern songmaker. It is Ives's best developed effort. In method it is similar to his other books: Ives talked to everyone he could find who knew the song maker; collected in print or

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2 In addition to the section on Gaelic folklore in Carpenter's work cited above, (pp. 346–52), see also Edith Fowke and Carole Henderson, *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English* (Downsview: York University, 1976), for a survey of published works related to Gaelic folklore.