

## (E)MIGRATING LEGENDS AND SEA CHANGE

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**Abstract:** In northwestern Europe, the migration of legends has been a growing area of study, exploring their history, development, and geographical/cultural distribution. The past two centuries have been a time of large-scale voluntary or forced migrations that have provided new opportunities for investigating how folklore, including legends, has survived and changed during mass population movements. Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, is foremost among the Scottish Gaelic diaspora communities, established in North America during the Highland Clearances, where oral storytelling traditions have been extensively recorded, and provides a unique opportunity for ethnologists to study survival and adaptation of various folklore genres through comparisons with those surviving in the Scottish Highlands from the early 19th century. This article will examine the kinds of legends that have travelled over the Atlantic; how they have adapted; legends that have sprung up in the new environment; and what distinctive new developments have appeared in post-migration tradition.

**Key words:** oral storytelling, migration of legend, legends of Cape Breton Island, Scottish Gaelic diaspora, Highland traditions

From the late 18th century, the Highland Clearances resulted in the removal of a large proportion of the Gaelic-speaking population of the Highlands in order to make room for sheep as a means of providing for the needs of a thriving British textile industry. A notable consequence of such economically driven policies was large-scale migration by Gaels to North America and the founding of Highland pioneer settlements. Many such Highland Diaspora communities continued a Gaelic way of life with its oral, musical, linguistic and social culture over some generations and well into the 20th century, and a few have been the subject of directed research by folklorists. Cape Breton Island in the Canadian Maritime province of Nova Scotia is the area where the demotic culture of the Gaels became most firmly established and actively transmitted over nearly two centuries. Annual numbers of Gaels immigrating to Cape Breton during the period of settlement (1800–1850) peaked around 1830. At its height toward the end of the 19th century the Gaelic-speaking population of the island and areas of the nearby mainland has been estimated to have been in excess of 30,000 (Campbell & Ennis 1990: 41), and Gaelic monoglots were known

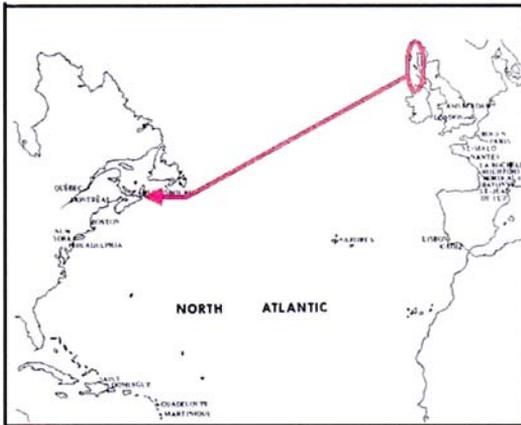


Figure 1. The Gaelic migration to Cape Breton (early 19th century).

to have existed as late as the 1960s. Communities were generally isolated, conservative and self-reliant, with a rich social life, providing a favourable environment for the transmission of traditions derived from the homeland, complemented by regional cultural innovation.

These circumstances have encouraged the extensive recording during the late 20th century of the island's oral storytelling traditions, providing a unique opportunity for ethnologists to study survival and adaptation of various folklore genres through comparisons with records of those surviving in the Highlands from the early 19th century, or from earlier. In the case of international tales, a strong continuity has been demonstrated in the post-migration repertoire, reflecting a high degree of cultural conservatism over five or six generations. Legends, however, differ from the above in some important respects. I propose here to examine the kinds of legends that have travelled over the Atlantic, how they have adapted, legends that have sprung up in the new environment, and what distinctive new developments have appeared in post-migration tradition.

An important category of legend, and the largest of those we will be examining, is that of belief legends in a local setting. Such narratives are closely attached to the rest of living folk belief, incorporating magic and the supernatural in a much more effective role than is found in wonder tales. The legend teller often claims some direct association with what is told, and the material is treated as being more factual than in other genres, portraying actual persons and objects related to the everyday world. This produces more substantial portrayals of character, with objects often being mentioned, pointed out or even brought forth as physical evidence: e.g., landscape features, footprints left behind, or ruins of buildings. Once more in contrast to wonder tales, there is no geographical separation between the everyday world and the other world; instead, there is a constant exchange often associated with specific locations or features of the landscape such as hills, fords and fairy mounds.

