

THE ISLAND FIDDLER



Hail and Farewell: A Fiddling Bishop Goes to Newfoundland.

Newsletter of the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society
No. 3, 1980

Interview with Bishop MacDonald

This interview supplements Bishop MacDonald's written statement in this issue. The article, "Why I Play Scottish Fiddle", was written late last year; this interview was held on February 6, 1980, after Father Faber's appointment as Bishop of Grand Falls had been announced.

It was only a deep interest in our Society that enabled him to fit our talk into a hectic schedule of farewells, and preparations for his appointment and new duties in Newfoundland. His love of the fiddle is reflected in its use as a symbol on his bishop's coat of arms. The program of his ordination service noted that this symbolizes not only his personal love, but also "the suitability of music for the people of God in the expression of their faith."

This transcript of our taped talk has been edited slightly for the reader. We began by looking back to 1976, when Fr. Faber got the Society going by sending out letters to many fiddlers, inviting them to a meeting. --J.H.

THE ISLAND FIDDLER: As the person who's generally considered to be the founder of the Society, what do you remember as the reason for sending out those letters to organize people. What was the goal originally?

BISHOP MacDonald: Well, I guess there were two or three things working in me at that time. One was, I wanted to play with others. I didn't want to just continue playing alone, for the rest of my life. And I had the experience in Tracadie of being with Reuben Smith a few times at his house, and that summer he invited me to play for a couple of weddings with him. And without any practice, or without having been together that frequently, we were able to play well with two fiddles; and I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could bring all the fiddlers together to do this kind of thing, and help them enjoy that.

The second thing that reinforced me in that was, I went over to the Glendale festival and I saw their topnotch fiddlers playing together, and it lifted the crowd. The people were so uplifted by it, and I was too, and I thought again--yes, we have to do that, that is the direction we have to go in. So that was partly a selfish reason, and partly an idea that this would be great for the people and great for the fiddlers. Then I took that step.

IF: You have mentioned taking music from Scotland and Cape Breton. Do you see that as any conflict with local music? There has always been music on the Island, and now there seems to be a strong Cape Breton influence. How do you see that in relation to what was traditionally played here?

MacD.: That is a question that I have had a difficult time finding an answer to. Y'know, what is traditional Island music? Some people will continue to insist that we should be playing more Island music. But when you ask, "well, what do you mean by Island music?" and then, well, "Cock o' the North, or Stack of Barley, or the Flowers of Edinburgh, or Lord MacDonald's Reel,"--but if you look, all those tunes



MacD. (cont'd): are in the traditional collections that come from Ireland and Scotland. So, y'know, what is traditional Island music?

IF: Well, it's what was played. Whether it originated here or not is not a determining factor in whether it was traditional here. If it was Lord MacDonald's Reel, if it was played here over a period of time and handed down from one fiddler to another through generations, I would say then it would be traditional. And maybe there are some traditional compositions or traditional Island sets of tunes.

MacD.: All this music that we're playing now, that was played here. Lord MacDonald's Reel was played all over the place, Farmer's Reel, Paddy on the Turnpike, the White Cockade, those hornpipes we have here [Minstrel's Fancy, etc]. I don't think there's very much that's not Island music.

There was a great wealth of tunes up in eastern PEI that were transported from generation to generation by ear and they never were in books perhaps. The masters played them, and they played them well and they played them right, and those who picked them up strove to get them correctly as well. Now the same was true over in Cape Breton. And probably a lot of that came across in the minds and the memories of the people who came over here from the old country. So I think that what we're just finding is music that's stored away in memory here that maybe is getting on paper for the first time.

IF: But I find it kind of sad that there are tunes that are documented to have been played on the Island, like the Picnic Reel, that people here are learning now, but they're learning them from Cape Breton. Maybe they originated in Scotland or somewhere, but there seems to be a dependence on learning them from Cape Breton when they could equally learn them from their own tradition. And I find that unsettling, because there are tunes here that people would say "Oh this is a new Cape Breton tune," but they had been played before 1900 on the Island.

MacD.: Sure, of course, but you see, people like Simon Chaisson and the MacPhees up east, and the Websters, and some of these people in PEI whose roots in this music went back generations, they weren't respected you know. I feel that that's one of the problems here on PEI, we have such an awe and a reverence for the outsider. So when Don Messer comes in with his New Brunswick kind of style, and so on, we lost all respect completely for a lot of these people, who had a treasure in their memory banks and their hearts and violins. And now that this other has disappeared, we're beginning to find out that we nearly lost that music.