With these general characteristics in mind, let us now turn to our Gaelic material. If we classify the legends recorded in Cape Breton into groups according to the geographical or conceived distance from Scotland, we may gain a clearer view of processes at work. Our *first category* is that of legends shared

between the two Gaelic areas and current down to the present. A prime example of such a widely popular shared legend is the etiological one explaining the origin of the fairies, labelled in our Scottish sound archive as ‘The Fall with Lucifer’ (F251 in Thompson 1955–1958; Carmichael 1928–1971 (2): 352–353). When God casts Lucifer, the rebel angel, out of Heaven to another place, many follow him and God has the gates of Heaven shut to prevent more from leaving. Some of these, once they view Hell, attempt to return; the gates remain shut and they settle in the mounds on Earth, to become fairies.

A *second category*, that of legends told on both sides of the Atlantic but firmly located in Scotland, extends to at least one clan saga from Uist concerning the escape of Clanranald, a western Hebridean chieftain, from captivity:

*Clanranald, held prisoner and soon to be put to death by his captors, befriends a young girl who tells him to hold the horses back from being watered until they become intensely thirsty, and then to observe which horse thrusts its muzzle deepest into the loch while drinking, for that is the horse with the greatest lung capacity. By watching closely, the condemned Clanranald identifies the right horse in the nick of time, leaps on its back and makes his escape, outdistancing his pursuers (350 A5).<sup>1</sup>*

In terms of historical legends a cycle concerning an actual historical personage, the mid-17th century piper, Ragnall mac Ailean Òig, a man of prodigious strength from Morar, in the west Highlands, is another shared tradition (6A2, summer 1964 – cf. MacDonald 1896–1904 (3): 254). A shared historical legend from more recent times is that of the Gaick disaster, where a party led by Capt. John MacPherson of Ballachroan, a notorious press-gang leader known locally as the Black Officer, perished in an avalanche in Badenoch whilst staying in the isolated hunting lodge of Gaick in 1800 (42A8–43A1 22/3/78 – cf. Maclean 1975: 91–94).

A *third category*, further removed, is that of relocalised or migratory legends, regarded by reciters as ultimately originating in Scotland. A further Morar story, that of *Cù Glas Mheobail* (The Grey Hound of Meoble), is summarised by Calum I. Maclean in his book *The Highlands* (67) and concerns the appearance of the Grey Hound presaging the death of members of the seed of Dugald branch of the MacDonalds of Morar. The legend has been effortlessly transferred to its Cape Breton setting and retained among descendants of the same branch of Morar MacDonalds, as summarised below:

*The reciter was certain he saw the Grey Hound one night as he was walking along the main road and a small grey dog appeared, walked beside him and then disappeared. There had been a light snowfall and next day when he returned his own tracks were there but the dog’s were*

*not. A week or so later one of his sisters died in Halifax. Her body was sent back and she was buried nearby (297A4).*

A possible *fourth category* is that of legends localised in Scotland, but recorded only in Cape Breton; whether because of the vagaries of collection or other factors, I have been able to find no examples, though Cape Breton settings of some legends provide interesting details not present in their Scottish counterparts.

A *fifth category*, and that of greatest interest to us, is that of legends localised or assumed to originate in Cape Breton. To be sure, these are more a question of local perception than identifiable origins, since many of them are in fact migratory and can be found under the legend classifications in the archive at the School of Scottish Studies. Within this category, fairy lore provides some familiar examples of how legends have become localised.

There was a local family of Campbells in Cape Breton Island who were renowned fiddlers and were reputed to have obtained their gift for playing from a fairy mound. It seems that the father of a certain Donald Campbell was on his way home after playing at a wedding and as he passed a certain place, he saw a fairy woman there busy milking a cow. She told him that she would give him the gift of fiddle playing as long as he did not relate to anyone where it came from, and that he would be able to pass it on to his son and grandson. The gift, which remained in his family no matter where they played, was passed on in the form of a bow from the fairy mound (MacNeil 1987: 430–431). Those familiar with Highland traditions will recognise this as a variant of the legend of the Black Fairy Chanter, where a youth acquires unusual musical skills from the fairy mound.<sup>2</sup>

There are also localised Cape Breton versions of the Changeling, a popular migratory legend, classified as ML 5085 in the Migratory Legend catalogue of the Norwegian folktale scholar Reidar Thoralf Christiansen (1958). In one recorded version, a couple had built a house in Inverness County on the western coast of the island beside the shore, and their child was born soon after. The mother had to work outside and was unable to take the baby with her since it was the fly season, so they took a young girl into the house to look after the child. When the young girl went outside for a short walk she heard crying, and upon returning, she found an odd apparition in the cradle. Not only did it look strange but also it was impossible to satisfy with food: it ate day and night. The parents, sensing something was wrong, went to see a person versed in the supernatural, and were advised to put the cradle with the strange being in it outside the house beside the window and let it scream until it tired. This they did and finally the screaming stopped and there was a silence, which led the parents to wonder whether the visitor was dead. They rushed out to find their

own child there in the cradle. They took it inside and it grew uneventfully into adulthood (339A2).

Witch legends, though not as plentiful as fairy legends, have likewise been recorded in their localised form. One of these has come to us first-hand from Dan Angus Beaton, a legend teller from Inverness County. One evening he was visited by a man from Big Pond, who was collecting money for a widow who had lost her house. He even carried a letter from a priest to this effect. The man spent the night at Dan Angus's farmhouse and proved to be good company; they got along well. As it happened, Dan Angus had given him a dollar – a generous amount at that time – toward his collection, so the next morning by way of thanks the visitor said that he wished to repay Dan Angus's kindness through a favour. He had noticed milk cans at the house and Dan Angus told him he was selling milk in Sydney, an industrial area of the island. At this point, he offered to give Dan Angus as much milk as would fill a hen's egg from every cow within 10 miles to the east, west, north and south. Dan Angus notes that it amounted to a considerable amount of milk, because cattle were plentiful in those parts, but he replied that he would not accept as much as a spoonful or indeed anything else, because the evening's company was ample reward for the dollar that he had given his guest. The man offered once again and then departed. Dan Angus, intrigued by this unusual offer, began asking around the district as to whether something of this kind was possible. Some people said that it would be, others that it would not, but Dan Angus emphasised that he could not accept such an offer under any circumstances. He ends the account by saying simply, *that's my story* (261AA5).

The devil is also no stranger to localised legends in Cape Breton. One story, recorded in Broad Cove Parish, further to the north in Inverness County, came from a man well known to the storyteller, who vouched for his honesty. It described a card game in neighbouring Prince Edward Island where one side was losing and one of the players said, *I'd rather someone came in on my side though it be the devil himself*. Shortly thereafter, a well-dressed man entered and they invited him to join in the game; he consented on the condition that he could join the man who was losing. This started a winning streak and a reversal of fortune for the players. In the middle of things a card fell to the floor and the man who bent down to retrieve it noticed that the stranger was wearing horseshoes. He let the others at the table know this and they began praying, upon which the stranger shot right through the roof of the house, leaving a hole that was burnt around the edges. The marks of his passage were never repaired and no-one ever dared fix the house or live in it. The storyteller then, by way of conclusion, vouches for the fact that this is a true story and not a lie in any way (104A1). This migratory legend (ML 3015) is well known in Scotland and Ireland, and indeed as far east as Estonia.

The district of Big Pond on the other side of the island is the setting for the story of *Riley's Adventures with the Devil*. In the springtime in rural pioneer communities, things were generally in short supply and a poor character by the name of Riley walking along the road met a gentleman, who asked how he was. Riley answered that he was fine but that he needed money and the gentleman replied, *I can give you money in exchange for a promise: you'll get money but you must meet me once more at this spot and promise to go off with me*. Poor Riley was so desperate that it never occurred to him to think about the consequences, but soon after he returned home, he began to reconsider. At that time the only priest in that part of the island had a large territory to administer and was based in the town of Sydney about 30 miles distant. When Riley told the neighbours about the bargain and his promise they replied that they were sure it was the devil, so the priest was sent for and arrived from Sydney on the evening the mysterious gentleman was to return. In the meantime, the neighbours had congregated inside Riley's house and surrounded him, and as time approached for the arrival of the mysterious gentleman, Riley's behaviour became bizarre and agitated. Finally, his neighbours held him down on his bed and barricaded the doors of the house. The gentleman arrived, causing a commotion outside the door and demanding to enter the house, and the priest took out his prayer-book and other holy items and began to pray. Now among the items was a small bottle with a piece of burnt candle inside. With the devil on the outside trying to enter and Riley trying to flee and having to be constrained, the neighbours themselves soon began to want to leave. Finally, the priest, knowing that some action was necessary, lit the candle stub and asked the man on the outside, *Will you leave Riley with me as long as this candle lasts? As you can see there's not much of it so it won't be long*. To this the man agreed immediately and the priest promptly blew out the candle, put the stub back into the bottle, and the story has it that the candle stub was sent to Rome where it has been preserved to this day (265A6–266A1).