And some people now will say "that's an old tune that was played down east in the '20s"--but the guy who played it is no longer there. But somehow or other the authenticity of it was guarded in Cape Breton, and we have to thank them for guarding the authentic expression of the Scottish fiddle. It wasn't that well guarded here; I don't know what the reasons were. I think that's one of the things that grates some people--why do we have to go to Cape Breton to learn this music? Well, that's the reason: we didn't listen to our own fiddlers, and we didn't appreciate them. Like we don't appreciate a lot of things here on PEI that are authentic to PEI. But we listen to the outsider.

Now I think we can continue here to bring out the old tunes, because when you practise them with several fiddlers playing at the

Why I Play Scottish Fiddle

By BISHOP FABER MacDONALD

I play Scottish fiddle music because it touches my soul.

My father played, and some of my earliest recollections are of him playing the violin. There was the time my father organized a community dance in the new machine shed he built on our farm. I was five years old.

The fiddler came from Souris. I vividly remember the music echoing out over our property. I listened to the music well into the night, and the next day the melodies turned over and over inside me.

When I was a youth, my mother took me with her for company to the socials in the parish hall. I watched the fiddler in amazement. He was like a magician, with the power to set aflame all human emotions. Through his music he moved people to dance, to talk, to shout, to love--yes, even to fight and quarrel.

I now see how the music of the violin took root in me. Like a seed, love and reverence for it became embedded in my soul. It became as integral to my formation as all the memories and relationships of my social milieu. The violin was a powerful force in the community from which I came.

I began fiddling at age 10. Soon I was able to play for house parties, which were so important in rural life before the age of television.

But at 14 I had to leave home to attend school. After three years in high school and one in university, I began to work for the Royal Bank of Canada. After six years with the bank, I returned to university for three years. During these years I did not concentrate on the fiddle. What had once filled me with pride became, in university and banking circles, an embarrassment. No one appreciated the fiddle the way I did, or understood my need for it. These people generally looked upon someone who enjoyed the fiddle as being from "the country"--in other words, lacking culture and social graces.

While with the bank I was stationed in Cape Breton, where I had the opportunity to see and hear two great fiddlers, Angus Chisholm and Scotty Fitzgerald. I sought chances to hear them. I recall being moved to tears listening to Chisholm play, and soon realized that he was a genius. He seemed to master the whole gamut of Scottish music with ease.

It was at this time that I became aware of the richness of Scottish music, including the slow airs, pastorals, laments, marches, strathspeys and clogs, as well as the jigs, reels and hornpipes. The laments and pastoral airs touch the melancholy, lonely and sad feelings; the strathspeys, reels and others stir the heart to joy, love, dancing.

Also at this time I heard three fiddlers play together. Their music stirred me to my roots, arousing memories of when I first heard the fiddle.

Through reflection I have come to realize that my love for this music is deeply rooted in my Celtic heritage, which has preserved it for hundreds of years. Two streams of Celtic blood flow in my veins--Scottish and Irish.

The Celt is a poetic personality. He loves life, and aims to live it to the full. The Celt has used music to express his deepest experiences: war, disaster, separation causing loneliness, pain, death; and gaiety, love and romance.

I believe that man is one with his experiences. I can enter into and share the feelings of another, such as loneliness. I can also experience these emotions in the rich variety of Celtic music. If we strive to become rooted in this, we will eventually generate the inspiration that will continue to give rebirth to our rich heritage.

There is a deeper reality here, a spiritual reality. It strikes at the very heart of the Christian experience. It is the death/resurrection mystery, and it too can be expressed in the language of music.

This mystery is at the heart of life. Its rhythm, like music, vibrates within us. It is present in the seasons, which move from life to death to life again. But the Christian, instead of being locked into a rhythm that seems to go nowhere, as in the life cycles of plants and animals, experiences something much more profound.

Christ, a man like others, lived, suffered and died as all men. But by being raised bodily from the dead through the power of the Father, He now lives in a completely new order, and he does so as a man clothed in a flesh like ours.

He has thus raised all our bodily experiences to a new plane, and to new levels of meaning.

Just as Christ was raised to victory after defeat so can we be, even when we may seem to be most defeated. A good example of this are alcoholics who speak of a higher power while at the same time admitting defeat.

But because this is a mystery, it must be known in the light of the Gospel, and by Faith. Music itself must be revered as the language used to express what is noble and pure in man. It must be respected as an expression of joy, because life is good, because it is victorious in the midst of trials and tears.

This is why there is a revival of folk music, and why a new respect is developing for the fiddle. Modern man has spent himself in the pursuit of material things, to the neglect of the soul and spirit. He has ignored the need to celebrate the way his forefathers did.

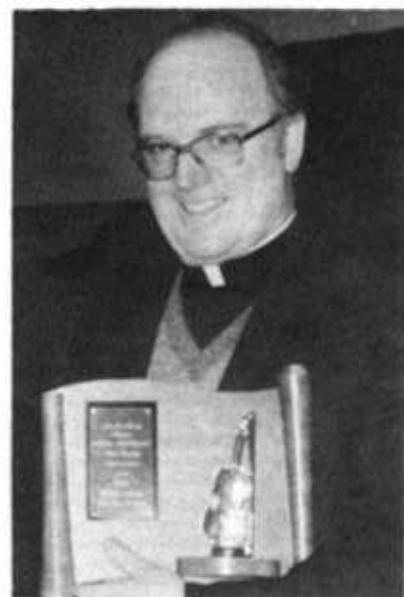
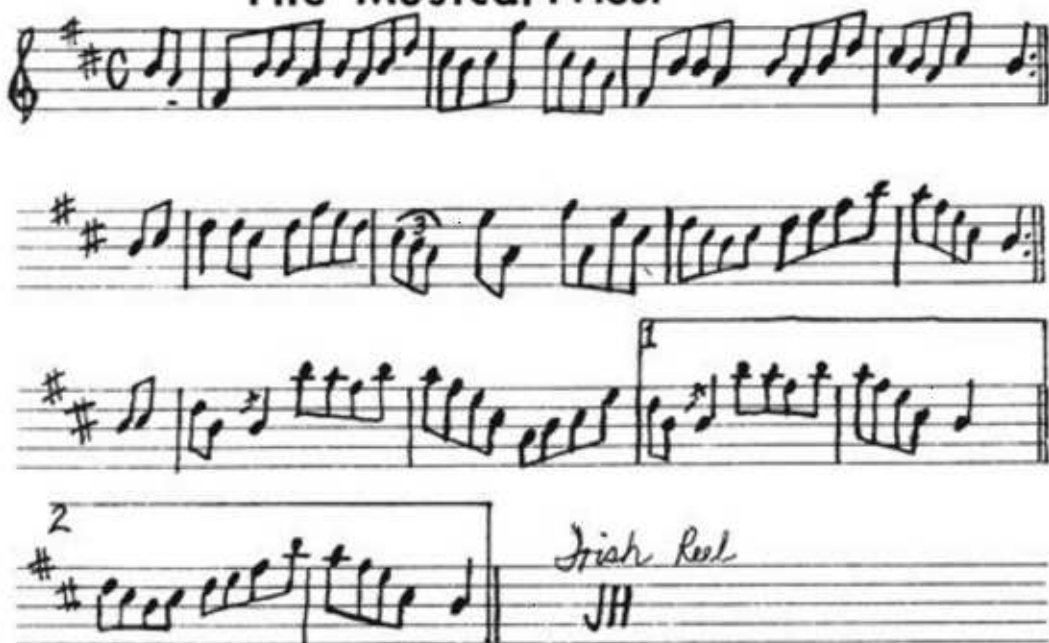
As a result, loneliness and alienation characterize modern life. This can be greatly alleviated by men and women learning to make music again, to dance, to sing and make merry.

The violin is an instrument that has gathered people in the past. It can continue to do so if it is played well.

I believe that people will learn to play the beautiful Celtic music if they are encouraged, if a climate of learning is created. And I believe that the Prince Edward Island Fiddlers' Society must strive to build comradeship and fellowship among its members. This climate will draw people especially gifted by the Good Lord to create music that will express our soul today.

Men and women will always need to express the depths of their souls, and here lies the need for Scottish fiddle music.

The Musical Priest



FIDDLERS' NOTES

Many of the social events lately have been farewell gatherings for Fr. Faber at which the fiddlers participated. A number of our members attended his episcopal ordination at St. Dunstan's Basilica on March 17, and several contributed to the lovely performance of Niel Gow's Lament for Abercairney....Earlier, on February 24, members from across the Island showed up for the Society's farewell party at St. Pius X that featured good music, good food, and a good spirit. Tributes to the guest of honor were extended by Bill MacDonald, Ernie Poole and Roddie Chaisson, and Neil MacCannell presented our parting gift, a wall plaque (above). In response, Fr. Faber said that he intends to drop in on us whenever he can find the time. "The fiddle carries with it a tremendous amount of power," he said, which we should use positively; the Society will flourish in so far as it uses the various gifts of the members. He also challenged us to try composing tunes....Cecil Trainor said that this appointment shows that Society members can "really go places"; however, it might be hard to find another member with real potential to achieve a similar position. ...The Queens County group continues to meet Thursday nights at the Lions Club hall in Parkdale, with 25-35 fiddlers usually present.... Several fiddlers from this group took part in the Burns concert at Confederation Centre, and a concert at St. Pius X the next weekend.... The Montague area group is active, with a practice every second Wednesday at the Legion. On alternate Wednesdays the group puts on a concert in aid of needy area residents. They are looking for a regular piano player; they would like to thank Duke Neilsen for his help on several occasions....The Souris area group is now practising Sundays at the church workshop in Rollo Bay. Joe Chaisson, Bear River, has further information. They sponsor violin lessons Monday nights at the same place; Mr. Zaat is instructing about 15 aspiring fiddlers.... The Chaisson Brothers recently gave a concert in the capital city with Stan Rogers and Wendell Boyle. We hope to see more ventures of this type, despite the disappointing turnout.... Solo fiddling is returning to the Queens County meetings after a too-long absence. Recently, 13-year-old Merle Longaphie played two solo numbers to the satisfaction of all. Give us more!