Legends involving ghosts (*bòcain*) were among those that have most successfully crossed the language divide and they appear in every Gaelic-speaking area of Cape Breton. In the course of his fieldwork on the island in the 1960s, the late Gordon MacLennan (1984) encountered variants of a local legend concerning Bòcan Brook, which he published some two decades later in Ireland. The variants recorded by him were from a parish close to Broad Cove in Inverness County, but other locations have been pointed out to me that have the same name and associated narratives (MacLennan: *passim*). People were traditionally reluctant to cross at these locations after sunset on account of the ghosts that would accost them. In one particular account from Margaree, Inverness County, an Alasdair Cameron, ex-soldier, was overtaken by darkness and confronted by a spectre of sorts at a brook. He tried to hit it but it was like

hitting a sack of wool, with each blow the ghost returned feeling like iron. Finally, Alasdair asked, *In the name of God what do you want?* It seems that the ghost was that of a man who had died on board a ship and his dying request was to be buried in consecrated ground in a graveyard. His companions had not fulfilled the request, so Alasdair promised to find a priest to bless the grave of the dead man located nearby and the spirit disappeared. It was morning before Alasdair reached his destination, looking the worse for wear, and told his hosts that he was going to see the priest and help the poor ghost. This he did, the priest blessed the grave, and no more was heard of the ghost. However, the name Bòcan Brook has survived to this day.

Another legend current in Cape Breton concerns a confrontation between a bishop and a ghost on Beach Hill in nearby Antigonish County on the mainland. The bishop was returning, again late at night, on horseback and decided to take the shortest way when the ghost met him on Beach Hill. The horse reared up to take on the ghost, and as he did so, the bishop fell to the ground. He remained there for some time while the battle continued – the horse keeping the ghost at bay with its feet – until the cock crowed and the ghost disappeared. When asked about the details later, the bishop replied, *If the grey horse were able to talk he would be the one to tell you. I cannot tell you because I did not experience it all. But they will hear no more of that on the hill anyway* (MacNeil 1987: 422–423). The same storyteller also tells of a man in Jamesville, near the centre of the island, who left a house after an evening's visit with a lit lantern in his hand. He had been warned against going out alone at night, but gave the humorous and flippant reply that he was after all not alone, the devil was with him. He did not reach home that night but the next morning was found huddled at the foot of the hill against the fence with the lantern scattered in pieces around him (338A2).

Forerunners like ghost stories are a mainstay of belief legend on the island. A legend teller from Inverness County gives a fairly typical account of the man who witnessed his own funeral. In one sense this was nothing new, since this man had foreseen every funeral in the community for over 50 years and would often come home and tell people, *the funeral passed me*. One night, as he returned home people knew from his behaviour that he had seen a funeral, and asked him what funeral he had seen. He replied, *I have seen many, many funerals, but at last I saw my own*. His brother asked, *How do you know?* and he replied, *All the family were there and the horse in our harness was pulling the coffin. Everyone was there except me, so I must have been the one in the coffin*. Within a month, he caught pneumonia (which, the storyteller adds, often led to fatalities in those days) and died shortly thereafter. Therefore, as the storyteller concludes, his own funeral passed him that night (261A6).