--J.W., J.H., Margaret MacKinnon

same time, there's more in the tunes for some reason. So I think that should be a bit of an emphasis for a while.

We have to stop looking at who's playing what. That's what happened here in the past. Through the contests you know; that's what competition does. "Well, here's so-and-so. His father couldn't play--how could he play?" And you bring all this human perspective into the thing, and you forget the music. And then, "this is the way Scotty played it, it has to be right," or "this is the way Joe Chaisson played it, it has to be right." Well, that's wrong. We have to pass by the individual who's playing the fiddle, and the fiddle that he's playing on, and get into the music. And the key to that is learning to read, and being able to grasp it oneself and having some common denominator.



IF: Do you think that becoming more musically literate is the way that will bring about the greatest results?

MacD.: Musical literacy is one thing that is very important, but I think what comes before that is the desire for unity, and to be one, and to strive against competition and jealousy and this kind of thing. There's nothing that's going to destroy any organization, especially related to musical development or art or folklore, nothing is going to destroy it quicker than competition and division and disunity. From the point of view of music I think it's taken on a cohesiveness, and it's expressing itself according to the roots of the areas where it was nourished here. Also, now there's a significant number of fiddlers who can read music very well, and that's in a matter of two or three years.

And they now enjoy playing together, and they appreciate the comradeship that has developed as a result of being together. So, as far as I'm concerned, I see it as something that's firmly established, and it can carry itself. There's a number of fiddlers who can stand a greater challenge. If an individual got frustrated with playing the same music week after week with a good portion who are beginners, well, the opportunity has to be provided for him to develop at his own pace. But how you go about serving that is something else. That's where good leadership comes in, that will challenge the maturity of the group. It's a hard thing, but I think it will come.

IF: Do you have any thoughts on what can be done to revive country dancing in connection with the revival of the music?

MacD: I think we have to do a bit of research in this area; there's a specific way to dance that music. I think if a number of people were interested in pursuing that, researching it and trying to do it, and then the proper music provided for it, then I think the dancing would enhance the music. Because it's not fully folk music until people are moving to it--stepdancing, or group dancing. Somebody said this to me somewhere along the line, that "someone who stepdances never needs a psychiatrist, all his defences are down." And that's what a lot of our people need, a lot of our young people especially. They're bound up, they're terribly unfree and unsure of themselves. And there's nothing that will give you a surety of yourself like letting go. The music is for that, and the people have to come back to that as ways of being liberated in their lives.

The Island Fiddler
P.O. Box 803
Charlottetown, PEI
C1A 7L9

FIDDLE MUSIC ON RADIO

"Scottish Strings" 580 CJFX, Antigonish (Mon-Fri 6:30-6:45 pm; Sat. 7:30-8:00 pm). Also on morning show 6:00-9:00 am.

"Sweet Music" 1320 CKEC, New Glasgow (Sat. 6:30-7:00 pm). Weekday country show (7:00-9:15 pm) also has some violin music.

"Highland Fling" 1410 CIGO, Port Hawkesbury (Sun. 8:00-9:00 pm).

"West Prince Party Line" 1240 CJRW, Summerside (Mon., Tues., Wed. and Fri. 11:30-11:45 am). Has some Prince County and mainland fiddlers.

"Bluegrass Jam" CKDH Amherst (Sat. 7:00-8:00 pm) has some area fiddlers periodically.

Please inform us of any we missed.

J.W.

The Island Fiddler is the newsletter of the PEI Fiddlers' Society.

Editors: Jim Hornby 836-3069
John Weyman 675-2223

©1980, The Island Fiddler. We solicit articles, suggestions, tunes, pictures and information of interest to Island fiddlers. Please send correspondence to The Editors at the address above.

Photos courtesy of: Camera Art (p.1), Clair Perry Photography (p.6), John Weyman (p.7). Set and typed by Jim Hornby.