The horse's reputed ability to perceive supernatural beings is a theme that emerges again in a story of a forerunner, cast in quite ordinary terms, once more from Big Pond. A horse pulling a wagon from town panicked as it passed a certain place, putting its rear legs over the crosspiece on the wagon that holds the swingletree and kicking the headboard of the wagon itself. It then bolted over a mile before the driver succeeded in calming it down. At that very place on the road some time later, a woman, known to the storyteller, was struck by a car as she crossed the road and lived for only a few days. The storyteller goes on to explain that the horse had seen the forerunner of the accident and knew that it was going to happen.

Local belief legends can take many other forms, in the following instance appearing as the international folktale type 'The Singing Bone' (AT 780 = D1318). Long ago, an American vessel was fishing off the west coast of Inverness County near Margaree. In those days, they used dories with two men per dory for trawling. Now in one particular boat, a younger man and his middle-aged co-worker fell out with each other and the older man struck the youth, who fell backward overboard and was drowned. There were no witnesses and when he returned aboard the ship, the older man claimed that the youth had accidentally fallen overboard and drowned, and that seemed to be the end of it. Two years later the same man was once again out with a young lad in a dory, fishing in the same place, and what came up on the hook but a bone! The reciter digressed slightly to explain that when a bone is on the ocean floor everything is stripped by the fish, normally leaving it white. This particular bone, however, began dripping blood, which astonished the two. They took it back on board the ship and the captain upon seeing it said immediately, *You're guilty of murder, that's proof enough for me.* They handcuffed the older man, took him back to the States and he was never seen again in those parts. As so often happens with legends, the storyteller concludes with a moral: *Think of the power of the One above putting blood into the bone to tell people that the other man was guilty. Just think about it* (302A4).

Religious legends have played an important role in the repertoire of Gaelic Scotland for centuries. A few were mentioned and summarised by Father Cornelius Ward in his account of a visit to Uist during the counter-reformation in the early 1600s (Giblin 1964: 83–87) and many more date back far earlier. Such legends are also found in Cape Breton, though not in great numbers. A simple and unadorned variant comes down to us from the time of settlement describing a vision, experienced by a young woman walking the 16-mile distance over a rudimentary path between the settlements of River Denys and Judique, not far from my own former residence in Inverness County. As she started up the mountain, it became dark, so she stopped at a spot beside the

road to spend the night and in her sleep, a dream in the form of a religious vision came to her. She remembered the spot well and when she described the dream the next day, it was understood to have religious significance. Consequently, the spot was chosen for the River Denys Mountain church, built in the early 1840s, and still conscientiously maintained, though the surrounding community has long since disappeared beneath the second-growth forest (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** River Denys Mountain Church. Photo by J. W. Shaw.

A legend recorded from a number of sources falls under the category of a musical/tune legend as well as being a religious legend. A priest, hurrying to give extreme unction to a dying man passes the house where he hears remarkable music coming forth. He stops for a few moments to listen until the tune is finished, and then, as he continues on his way, he hears a great laugh echoing and the words *Chail thu an t-anam* (You have just lost the soul). As a result of the negligence and the eternal consequences, the particular tune, a reel known as ‘The Black Mill’, is considered to be ‘crossed’ (associated with the devil), but that does not prevent it from being one of the most popular traditional Scottish reels down to the present (348A1).

A variety of historical legend resulting directly from the diaspora is the settlement legend. Examples are still to be found in various communities throughout the island, and serve as an internal community record. A founding legend of Mabou Coal Mines, on the shore of the Gulf of St Lawrence, is that of John Rankin and the Bear. John Rankin was said to be the first Rankin from Lochaber to settle there, and the story centres around a particular tree known as *Craobh a' Mhathain* 'The Bear's Tree', which, the storyteller assures us, stood there until recently. One day, as Rankin was working alone a half-mile or so from his house, he encountered a bear with two cubs. Understandably, the bear attacked him immediately. Rankin climbed a hardwood tree and the little dog that was with him began to attack the bear as it rose on its hind legs to pursue him. As the bear started to climb, the dog would bite it and the bear would then descend to deal with the nuisance. This gave Rankin the time he needed to climb up and to crawl out on a large limb, but eventually the bear succeeded in climbing the trunk. It started out toward Rankin along the limb, but as it did, the limb would bend under its weight so the bear would retreat to the trunk and descend to the ground again. On its first ascent, however, it had caught Rankin's heel and taken a chunk out of it, causing heavy bleeding. When the bear had returned to the ground Rankin took off his coat and threw it down, and the bear tore it to shreds with his claws as the dog kept harassing it. Finally, tiring of the dog's barking, the bear departed and Rankin descended from the tree, which was known thereafter as 'The Bear's Tree'. Sadly, Rankin never recovered from the ordeal and died two years later from the effects of loss of blood, leaving 14 of a family. The reciter concludes by saying that there is a photograph of his widow in the family farmhouse nearby at Mabou Harbor (302A1).

I would like to conclude with some remarks on a group of colourful but unsettling legends that were told widely in Cape Breton and must date in some form from the 18th century. These I have termed the Dòmhnall Gorm Cycle, since they centre on the exploits in various parts of the island, and later in Quebec, of a specific ruthless soldier from Scotland during the war between the French and the British for the control of North America from 1756 to 1763. First, let us look at the likely historical basis. The name Dòmhnall Gorm – literally Blue Donald – is by no means confined to any single historical figure in Scotland. It has been associated with the MacDonalds of Sleat from the 16th century, and appears in at least two songs, both of which may date from that time. A look at the genealogies of Clan Donald, however, suggests a candidate whose history, as it was known in Scotland, is eminently compatible with the contents of the Cape Breton group of legends. The excerpt from The Clan Donald history is as follows:

*Captain Donald MacDonald of Benbecula, old Clanranald's second son, deserves special reference in the history of his house. In early life, he entered the French army, but followed Prince Charles in 1745, and fought in all the battles of the campaign. After many vicissitudes, he again entered the French service, but returned to Scotland in 1756. The following year he obtained a commission in Fraser's Highlanders, and greatly distinguished himself in the American war. He was wounded at the taking of Cape Breton, where he rendered brilliant service in 1758, and on the 28th April 1760, he fell on the Heights of Abraham, near Quebec, in an attack by General Murray on the French besieging army. We are informed by an eminent authority that 'He was employed on all duties where more than usual difficulty and danger were to be encountered, and where more than common talent, address, and spirited example were required' (MacDonald 1896–1904 (2): 360).*

The above, at least in the form that it was known to the authors of the Clan Donald, fits neatly with the Cape Breton legend material, as we shall see. Yet, if we accept Donald MacDonald of Benbecula as being the historical personage on whom the legends are based, as I think we may, some questions emerge. The most puzzling of these is the chronology of the events located in Cape Breton – the 'legend nuclei' – around which the related legends have formed, since these must have occurred close to 50 years prior to the Gaelic settlement. Considering that Gaels did not arrive in significant numbers until around 1800, it is equally puzzling that no traces of the legend are recorded from the areas of the Highlands where soldiers who served in the war were said to have returned. Such lack of evidence can of course be attributed to the vagaries of fieldwork during the 19th and 20th centuries, but it is not a total consolation to learn that the only evidence for a channel of transmission – and indirect evidence at that – may be found in the accounts, most of them oral, of ample connections with the siege of Quebec from Barra settlers, among others, in Cape Breton itself. One such pioneer, Malcolm MacNeil, who settled not far from where the legends were collected some 130 years later in a local history of the Barra settlement of Christmas Island, was with Lieutenant Roderick MacNeill at the siege of Quebec in 1759 (MacKenzie 1926: 82). Furthermore, the same source informs us that Barra settlers were aware of kinship of one of their number living in the community to Dòmhnall Gorm.

More to the point, perhaps, three Barra men under Major General Amherst were at the taking of Louisbourg, the French fortress in Cape Breton, in 1758. They returned to Barra and encouraged their friends and relatives to settle around Grand Narrows. One of these, a Donald MacNeill, was a *gille-cuim* or

body servant to Capt. Donald MacDonald, that is, Dòmhnall Gorm (MacKenzie 1926: 119–120). Such possible channels of transmission, however, are not restricted to Barra men. Capt. Angus Tulloch MacDonald, a Lochaber man from a prominent family and a career officer in the British army, distinguished himself at the siege of Louisbourg in 1758, and his sons settled in Inverness County, where the family was well known (MacDonald 1896–1904 (3): 430; MacDougall 1972: 524–526). This may explain the presence of fragments of the Dòmhnall Gorm legends among descendants of Lochaber settlers living a considerable distance from the Barra communities. The overall impression that we get from the oral historical sources, scarce as they are, is one of a professional and outstanding soldier who was once widely known, but whose exploits have not survived in the legends of the Outer Isles. To my knowledge, Clan Donald is the only printed source in Scotland where he does appear.

Let us go then to the legends themselves, to see how Dòmhnall Gorm was remembered among the folk. The material was recorded from four storytellers, all of whom were raised within a radius of 15 miles in the central part of the island, in communities with a strong Barra representation (208A9; 211A3; 233A6, 336A8–337A4; 368A1; 368A3; 368A4). Instead of contrasting and comparing the various versions of the legend from the various storytellers, I propose to attempt to collate them and to construct from this a coherent folk version, disturbing as it is, of the exploits of Dòmhnall Gorm in Cape Breton. In spite of his impeccable Gaelic pedigree and central role in the Eastern Theatre of the war, Gaelic legend is consistent in emphasising his demonic aspects rather than the qualities of bravery and military valour recorded by his British masters. Storytellers convey a grudging respect for his cunning and effectiveness as a soldier, but the most striking characteristic of the oral accounts is the unbridled savagery that he loosed upon the French-speaking Acadian population of the island.

The first event and the one most consistently mentioned in legend is Dòmhnall Gorm's role in the taking of the fortress of Louisbourg, the strongest French outpost of its time in North America. Louisbourg, on the extreme eastern shore of the island, was well placed to control traffic from the Atlantic into the Gulf of St Lawrence, and was thus a key location in the war between the British and the French (Fig. 3). According to oral accounts, the French, once they became aware of the British intention to seize the fortress, closed the entrance to the harbour with a great chain, preventing British warships from approaching. One of the legend tellers even claims to have seen where the ends of this chain were fastened at the mouth of the harbour; in any event, Dòmhnall Gorm was able to sever the chain and attack the fortress. Two apparently separate versions describe how he attached serrated plates of hard-

ened steel to the bows of the ships, and by keeping their bows tight against the chain, together with the up-and-down motion of the waves, succeeded in cutting through it (208A9).

The reciter goes on to say that during the taking of Louisbourg, one of Dòmhnall Gorm's men went ashore and was met by a woman who willingly gave him news of the place, including details of the fortress defences. The information was taken back to Dòmhnall Gorm, who made good use of it in taking the fortress. Another source describes how Dòmhnall Gorm, while leading an assault on the fort, tricked the French sentries by answering in French when challenged and thus breached the defences.



Figure 3. Map of Cape Breton Island.

The accounts continue with the taking of the fortress and the slaughtering the entire garrison along with the civilians inside. One storyteller then goes on to explain that Dòmhnall Gorm was left behind by the British forces to exterminate the French on the island and that he then set out from Louisbourg on his mission. The individual episodes differ from one storyteller to another, but all are agreed that Dòmhnall Gorm carried out his task with singular ferocity. What follows is a virtual catalogue of unnecessary atrocities linked with specific place names, including wholesale slaughter of town populations, the burning of a church and its congregation during mass, infanticide and the maiming of a native Indian who had tried to warn those ahead of his arrival. At this point, the supernatural intrudes for the first time in the form of a prophecy from a widow whose sons he forcefully abducts. As he departs with one of her sons, who is lame, Dòmhnall Gorm says to the widow, *Your son is departing, never to return*, to which she replies, *The cripple will return but you will not*. The storytellers comment that there is a probable connection to a well-known traditional song (also recorded in Scotland), which alludes to press gang raids on families by a Dòmhnall Gorm. The song is widespread in Cape Breton and mentions the names of young men who were pressed into military service (208A9; 211A3; 336A8; 337A1–337A3; cf. *Tocher* 1977 (4):327–330).

The supernatural likewise features in the varied accounts of the end of Dòmhnall Gorm. There are indications that some legend tellers were aware of his role at the taking of the citadel in Quebec. By one account, he once again used his command of French together with the correct password to deceive French ships guarding the St Lawrence river (368A3). Later, with his company he scaled a steep place, probably the side of the citadel, and caught the sentries sleeping, leading to the taking of the city. The most detailed of account of his death opens with soldiers camped near a beach backed by a steep stone bank. One evening a man descended, asking for Dòmhnall Gorm, and the soldiers advised their commander against going off with him. Dòmhnall Gorm replied that he feared neither god, man nor the devil, and he was never seen again. Soon after, in a company camped nearby, each soldier assigned night sentry duty was found dead the following morning. Finally, the soldier whose lot it was to stand guard remembered to make the sign of the cross around himself, and at midnight a terrible sound was heard and a pig appeared covered in chains, approached, and said, *I'm Dòmhnall Gorm and your prayers served you well tonight, since I intended to kill you. The widow turned me into my present shape.* A further account adds a few details: after Dòmhnall Gorm's death two soldiers, or perhaps more, who were Gaelic-speaking, were walking around at night and saw a black pig. They spoke to it and it replied that it was Dòmhnall Gorm's spirit. One of the soldiers asked him what had turned him into a demon and he answered that it was the curse of seven widows, but there was one widow among them whose curse was the worst of all, and the reciter suggests that it was she who made the press-gang song alluded to above. There is an additional tradition concerning his demise, in which on the day that he was killed in battle he was to have said, *Today is the last day of my life.* When they asked him how he knew, he replied that there was a red tinge (*fiamh dhearg*) to the water that he washed in that morning (337A4).

In addition to the absence of accounts appearing anywhere in Scotland, be it Benbecula, Barra or Lochaber, the Dòmhnall Gorm cycle raises additional questions. At least one of the storytellers, Joe Allan Maclean, from the Barra settlement at Christmas Island, was well aware of Dòmhnall Gorm's pedigree, calling him *Mac 'ic Ailein*, Clanranald's patronymic and thereby giving independent support to our conjecture concerning his identity. It is also of interest that Capt. Donald MacDonald, being a warrior aristocrat from a distinguished line with strong Gaelic connections, not to mention his Jacobite background, was not portrayed in the flattering terms that we would expect from clan-based accounts. To be sure, some credit is given for his effectiveness, resourcefulness and ingenuity, but the legends tell us that on at least two occasions his lack of humanity did not enlist the full sympathy of his own troops. No less

telling is the supernatural retribution arising from the widows' curse, presaged by other supernatural signs, in which the aristocrat warrior is demonised in a remarkably sinister way: after killing his own comrades who had not protected themselves through prayer he disappears forever. This last touch, of course, is merely a continuation of the anti-Christian diabolical aspects of his nature, which emerge at the burning of the church. Interestingly, the themes of his demonisation in the form of a pig and the details of the widow's curse appear to have been retained from geographically separated sources. One, of course, is from the communities close to the centre of the island and was presumably derived from Barra men who were close to the campaign. The other, which is identical in its content, came to that side of the island via a storyteller from Mabou in Inverness County, who was raised no great distance from the Lochaber MacDonalds of Tulloch (see Fig. 3 on p. 55).

Having posed some general questions at the beginning of our survey, what conclusions can we draw concerning the use and adaptation of Gaelic legend material in Cape Breton? When we consider the openness and flexibility of the legend as a genre, the most striking characteristic is the conservatism of the tradition as it has continued in Cape Breton. Many of the legends we have examined, although nominally localised, can still be ranged easily under the legend categories in the tale archive at the School of Scottish Studies, and serve to complement rather than challenge the tradition as we know it in Scotland. Much specific research remains to be done, but it would be no great surprise if nearly every local Gaelic legend recorded in Cape Breton could be linked historically or typologically with a close counterpart in the Scottish collections. Our survey thus provides clear indications that Cape Breton has provided a new territory for a large number of migratory legends already known in northwestern Europe, rather than a new and distinctive legend tradition of its own. Nevertheless, the development of the Dòmhnall Gorm cycle demonstrates that the new Gaelic territory has been capable of producing a linked series of legends around a coherent theme. Furthermore, I believe there is considerable significance in the extent to which episodes from the group of legends were related by reciters to other items in Gaelic tradition already extant on the island, be it genealogy, place-name lore or song.

## COMMENTS

<sup>1</sup> This and other item numbers refer to field recordings made by the writer in Cape Breton between 1964 and 1987.

<sup>2</sup> F101 in the classification system for fairy legends, developed by Alan Bruford for the archive at the School of Scottish Studies.

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